



Middle Ages and the Holy Roman Empire

Charlemagne and His Reforms

Introduction

- The Western Catholic church received much of its shape in the Middle Ages.
 - It is still premature to call it Roman Catholicism, but the structure was built. It just needed to be filled in with a few more items.
- The rise of the Holy Roman Empire assisted greatly with this.
- Eventually, the Holy Roman Empire will decline followed by chaos.
- Social stability filled that void in the form of Feudalism.
- All these will be discussed in this lesson.



Merovingian Decline

- When the Franks first settled France, their kings, such as Clovis, were part of the Merovingian dynasty (after Clovis's grandfather Merovech).
- The 6th century saw the progressive loss of power of this dynasty as the nobles grew in power at their expense.
 - They started acting like miniature kings in their private domains.
- By 630, the Merovingian kings had no power outside their own royal land, and even within the royal land the mayors of the palace became all-powerful prime ministers that relegated the monarch to just a figurehead.
- The office of mayor became a hereditary inheritance of the Carolingian family (it was later named this after its greatest member—Charlemagne).



Carolingian Ascendancy

- These Carolingian mayors launched a successful campaign to increase the power of the Merovingian kings simply because it expanded their own power as the mayor.
- One way they expanded power was Christianizing the Pagan tribes in the Netherlands and Germany (Frisians, Hessians, and Saxons).
- Their plan was to control the Germans through the church.
 - If they became Christian, then they would be under the spiritual authority of the church—an organization not bound by borders or kingdoms.
- The Carolingians could then put their guys in position as bishops (due to their alliance with the bishop of Rome). To aid in this plan, one of the greatest mayors, Charles Martel (690-741) supported the strong missionary currents coming from England to Northern Europe.
- One of the great English missionaries was Boniface (680-754).
 - He spread Christianity as well as papal authority wherever he preached. For this reason, various popes rewarded him greatly with both rank and a large diocese.
 - Despite his successful work, he was killed by Pagan Frisians in 754. Prior to his death, he brought large parts of Germany into the Christian faith and under the spiritual authority of Rome. This served the Carolingian interests.

Pepin the Short

- After Charles Martel died, the alliance between the papacy and the Carolingians grew even stronger under his sons Carloman and Pepin.
 - They were raised in monasteries and had a genuine concern for the health of the church.
- As they shared the throne, they asked Boniface to help them reform the Frankish church. Since Boniface was the pope's representative, this only strengthened the bond between the two.
 - Carloman went back to being a monk after the reforms, and this left Pepin as the mayor.
- He was the chief servant to the Merovingian Childrech III. Pepin (the Short) was ambitious and desired more than the position of mayor. He knew he was the real ruler of France and he wanted the crown.
 - Pope Zacharias (741-752) supported his ambition, and so in 751 Pepin deposed Childrech and forced him to retire in a monastery.
- Boniface, acting in the pope's name then crowned Pepin the king of the Franks. He was the first of the great Carolingian dynasty.
- What makes this significant for church history is this is the first time a pope claimed his apostolic authority involved the right to approve the dethroning of one king and his replacement by a new one.
- This meant that the new royal family in France owed its legal authority to the papacy.



Pepin Benefits the Papacy

- Pope Zacharias had a political motive in this move. The Lombards in Northern Italy expelled the Byzantine governor and armies, and its king set his sight on Rome.
 - A strong military alliance with powerful Franks could serve as protection.
- Zacharias's successor was Pope Stephen II (752-757), and he will strengthen this alliance even more by having a second coronation of Pepin.
 - In return, Pepin invaded Italy and forced the Lombards not to attack Rome. Two years later, the Lombards reneged and Stephen called on Pepin for protection.
 - Pepin inflicted near total defeat of the Lombards. They lost most of their land in Italy, and Pepin gifted it to Stephen.
 - This is called the donation of Pepin, and it placed many cities and substantial land in Italy under the control of the Pope (about 1/5 of Italy).
- The papacy was now a legitimate political state in its own right. The Pope was a chief of state as well as a religious leader. Pepin even gave Byzantium's lost land to the Pope, and ignored the emperor in Constantinople's objections.
- Pepin's actions produce three significant results.
 - First, it severed the link between the papacy and the Byzantine Empire. The Eastern and Western churches had been drifting apart, and now with a political separation, it would speed the separation.
 - Second, it sealed the political, religious, and military bond between the papacy and the Frankish kings. The Frankish monarch replaced the Byzantine Empire as the center of Rome's diplomatic and spiritual world.
 - Third, it gave the papacy a large independent state in central and northern Italy. Some Popes became so absorbed in their secular business that they lost interest in theology and pastoral work.

The Donation of Constantine

- Around this same time (middle of the 8th century) a document called the *Donation of Constantine* emerged.
 - It purports to be a letter from the first Christian Emperor Constantine to Pope Sylvester I (314-335).
- The letter allegedly shows that Constantine was healed of leprosy by the pope, and in gratitude he declared that the Pope is superior to the Emperor.
- He also declared that the pope politically controls all imperial territory in Italy itself and the entire Western Empire.
- The letter was a clear forgery that used language and circumstances that match the 8th century, not the 4th. But for 700 years it was used by popes to back up their exaggerated claims.
- The forgery was definitively exposed in 1440 by the Renaissance scholar Lorenzo Valla.
 - It was likely a forgery made by Stephen II himself to justify the West's political independence from the East, as well as to justify the territory gifted to him by Pepin.
 - It also likely was used to justify the relationship of the popes and the Franks where the popes held a greater authority. After all, they crowned the Frankish ruler.



The Rise of Charlemagne

- When Pepin died, the throne was shared by his sons Carloman and Charles. Carloman died in 771, leaving Charles as the sole ruler.
- He reigned for 43 years (771-814) and created the first great Western Empire since the Fall of Rome.
 - He is called Charles the Great, or Charlemagne. He is one of the most influential and colossal figures of all of European history.
 - Some call him the Moses of the Middle Ages since he led the Germanic peoples out of barbarism and gave them a new law (both civil and religious).
- He is truly comparable to Constantine the Great. Charlemagne recreated the Western Roman Empire on a Christian basis.
- He was a large man physically, with a lot of energy. He was simple in his life, generous in his possessions, just in his rule, loyal to friends, and very popular with his subjects.
- He also was sincerely devoted to Western Christianity. His goal was to unite the Western nations under a Christian empire.
- Charlemagne was truly an incredible leader.
 - However, he did have one major flaw. He had a less than biblical standard of sexual conduct reflected in his divorcing and remarrying women at will. After his fifth wife died, he took a number of concubines.



Charlemagne's Military Achievements

- Most of Charlemagne's reign was spent fighting wars, and he won all but one of them.
- The first was his rescue of the Papal States from Lombard aggression.
 - This was their final defeat since he deposed their king and made himself their king, thus expanding his rule beyond Franks. Northern Italy was now added to his empire.
- He defeated the Muslims in Spain, thus pushing them even further south.
 - He now ruled Spain down to Barcelona.
- Up in Germany, he annexed Bavaria, and fought and crippled the Pagan Avar people in Danube (Hungary).
- His most intense and longest fighting was against the Saxons (18 campaigns over 30 years).
 - He finally won by forcing them in small groups to settle other areas of his kingdom so they would be the minority in each place. He also put the choice to them: Christian baptism or death.
 - Some Christian leaders protested this (you can't force faith with a sword), and Charlemagne eventually gave in and abolished the death penalty for pagans in 797.

The Holy Roman Empire

- Charlemagne's church officials saw his conquests and the wide extend of his kingdom as a re-created Roman Empire in the West.
- Thus, in 800, he was recognized as the emperor of the Romans. On Christmas day in AD 800, Charlemagne was kneeling in St. Peter's Church in Rome as he was receiving communion.
 - Pope Leo III suddenly placed a crown on Charlemagne's head and proclaimed him Charles Augustus, crowned by God as Emperor of the Romans.
 - This is the birth of the Holy Roman Empire.
- This act of the Pope declared that Charlemagne was not just the king of the Franks, but the heir to the old Caesars of Rome. He now was the political master of all the West.
- The Byzantine emperors resented this claim since they saw themselves as the heirs to the Roman Empire.
 - So this coronation of Charlemagne by the pope further pushed East and West apart.
- Furthermore, Leo's move showed that the new Holy Roman Emperor owed his position to the pope.
 - He was determined to make the political ruler dependent on the pope for the imperial crown. Charlemagne was pleased with the position, but not with how Leo did it.
 - He had his son crown himself to show the position does not depend on the pope, but it was to no effect. The people of the Middle Ages were convinced that the Holy Roman Empire was a gift of the pope.



Carolingian Renaissance

- Charlemagne gathered around him the greatest intellects of his empire (all came out of the monasteries since that was the center of knowledge), and they built a strong Christian culture throughout the Empire.
- This cultural achievement is called the Carolingian Renaissance.
- From it, the following emerged.
- Latin was refined, and the current form of our letters (called Carolingian miniscule) was developed.
 - All educated people in Europe spoke Latin regardless of their first language.
- Charlemagne also had an army of monks copy down books (most of our ancient copies of Greek and Roman works came from this campaign).
 - The monasteries became the repository for these massive libraries that contained both ancient and current knowledge.
- A standard edition of the Vulgate was also codified during this time.
- Charlemagne also pushed education, demanding that in each parish, the monks educate all the male children.
 - A parish is a small unit of territory that can be serviced by one church and the church is supported by the tithes of that territory.



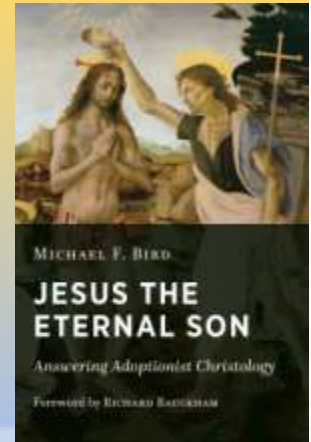
Charlemagne's Religious Reforms

- Charlemagne considered himself to be both the political and spiritual leader of his Empire, like the Kings of Ancient Israel.
- He decreed fasts, sat in on councils, appointed bishops throughout the Empire, appointed abbots, and imposed a moral code on the clergy.
- From this time forward, clergy wore a special kind of clothing (cassock) that distinguished them from the laity.
- He also passed religious laws that affected the entire society.
 - Sunday was declared a day of rest and all work was illegal.
 - The payment of tithes was compulsory and universal. Tithes were levied on land and not persons, and they were paid in corn, wine, hay, and livestock. Refusal to pay the tithe to one's parish resulted in excommunication.



Theological Controversy: Adoptianism

- There was one big theological controversy during his reign. Adoptianism was taught by a few monks and spread.
- This wasn't the same as the ancient version, but instead it confessed that Jesus's divine nature is the eternal Son of God.
 - But it insisted that the human Jesus was adopted as God's son just like believers.
- The root of the controversy was whether sonship belonged to the person or the nature.
 - Adoptianists said it belongs to nature, and since Christ had two natures, He must have two sonships (an eternal divine sonship and an adopted human sonship).
 - The orthodox position is that it belongs to the person. Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the Son of the Father. They share the same nature (divine), but what makes them distinct is the personhood revealed in the divine Fatherhood and Sonship.
 - So Christ the divine Son cannot have an additional human sonship unless He has a separate human personality. They claimed this was Nestorianism.



Charlemagne vs. the Popes

- Charlemagne's view of his own authority brought him into conflict with the papacy. He believed he had divine authority to regulate church affairs within the Empire.
 - Some of the churchmen of the time made this very argument, and it is not unique to them.
 - The Council of Chalcedon in 451 essentially said the same about the Emperor. But Byzantium had no equivalent of the papacy. So it may have gone without much controversy in the East, but it will be challenged in the West. The battle between bishop and king in the West is something the East never dealt with.
- Charlemagne saw himself as the pope's superior. For example, in 790, he decreed the Western church's position on the Iconoclastic controversy in the East without consulting the Pope.
 - It was a middle way between the opponents and advocates of icons in the East. It rejected bowing to them ascribing miracles to them, but it did see them as useful for adorning buildings and educating those who were illiterate. They also agreed that special honor should be given to the cross.
 - This opposed the position of the East, but it doesn't last since by the 10th century, the West completely swung over and went further than the East.
- A second example of Charlemagne assuming his authority over the Pope was against Pope Leo III's veto, Charlemagne supported the insertion of the *filioque clause* into the Nicene Creed.
 - From the 6th century onwards, the Western Church added this clause concerning the procession of the Holy Spirit. This caused great controversy between the East and West leading to great protest in the East.
 - They claimed the Western Church had no authority to alter one of the ecumenical creeds. They also said the alteration is false, that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son, but the Father alone. Leo agreed with the Carolingian position, but he opposed the insertion of the clause into the Creed. Charlemagne ignored him.

Church vs. State

- So it was an uneasy relationship between the two.
- There will be many versions of this conflict throughout the Middle Ages.
- The kings often see themselves as appointed by God and the popes should just be their advisors.
- The popes in contrast see the need for church independence from state control.
 - To secure that, they wanted to place the state under the church's control. This is why Leo crowned Charlemagne.
- As long as state and church were united as two aspects of a single society, this tension and conflict were inevitable.
 - Those who supported the pope were called papalists, and those that supported the emperor were called imperialists.



Western Worship under the HRE

- Education in the West, though improved by the Carolingian Renaissance, was still weak compared to the days before Rome fell.
- This led to a decrease in the education of many in the clergy, which affected the worship in the West.
- It became activity driven, meaning the priests did the sacraments: baptisms, the Lord's Supper, etc. But they didn't preach.
- They didn't write sermons.
- Instead, they would read homilies (sermons written by others).
 - This eventually became the standard practice in the Western Church.
- Also, Charlemagne did not want separate liturgies in his empire. So he had his bishops create one standard liturgy centered around communion. They called it Mass.
- This is when high mass and low mass developed.



Eucharist in the Holy Roman Empire

- The Eucharist in the Middle Ages, however, was usually only taken by the clergy, and not the laity (very different from the patristic age).
 - By the 6th century, the laity could only receive it three times a year: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. By the time of Charlemagne, it was reduced to just Easter.
- In the parish churches, the priest did communion each Sunday, but he ate all the bread and drank the wine by himself. The congregation just had to watch.
- Ironically, in Rome, the laity was able to take communion every week. It was like that in the East too.
- Why did the Germanic West move in this direction?
 - Many of the laity were scared that they were unworthy. And since it was increasingly believed it turns into the body and blood of Christ to be re-sacrificed for sin (this was a heavily debated issue during the 9th century), they were even more afraid.
 - Also, the clergy encouraged people to take it only if they are serious and will renounce worldliness. Many of the German laity knew their faith was shallow.
 - They were just following their political leaders.



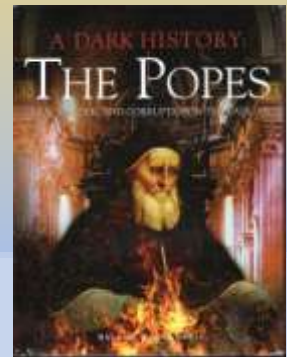
The Decline of the Holy Roman Empire

- The Holy Roman Empire was not to last.
- Charlemagne's son ruled according to his dad's ideas, but without the same talent. At the end of his reign, he divided the empire up between his three sons.
- Upon their deaths, their territories divided even further, and tribal chiefs started taking the title of king over smaller territories.
 - Some became dukes and high nobility.
- The title Emperor passed to German kings.
- The papacy took the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire to reassert their supreme authority over church affairs.
- They succeeded at this, but with the loss of the HRE, they also lost their greatest protectors.
- Henceforth, many popes will be controlled by Roman nobility.



Chaos Follows the HRE's Decline

- While this chaos ensued, it was made worse by new Islamic invasions, the Viking invasions, and the Magyar invasions.
- Many Christians in the West thought the world was coming to an end. They expected it would happen in AD 1000.
- The years (896-904) were particularly dramatic. There were 10 popes in 8 years, each one killed by his replacement.
 - Murder, immorality, and treachery were the way of the popes.
 - Some call this period "The Rule of the Harlots." This is because many popes were ruled by wicked women behind the throne – mistresses and mothers.
 - The reason this is important is the papacy survived as an institution despite this.
 - Having set land, recognized authority, standard practices in the church, and political alliances with those in power, it did not matter who the pope was or how wicked he was.
 - The institution was now indispensable to Europe.
- The Chaos gives way to a new social order known as feudalism.



Feudalism: The New Social Order

- Feudalism is a socio-economic system based on land ownership.
- Under the sons of Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Empire lost a unified control of Western Europe.
 - To fill in the gap, local regions developed their own form of government that came to feudalism.
- Each feudal territory (fief) was headed by leader who operated like a monarch – this was prior to the rise of the nation-state and great kings.
 - In the fiefdom, there is a small castle housing the lord of the manor. Out from the castle was a road and along it, hut-type houses with thatched roofs. At the opposite end of the road would be a Christian church with a priest – in a city it would be a bishop.
 - The upper class lived in the castle – the noble lord, knights, ludes (servants of the lord, but part of the upper class).
 - Out in the grass huts were the serfs and peasants. There was a huge distinction between the upper and lower classes. Before long, this class strata became a caste system in which people were born into their class.
 - Along the road, a small market, would emerge and the lower class would consist of bakers, blacksmiths, peasants, and serfs. All life centered around the manor and the will of the upper class who had everything they wanted.
 - The two central foci were the castle and church.



Feudal Benefit to the Papacy

- How did this advance the cause of the papacy?
 - The only hope for the lower classes was the church, and so they depended on the bishops and priests.
- The church was separated from this feudal distinction between the classes. Both the upper and lower classes needed the sacraments from the church.
- The lower classes committed themselves to the church because their only hope was in the next life.
- Also, the church was not under the political authority of the lord of the manor, but instead the pope.
 - Yet, both were under the spiritual authority of the bishop of Rome.
- Since there were no nation-states, great kings, or emperors who could control entire states, no central person was able to lead it all.
 - Yet, the bishop of Rome already ruled a monolithic structure that was in every fiefdom – the church. This added to his prestige since with religion he held authority that no one did in terms of politics.
- Some priests even became wealthy and some even became lords of the manor.
- It is for these reasons, many refer to 3 classes: upper, lower, and priestly.



Conclusion

- The Middle Ages led to an increase of prestige and power of the papacy.
 - The Papal States; the crowning of Emperors; etc.
- At the same time, it led to a temporary revived Roman Empire known as the Holy Roman Empire. It had a Catholic/Frankish character.
 - This, as well as doctrinal controversy, widened the rift between the Eastern and Western Churches.
- Much of Medieval European culture (Christendom) was developed in this time.
- The same is true of church practice, especially with regard to worship.
- The decline of the Holy Roman Empire ushered in a long period of chaos and violence.
- Feudalism filled the void and provided stability that will last until the modern age.