

OLLI Lecture #2  
July 2, 2013  
“Pontifical Rome”

As our tour group strolls through Rome this October, we'll be walking through streets so dense in history that it will be impossible to explain what we're seeing in just a few days. As I said last time, Rome began as a fishing village on the banks of the Tiber River in pre-historic times and ended up as a capital of one of the world's greatest empires, enduring in that status for half a millennium. When the founders of our American Republic decided to locate its capital in a swamp in what we now call Washington, D. C., they named the stream that flowed from Capitol Hill, the Tiber.

Well, the Tiber wasn't in the fourth century AD what it used to be. The river that once supplied water to a population of a million in the days of Caesar Augustus in the first century AD had by the fourth century become a far more modest tributary of the Mediterranean, especially after the Emperor Constantine (272-337 AD) had decided in 312 AD to move the imperial capital east to the Bosphorus and created its new location at Constantinople, modestly named after himself. Rome wasn't then a backwater, but its status was significantly diminished. In fact, when the city was attacked in 410 AD by the Germanic Visigoths and again later by German Lombards its chief defender was not an agent of the Roman empire but the leader of the Christians in the city, its *etiokotoi* or “bishop.”

You'll recall that at first the Roman elite viewed Christians as a subculture of Judaism, the rebellious religious sect in Palestine that refused to avow credence to the Emperor as a deity. The Christian sect of Judaism also was reluctant to serve in the Roman army; hence, here was a group that spurned the loyalty oath and avoided military service. From the Roman point of view the Christians were worse than Jews and thus were both persecuted. Under Nero (37-68 AD) and subsequent emperors both Jews and Christians were hunted down and subjected to horrendous persecution.

But by the fourth century, however, Christians were so numerous and politically important in Rome that they were a military asset to Constantine (272-337 AD) in his quest to gain the imperial title. Thus when he defeated his opponents in this contest, Constantine granted tolerance to the Christian religion. In 312 he also gave the bishop of Rome (Miltiades) the right to occupy the Lateran Palace in Rome, thus establishing that place in what later would become the Vatican.

The decree of tolerance led to problems, however, because once the Christians were free to go public, their theological disputes about whom Jesus was their disputations led to rioting in the streets and other forms of civil strife. Constantine decided to put an end to all that and convened a conference of bishops at Nicea (modern day Turkey) to resolve these disputes once and for all. The result was the Nicene Creed, still widely used in Christian churches to this day. It affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity—Jesus as the earthly manifestation of God, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit, all in one. Don't ask me to explain it, but it satisfied Constantine (who later converted officially to Christianity). In 391 AD, one of his successors, Theodosius I (347-395), actually proclaimed the Christian religion to be the official religion of the Empire, thereby abandoning the old pagan gods.

Not everyone agreed. An Egyptian theologian, Arius of Alexandria (256-336 AD) dissented from the Nicene creed and proceeded to send forth missionaries from Alexandria to preach a different understanding of Jesus, emphasizing his junior role to the Father. While officially the Empire stayed with Constantine theologically, Arius and his Arians managed to convert many of the roaming Germanic tribes to his interpretation. Thus, when the Germans conquered Gaul, Spain, and even Italy itself they (as heretics) could not count upon the support of the Christian hierarchy.

I use that word, "hierarchy," advisedly. It emerged very slowly in the declining years of the Empire. Our knowledge of this development, especially in Rome, is sketchy at best for at least two reasons: 1) the Christian community was severely persecuted by several emperors prior to Constantine and therefore was not inclined to leave us many

records of their activities; and 2) they fully expected that the world would be ending promptly (and the Roman world did). In the midst of this chaos, leaders of the Christian community emerged as rallying points for some kind of order and their *etiokotoi* (bishops) gained authority. Ultimately, it was “papa” [Pope] Leo I (440-461) who would take charge of negotiations with Attila the Hun (406-453) and convince him (at a fee) to remove his hordes from Italy.

That crowning achievement buttressed the prestige of the Roman bishop who could and did claim that both St. Paul and St. Peter had visited Rome and been martyred there by secular authorities in the first century AD. Thus Rome was claimed to be “the holy See” and its bishop to be foremost among all Christian clergy. This **Doctrine of Petrine Supremacy** asserted that since St. Peter had to have been bishop of Rome all of his successors were correct in claiming that they were the “rock” upon which the church was based. Once more, not everyone agreed, especially Christian clergy in the Greek-speaking portion of the Empire, which by the fourth century was far more populous and wealthy than the western and Latin portion of the Roman world. In 1054 this disagreement led to a formal division of Christianity when the Pope Leo IX (1002-1054 AD) excommunicated his counterpart in Constantinople, Michael Cervlarius, (1000-1059) and the Patriarch did the same to the Pope. Hence, the division of Catholic and Orthodox Christians remains to this day.

While these disputations were going on among the Christians, at least two important things developed: 1) the rise of Islam, which divided the Mediterranean world into three parts; and 2) the advance of the Germanic tribes (many of them Arians) into what had previously been the western Roman empire. As the great medieval historian Geoffrey Barraclough has noted in his study of The Medieval Papacy:

*Few institutions in the whole of history have shown an equal capacity for survival. Its history is the story of the way it came to terms with the different environments in which it was placed: the Roman empire, the Germanic kingdoms of the early middle ages, the national*

*states which were visibly rising in the fifteenth century, and today the 'third world' of Asia and Africa. It is characteristic of the church, whose ultimate end is not in this world, that it has never irrevocably identified itself with any existing social or political system. From most it has taken, and to all it has given; and in the process it has transformed itself and its position in the world.*

Decisive in this evolution was the relationship between the Bishop of Rome and Clovis, king of the Franks (466-511), who had captured much of Gaul (modern day France) when Roman authority collapsed. Clovis came to reject Arianism and embraced the Roman Catholic faith in 496 AD. In time, the Bishop of Rome (Pope Leo III) recognized his successor, the King of the Franks (Charlemagne 742-816) as Roman Emperor, thus undermining the authority of the sitting Emperor in Constantinople. Historian Joseph Strayer described that moment as follows:

*On Christmas Day, 800, as Charles knelt in prayer before the altar in the old church of St. Peter, Pope Leo suddenly placed upon his head a crown, and the people proclaimed him as emperor. If we can trust an account written a little later they cried three times: 'To Charles, the most pious Augustus, crowned of God, the great and peace-giving emperor, be life and victory.'*

Well, Charles had another 16 years to live and through his conquests Charlemagne expanded Roman Catholic belief well into central Europe and even into the Spanish March (north of Barcelona). Squabbling among his successors, however, prevented his monarchy from becoming a powerful centralized entity. The same cannot be said of Pope Leo's successors.

Incrementally over the following decades, the claims of the papacy to monarchical powers grew extensively, reaching a crisis point in 1077 when Pope Gregory VII (1020-1085) excommunicated Charlemagne's successor, the Emperor Henry IV (1050-1106) and obliged him to seek humble redemption at a papal retreat at Canossa, Italy. It has been argued that Henry's humiliation at the feet of Hildebrand Bonizi, the son of an Italian blacksmith, was an act of political

cunning (since as a priest the Pope could not refuse a plea of contrition). In the years that followed, the office of the Holy Roman Emperor grew weaker while Hildebrand was successful in imposing the pledge of celibacy on the Latin clergy everywhere and establishing the College of Cardinals (mostly Romans) as the electoral body for his successors.

The pinnacle of the papal monarchy was reached under Pope Innocent III (1161-1216) who presided over the Roman bishopric from 1198-1216. He claimed that as St. Peter's successor he was in fact sovereign over all the reigning monarchs of Latin Christendom. When, for example, in 1209 that he and King John of England (1166-1216) fell into dispute, Innocent excommunicated him. Of course that action so weakened John's hold on the throne that in 1215 John was obliged to sign the *Magna Carta* in the face of his noble opposition.

One of Innocent's successors, Boniface VIII (1294-1303) went even further, proclaiming in the papal bull *Unam Sanctum* that "it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman pontiff."

Jerusalem had fallen to Muslim invaders in 1187 just before Innocent ascended to the papal throne. He was determined to reverse that defeat and summoned what is now called the Fourth Crusade. The first had been summoned in 1095 by Pope Urban II (1042-1099) after a plea for help from the Byzantine Emperor, Alexerios I. Through circumstances that I do not now have time to detail, the fourth Crusade missed its mark and instead successfully invaded Constantinople, thus weakening what remained of the Eastern Roman Empire. The crusaders sacked the place.

Innocent also fostered a crusade against the Albigensians, a group of Christians in southern France who espoused what he determined was heretical belief. They were slaughtered by the thousands by the emerging French monarchy and to make sure that no such heresies were to be tolerated in the future Innocent established the Inquisition to seek out such devious thinkers.

If you've been listening closely, you might detect a sub-theme here—the collision of the papal monarchy with the emerging national monarchies of Latin Christendom: the excommunication of the German Emperor; the excommunication of the King of England; the reliance by the papacy on its good right arm, the King of France. All of that went awry in 1305 when the College of Cardinals, badly divided between French and Italian clerics, elected Raymond Bertrand de Got (1264-1314), to assume the papacy. He took the title of Clement V and removed the Holy See to Avignon, France, where it remained through seven papacies until 1377. Then things got really messy.

The College of Cardinals elected an Italian, Pierre Roger de Beaufort (1329-1378) to the Pontificate and, as he termed himself Pope Gregory XI, he promptly decided to return the papacy to Rome and shortly thereafter died in office. When the College of Cardinals convened again to elect his successor, it was invaded by a Roman mob and in the resulting chaos two men—one Italian and one French were proclaimed to be popes. An ecumenical council convened at Pisa in 1409 to resolve the dispute, elected their own pope, but the two successors refused to step down. Now there were three.

This entire mess was resolved by the Council of Constance (1414-1415) which elected Odo Colonna (1378-1431) to the papacy. The scion of a prominent Roman family, the Council had elected him as Martin V (1417-1431) after convincing all of his rivals to step down. Thereafter, councils were not convened to elect popes; that privilege remained with the College of Cardinals (mostly Romans). They turned soon to Spaniards (the Borgias) and thereafter to more Italians (the Medicis).