

As a courtesy to our friends in the network media, The Maximus Group is pleased to provide you with this comprehensive summary:

Celebrating 2000 Years of Christianity

by Gloria Thomas

Life of Christ

Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ entered human history announced by an angel. The event of His birth is the pivot from which the history of man is counted. That day, 2000 years ago, arrived like all the others, yet time itself was divided by it into before and after. Christ lived on earth for thirty-three years, teaching, healing, and bearing the sins of the world. Through His Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension He opened paradise for us and changed the world forever. An infinity of good works has been done in His name. His teaching of love, justice for all, and the dignity of every human person is at the heart of our civilization.

1st Century

The First Century saw the establishment of the Church at Pentecost. St. Stephen, a deacon of the Church, was the first to give his life for Christ. He was stoned to death in Jerusalem for his preaching. The missionary journeys of the Apostles extended throughout the world -- James went to Spain and Thomas to India. Peter and Paul went to Rome. The Roman Empire waged a war of extermination against the Church for three centuries. Virtually all the Apostles were martyrs. John wrote the Apocalypse in exile, completing the text of Sacred Scripture.

2nd Century

In spite of bloody persecution, the Church flourished. Every convert to Christianity risked public hatred, confiscation of property, torture and death. Martyrs, believing in eternal life, refused to renounce their faith. Christian Apologists began writing a reasoned defense of their religion in the face of pagan literary attacks. Christians were thrown to the lions or brutally murdered in the circuses built by Romans for public entertainment. From its beginning, the Church established a vast system of charity. Rich families changed their palaces into churches, schools, and hospitals for the distribution of alms. Many gave their entire substance to the poor.

3rd Century

Serious disputes between Bishops resulted from the struggle to establish the Apostolic Tradition free from error throughout the Church. Many Christians fled persecution, hiding in the wilderness and suffering every privation. Some found the desert wastes a fertile soil for spiritual growth. These became hermits, refusing to return to the wicked cities of the Empire. Christians worshiped secretly in the catacombs, tunneled beneath Rome. Christians everywhere were ordered to sacrifice to the Roman gods or die.

4th Century

The Fourth Century began with the bloodiest of all persecutions. But it ended with the imperial establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Emperor Diocletian, believing Christianity was a threat to the Roman state, condemned multitudes of the faithful and burned sacred books. Nine years later, a miracle happened. Emperor Constantine and his whole army saw a resplendent cross above the midday sun. It was inscribed IN THIS SIGN CONQUER. After the promised victory, he decreed liberty of worship, full freedom and restitution of property to all Christians. The era of persecution was over. In 330 Constantine moved the seat of the government of the Empire to Constantinople where it remained until its collapse in 1457. The Council of Nicaea defined the Holy Trinity, confirming the divinity of Christ. The Nicene Creed remains the essential declaration of Christian faith.

Jerome translated the Scriptures into the common language of the Empire. His Vulgate is still the official Latin version of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church. The Emperor Theodosius established the Roman Empire as a Christian state. Heretics were outlawed. Pagan rituals were forbidden. He published a decree making agreement with the Bishop of Rome the test of orthodox faith.

5th Century

Augustine, Bishop in North Africa, integrated classical philosophy with early Christian thought. His insight profoundly influenced the Church throughout succeeding ages. Barbarians from the north invaded the Empire. The resulting stream of refugees and captives carried the Gospel into new lands. Pope St. Leo the Great heroically met the invader Attila the Hun face to face, persuading him to spare Rome. When the faith was threatened by factions in the Church, he defined the dogma of the Incarnation and defended the divinity of Christ. St. Patrick had been a captive and slave of the pagan Irish. After his escape he returned to convert all Ireland before he died. Clovis, king of the barbarian Franks, was converted by the example of his Christian wife Clotilda. He and three thousand of his army were baptized on the same day.

6th Century

The Dark Ages was a time of territorial struggles and social upheaval. Cruelty was commonplace and men grasped at gain with brutish abandon. In all this chaos, the Church was the only stabilizing force. With the virtual disappearance of schools, monasteries preached the Gospel, served the poor and sick, instructed the young, copied and preserved manuscripts, improved agricultural techniques, and provided sanctuaries of faith and charity from the hostility abroad. Monks and nuns were among the most learned scholars of the early Middle Ages. The kingdoms of the Franks, the Britons, and the Lombards were all the subjects of mass conversions resulting from the faith of their Catholic queens, Clotilda, Bertha, and Theodolinda. In Constantinople, the Emperor Justinian infused the Roman law with Christian principles. He built the great Hagia Sophia. Pope St. Gregory the Great was a Benedictine monk who established the papal states and the liturgical use of Gregorian Chant.

7th Century

The great monastic establishments of Ireland sent forth a stream of missionaries into pagan Europe. St. Columban founded numerous monasteries there. St. Isidore of Seville, Spanish bishop and educator, was the best scholar of his day and the father of Spanish literature. A new religion founded by the Arabian Mohammed exploded out of the desert and took possession of Palestine, Cyprus and all of Northern Africa in fifteen years. Many Christian churches completely disappeared. Theological controversy ripped through the Eastern Church. Pope St. Martin I defined the dogma of the human and divine natures of Christ to settle this controversy. He was put to death by the emperor at Constantinople who wanted to control the Church. St. Maximus, known as "The Theologian," was a statesman and monk of Constantinople. Among the foremost theological writers of the Greek Church, he died a martyr in defense of orthodoxy and in support of Pope St. Martin I. The Pantheon in Rome was built in ancient times to honor all pagan gods. Pope St. Boniface IV made it a Christian church to which he moved from the catacombs the bones of the martyrs who had gloriously triumphed over these gods.

8th Century

Boniface, bishop and martyr, was called the Apostle of Germany. He was a great missionary. He chopped down the tree held sacred by pagans of Northern Europe. Iconoclasm was the attempt of the emperors at Constantinople to suppress the veneration of images and to ban the crucifix. It convulsed the Eastern Church. The popes at Rome resisted, and at length icons were restored. Pepin of France conquered Northern Italy and donated it to the Church, giving the Pope a political power independent from Constantinople. Alcuin and Bede were great British scholars and educators. Alcuin set the model for schools, which resulted in a revival of learning throughout Europe.

9th Century

Charlemagne, King of France and conqueror of Europe, was crowned the first Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in 800. The Pope thus established a partnership between the religious and political spheres of European civilization. The monks Cyril and Methodius, two brothers from Thessalonica, became missionaries to the Slavs. They invented the Slavic

alphabet and translated the Bible into the Slavic tongue. Viking invasions inflicted great injury on the Church. They destroyed hundreds of monasteries and pillaged churches along the rivers of Europe. Alfred the Great was an ideal Christian prince. He promoted education and translated books from Latin into English for his subjects. He was a great warrior, although he was never the aggressor. After a tremendous struggle against the invading Danes, England was united under his reign. Feudalism was the political order of the day. Overlords gave land to vassals in exchange for military and other services. This land was worked by serfs, who were bound to it. Every level of society received protection and benefits from services rendered to a higher order. The Church with its land holdings participated.

10th Century

This century, often called the darkest hour for the Church, still had many great saints. Matilda, Queen of Germany, was renowned for her vast charities and personal involvement with the poor. The Abbot of Cluny, Odo, developed the reform that ultimately enveloped the whole Church. Nuns were often very cultivated, as was the Benedictine Hroswitha, poet and dramatic artist. Saint Dunstan of England, abbot and able statesman, is considered one of the greatest saints in Anglo-Saxon history. Clerical offices were bought and sold. Often feudal lords would sell monasteries or whole dioceses to laymen, and much of the Church's prestige withered away. Eastern European monarchs, like the beautiful and powerful Olga of Russia, determined the conversion of their nations by their own conversion from paganism.

11th Century

Bold Popes implemented drastic reform. So powerful was Pope Gregory VII that he excommunicated the Holy Roman Emperor, which absolved his subjects from their allegiance. Art, music and gothic architecture flourished. Guido of Arezzo is credited with the invention of musical notation. He revived the people's piety by the exaltation of chant. Morals were at a low ebb. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was a great philosopher and director of souls. He awakened the Christian conscience of England. In a period fraught with incessant feuding, the Popes pressed a brilliant idea, "The Truce of God." In cooperation with secular authorities, they limited warfare to only a few days in each week. The unity of the Church was breached in 1054 when the Greek patriarch charged Rome with heresy and broke away to form Eastern Orthodoxy. This schism built a wall of separation that has lasted to the present day. The Crusades began. They were a unified response of the Christian peoples from all over Europe to the continuing Islamic conquests of Christian lands.

12th Century

The Pope commissioned Bernard of Clairvaux to travel throughout Europe and inspire the people to fight the infidels in a second crusade. A mystic and celebrity in his time, his writings have made him a permanent influence in Christian history. The blind leading the blind is a symbol of heresy. Albigenses were heretics in Southern France. They became so numerous, immoral and violent that the Pope commissioned an army to suppress them. The seven crusades extended over three centuries. They began with great religious zeal but ended in failure. The ravages of war and self-interest dishonored their original inspiration. Eighty European universities were founded during the Middle Ages. Many, like the Sorbonne, survive to the present day. It was the Age of Logic. Great confidence in the powers of human reason fueled all disciplines. The monk Gratian's work in Christian justice has had a vast influence in the development of law.

13th Century

Religious ardor pervaded every area of life. Saints Elizabeth and Gertrude are contrasts of holiness in court life and convent. Elizabeth of Hungary gave her husband's fortune to the poor. Gertrude the Great, a Benedictine mystic, devoted herself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Logical analysis reached its peak in Scholasticism. Founded on divine revelation and guided by reason, it made the whole fabric of Christian thought lucid and harmonic. St. Thomas Aquinas was its great champion. Innocent III was the strongest of all Popes in worldwide political affairs. He forced a respect for the rights of the Church and moral law. Franciscans and Dominicans, mendicant orders, were established. They took a vow of poverty, renounced all ownership and relied on donations, hence the name, "Begging Friars." St. Louis of France, the ideal Christian king, led his nation in two crusades. The growth of heresy threatened the state, whose laws were based on Christianity. The Church conducted investigations, and the guilty were turned over to the state to be punished. The ultimate punishment was burning at the stake. This was the beginning of the Inquisition.

14th Century

Catholic faith and fervor steeply declined. Speculation ran riot, as the authority of both clergy and dogma were questioned. Due to violent and unstable political conditions in Rome, the seat of the papacy was withdrawn to the city of Avignon in Southern France. Fear of the influence of the French monarch over Church affairs caused resentment throughout Europe. The great mystic, Catherine of Siena, convinced the Pope to return to Rome from Avignon. Vincent Ferrer, Dominican monk, converted thousands to the faith in his preaching campaigns in Spain, France and Italy. Between 1346 and 1350, the Black Plague devastated Europe. At least a fourth of the population died; no sector was harder hit than the clergy, who administered the sacraments to the dying. With an Italian Pope in Rome, French cardinals elected another Pope and seated him at Avignon. Thus, two claimants to the papacy and two sets of cardinals co-existed. Finally, three Popes were simultaneously claiming authority. A council at last resolved the conflict.

15th Century

Political struggles in Italy led to nostalgia for the triumphs of ancient Rome. Greatly encouraging the arts, this idealization of pagan civilization undermined the influence of the Church. Joan of Arc heard angelic voices calling her to save France. This young girl led the French armies to victory. Captured by the English, she was burned at the stake. The invention of the printing press created an explosion of culture. Publishing greatly magnified the influence of even insignificant ideas. The invention of the astrolabe enabled sailors to navigate beyond the shoreline into the open sea. This was an Age of Discovery and Christian expansion. Missionaries accompanied Columbus on his second voyage to the new world. Humanists turned from divine things to focus on worldly affairs. In the moral decline that followed, many great preachers arose. They traveled from city to city inciting huge crowds to make bonfires of their playing cards, wigs, lewd paintings and other vanities in the public squares.

16th Century

This century separates medieval from modern times. The promise of new discoveries challenged the established order. Protestantism began. Martin Luther changed the course of history when he nailed his protests of Catholic practices to the church door. Henry VIII established himself as head of the English church and broke all relations with papal authority. John Calvin created another sect without sacraments or tradition, built on his own interpretation of Scripture and a merciless doctrine of predestination. This revolt was bloody. Churches and monasteries were seized. Religious art and Catholic books were destroyed by the followers of the new sects. Armies were formed. Persecutions and expulsions raged on both sides. The Catholic defense was a complete restatement of its apostolic tradition at the Council of Trent. While Europe was in the throes of this catastrophe, Catholic missions throughout the world thrived. Mary, the mother of Jesus, appeared in Mexico to a simple peasant and left a painting of herself on his garment. This miracle of Our Lady of Guadalupe inspired the conversion of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans. The Jesuit Order was created to defend and propagate the Catholic faith. Even today they take a special vow of obedience to the Pope.

17th Century

While Europe became a checkerboard of Christian factions, Catholic missionaries spanned the globe. Often persecuted and martyred, many gave their lives for the salvation of souls. European Protestants fought Catholics for territory in the Thirty Years War. A treaty allowed each ruler to determine the religion of his region. These absolute monarchs overshadowed the church, further weakening the influence of religion in the affairs of men. Scientific discoveries proliferated. Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood, Newton developed calculus, and Galileo invented the telescope. New religious orders rose to counteract the secularization of education.

18th Century

The 18th century popularized unbelief, and faith declined rapidly. Championing naturalism, philosophers abandoned the Church and Revelation. The rise of Freemasonry fanned the flame of revolution. As impiety grew, piety also grew. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, magnified by the visions of Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque, spread widely. The great St. Alphonsus Ligouri wrote his immortal works of moral theology. The French Revolution was a revolt against the authority of both the Church and autocratic state. More than 35,000 priests and 100 bishops were exiled. Many were martyred,

including the sixteen Carmelite nuns of Compiègne. The revolution overflowed France. Napoleon occupied Rome, taking the Pope captive. All Europe became embroiled in this struggle.

19th Century

This was a century of embattlement for the Church worldwide -- political oppressions in the West and massacres in the East. In Vietnam alone, 100,000 Christians were killed. It was an age of skepticism and blind faith in progress. Revolutions broke out repeatedly. In the West, political upheaval replaced authoritarian governments with democracies. In the name of religious freedom, church properties were confiscated and monastic institutions abolished. Clergy and religious were massacred in Madrid and Paris. In 1806, the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved after 1000 years. The Papal Estate was reduced from vast holdings to the tiny circumference of the Vatican. Countering the rampant religious confusion of the age, the Church defined the dogmas of papal infallibility and the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Protestants continued dividing into more and more specialized sects. In her autobiography, St. Theresa of Lisieux showed the simple nature of holiness. St. John Vianney spent from 16 to 18 hours a day hearing the confessions of 2000 pilgrims each year. Blessed Josephine Bakhita was a renowned religious who had been a pagan slave in Africa.

20th Century

We are a part of all that has gone before. In our age, the tree of knowledge of good and evil has borne grievous fruit. Atomic weapons are poised to destroy the earth. More than ever, this world needs the savior. Rapid change marks our time. From East to West, tyrannical atheistic governments have hounded to death throngs of Christian martyrs. The Church has also suffered treachery from within. St. Pius X condemned the Modernist errors against dogma and inspiration. The Second Vatican Council affirmed the Catholic faith in the context of the modern world. Many traditions were discarded in its wake. Mother Teresa of Calcutta established houses of charity worldwide, but the period following the council has been troubled by dissent. Many priests and religious abandoned their vocations. In a time of unparalleled sexual immorality, Paul VI reaffirmed the Church's condemnation of contraception and abortion. Catholics everywhere have united in defense of the sanctity of human life.

Courtesy of The Maximus Group, 600 Churchill Court, Woodstock, GA, 30188 - 678-990-9032 - www.maximusmg.com

("Celebrating 2000 Years of Christianity" includes an exhibit of narrative paintings by Gloria Thomas, each representing one century. For more information contact St. Martin de Porres Lay Dominican Community, New Hope, KY 40052, 270-325-3061.)