13 The Early Christian Church

Almost all of the information we have on the early years of the Church comes from the New Testament. The Letters of Paul and the other apostles are the earliest documents of the New Testament, and from them we can deduce the main features of the early church. The other parts of the New Testament, Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, Revelation were written in their present form at a time when the first generation of "eye-witnesses" was disappearing. The Acts of the Apostles is our main source for historical information about this period.

The first Christians were, like Jesus, Jews, and like Jesus they experi-enced opposition and "persecution" from the Jewish leaders. The early deaths of Christian "martyrs" (witnesses) recorded in Acts are the result of this conflict (Stephen, James). From the beginning the church actively spread its message, while the Jews felt that as the Chosen People, they had above all to keep themselves apart from the "gentiles" (other nations). The Jews were a recognized nation within the Empire, their religion was that of an allied people, but not liked because of its exclusivity.

Christianity first found non-Jewish members among those who, tired of the official Roman religion, were interested in the monotheistic, historical faith of the Jews. The anti-legalistic teaching of Jesus ("Love one another"), the element of mystery offered by the proclamation of his Resurrection from the dead, the promise of salva-tion after death in his coming Kingdom, all had great appeal for such searchers after God. Where the Jews had demanded that those sharing their faith should be circumcised and keep all their complicated traditions and laws, the Christians only asked them to receive Baptism and believe in the faith taught by the Apostles, expressed in what is still called the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God the Father almighty
maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried,
he descended into Hell,
the third day he rose again from the dead,
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God, the Father almighty;
He will come to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end;
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy, catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

In each place there must have been varying traditions but it seems that everywhere the Church's main celebration took place in the night between Saturday and Sunday. In each local assembly (ekklesia) there was normally one episkopos (president of a council, giving the English "bishop") and a council of elders (Greek presbyteroi, from which comes the word "priest"). There were also diakonoi, deacons who serve the needs of the community in concrete ways, especially helping those who are poor or sick (the Greek root of "deacon" means "serve", as also that of the Latin "minister"). Some communities were certainly more democratic than others, and the bishops of Churches that had memories of having been founded by Paul or another of the Apostles felt particular responsibility for maintaining the purity of the Apostolic teaching.

The assemblies seem to have sung hymns, read the Scriptures, and received instruction from the bishop. There were, of course, no special church buildings in the early centuries and it is difficult to imagine the practical solutions they found when the numbers grew too large for ordinary houses to hold.

At the end of the worship, after the Catechumens (people not yet baptized, but preparing for baptism) had left, the bishop presided the Sacrament of the Eucharist: a celebration at which, like Jesus during the Last Supper, he took bread and wine, gave thanks to God for the salvation brought by Christ, repeated the story of the Institution: "This is my body, this is my blood," and then distributed the communion.

This was felt to be the supreme mystery of the Christian faith and no non-Christian was allowed to witness it. That may explain why John's Gospel has long passages about eating Jesus's body and drinking his blood, but does not report the actual story of the Institution. Later, when church buildings arose, the mystery was preserved by hiding the table (altar) behind curtains and screens, and forbidding ordinary people to come too close to it.

One of the earliest books of Christian prayers is that known as the Didache, parts of it may date from the 1st century. The following texts related to the Eucharist are especially well-known and admired:

> As touching the eucharistic thanksgiving give thanks thus. First, as regards the cup:
>
> We give you thanks, Father,
> for the holy vine of your son David,
> which you made known to us
> through your Son Jesus;
> yours is the glory for ever and ever.
>
> Then as regarding the broken bread:
>
> We give you thanks, Father,
> for the life and knowledge
> which you made known to us
> through your Son Jesus;
> yours is the glory for ever and ever.
>
> As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains
> and being gathered together became one,
> so may the Church be gathered together
> from the ends of the earth into your kingdom;
> for yours is the glory and the power
> through Jesus Christ for ever and ever.
>
> And after you are satisfied thus give thanks:
>
> We give you thanks, Holy Father,
> for your holy name,
> which you have made to tabernacle in our hearts,
> and for the knowledge and faith and immortality,
> which you have made known to us
> through your Son Jesus;
> yours is the glory for ever and ever.
>
> Almighty Master,
> you created all things for your name's sake,
> and gave food and drink to us for our enjoyment,
> that we might render thanks to you;
> but you have given us spiritual food and drink and eternal life
> through your Son.
>
> Before all things we give thanks
> that you are powerful;

yours is the glory for ever and ever.
Remember, Lord, the Church,
deliver it from all evil,
perfect it in your love;
and gather it together from the four winds--
even the Church which has been sanctified--
into the kingdom which you have prepared for it;
for yours is the power and the glory for ever and ever.

May grace come and may this world pass away.
Hosanna to the God of David.
If any one is holy, let him come;
if any one is not, let him repent.
Maran Atha. Amen.

(Maran Atha is an Aramaic prayer. It means both 'The Lord is coming' and 'Come, Lord.')

Very quickly, there were groups of Christians in all the main cities of the Roman Empire. When Paul arrived in Rome for his trial he was welcomed by members of the church there. The Greek and Latin word for "church", ecclesia, is that used for the Assembly in Greek democracy, and for great gather-ings of Israel as God's People in the Greek Old Testament, the Septu-agint. From the beginning, there were people of every class, rich and poor, present at the worship and meetings of the church, offering possibilities for sharing wealth or for tensions. The Gospel spread amazingly rapidly, thanks in part to the ease of communications offered by the Empire's almost universal Greek.

Persecutions and Martyrdom

Many people imagine that in the early centuries, Christians were always being fiercely persecuted. This is far from the truth. Except for the drama of Nero's accusation against the Christians after the fire of Rome in 64, Rome did not actively persecute the Christians. They were seen as part of the wider 'Jewish problem' and not something separate. Only later, as the number of Christians grew, and the ceremonies celebrating the living emperor as a god were developed, did conflict arise. It may be that in the East, where there were many Jews, they were able to make trouble for the Christians with the authorities, but this was not general. Thus Trajan, in his reply to Pliny's letter asking how Christians should be treated, told him that although the Christian religion was illegal (perhaps because it was "secret" and individual), he should not search for Christians, but act if one was accused directly (the accuser had to direct the prosecution and was punished if the case was found not proved).

The first century of the church's history is almost unknown to us apart from the New Testament. Sudden outbursts of persecution leave their mark in stories about heroic martyrs. In 155(?), in Smyrna (now Turkey) the 86 year-old bishop Polycarp (who was John's disciple) was seized and burned, although he was much respected in the city. In Lyons (France) in 177 a mob forced the martyrdom of 48 Christians, including the brave young slave Blandine. At this time, many people believed terrible rumors about the Christians' practices. They were said to murder children, eat human flesh, commit incest. Persecution was usually a result of some kind of mob-hysteria, not an official policy. Christians had by now begun to try to communicate their beliefs to educated Roman citizens, not merely to communicate faith, but also to explain that they were loyal citizens of the Empire and not rebels. By 180, we find many Christian groups in North Africa, where the church became for the first time Latin-speaking, Until then, even in Rome, it had mostly used Greek.

The first official, empire-wide persecution only came in 202, under Sep-timus Severus; it was launched for no clear reason, and there were martyrs in Alex-andria, Rome, Corinth, and Carthage. From Carthage we have a document recording the suffering of two young women, the high-class Perpetua and the slave Felicity, partly written as a diary by Perpetua herself, which is most moving. She was hardly more than twenty, married and had a small child.

We were lodged in the prison; and I was terrified, as I had never before been in such a dark hole. What a difficult time it was! With the crowd the heat was stifling; then there was the extortion of the soldiers; and to crown all, I was tortured with worry for my baby there.

Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours. Everyone then left that dungeon and shifted for himself. I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child in their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me. These were the trials I had to endure for many days. Then I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else.

After they are condemned to death, her father keeps the baby at home.

As for Felicitas, she too enjoyed the Lord's favour in this wise. She had been pregnant when she was arrested, and was now in her eighth month. As the day of the spectacle drew near she was very distressed that her martyrdom would be postponed because of her pregnancy; for it is against the law for women with child to be executed. Thus she might have to shed her holy, innocent blood afterwards along with others who were common criminals. Her comrades in martyrdom were also saddened; for they were afraid that they would have to leave behind so fine a companion to travel alone on the same road to hope. And so, two days before the contest, they poured forth a prayer to the Lord in one torrent of common grief. And immediately after their prayer the birth pains came upon her. She suffered a good deal in her labour because of the natural difficulty of an eight months' delivery.

Hence one of the assistants of the prison guards said to her: 'You suffer so much now--what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts? Little did you think of them when you refused to sacrifice.'

'What I am suffering now', she replied, 'I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.'

And she gave birth to a girl; and one of the sisters brought her up as her own daughter.

They are brought to the arena for execution; they are to be tormented by wild animals.

For the young women, they had prepared a mad heifer. This was an unusual animal, but it was chosen that their sex might be matched with that of the beast. So they were stripped naked, placed in nets and thus brought out into the arena. Even the crowd was horrified when they saw that one was a delicate young girl and the other was a woman fresh from childbirth with the milk still dripping from her breasts. And so they were brought back again and dressed in unbelted tunics.

First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.

Then she got up. And seeing that Felicitas had been crushed to the ground, she went over to her, gave her hand, and lifted her up. Then the two stood side by side. But the cruelty of the mob was by now appeased, and so they were called back through the Gate of Life.

There Perpetua was held up by a man named Rusticus who was at the time a catechumen and kept close to her. She awoke from a kind of sleep (so absorbed had she been in ecstasy in the Spirit) and she began to look about her. Then to the amazement of all she said: 'When are we going to be thrown to that heifer or whatever it is?'

When told that this had already happened, she refused to believe it until she noticed the marks of her rough experience on her person and her dress. Then she called for her brother and spoke to him together with the catechumens and said: 'You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and

do not be weakened by what we have gone through.'

At another gate Saturus was earnestly addressing the soldier Pudens. 'It is exactly', he said, 'as I foretold and predicted. So far not one animal has touched me. So now you may believe me with all your heart: I am going in there and I shall be finished off with one bite of the leopard.' And immediately as the contest was coming to a close a leopard was let loose, and after one bite Saturus was so drenched with blood that as he came away the mob roared in witness to his second baptism: 'Well washed! Well washed!' For well washed indeed was one who had been bathed in this manner.

Then he said to the soldier Pudens: 'Good-bye. Remember me, and remember the faith. These things should not disturb you but rather strengthen you.' And with this he asked Pudens for a ring from his finger, and dipping it into his wound he gave it back to him again as a pledge and as a record of his bloodshed.

Shortly after he was thrown unconscious with the rest in the usual spot to have his throat cut. But the mob asked that their bodies be brought out into the open that their eyes might be the guilty witnesses of the sword that pierced their flesh. And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord as the people wanted them to, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Saturus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua. Perpetua, however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.

It is not surprising that many of the onlookers at such scenes came away convinced that the martyrs' faith must be true. Many must have repeated the words heard when old Polycarp had insisted that he alone should be killed: "Look how much these Christians love one another; they are even ready to die for each other."

Those who were killed professing faith in God were thought to have died like Jesus, and so they began to be called 'martyrs' (witnesses) and 'saints' (holy people) although Paul had used the word 'saint' to describe every Christian who had been baptized. People began to venerate the bodies and tombs of the saints, as well as cloths dipped in their blood. Catechumens who were killed before baptism were said to have undergone a 'baptism of blood'. Believers who were imprisoned and tortured but not killed were often referred to as 'Confessors' and treated with special veneration after their release. In Rome, many martyrs were buried in the Catacombs, the underground corridors lined with tombs that were a popular place of burial.

This persecution ceased, but in 212 the emperor Caracalla granted Roman citizenship to almost all the free inhabitants of the lands in the empire. Now, Roman citizens were obliged to acknowledge the gods of the empire, and to make the offerings of the cult of the emperor as god. For a time, this problem was not acute, and it is in these years that Christians first built special buildings for their worship in Asia Minor.

Early Christian Thinkers

At this time, office in the church was becoming socially desirable, many new converts were coming for instruction and baptism, and new thinkers were arising. Irenaeus, a pupil of Polycarp, and bishop of Lyons after the martyrdom of 177 until his death in 202, wrote a number of theological works, especially a defence of Christianity against the Gnostic heresy. He is sometimes called the "first sys-tematic theologian." His most celebrated saying is: "The glory of God is Man alive."

Origen (185-255) is perhaps the first major Christian intellectual, although much of what he wrote is now lost. He was born and lived in Alexandria, where his father was martyred in 202. He became head of the Catechetical School but was later (231) obliged to settle in Palestine. During the great persecution under Decius (250) he was tortured and he died soon afterwards. He was a controversial figure because of the originality of his thought. He was interested in the textual criticism

of the Bible, and wrote commentaries on the Scriptures. a presentation of basic Christianity, an apology for Christianity (Contra Celsum) in reply to an earlier pagan attack. He was highly esteemed by the writers who followed him, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil, and Eusebius.

Quite unlike him, while living at the same time, was Tertullian of Carthage (160-240). He was born into the old world, attracted by the rigours of Stoicism, then became a Christian attracted by the purity of life and the spirit of the martyrs. He was a lawyer by training, a rhet-orician, and his many writings in Latin are a brilliant expression of the most "puritanical" form of non-conformist Christianity. He was by nature an extremist, he joined the most radical groups, expecting the destruction of the evil world at any moment, he resisted any com-promise with the pagan world and its culture. The West received much of its thought on politics and religion from him.

Persecutions and Victory

In 250, at a time when the Empire was threatened with Germanic invasion, the emperor Decius called on all citizens to sacrifice to the gods. Those unable to produce a certificate proving that they had offered the sacrifice would be punished. In the cities, the Christians were unprepared for this, and many chose to make the sacrifice, which made them guilty of apostasy. Much worse was to come. The next emperor, Valerian, from 257-9 set out to suppress Christianity and enforce the cult of the Roman gods. This was the worst of all the per-secutions in the West, many died, perhaps the emperor was tempted by the wealth of the church, which was already considerable.

The final struggle came in 303, when Diocletian ordered the destruc-tion of church buildings, the confiscation of the Scriptures, and pagan sacrifice by the clergy. In 304 he even demanded a universal sacrifice. He realized that now Christianity had spread from the cities to the countrysides, into Armenia and Persia, and was a real threat to the old religion. He felt that the present problems of the Empire came from neglect of gods like Jupiter and Hercules, and the presence of "foreign" religions seemed likely to displease them more. However, he ordered that people were not to be killed, and in 305 he abdicated.

It was only now that the word 'pagan' begins to be used to describe people who follow non-Christian religions. The word originally meant 'rural' and serves to remind us that Christianity spread much more quickly among the urban population of the Empire. 'Paganism' remained strong in the rural areas for many centuries, until it slowly declined into 'superstition' or 'popular religion' and ceased to be felt to be threatening.

In the East, anti-Christian activities continued for a few more years while Constantine was struggling against his rival Maximinus. The final triumph of Christianity came about in strange ways. Constantine believed like many Romans of his time that the sun was the one true God. This cult of the sun was widespread, with the resulting confusion between the physical sun and its symbolic uses; Christians still worship on Sundays. Constantine told Eusebius that he once had a vision of a cross combined with the sun, with the message 'In this sign, conquer.' In 312, when Maximinus could have stayed safely inside the walls of Rome, he suddenly emerged and was defeated at the Milvian Bridge across the Tiber by Constantine's much smaller army. This 'God-given' victory was decisive in Constantine's conversion to faith in Christ as the true Sun of Justice. Soon after it, he was instructed in a dream to use the 'Chi-Ro' symbol of Christ on his standards and coins as a sign of victory.

The outcome of this process was Constantine's Edict of Milan (313), which is more than a simple declaration of tolerance for Christianity; it marks the beginning of the process by which orthodox, catholic Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under The-odosius, who in 391 ordered the final closing of all temples and the abolition of pagan worship.

The Teaching Church

After Origen, the most important name is that of Eusebius (260--340), who became bishop of Caesarea, in his native Palestine, in 314. Origen had lived his years of exile there and Eusebius admired him very much, most of what we know about Origen comes from him. Eusebius was close to

Constantine, whom he admired. His vision and writings are mostly historical, his vision of history is of a conquest of Christian, biblical truth over pagan ideas. His Alexandrian education, though, meant that he respected the achievements of the ancient world, seeing in them a providential Praeparatio Evangelica (prepara-tion for the Gospel, the name of a work in which he shows how even the best Greek philosophy, that of Plato, is equalled by the Bible). His main fame rests on his Ecclesiastical History, inspired by classical history, which traces the history of the church from its beginnings until 324. Eusebius is the model for all later Western ecclesiastical historians (Bede, for example), by his direct quotation of ancient records and authorities.

Eusebius reflects the basic problem of the relationship within Christianity of the two cultures, biblical and classical. Within the church, however, there were other problems. The gravest of these were those forms of teaching called Arianism and Donatism. This latter divided the North African church after the Great Persecution (303-5) when some had surrendered copies of the Scriptures to the authorities (traditores, meaning 'surrenderers', from which the word "traitors"). Later, the extremists in the church refused to accept these people as members of the church, so that in the time of Augustine we find two parallel churches, the Catholic (ready to forgive) and the Donatist (strict, unforgiving followers of the bishop Donatus).

Arianism, though, was an Eastern problem, Alexandrian in origin. Arius was a priest in Alexandria, and in talking of God he seems to have said that the Son, Christ, since he suffered and died, was obviously "inferior" to the Father who is above all that. At the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel, Christians had been challenged by Gnostics who had said that Jesus, being God, could not have been a "real" man. Now they were challenged by the idea that, being a man, Jesus could not "really" be God. Since the church has always wanted to stress that the Gospel is one of reconciliation between God and Man in Christ, ideas which deny one side of the equation matter. Yet the ideas taught by Arius seemed right to many, they spread by missionaries as far as the Germanic Goths who were later going to invade Italy.

Constantine wanted unity among the Christians, so in 325 over 200 bishops met in Nicaea (Turkey) with Constantine presiding to "settle" the problem. The result, eventually, was the "creed" that is called the Nicene Creed, declaring that the Son is "of one substance with the Father." This is the Credo sung in Masses by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven etc. It did not settle the problem, but with time Arianism melted away:

I believe in one God, the Father almighty,
Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things, visible and invisible,
and in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only begotten Son of God,
begotten of the Father before all worlds:
God of God, Light of Light,
True God of True God, begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father,
by whom all things were made,
who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
He was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered and was buried;
the third day, he rose again, according to the Scriptures,
he ascended into Heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He shall come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead,
his kingdom shall have no end.
And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father (and the Son),
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified,
he spoke by the prophets.

I believe one holy, catholic and apostolic church,
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins,
and I look for the resurrection of the body,
and the life of the world to come.

Ambrose and Augustine

The next important name is that of Ambrose (339-397) who was chosen to be bishop of Milan (Italy) before even he had been baptized. Before this he had been a local governor. He exerted great influence over emperors, especially Theodosius, with the aim of having a single, unified church uniting every person in the Empire. He was therefore opposed to "heretical" groups (Arians, Donatists etc.), to pagan religions, and to the Jews. He was outraged when the "Christian" Theodosius in 390 had 7,000 citizens of Thessalonica massacred in a theatre; he excluded him from the church and made him do penance. In writing and preaching, he drew on deep knowledge of Platonic phil-osophy, his sermons helped to convert Augustine, who was moved to tears by his hymns.

Augustine (354-430) is the greatest figure in the transition from classical to medieval (and modern) culture. He was born in what is now Algeria and his mother, Monica, was a devout catholic Christian. He received a classical education and at 19, reading Cicero, discovered the possible depths of philosophy. He therefore turned away from the Christianity of his mother and began a spiritual pilgrimage in search of Wisdom which led him to Manichaeism.

He began to teach rhetoric, teaching at Carthage, Rome and Milan. At Milan he was attracted by the Christianized Neo-Platonism of Ambrose, for his was a tormented psyche, intensely aware of the tensions and contradictions between the visible and the invisible, nature and Grace. In his Confessions, he tells how he was reading the Bible one day, when he found in Paul's Letter to the Romans a key to his distress and realized that he had become a Christian.

Augustine's Conversion (*Confessions*: Book 8)

There was a little garden belonging to our lodging, of which we had the use--as of the whole house--for the master, our landlord, did not live there. The tempest in my breast hurried me out into this garden, where no one might interrupt the fiery struggle in which I was engaged with myself, until it came to the outcome that thou knewest though I did not. But I was mad for health, and dying for life; knowing what evil thing I was, but not knowing what good thing I was so shortly to become.

I fled into the garden, with Alypius following step by step; for I had no secret in which he did not share, and how could he leave me in such distress? We sat down, as far from the house as possible. I was greatly disturbed in spirit, angry at myself with a turbulent indignation because I had not entered thy will and covenant, O my God, while all my bones cried out to me to enter, extolling it to the skies. (...)

Chapter xii

Now when deep reflection had drawn up out of the secret depths of my soul all my misery and had heaped it up before the sight of my heart, there arose a mighty storm, accompanied by a mighty rain of tears. That I might give way fully to my tears and lamentations, I stole away from Alypius, for it seemed to me that solitude was more appropriate for the business of weeping. I went far enough away that I could feel that even his presence was no restraint upon me. This was the way I felt at the time, and he realized it. I suppose I had said something before I started up and he noticed that the sound of my voice was choked with weeping. And so he stayed alone, where we had been sitting together, greatly astonished.

I flung myself down under a fig tree--how I know not--and gave free course to my tears. The streams of my eyes gushed out an acceptable sacrifice to thee. And, not indeed in these words, but to this effect, I cried to thee: "And thou, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord? Wilt thou be angry forever? Oh, remember not against us our former iniquities. For I felt that I was still enthralled by them. I sent

up these sorrowful cries: “How long, how long? Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour make an end to my uncleanness?

I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a girl I know not which--coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, “Tollite, legite; pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it.” Immediately I ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think whether it was usual for children in some kind of game to sing such a song, but I could not remember ever having heard the like. So, damming the torrent of my tears, I got to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon. For I had heard how Anthony (of Egypt), accidentally coming into church while the gospel was being read, received the admonition as if what was read had been addressed to him: “Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me. By such an oracle he was forthwith converted to thee.

So I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the apostle’s book (Paul’s Epistle to the Romans) when I had left there. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof. I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

Closing the book, then, and putting my finger or something else for a mark I began--now with a tranquil countenance--to tell it all to Alypius. And he in turn disclosed to me what had been going on in himself, of which I knew nothing. He asked to see what I had read. I showed him, and he looked on even further than I had read. I had not known what followed. But indeed it was this, “Him that is weak in the faith, receive. This he applied to himself, and told me so. By these words of warning he was strengthened, and by exercising his good resolution and purpose--all very much in keeping with his character, in which, in these respects, he was always far different from and better than I--he joined me in full commitment without any restless hesitation.

Then we went in to my mother, and told her what happened, to her great joy. We explained to her how it had occurred--and she leaped for joy triumphant; and she blessed thee, who art “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.” For she saw that thou hadst granted her far more than she had ever asked for in all her pitiful and doleful lamentations. For thou didst so convert me to thee that I sought neither a wife nor any other of this world’s hopes, but set my feet on that rule of faith which so many years before thou hadst showed her in her dream about me. And so thou didst turn her grief into gladness more plentiful than she had ventured to desire, and dearer and purer than the desire she used to cherish of having grandchildren of my flesh.

He was baptized at Easter 387, to the great joy of his mother. She died suddenly of a fever in the autumn, as they were on the way back to Africa.

I closed her eyes; and there flowed in a great sadness on my heart and it was passing into tears, when at the strong behest of my mind my eyes sucked back the fountain dry, and sorrow was in me like a convulsion. As soon as she breathed her last, the boy Adeodatus burst out wailing; but he was checked by us all, and became quiet. Likewise, my own childish feeling which was, through the youthful voice of my heart, seeking escape in tears, was held back and silenced. For we did not consider it fitting to celebrate that death with tearful wails and groanings. This is the way those who die unhappy or are altogether dead are usually mourned. But she neither died unhappy nor did she altogether die. For of this we were assured by the witness of her good life, her “faith unfeigned, and other manifest evidence.

What was it, then, that hurt me so grievously in my heart except the newly made wound, caused from having the sweet and dear habit of living together with her suddenly broken? I was full of joy because of her testimony in her last illness, when she praised my dutiful attention and called me kind, and recalled with great affection of love that she had never heard any harsh or reproachful sound from my mouth against her. But yet, O my God who made us, how can that honor I paid her be compared with her service to me? I was then left destitute of a great comfort in her, and my soul was stricken; and that life was torn apart, as it were, which had been made but one out of hers and mine together.

While those whose office it was to prepare for the funeral went about their task according to

custom, I discoursed in another part of the house, with those who thought I should not be left alone, on what was appropriate to the occasion. By this balm of truth, I softened the anguish known to thee. They were unconscious of it and listened intently and thought me free of any sense of sorrow. But in thy ears, where none of them heard, I reproached myself for the mildness of my feelings, and restrained the flow of my grief which bowed a little to my will. The paroxysm returned again, and I knew what I repressed in my heart, even though it did not make me burst forth into tears or even change my countenance; and I was greatly annoyed that these human things had such power over me, which in the due order and destiny of our natural condition must of necessity happen. And so with a new sorrow I sorrowed for my sorrow and was wasted with a twofold sadness.

So, when the body was carried forth, we both went and returned without tears. For neither in those prayers which we poured forth to thee, when the sacrifice of our redemption was offered up to thee for her--with the body placed by the side of the grave as the custom is there, before it is lowered down into it--neither in those prayers did I weep. But I was most grievously sad in secret all the day, and with a troubled mind entreated thee, as I could, to heal my sorrow; but thou didst not. Then I slept, and when I awoke I found my grief not a little assuaged. And as I lay there on my bed, verses of Ambrose came to my mind:

"O God, Creator of us all,
Guiding the orbs celestial,
Clothing the day with lovely light,

Appointing gracious sleep by night:
Thy grace our wearied limbs restore
To strengthened labor, as before,
And ease the grief of tired minds
From that deep torment which it finds."

And then, little by little, there came back to me my former memories of thy handmaid: her devout life toward thee, her holy tenderness and attentiveness toward us, which had suddenly been taken away from me--and it was a solace for me to weep in thy sight, for her and for myself, about her and about myself.

Thus I set free the tears which before I repressed, that they might flow at will, spreading them out as a pillow beneath my heart. And it rested on them, for thy ears were near me--not those of a man, who would have made a scornful comment about my weeping. But now in writing I confess it to thee, O Lord! Read it who will, and comment how he will, and if he finds me to have sinned in weeping for my mother for part of an hour--that mother who was for a while dead to my eyes, who had for many years wept for me that I might live in thy eyes--let him not laugh at me; but if he be a man of generous love, let him weep for my sins against thee, the Father of all the brethren of thy Christ.

Returning to North Africa, he set up a kind of monastic community; in 391 he became a priest, against his will, and in 395 he became bishop of the town of Hippo where he served for 34 years. His mind was intensely active, he wrote many works designed to support the catholic doctrines against other groups (Donatists) and against the Gnostic Manichees. He left over 100 works, 200 letters, 500 sermons.

The most famous of his works are the *Confessions* and *The City of God*. The Confessions (c.400) tell the story of his early struggles, his conversion and new life, in a vivid, emotional way. Intensely "personal" in a way nothing written before it had been, it is one of the great classics of spiritual autobiography. In many ways, Augustine invented "modern man" by the depiction of his inner struggles, contradictions, and doubts in the *Confessions*.

In 410, Rome fell to the Goths, and for Augustine this seemed a sign of the end of the world, since Rome was for him the symbol of all civilized culture. So he began to write a book! The City of God (413-426) is the basic work in which Christianity and classical culture are united, thanks to Augustine's vision. This vision is literary in its use of language, Neo-Platonic in its fundamental approach, biblical in its teaching. Almost certainly, no book has marked Western culture so deeply. Yet Augustine is no easy writer, and his ascetic doctrine, his distrust of the physical world (he was deeply

tempted by ambition as well as sensuality), his doctrine of the deep depravity of fallen humanity redeemed only by God's saving Grace, underlie the deep pessimism of what is often called Western Puritanism. Calvinism in particular was deeply influenced by his dualistic vision.

Because of Augustine's writings, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were essentially Neo-Platonic, without realizing it. Until the Renaissance almost none of Plato's works existed in Latin translation and they were not read in the West. Protestant theology remains deeply marked by his influence, in its doctrines of Grace, its concern with (double) predestination, its "other-worldliness", and its love of verbal discourse.

The other great name of these years is that of Jerome (348-420) who was more of a pure scholar than Augustine, who was an intellectual and a pastor. His character was even more complicated than that of Augustine; he found human relations very difficult. His teacher, Aelius Donatus, was the most famous "grammarian" of the age, he wrote two school books on grammar and rhetoric that were used throughout the Middle Ages. Jerome was baptized when he was a student and then went to the Syrian desert and learned Hebrew. He met the great teacher Gregory of Nazianzus in Constantinople, then returned to Rome, where he revised the style of the Latin New Testament then in use.

In 385, he left Rome and travelled to Syria and Egypt to see the monastic communities living there, before settling for the rest of his life in Bethlehem with a community of Roman followers, men and women. There he completed the new translation of the Old Testament into Latin, based on the work of Origen, that became the official Latin Bible until the present age, known as the Vulgate. Jerome's style is the most classical of all the Christian writers, full of echoes of Cicero, Virgil, Horace.

Into the Middle Ages

With the fall of Rome and the collapse of the Empire in the West, the "Dark Ages" came to Britain and Gaul. A number of writers were vital for the transmission of classical values. Orosius came from Spain to be with Augustine and at his suggestion wrote a Christian chronicle history of the world from its foundation, through the Roman empire, until the present (417), using Eusebius' and Jerome's works, and pagan histories. It was the basic work of history for the Middle Ages.

Macrobius (c.420), an otherwise unknown African offical, left two works which the Middle Ages built on: his neo-platonic Commentary on Cicero's Somnium Scipionis (the "Dream of Scipio") by which medieval dream-visions and other dream literature were inspired; and his Saturnalia ("New Year's Party") which is a kind of didactic symposium centred on the meaning and importance of Virgil as the model Rhetorician, but covering many topics. In the Middle Ages it served as a kind of encyclopedia.

Another North African, Martianus Capella (c.410-430), composed a didactic treatise combining prose and verse (Menippean Satire), the "Marriage of Mercury and Philology" in which a personified Philology goes on a journey to heaven with her servants, the Seven Liberal Arts, to be married to Mercury who is god of Eloquence. It gave the idea of the heavenly-ascent allegory to the Middle Ages, and also the outline of the basic course of education in Grammar Schools and Universities until the 19th century: the Trivium of Grammar, Logic (or Dialectic), Rhetoric, after which a student became Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), and the Quadrivium of Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, Music, after which he became fit to teach others, as Master of Arts (M.A.) or went on to study Philosophy and Theology.

The other writer by whom the classics were transmitted to the West is Boethius (480-524). He was of a noble Roman family, and served as consul in 510. His was the last generation to be able to study the Greek classics in Greek, and one of his goals was to translate the works of Aristotle and Plato into Latin, with commentaries reconciling the differences between them. If he had succeeded, Western intellectual history would be different, there would have been no rediscovery of Aristotle in the 12-13th centuries, no ignorance of Plato in the Middle Ages, no rediscovery of him in the 15th century! But after having served under Theodoric the Ostrogoth, he was suspected of treason, put in prison, and finally executed.

While in prison, Boethius wrote his immensely influential Consolation of Philosophy, a mixture

of prose and verse, a dialogue in which the personified figure of Philosophy explains to him how philosophy enables him to live truly as a human being even in absurd and cruel situations such as his. The fundamental question explored in this book is the nature of true happiness.

The work alternates sections in verse with the prose debate between Boethius (who takes the role of the blockhead who needs always to be instructed) and Philosophy. In Book 1 Boethius expresses his anguish in verse, to which Philosophy replies in prose. He contrasts the harmonious order of Nature with the apparent disorder of human life in which people suffer for no just reason:

> 'Founder of the star-studded universe,
> resting on your eternal throne
> whence you turn the swiftly rolling sky,
> and bind the stars to keep Your law;
> at your word the moon now shines brightly with full face,
> ever turned to her brother's light,
> and so she dims the lesser lights;
> or now she is herself obscured,
> for nearer to the sun her beams shew her pale horns alone.
> Cool rises the evening star at night's first drawing nigh:
> the same is the morning star
> who casts off the harness that she bore before,
> and paling meets the rising sun.
> When winter's cold doth strip the trees,
> You set a shorter span to day.
> And you, when summer comes to warm,
> change the short divisions of the night.
> Your power doth order the seasons of the year,
> so that the western breeze of spring brings back the leaves
> which winter's north wind tore away;
> so that the dog-star's heat makes ripe the ears of corn
> whose seed Arcturus watched.
> Naught breaks that ancient law:
> naught leaves undone the work appointed to its place.
> Thus all things you rule with limits fixed:
> the lives of men alone dost you scorn to restrain,
> as a guardian, within bounds.
> For why does Fortune with her fickle hand
> deal out such changing lots?
> The hurtful penalty is due to crime,
> but falls upon the sinless head:
> depraved men rest at ease on thrones aloft,
> and by their unjust lot can spurn beneath their hurtful heel
> the necks of virtuous men.
> Beneath obscuring shadows lies bright virtue hid:
> the just man bears the unjust's infamy.
> They suffer not for forsworn oaths,
> they suffer not for crimes glozed over with their lies.
> But when their will is to put forth their strength,
> with triumph they subdue the mightiest kings
> hom peoples in their thousands fear.
> O you who weave the bonds of Nature's self,
> look down upon this pitiable earth!
> Mankind is no base part of this great work,
> and we are tossed on Fortune's wave.
> Restrain, our Guardian, the engulfing surge,
> and as you rule the unbounded heaven,

with a like bond make true and firm these lands.'

While I grieved thus in long-drawn pratings, Philosophy looked on with a calm countenance, not one whit moved by my complaints Then said she, 'When I saw you in grief and in tears I knew thereby that you were unhappy and in exile, but I knew not how distant was your exile until your speech declared it. But you have not been driven so far from your home; you have wandered thence yourself: or if you would rather hold that you have been driven, you have been driven by yourself rather than by any other. No other could have done so to you. For if you recall your true native country, you know that it is not under the rule of the many-headed people, as was Athens of old, but there is one Lord, one King, who rejoices in the greater number of his subjects, not in their banishment. To be guided by his reins, to bow to his justice, is the highest liberty.

Know you not that sacred and ancient law of your own state by which it is enacted that no man, who would establish a dwelling-place for himself therein, may lawfully be put forth? For there is no fear that any man should merit exile, if he be kept safe therein by its protecting walls. But any man that may no longer wish to dwell there, does equally no longer deserve to be there. Wherefore it is your looks rather than the aspect of this place which disturb me.

Initially, Boethius thinks that everything is the work of Fortune, a personification of blind destiny, who turns the wheel that raises people to prosperity or plunges them into disaster. In which case there is no meaning and no justice in life.

In Book 3, Philosophy prays to God in a much-admired Platonic hymn, before showing Boethius that God is the perfect Good which can alone be the source of true happiness. God here is the Platonic Good rather than the Christian God, but Boethius stresses the omnipotent Providence that ensures that human lives are not unjustly subject to mere chance.

'You who rule the universe with everlasting law,
founder of earth and heaven alike,
who ordered time stand forth from out Eternity,
for ever firm yourself, yet giving movement unto all.
No causes were without you
which could thence impel you to create this mass of changing matter,
but within yourself exists the very idea of perfect good,
which grudges naught, for of what can it have envy?
You make all things follow that high pattern.
In perfect beauty you move in your mind a world of beauty,
making all in a like image,
and bidding the perfect whole to complete its perfect functions.
All the first principles of nature you bind together
by perfect orders as of numbers,
so that they may be balanced each with its opposite:
cold with heat, and dry with moist together;
thus fire may not fly upward too swiftly because too purely,
nor may the weight of the solid earth drag it down and overwhelm it.
You make the soul as a third between mind and material bodies:
to these the soul gives life and movement,
for you spread it abroad among the members of the universe,
now working in accord.
Thus is the soul divided as it takes its course, making two circles,
as though a binding thread around the world.
Thereafter it returns unto itself and passes around the lower earthly mind;
and in like manner it gives motion to the heavens to turn their course.
You carry forward with like inspiration these souls and lower lives.
You fill these weak vessels with lofty souls,

and send them abroad throughout the heavens and earth,
and by your kindly law you turn them again to yourself
and bring them to seek, as fire doth, to rise to you again.

'Grant then, O Father, that this mind of ours
may rise to Your throne of majesty;
grant us to reach that fount of good.
Grant that we may so find light
that we may set on you unblinded eyes;
cast from our minds the heavy clouds of this material world.
Shine forth upon us in your own true glory.
You are the bright and peaceful rest of all your children
that worship you.
To see you clearly is the limit of our aim.
You are our beginning, our progress, our guide, our way, our end.'

The work ends with a long discussion about the nature of Providence and the possibility of human freedom when everything is already known to God's eternal mind. The themes of the work are classical commonplaces, and the work is above all remarkable for its self-restraint; for although Boethius was certainly a Christian, he nowhere uses faith as an easy escape from difficult questions. He always refers to the possibilities available to the philosophical mind, whether Christian or not.

King Alfred, Chaucer, and Queen Elizabeth, are among those who translated the Consolation into English. It was one of the most important works of "practical philosophy" in the Middle Ages, when many people were always struggling to understand the workings of "Fortune"and Providence in life.

Less familiar, but just as important, Cassiodorus (490-583) should be better known. He followed Boethius as consul and in other offices, then retired, after failing to create a Christian university in Rome. He spent at least 10 years in Constantinople, then returned and created a monastery on his land in Calabria (Italy), the Vivarium. The most important feature of this monastery, created at about the time when Benedict was founding the first Benedictine monasteries at Subiaco and Monte Cassino, is its stress on the intellectual activities of the monks. The Vivarium is above all vital for Western civilization by its library. Other monasteries, like that founded in North England in the following century by Benedict Biscop, followed its example, and these monastic libraries, hidden in remote areas, preserved the classical manuscripts that played a vital role in the moments of "Renaissance": that led by the monk Alcuin under Charlemagne, that of the 12th century (Abelard) which saw the founding of the modern universities, that of the 14th century led by Petrarch, that of the 16th century led by Erasmus. Cassiodorus also organized the translation of various Greek works into Latin.

The link between the scientific learning of Antiquity and its redis-covery in the high Middle Ages is very often Isidore of Seville (620-636), a bishop who wrote books about history, science, theology, but whose most important work was the Etymologiae or "Origins", an encyclopedia in the tradition of similar works by Boethius and Cas-siodorus, in which he notes briefly everything he thinks worth knowing about everything.

Finally, Prudentius (348-405) was the writer of great Latin hymns and, most important, of the allegorical epic the Psychomachia (the battle of the soul) from which all medieval allegories and Morality plays derive, thanks to its portrayal of the soul torn between the forces of Good and Evil represented by personified Virtues and Vices, good and bad angels.