

# Forging the Faith

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Saturday session 1

1. The church at Rome in the fifth century divided its income 4 ways:  $\frac{1}{4}$  going to the bishop. Which of these didn't get  $\frac{1}{4}$  share?

- A. other clergymen
- B. building maintenance
- C. missions and evangelism
- D. the sick and the poor

## 2. What are catechumens?

- A. demons from Greek mythology that were half cattle, half human
- B. Christians who met in catacombs
- C. People undergoing instruction for baptism
- D. The candles used in the 5<sup>th</sup> century to examine a person's throat during an exorcism

3. Perhaps the most exhausting 5<sup>th</sup> century ascetic ritual was performed by the “acoimetai”. What did they do?

- A. they had to preach the gospel to a different tribe every day of the year
- B. they had to remain attached to a 40 kilogram cross at all times
- C. they had to swim slightly over 10 kilometres a day to signify being “born of the water”
- D. they had to sing a praise song every three minutes round the clock, seven days a week

4. In 419AD, according to Roman law, a fugitive was safe if he could get within 16 metres of what?

- A. a large group of well-armed friends
- B. a priest
- C. the eucharist (if it had been consecrated)
- D. a church door

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## 1: The Early Church Period

# Periods of Church History

- Early Church History – up to 500/600AD
- Medieval Church History – up to 1500 AD
- Reformation Church History – 1500-1650AD
- Modern Church History – 1650 onwards
- These are not simply dates chosen at random. They represent changes of world-view in society & Church.

# Perennial questions

- What is the Church?
- Where/who is the authority?

# Changing demographics

- As the Church spread, it became increasingly Gentile in composition.
- Jerusalem ceased to become the centre of the Church.
- Therefore the Church encountered an increasing diversity of languages and cultures.
- Could Christianity adapt to this encounter?

# A period of martyrdom

- Began with Neronian persecution in 64AD
- About 10 separate periods of persecution during the next 250 years
- Persecution was therefore not continuous; there were peaceful years
- Persecution was often localised, not Empire-wide

# Emperor Nero



# Why martyrdom?

- Christians were seen as cannibals
- Christians were seen as incestuous and immoral
- Christians were seen as anti-social
- Christians were seen as anti-Rome
- Christians were seen as atheists
- Christians were blamed for natural disasters

# 100AD: two competing church models

- Bishop-centred model; conformity to bishop advocated at all costs. Seen clearly in the writings of Ignatius.
- Congregation-centred model; open to travelling prophets and teachers, but there is a need to judge their motives. Seen clearly in the Didache.
- When Jesus didn't return immediately, the emphasis of congregations changed from preparing to leave together to preparing to live together.

# An equation

- Unity = unanimity + uniformity.
- Agree? Disagree? Why?
- This shows one of the profound differences between our period and all earlier periods of Church History.
- The ability to conceive of a unity that can co-exist with (and even embrace) disagreement and diversity is a profoundly Modern characteristic.

# Gnosticism: an early challenge

- Dualism: matter versus spirit
- God could have nothing to do with matter (therefore could not be guilty of creation)
- Between the most high God and the defilement of creation were many layers of intermediate beings
- Creation was the fault of an intermediate being who had the power to create and was stupid enough to do so (Gnostics saw this as the God of the Old Testament)
- Salvation = knowledge of the “system”

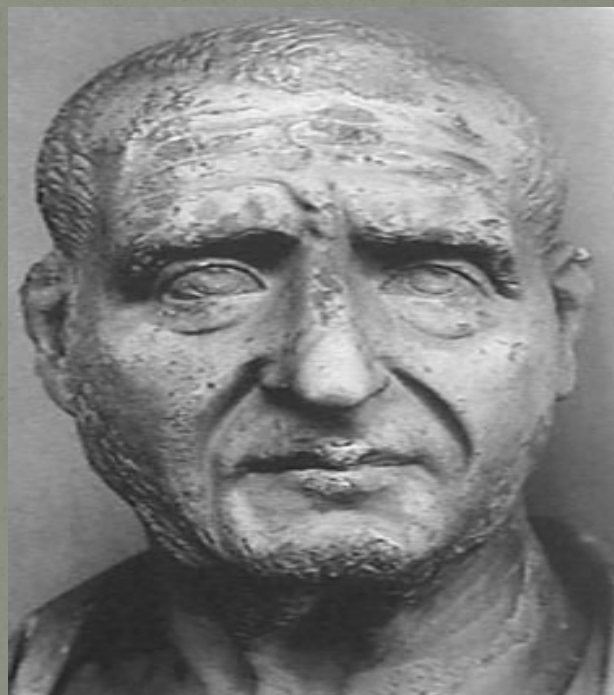
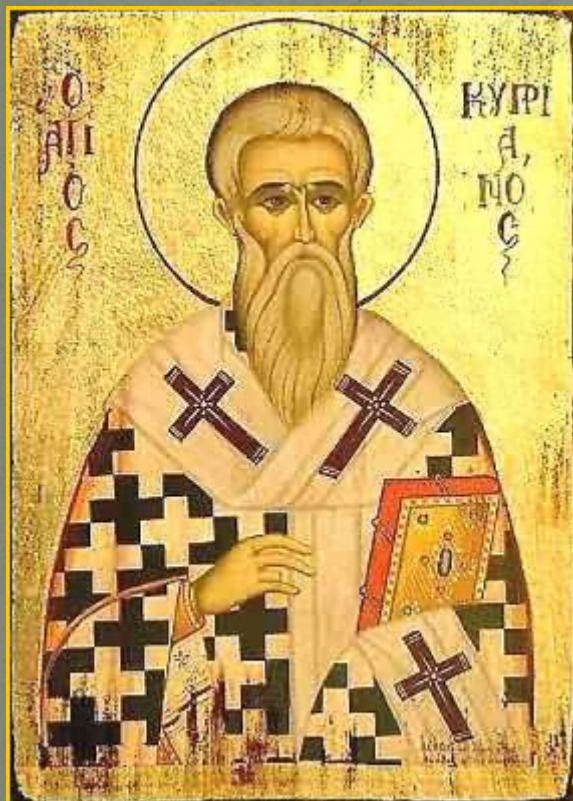
# 2<sup>nd</sup> century heretics & ascendancy of bishops

- Marcion
- Montanus
- By late 2<sup>nd</sup> century, bishops were the unchallenged leaders in Church affairs
- Heresy had contributed to the need to find an authoritative voice
- By 220AD, bishops could forgive sins, especially concerning readmission to Church
- Monarchical bishops (all other roles subservient)
- Concept of apostolic authority in bishops cf. Irenaeus

# Cyprian: pastoring in persecution

- Decian persecution in 250s
- The problem of the lapsed
- The Church as Christ's bride; the Church as Ark
- "Whoever does not have the church as a mother no longer has God as a father."
- Bishops, penance and re-entrance to the Church
- All bishops equal; none had pre-eminence
- Bishops effectively controlling God's grace

# Cyprian & Decius



# The Church “defeats” Rome

- A great irony: through Constantine’s conversion, Christianity, the “underdog” won over the Empire
- This victory had come at great cost through persecution, not warfare
- Immediate benefits included: relief from persecution, full recognition of Christianity, and State sponsorship of Christian activities.
- But there were disadvantages...

# Emperor Constantine



# The Church-State relationship

- The Church-State relationship would be a dominant factor in history for the next 1500 years
- This meant that for the first time there was an alliance between the rich & powerful and the Church
- The risk of nominalism: for the first time Christianity could lead to material gain
- The potential for State interference in Church affairs

# Defining the Faith: Church Councils

- The end of persecution brought a period of peace for theological reflection and a series of Councils to debate doctrine
- Council of Nicaea (325) was the first of these. Convened by Constantine (who was concerned for unity) the key issue was the deity of Christ: was he human or divine? Or somehow both?
- Arius argued that Christ was created (not eternal), Athanasius argued that Christ was fully God

# Further Councils

- Council of Constantinople (381): if Christ is fully God, how do the divine and human natures co-exist in him? Does the divine replace the human?
- Council of Ephesus (431): how do the two natures co-exist? Does the divine dominate?
- Council of Chalcedon (451): the two natures co-exist but remain distinct.
- The last two Councils had the benefit of the agreed NT canon, but all the Councils demonstrated lack of unanimity amongst committed believers.

# The Church strengthens; Rome falls

- 150 years of Council debates solidified core theology
- The Church benefited from 150 years of State support
- The Church tended to increasingly reflect the hierarchy of the Empire
- But the Empire was beset by barbarians
- 452: Leo I and Attila the Hun. Leo's claims accepted in the West but rejected in the East.
- 476: Rome falls. Barbarians take over.
- The Church becomes the mortar of society for the next millennium.

# Theological developments

- Mary was early seen as playing a key role in God's redemptive plan (as antithesis of Eve), although prayer wasn't addressed to her until the 5<sup>th</sup> century
- The idea of Mary's *perpetual* virginity though, was of 2<sup>nd</sup> century origin, but was debated for some time.
- By 4<sup>th</sup> century, concept of purgatory was being taught.
- First complete list of 27 NT books is from Athanasius in 367; Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, James & 3 John remained doubtful for some time, while others, eg. the Apocalypse of Peter & Shepherd of Hermas found favour

# Where is the authority at the end of the Early Church period?

- The Church is now centred on Rome and the role of Pope is pre-eminent
- The Church is a hierarchy and there is a clear divide between clergy and laity
- Laity approach God indirectly, i.e. through saints
- Anyone who is not clergy trying to minister/preach is immediately suspect & probably a heretic
- The Bible is in Latin only and clergy interpret it

# Group questions

- Break into groups to discuss questions