

The Middle Ages: an era of faith

AD 500-1500

In the wake of the barbarian invasions, the authority of the Christian Church brought a thousand years of unity to Europe



EUROPE TAKES SHAPE

Charlemagne unified much of Europe by 800, but by the end of the Middle Ages separate nation states had emerged

For 400 years the Roman Empire gave unity and security to the Mediterranean world and to Europe up to, and at times beyond, the Rhine. After the final collapse of Rome in 476, when its last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by the Goths under the leadership of Odoacer, the Christian Church gave Europe a similar measure of unity for the next 1000 years. The pope was more powerful than the barbarian kings who tried to recreate the Roman Empire; for the pope claimed his authority descended from St Peter, to whom Christ had said: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church."

The pope's armies were bishops and clergy and Crusaders. His Master and his creed were supernatural. The core of Christian belief defied reason. The believer held that Christ was both God and Man, that he bore the sins of the world, that he had risen from the dead, and that all who believed this would inherit eternal life. The notion of the Trinity of God as Father, Son and Holy Ghost may have been difficult to grasp, but the Christian ideal of the

Pagan rites absorbed

By a stroke of tactical genius the Church, while intolerant of pagan beliefs, was able to harness the powerful emotions generated by pagan worship. Often, churches were sited where temples had stood before, and many heathen festivals were added to the Christian calendar. Easter, for instance, a time of sacrifice and rebirth in the Christian year, takes its name from the Norse goddess Eostre, in whose honour rites were held every spring. She in turn was simply a Northern version of the Phoenician earth-mother Astarte, goddess of fertility. Easter eggs continue an age-old tradition in which the egg is a symbol of birth; and cakes which were eaten to mark the festivals of Astarte and Eostre were the direct ancestors of our hot-cross buns.

Growth of the monasteries

In every country the popes had another powerful and dedicated instrument: the monasteries. The notion of withdrawal from the world to escape from its vices and seek salvation through self denial and even physical agony was very old. St Simeon Stylites (390-459) set a standard for victory over the flesh when he spent 35 years on top of a pillar 60 ft high at Telanessa, near Antioch in Turkey. But the monks, as well as withdrawing from the world, also returned to it, their energies renewed by prayer and meditation, to carry out the work of Christ.

Monasticism in the West owed its shape largely to one man of vigour and command, Benedict (480-543) of Nursia - the modern Norcia in Umbria, north-east of Rome. He had been so outraged by what he saw as the vice and corruption of Rome that he spent three years as a hermit in a cave at Subiaco in the wild hill country of Latium to the east of Rome. The fame of his piety brought him disciples and he moved to Monte Cassino. There he set up a monastery on the site of an ancient temple of Apollo - a monastery which still survives, despite having been destroyed on five occasions, the last by Allied bombers in 1944.

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH is that body of Christians which accepts the pope as its head on earth. It looks upon him as the representative of Christ and as the successor of Saint Peter in a direct line. It believes that special powers given by Christ to Peter have descended to the pope. It also believes that the pope is infallible in all matters of faith and morals when he speaks *ex cathedra*, or by virtue of his office. Decrees on these matters, when defined by the pope or by him and the bishops in council, are held of necessity to be free from error. Roman Catholics believe that by special protection of the Holy Spirit their church has kept unchanged the doctrines laid down by Jesus Christ. They also believe that it is impossible for error to creep into the official teachings and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church concerning faith and morals.

In 529 Benedict drew up his rule or *regula*, which was gradually adopted by most monasteries in the West. The *regula* required the monks to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and their monastery was organised as a family, under the abbot - the word comes from the Greek *abbas*, meaning father. Life in 6th and 7th-century monasteries was severe but not harsh, being divided between sleeping, working and praying. The monks had a pound of bread, two cooked dishes and a measure of wine each day, though eating meat was forbidden.