

**The Decline in the North African Church**  
**with reference to the state of the Church from 100 AD to 640 AD**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER of THEOLOGY

at the

SOUTH AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

in

January 2012

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*The opinions expressed in this thesis do not necessarily reflect the views of the  
South African Theological Seminary.*

## DECLARATION

I hereby acknowledge that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted to any academic institution for degree purposes.

Richard Coombs.

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Richard John Coombs  
January 2012

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My greatest thanks is to my Lord Jesus Christ, who graciously called me to himself and gave me the privilege of entering ministry. He has given me the opportunity to study at South Africa Theological Seminary and, by his grace and mercy, I have been able to complete these studies.

I am grateful to Dr. Raymond Martin, my supervisor, who guided and encouraged me with a warm heart during its progress. It was a privilege to meet and stay with him in his home in Allentown, Pennsylvania and be able to talk through various issues of this topic.

My thanks are also due to all the staff of South Africa Theological Seminary for their kindness and encouragement.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of the various members of the Australian Board of Middle East Christian Outreach (MECO) Australia.

I wish to thank my family for their patience, prayers and love during my M. Th. studies.

Finally, I would most especially like to thank my wife, Margaret, for bearing the brunt of my responsibilities with patience and understanding. She has shared my joys and difficulties during this period. I would like to share the happiness of completing this thesis with her.

Richard John Coombs

January 2012

## SUMMARY or ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the reasons for the decline in the North African Church. It is generally considered that the spread of Islam brought about the destruction of the North African Church between the seventh and the eighth centuries.

The Church began its history with encouraging growth and its message and witness spread through the Roman world. This culminated in Christianity being more readily accepted as 'one of the many religions' through the declaration of the Edict of Milan by Constantine in 313 AD.

Difficulties also, soon arose, both externally and internally to the Church. The external pressures came through persecution (notably Decius in 250 AD and Diocletian in 303 AD). The internal pressures came about as different theologians and Churches argued over matters of polity and doctrine. Some of these tensions arose from such issues as Church governance, worship and the relation of the Church to State.

This thesis seeks to analyse the various reasons for the decline of the Church in North Africa during the period 100 AD - 642 AD.

- What social, political, cultural and religious reasons might have impacted on the decline of the Church?
- What role did doctrinal 'heresy' play in this decline?
- Was it because of the coming of Islam in the seventh century?

My objective is to note that there were a variety of factors that influenced the decline of the Church during this period of time. I will have shown that the rise of Islam during this time had little or no influence upon the decline of the Church for this period.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **A Concise History of the Church in North Africa**

The aim of the present chapter is to give a concise history of the North African Church, paying particular attention to its beginning, expansion, and decline. To this end, the dissertation classifies the history into five periods:

- the beginning of the Church (c30 AD - 200 AD);
- the persecution and expansion of the Church (200 AD - 313 AD);
- the Church and the Christianised Roman Empire (313 AD - 430 AD);
- the Church under the Vandals and the Byzantine Empire (430 AD - 642 AD); and
- and the decline before invasion by Islam (642 AD - 709 AD).

#### **1.1 The Commencement of the Church (c30 AD - 200 AD)**

When Christianity first came to North Africa, and how the Church began there, is uncertain because of limited resources and information. Concerning the question of where the gospel arrived, some historians are agreed that the gospel may have



reached Carthage, both westwards from Egypt and southwards from Rome, and then spread rapidly in the second century along the coast of North Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the birth of the Church in North Africa, two main thoughts concerning the beginning of Christianity are generally accepted amongst scholars: the one is its arrival in the first century; the other is during the second century. The former depends on the Bible and old traditions, and is chiefly supported by missionary historians, while the latter relies on the Early Church Father's writings such as Tertullian's *Apology*, which is supported by most Church historians.

### 1.1.1 North African Society

There were three main social groups in North Africa: the Berbers, descendants of the ancient Berbers, who were mainly farmers and labourers dwelling in the villages and desert; the Phoenician or Punic element, which made up the middle class; and the Romans, who formed the upper class, owning property and estates and who also managed the leading business enterprises. Accordingly, three popular languages were spoken at the time: Berber, Punic, and Latin.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the Latin age, the educated classes and Church leaders spoke and wrote in Greek until the beginning of the third century. However, Greek does not seem to

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<sup>1</sup> See Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965), p. 37; J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), p.10; John Foster, *The First Advance* (London: SPCK, 1991), pp. 37-41; Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed* (Harpender: Tamarisk, 1993), pp. 58-64; Phillip Schaff *History of the Christian Church* vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp.26-28; K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. II (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp.97ff

<sup>2</sup> Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 84.

have been used generally in daily life in the way that Latin and Punic were. Later, Latin culture replaced native and Canaanite customs, and Latin was generally spoken in the Christian Church.<sup>3</sup> Despite successive foreign dominations, however, the native Berbers do not seem to have been dominated by either Greek or Latin influences. The Berbers still remained as Imazighen, meaning 'free men,' and lived under the influence of their traditional religions like Saturn.

## 1.1.2 The beginning of Christianity in North Africa

### 1.1.2.1 The first century theory

The possibility of the arrival of the gospel in the first century is accepted without question by many Church historians and missionary historians. Some historians base their theories upon the testimony of the Bible, specifically Acts: 2:9-11<sup>4</sup>; 8:26-40; 11:20; 13:1-2; and 21:8.<sup>5</sup> Relying on such biblical references, John Foster believes that African Christians had already had a key role in spreading the gospel in the first century.<sup>6</sup> Herbert Kane, a missionary historian, also insists that the Church established itself in Cyrene. This is dependent upon the testimony of Luke concerning an African called Simon from Cyrene, who carried the cross of Jesus,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J.W.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church* (London: Methuen & Co., 1953), p.79.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:10, 'Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome; Cretans and Arabs - we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues'. (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> See Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, pp. 58-64; Phillip Schaff *History of the Christian Church*, vol. I, pp.26-28; K. S. Latourette vol. II, pp.97; Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 37; J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, p.10; John Foster, *The First Advance*, pp. 37-41.

<sup>6</sup> John Foster, *The First Advance*, pp. 37-41.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark 15:21; Romans 16:13.

and seemed to have been a Christian. His two sons, Alexander and Rufus, were also well known to the Christians for whom the Gospel of Mark was written.<sup>8</sup>

Besides the evidence of the Bible, the expansion of Christianity in the first century can be confirmed by several historical references. Tertullian testifies to the conversion of the indigenous tribes, like Imazighen and the Moors, where the Romans did not reach.<sup>9</sup> Tertullian says that the expansion of Christianity in the area did not result from the *Pax Romana*, but from individual itinerant Christians.<sup>10</sup> John C. Thiessen also mentions the movement of early Christian refugees from Jerusalem to Morocco to avoid the persecutions of Titus in 70 AD.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Robin Daniel refers to the early Christian graves found in Cyrene among the tombs of the Jewish community.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.1.2.2 The second century theory

It is claimed by some that the North African Church commenced in the second century with the "blood of martyrs". On the one hand, Boer argues that Christianity had probably been established in Carthage at the beginning of the second century under Roman influence.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, based on historical records, such as *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius or *Apology* of Tertullian, and various archaeological proofs, most Church historians insist that the Church was established at the end of

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<sup>8</sup> See Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, p.10; Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews* 7. Re-quoted in Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews* 7. Re-quoted in Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> John Caldwell Thiessen, *A Survey of World Mission*, p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 59; J. C. Thiessen, p. 182.

<sup>13</sup> Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, p. 25.

the second century.<sup>14</sup> The first record is that a number of Christians were found in a little town called Scilli,<sup>15</sup> in Numidia, far beyond Carthage.<sup>16</sup> Eusebius seemed to identify these Christians with the first martyrs of North Africa in Scilli, who were accused of carrying 'books and letters of Paul'.<sup>17</sup>

According to *Ecclesiastical History*, seven male and five female Christians, from the city of Scillium, in Numidia, were all executed in Carthage for the sake of the gospel on the 1st of August 180 AD.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, it is believed that the African Church was inaugurated by martyrdom, and furthermore it is argued amongst historians that the place where the Church began was Scilli not Carthage.

### 1.1.3 Status of the Church during the first two centuries

With regard to the condition of the Church, two major features should be considered: one is the enormous growth of the number of Christians, and the other is the translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Latin.

On the one hand, it seems that North Africa already had a large population of Christians by the end of the second century. Tertullian, in his *Apology*, written in Carthage in 197 AD, mentioned the expansion of Christianity in the Roman world:<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Henry Melvin Gwatkin, *Early Church History to A.D. 313* (London: Macmillan, 1912), p.237; J.W.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church*, pp. 55-56; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*; p.91; F. F. Bruce, *The Growing Day*, p.33;

<sup>15</sup> Often used as 'Scillium' in modern Tunisia

<sup>16</sup> See Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, vol. I, p.188; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p.91.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1995), p.34.

<sup>18</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, in *A New Eusebius*. pp. 41-42; J.W.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church*, pp. 55-56; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p.91; F. F. Bruce, *The Growing Day*, p.33; Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1967), p.218;

<sup>19</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 37 - Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Tertullian Parts*. vol.XI. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 (repr.)

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you - places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum - we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.<sup>20</sup>

We do not know the exact number of Christians in North Africa at this time, but we are able to estimate the number of Christians in Carthage as approximately ten percent of the population, from Tertullian's *To Scapula*.<sup>21</sup> Tertullian tells Scapula, the governor of Africa, of many thousands of multitudes of men and women, persons of both sexes and every age and rank.<sup>22</sup> However, it does seem that the mass conversion to Christianity among native peoples, such as the Berber and the Punic, was rare in this area. The Christianising of the Punic population would have meant their Latinization, and this they strongly resisted.<sup>23</sup>

Another factor, which should be mentioned here, is the development of the Episcopal system. The Church had already been organised and controlled under bishops. It is not certain when the term 'bishop' was used for the first time, nor how Church government was activated. Philip Stafford Moxom maintains that the president-bishop began to lay claim to a teaching, as well as to a ruling function, by the end of the first century.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, it is strongly believed amongst historians that the first translation of the Bible in North Africa from Hebrew into Latin, and miscalled Itala, occurred

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<sup>20</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> W. E. Addis, *Christianity and the Roman Empire* (London: The Sunday School Association, 1893), pp.45-46

<sup>22</sup> Tertullian, *To Scapula*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church* (London: Clarendon, 1922), p. 111.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Stafford Moxom, *From Jerusalem to Nicaea* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895), p.65ff

before 200 AD. It was probably this translation which was frequently quoted by Tertullian.<sup>25</sup> If this notion is correct, it is likely that the North African Church rather than Rome was the first Latin-speaking Church in the world and the first centre of Latin theology.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Christian writings from the first and second centuries have two common characteristics due to the influences of Hellenism: they are all written in Greek and they are relatively small in quantity.<sup>27</sup> The Roman Catholic Church, too, had only used a version of the Psalms and of the New Testament at that time. So, this translation is thought to have been the model for St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate, published in the fourth century.<sup>28</sup>

## **1.2 The Expansion and Persecutions of the Church (200 AD - 313 AD)**

For two and a half centuries, the North African Church encountered three connecting events: the expansion of Christianity, two great persecutions, and controversial ecclesiological schisms - as the result of persecutions. The schisms will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **1.2.1 The Expansion of the Church**

Even in times of persecution, the progress of Christianity seems to have been especially rapid in the third century. The Christian gospel, according to Cyprian,

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<sup>25</sup> See Phillip Schaff *History of the Christian Church* vol. I, p.28; W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), p.347; Addis, W. E., *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, p. 46; Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 37; Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, p.217. Compared to them, Rowan Williams tells of the Latin translation made between the second and the fourth centuries (See Rowan Williams, 'The Bible,' in *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, ed. by Ian Hazlett (London: SPCK, 1991), p.89.)

<sup>26</sup> J.W.C. Wand, *A History of the Early Church*, p.79.

<sup>27</sup> J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p.120.

<sup>28</sup> W. E. Addis, *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, p. 46.

had spread everywhere in all parts of the provinces by 250 AD.<sup>29</sup> There are two main opinions amongst historians concerning the reasons for the expansion of Christianity during the third century in North Africa. K. S. Latourette sees the 'rapid Romanisation' and the mass conversion of heretical communities<sup>30</sup> as the main reason while J. S. Mbiti sees the similarity of African culture with Christianity as a main factor.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence of the expansion of Christianity, the worship of Saturn, a traditional religion, almost ceased between 240 AD and 275 AD.<sup>32</sup> The Church seems to have been strongest in the cities, mainly within the Latin-speaking portion of the population. Therefore, the conversion of both the Punic and Berber tribes seems to have been rare in this era.

However, we could not conceive of the expansion of Christianity without considering the development of the Church system, specifically that of the bishop. As mentioned above, the Episcopal system had already been introduced into Africa in the first century. As early as the middle of the third century, the Christian Church and its bishop were accepted as a normal part of the community in most cities of Roman Africa. According to Stephen Neil, every town, and almost every village had its bishop, whereas the rest of the Christian world had bishops only in cities.<sup>33</sup> There seems to have been a great increase in the number of bishops through the third century: seventy-one African and Numidan bishops assembled at Carthage in 220 AD.

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<sup>29</sup> J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, pp. 10-11; Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* 1, pp. 92-93; "it was because the rapid Romanization of the region with the weakening of old institutions made the populace more receptive to new ideas"

<sup>31</sup> See W. H. C. Frend, *Donatist Church*; J.S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*; Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*; N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power* (London: Grace, 1997), p.126.

<sup>32</sup> J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church*, p.113.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 37.

Following that assembly, their number seems to have almost doubled in the next fifty years, so that by the outbreak of the Diocletian persecution, about two hundred and fifty bishops were said to have been in office.<sup>34</sup> Frend maintains that by 245 AD, North Africa had ninety bishops, and a well-organised disciplinary system that could dethrone a bishop responsible for mistakes and sins.<sup>35</sup> These figures imply that considerable progress had been made, and at this stage of the Church's organization a bishop represented only a single city.<sup>36</sup>

## **1.2.2 The Persecutions of the Church**

In Acts 2:41, the gospel writer, Luke refers to the early growth of the Church when he reports that 3000 believers were 'added to the Church'. In Acts 21:20 he records how James and the elders speak to Paul of 'how many thousands of converts there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law'.

### **1.2.2.1 The Earliest Persecutions**

In 49 AD disturbances broke out in Rome that were ruthless enough to prompt an expulsion of Jews from the city. The biographer Suetonius says:

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> J.G.Davies, *The Early Christian Church*, p.127.

<sup>35</sup> See W.H.C.Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp.129-30.

<sup>36</sup> L.E.Elliott-Binns, *The Beginning of Western Christendom* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), p.153.

<sup>37</sup> *Claudius* 25.4



Seutonius's comment 'at the instigation of Chrestus' seems to misunderstand the fact that the trouble arose over Christianity being preached - the name *Chrestos* (Chrestus) being pronounced indistinguishably from *Christos* (Christ).<sup>38</sup> This outbreak of unrest which prompted the expulsion of Jews from Rome would indicate that Christianity had not only arrived there by 49 AD, but also attracted enough support to provoke opposition. If Christianity caused problems in Rome it is also very likely that it did in other places as well.

Different rulers in Judea from 44 AD had halted anti-Christian moves and given the Jerusalem Church some respite, however, in 62 AD Festus, the Roman procurator, died in office. In the power vacuum before his successor arrived, Herod Agrippa II deposed Joseph Kabi, son of Simon, who had recently been made high priest, and instead appointed Ananus son of Ananus instead.

Ananus was a supporter of the Sadducees. He convened the Council, brought James before it, accused him of having broken the law, and had him put to death. Josephus, who tells the story,<sup>39</sup> says this action was unpopular with 'those of the inhabitants of the city who were considered the most fair-minded and who were strict in the observance of the Law.'<sup>40</sup> This may mean that the Pharisees ('strict in the observance of the Law') were angry at seeing the Sadducees taking action against the Nazarenes (= Christians), who were also 'zealous for the law' (Acts 20:21).

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<sup>38</sup> J. Stevenson, (ed.), 1987, *A New Eusebius*. London: SPCK, 1970

<sup>39</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.196-200

<sup>40</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.201

The report of James's death is described by Hegesippus, who makes scribes and Pharisees the leading figures in the events ending in James's death. James was thrown from the temple, stoned, and killed by a blow from a fuller's club.<sup>41</sup>

It appears that the Roman government in 62 AD was approaching a crossroads. The killing of James had been illegal, though the consequences for those responsible were not severe. Paul had received mixed treatment from Roman judges while awaiting trial in Rome (Acts 28:30-31): at its worst, it was corrupt (Acts 24:26-27), but at its best, fair-minded (Acts 25:12; 26:31-32). It is not clear what happened to Paul next, or exactly when he and Peter were put to death; but in 64 AD the fire of Rome occurred. The unpopular Emperor Nero was suspected of having planned the fire and the Roman historian Tacitus, writing around 115 AD, describes what he did:

Neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating heaven, could stifle the scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd style Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.

First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle, and

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<sup>41</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.3 - 18

gave an exhibition in his circus, mixing with the crowd in the costume of a charioteer, or mounted on his chariot. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.<sup>42</sup>

It remains uncertain on what basis Christianity became and remained unlawful, but the persecution after the fire of Rome is the moment from which illegality must be counted. T. D. Barnes in his article on legislation against the Christians shows that 'no Roman official in the *Acts of the Apostles* regards Christianity as a punishable offence, still less an offence which had been the subject of recent legislation.'<sup>43</sup>

The next evidence on the legal status of Christianity comes from Pliny's exchange of letters with Trajan, almost fifty years after the fire of Rome. Pliny in his letter says he is not sure what should be done at trials of those accused of Christianity. Later Christian writers, as Barnes argues, have no independent knowledge of what measure first made Christianity illegal. The nearest thing to possibly useful information appears in Tertullian (writing in the 190s), who in writing *To the Gentiles* calls persecution of Christians the *institutum Neronianum* ('Neronian institution').<sup>44</sup>

Barnes's thoughtful article concludes by arguing that Christianity from its inception had always been likely to come to be regarded as illegal: *mos maiorum*, (ancestral custom) he notes, 'it was the most important source of Roman law, and it was

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<sup>42</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15.4

<sup>43</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Legislation against the Christians*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 58:32-50

<sup>44</sup> Tertullian, *To the Gentiles* 1.7.89

precisely *mos maiorum* in all its aspects, that Christians urged men to repudiate';<sup>45</sup> foreign religion was always to some degree suspicious in Roman eyes. Therefore, as he sees it, no precise enactment was needed before a provincial governor could punish people for being Christians.

Pliny and Trajan exchange correspondence in which the emperor (agreeing that Pliny has acted correctly) lays down conditions under which Christians should be punished. From 112 AD onward, Trajan's letter, published for the reading public along with Pliny's correspondence, was itself a law, since a letter from the emperor giving instructions to an official had the force of law.<sup>46</sup>

There was no other foreign religion whose treatment by the Romans paralleled the treatment of Christianity closely enough to support the idea that refusal to practise polytheism or participate in public religious ritual was by itself a transgression against *mos maiorum* punishable with death.

It might have happened that Nero or Domitian (or both) issued a decree or decrees making Christianity illegal. Both those emperors after their deaths were subjected by the Senate to *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of their memory), and their decrees were abolished - that is, all laws they had issued were repealed.

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<sup>45</sup> T.D. Barnes, *Legislation against the Christians*. *Journal of Roman Studies* 58:50

<sup>46</sup> Gaius, *Institutes* 1.5: 'A law of the Emperor is what the emperor determined in a decree or an edict or by letter. There is no question that it has the force of law, as this emperor received his *imperium* (emperorship) lawfully.'

Suetonius, in his biography of Nero, lists persecuting Christians as one of the good things Nero did.<sup>47</sup> Evidence for persecution by Nero and Pliny is not plentiful, but it exists: consider what Clement of Rome said (probably about 96 AD) in his first letter to Corinth:

Owing to the sudden and repeated calamities which have befallen us, we consider that our attention has been somewhat delayed in turning to the questions disputed among you, beloved ... (1 *Clement* 1.1).

These 'sudden and repeated calamities' are probably actions taken against Christians in Rome by Domitian in the 90s. Then, around 106 AD, under Trajan, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, was brought to Rome to be executed for being a Christian.<sup>48</sup> Similarly in Jerusalem, Bishop Simon son of Clopas was executed.<sup>49</sup> So, from the 60s Christianity was illegal. It is believed that Paul and Peter died in Rome under Nero.

Rome appears to have been the flashpoint. Though not planned by Christianity's most important leaders, perhaps the original introduction of Christianity provoked the Chrestus riots. Peter's decision to base himself in Rome could well have been strategic and this strategic move was possibly based on an observation that Christianity was taking off well there (this was what Tacitus observed disapprovingly).

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<sup>47</sup> Suetonius, *Nero*, 16.2: 'During his reign a great many public abuses were suppressed by the imposition of heavy penalties ... Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief.'

<sup>48</sup> Ignatius, *Romans* 5.2-3

<sup>49</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.32.6

Christianity certainly did not avoid imperial attention. Even if Nero did not remember the Chrestus riots, he had Paul's case to prompt him. Acts ends by saying that Paul spent two full years in Rome teaching (and waiting for his court date) (28:30-31), but eventually he must have come up before Nero. Whatever the decision, it is a fair guess that memories of the accusations made against Nero were in Nero's mind when he made the decision that the Christians were a suitable group to blame for the fire. The persecution of 64 AD was a defining moment for the early believers.

For the next several decades there was an uneasy truce between the authorities of Rome and the young, growing Christian movement. In 155 AD or 156 AD the Asian Churches, founded by Paul, suffered their own loss when Polycarp, aged eighty-six and the Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred.

Polycarp was a young bishop when Ignatius addressed one of his letters to him personally, and Polycarp was well known by the non-Christian community as well as Christians. The gladiatorial games, coming to a close when Polycarp is brought in to the arena at Smyrna, are a ritual of unity around Greco-Roman religion, and one in which Christians will not join, although (the *Martyrdom* says) Jews are there. When the result of his questioning by the proconsul is announced, the crowd in the arena shouts, 'This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice or worship!'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.2

Eleven Christians, besides Polycarp, are killed. One, Germanicus, forces a spiritless wild beast to kill him; but a person called Quintus avoids death by agreeing to take the oath to the emperor and offer incense.<sup>51</sup> Christian visitors from Philadelphia are martyred together with Polycarp; perhaps their presence triggered the Smyrnaeans' impulse to act against him. The threat which the Roman leaders perceive, however, has built up slowly and Polycarp has had decades, apparently undisturbed, in which to become 'the teacher of Asia'. Now that Pliny has acted against the Christians, with Polycarp's death, the Christians in Smyrna find the persecution against them comes to an end.

In the 160s, opposition rears its head again. This time it is Fronto, a former tutor of Marcus Aurelius, who delivered a speech against Christianity at Cirta in his home province of Africa, repeating the old allegations of infanticide and incest.<sup>52</sup> The emperor himself was equally anti-Christian.

By the turn of the second and third centuries, Christianity was continuing to grow and appeared increasingly successful. From time to time there was persecution: the long *Martyrdom of the Scillitans* from 180 AD, for example, provides the earliest evidence for Christianity in Africa outside Egypt. It describes the trial at Carthage, the provincial capital, of twelve small-town Christians, seven men and five women. They refused to take an oath demanded by Caesar, and refused to accept a thirty-day deferral of their case - so Saturninus, proconsul of Africa, condemns them to

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<sup>51</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.1-4.1; eleven plus Polycarp: *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 19.1

<sup>52</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.6; 31.2

death:

The proconsul Saturninus read out the sentence from a tablet: 'Whereas Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the others have confessed that they live in accordance with the religious rites of the Christians, and, when an opportunity was given them of returning to the usage of the Romans, persevered in their obstinacy, it is our pleasure that they should suffer by the sword.'

Speratus said, 'Thanks be to God.'

Nartzalus said, 'Today we are martyrs in heaven: thanks be to God.'

The proconsul Saturninus commanded that the proclamation be made by the herald: 'I have commanded that Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januarius, Generosa, Vestia, Donata, Secunda be led forth to execution.'

They all said, 'Thanks be to God.'

And so all were crowned with martyrdom together, and reign with the Father and Son and Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Other martyr-acts illustrate some of the unifying features evident in the burning of Polycarp. Killings in the amphitheatres such as that of Blandina and others at Lyons in 177 AD, and of Perpetua and others at Carthage in 203 AD, dramatized government action against Christianity. Elsewhere, governors sometimes found reason to avoid being drawn into action. Tertullian before 200 AD was confident that Christianity was not only growing but gaining influence:

'we have filled everything you have,' he says, 'cities, tenements, forts, towns, exchanges - yes, and army camps, tribes, palace, senate, forum. All we have left you is the temples!'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 37.4-5



### 1.2.2.2 The Decius Persecution (250 AD)

The Decius persecution, generally known as the first great persecution, took place in 250 AD. Decius believed that the Church was a deadly threat to the Empire's unity and stability. Christians had made themselves very unpopular in 247 AD by refusing to join in the pagan festivities celebrating the one thousandth anniversary of the founding of Rome. Decius blamed the Christians for the calamities the Empire was facing and stated, for example, that the gods were angry because the Church was drawing away so many people from worshipping them. For this reason, Decius decided that he must eliminate the Christian Church from the body of the empire.

He began by targeting Church leaders. Decius ordered that all the inhabitants of the Empire must offer sacrifice to the gods and obtain an official certificate, called *libelli*, stating that they had done so.<sup>54</sup> The requirement was for all Romans to attend sacrifices arranged under the supervision of commissioners. The commissioners then needed to be satisfied that they had complied with the requirements of the ritual, and had obtained a certificate proving that they had done so. Some of these certificates survive in Egypt, and similar ones were issued all over the empire during 250 AD. Aurelius Diogenes got his certificate on 26 June:

(First hand) To the commission chosen to superintend the sacrifices at the village of Alexander's Isle. From Aurelius Diogenes, son of Satabous, of the village of Alexander's

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<sup>54</sup>J. Stevenson, (ed.) *A New Eusebius* 200.

Isle, aged 72 years, with a scar on the right eyebrow. I have always sacrificed to the gods, and now in your presence in accordance with the edict I have made sacrifice, and poured a libation, and partaken of the sacred victims. I request you to certify this below.

Farewell. I, Aurelius Diogenes, have presented this petition.

(Second hand) I, Aurelius Syrus, saw you and your son sacrificing.

(Third hand) ...]onos[...

(First hand) The year one of the Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Epeiph 2 [26 June, 250]<sup>55</sup>

The bishops of great cities were attacked promptly. Fabian, Bishop of Rome, was put to death on 20 January 250 AD,<sup>56</sup> and Babylas, Bishop of Antioch, on 24 January.<sup>57</sup>

At Alexandria, the Prefect of Egypt sent a soldier after Bishop Dionysius as soon as he received the edict<sup>58</sup> and, at Carthage, Bishop Cyprian was declared an outlaw.<sup>59</sup> These were the four biggest cities of the empire. Evading arrest, Cyprian left Carthage early in 250 AD, not to return until after Easter 251 AD. His evasion of persecution was to prove controversial and cause some tension among other Christians. While he was in exile his flock did not stand up to the pressure well, in their bishop's opinion and some of them queued to sacrifice:

Alas! ... They did not even wait to be arrested before they went up, or questioned before they made their denial. Many fell before the light, many were laid low without meeting the enemy; they did not even give themselves the chance of seeming unwilling to sacrifice to the idols. They ran to the market-place of their own accord, they hastened to death of their own will; as if they had always wished it, as if embracing an opportunity which they had

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<sup>55</sup> J. Stevenson, (ed.) *A New Eusebius*. 193.1

<sup>56</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.39.1

<sup>57</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.39.4

<sup>58</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.40.2

<sup>59</sup> Cyprian, *Letters* 66.4.1

ferverly desired. How many the magistrates put off at the time, as night was at hand! How many there were who even entreated that their undoing might not be delayed! How can anyone make violence an excuse for his guilt, when the violence was rather on his own part and to his own destruction?<sup>60</sup>

By the time of writing, Cyprian was facing the question of how to deal with Christians who had sacrificed and now wanted to be forgiven and re-admitted to the Church. While the persecution was going on there was uncertainty whether a Church would be left. Christians who refused to sacrifice were imprisoned and tortured. Many died.

By November 250 AD persecution was easing off at Carthage. Cyprian ruled by letter that the lapsed were not to be re-admitted to Church too quickly, and certainly not while he himself was still out of town.<sup>61</sup> But, cautious as he was, even Cyprian was confident enough to return before Decius's death in battle against the Goths in May or June 251 AD. This was the end of the first empire-wide persecution of Christians and the most dangerous one. By the time of the Great Persecution, between 303 AD and 312 AD, numbers had increased to a point where wiping Christianity out empire-wide was not a realistic political strategy.

According to Cyprian's, *De Lapsis*, large numbers of Christians seem to have surrendered and offered sacrifices to the gods.<sup>62</sup> The persecution under Decius had created a very serious split in the Church in North Africa. This was called the

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<sup>60</sup> Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 8

<sup>61</sup> Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 17.1-3

<sup>62</sup> Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 8-9, in *A New Eusebius* 201-202.

Novatian schism and resulted from having to deal with lapsed Christians under the persecution and their re-baptism.

Valerian, ascended to be Emperor in 253 AD and announced a second empire-wide persecution of the Decian type in 257 AD. Eusebius blames Macrianus, a financial official in Egypt, for poisoning Valerian's mind against the Christians and persuading him to persecute.<sup>63</sup> Cyprian says Valerian's edict focused on clergy and Christians from high-status backgrounds:

Valerian had sent a rescript (an order) to the Senate directing that bishops, presbyters and deacons should forthwith be punished; that senators and men of rank, and Roman knights, should lose their dignity and be deprived of their property, and if, when deprived of their possessions, they should still continue to be Christians, then they should lose their heads also; that matrons should be deprived of their property and banished; and that whosoever of Caesar's household had either before confessed, or should now confess, should forfeit their property, and be sent in chains as conscripts to Caesar's estate.<sup>64</sup>

Gallienus ended the anti-Christian campaign and instructed that buildings confiscated from Christians should be returned. His original edict does not survive, but Eusebius preserves a letter Gallienus sent to some bishops who requested confirmation that they were to have the buildings - presumably to overcome bureaucratic reluctance.

The Emperor Caesar Publius Licinius Gallienus Pius Felix Augustus, to Dionysius and Pinnas and Demetrius and the other bishops. I have given my order that the benefit of my bounty should be published throughout all the world, to the intent that the places of

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<sup>63</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.10.4

<sup>64</sup> Cyprian, *Letters* 80.1

worship should be given up, and therefore you also may use the ordinance contained in my rescript (order), so that none may molest you. And this thing, which it is in your power to accomplish, has long since been conceded by me; and therefore Aurelius Quirinius, who is in charge of the exchequer, will observe the ordinance given by me.<sup>65</sup>

Pardons and reinstatements after Decius's death may account in part for the quick change which made Valerian's palace 'a Church of God', but under Gallienus there was more substantive recognition of the realities of the situation, and for the first time toleration for Christianity was decreed.

Consequently, under Diocletian (284 - 305 AD) some high palace officials were Christians: Adautus, a long-serving official, promoted from grade to grade, was at the top of the Ministry of Finance when put to death in the Great Persecution;<sup>66</sup> Dorotheus, a presbyter at Antioch, who knew Hebrew and read the Old Testament in its original language, and who joined the imperial service, was appointed manager of the dye-works at Tyre (another clergyman entering a palace career – Cyprian would have disapproved);<sup>67</sup> Philoromus, an Alexandria-based high official, executed in the Great Persecution;<sup>68</sup> and Dorotheus and Gorgonius at Nicomedia.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps most importantly, Lactantius, later to write (among other books of Christian apologetic) *The Deaths of the Persecutors*, was serving as professor of Latin at Diocletian's court before the Great Persecution began.

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<sup>65</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.13

<sup>66</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.11

<sup>67</sup> Cyprian, *Letters* 7.32.2-4

<sup>68</sup> Cyprian, *Letters* 8.9.7

<sup>69</sup> Cyprian, *Letters* 8.6.1, 5

Lenient imperial attitudes to Christianity in the palace made it possible, in the last generation of the old-style *familia Caesaris*, to set up in and near Rome some of the earliest Christian grave inscriptions.

Like Christianity as a whole, the imperial household was cosmopolitan. Its members were based everywhere. Third-century increases in the size of the civil service influenced the effect of Church growth in the empire at large. There were reactionary regimes in the middle of the century that attempted to root Christianity out of the civil service and (under Decius and then Valerian) from the Roman world as a whole. These measures were, however, infrequent, and under the more fluid third-century entry conditions Christians were sure to be appointed. Attitudes to education and social life within the Churches ensured that by that time a steady (and probably increasing) proportion of suitable candidates would be Christian.

By the time of the Great Persecution the disproportionately Christian Roman civil service constituted a great obstacle to the officially stated aim of wiping Christianity out.

### **1.2.2.3 The Diocletian Persecution (303 AD)**

The Diocletian persecution was the greatest persecution in Christian history (to that time). Under the pretext of uniting the Empire,<sup>70</sup> Diocletian dismissed all Christians

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<sup>70</sup> See Lacanitus, *The Deaths of the Persecutors*, 11-13

from the government and the army, and issued three anti-Christian edicts in 303 AD, and a fourth one in 304 AD.

The lead-up started when army authorities stopped turning a blind eye to soldiers who did not participate in sacrificing. At first, most of the soldiers who would not comply were allowed to leave the army. A few were put to death. Eusebius says:

as yet the instigator of the plot [Galerius] was working with a certain moderation and daring to proceed to blood only in some instances; fearing, presumably, the multitude of believers, and hesitating to plunge into the war against us all at once.<sup>71</sup>

Then, at a public sacrifice with Diocletian and Galerius present, probably at Antioch, in 302 AD, some imperial servants crossed themselves. When repeated sacrifices failed to produce acceptable results, the chief of the haruspices (inspectors of entrails of sacrificed animals) told the emperors that the gods refused to give an answer because profane persons were in attendance.<sup>72</sup> Angry, Diocletian ordered that everyone in his palace must offer sacrifice or be whipped if they refused.

On 23 February 303 AD in Nicomedia, the residence of Diocletian and effective eastern capital, the Praetorian prefect and other officers searched the Church and burnt its copies of the Scriptures. They then, warned by Diocletian not to start a fire which might burn the city down, had the Praetorian Guard demolish the building.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.4.4

<sup>72</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors*, 10

<sup>73</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors*, 12.2-5

The next day, Diocletian's first Persecution Edict was posted on a public notice-board which contained the following: Churches throughout the empire were to be destroyed and sacred books burnt; Christian *Caesariani* were to be purged; Christian *honestiores* were to lose their social privileges; no Christian could be the accuser in a case of personal injury, adultery or theft; and Christian slaves could not be freed. There was no death penalty for Christianity under this edict, although a Christian who pulled the notice down and tore it to pieces was arrested and executed.<sup>74</sup>

A fire started in the imperial palace. Lactantius alleges that Galerius was responsible,<sup>75</sup> but the explanation he refuses to countenance - that Christians did it. In contrast, it struck Diocletian as obvious and he had some Christians burnt. Judges sent to investigate the case found out nothing about the incident because (perhaps prudently) they would not torture members of the emperor's household.

Implementation of the edict varied in differing parts of the empire, but at Nicomedia resistance continued.

There was a second fire at the palace.<sup>76</sup> Afterwards, the apparently pro-Christian Empress Prisca and her daughter Valeria were required to sacrifice and further action was taken against palace staff.<sup>77</sup> There was also a roundup of Nicomedian Christians, from presbyters down and on 28 April, two hundred and sixty eight believers were martyred.

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<sup>74</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.5

<sup>75</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors* 14.2.5

<sup>76</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors* 14.6

<sup>77</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors* 15.1



Elsewhere, prospects for success in violent resistance looked better. Short-lived revolts began in Armenia Minor and Syria. These were areas where Christianity was strong.

A second edict, in summer 303 AD, provoked by the revolts, ordered that clergy should be arrested, with the result that 'the prisons were filled with bishops, presbyters, deacons, readers and exorcists, so that there was no room left there for those convicted of crimes.'<sup>78</sup>

A third edict dated 20 November 303 AD, the twentieth anniversary of Diocletian's accession, required the arrested clergy to sacrifice and be released. Some officials saw this as a chance to get rid of an embarrassment:

... in the case of one man, others held him fast by both hands, brought him to the altar, and let fall on it out of his right hand the polluted and accursed sacrifice: then he was dismissed as if he had sacrificed ... When yet another cried out and testified that he was not yielding, he was struck on the mouth and silenced by a large body of persons appointed for that purpose, and forcibly driven away, even though he had not sacrificed. So much store did they set by seeming to have accomplished their purpose.<sup>79</sup>

In Roman Africa, after the Great Persecution, the hot issue in the Churches was how individuals had behaved when it was demanded that they hand over copies of the Scriptures. Many had been reluctant, and some had tried to find ways of avoiding this (like Mensurius, Bishop of Carthage, who handed heretical books over instead of Bibles), but few went as far as Felix, Bishop of Thibiuca, who

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<sup>78</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.6.9

<sup>79</sup> Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine* 1.4

preferred to be martyred rather than give up the books. It is not clear if a general requirement to sacrifice was implemented in any of the western provinces but at Ammaedara (in modern Tunisia) a stone balustrade and a mosaic are preserved from a Church's martyr shrine. On this shrine are recorded the names of thirty-four people who 'suffered persecution under the divine laws of emperors Diocletian and Maximian.'<sup>80</sup>

During the persecution, not only were large numbers of Christians tortured and killed, but Church buildings were also destroyed. Some Christians yielded to the persecution and even some Church leaders surrendered to avoid suffering and handed over their Bibles to be burnt.<sup>81</sup> The Diocletian persecution split the North African Church in two: one Church was led by Caecilian, who was consecrated by Rome, the other by a rival bishop called Donatus, who rejected Caecilian, and pursued the "purity of the Church."

### **1.3 The Church and the Christianised Roman Empire (313 AD - 430 AD)**

This period could be viewed as the golden age of the Church, but it was also one of crisis. During this time there was a new relationship between the Church and the State in terms of Constantine's policy towards the North African Church.

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<sup>80</sup> Merrills, Andrew H. ed. *Vandals, Romans and Berbers*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004), p.261

<sup>81</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.2-3.

By 310 AD, Galerius's policy of promoting personal friends had produced poor results. Perhaps he calculated that eight years of persecuting Christians had not led to the religious unity he wanted. Either way, at Nicomedia on 30 April 311 AD he published a decree ending persecution and legalizing Christianity:

Among other steps which We are always taking for the profit and advantage of the State, We had formerly sought to set all things right according to the ancient laws and public order of the Romans, and further, to provide that the Christians, who had abandoned the religion of their own ancestors, should return to sanity. For the said Christians had somehow become possessed by such an impulse, and such stupidity had taken hold of them, that instead of following the traditional practices of the ancients (the practices which perhaps their very own ancestors had originally established), they made laws at their own will and pleasure and for their own observance, and held meetings of various ethnic groups in various places. Eventually, when We issued a command to the effect that they should bring themselves back to the traditions of the ancients, many of them were subjected to danger, and many even completely overthrown.

Since most of them persevered in their purpose, and We saw that they were neither giving worship and due reverence to the gods nor practising the worship of the god of the Christians, We are giving consideration to Our most gentle clemency and Our immemorial practice of extending pardon to all people, and We have judged it right to extend Our speediest indulgence to them also, so that they may again be Christians and hold their meetings, provided always that they do nothing contrary to public order.

Further, by another letter We will inform governors of provinces what conditions Christians must observe. Under the terms of this Our indulgence it shall be their duty to pray to their god for Our well-being, and that of the State, and their own: to the end that the State may be kept unharmed on every side, and they may be able to live securely in their own habitations.<sup>82</sup>

Issued in his own name and those of Constantine, Licinius and Maximinus Daia, this toleration edict was Galerius's last move. On 5 May he died.

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<sup>82</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors* 34.1-5

Afterwards, Maximinus moved faster than Licinius and took control of most of the east, including Nicomedia, Diocletian's capital. With a brief pause, he pushed ahead with the persecution policy which Galerius had abandoned. On 25 November 311 AD Peter of Alexandria and 'many other bishops with him' were put to death at Alexandria.

Lucian of Antioch, who taught theology to some of the clergy who were to be key voices in the Council of Nicaea and the 'of one substance' dispute, was put to death at Nicomedia on 7 January 312 AD. Eusebius, who visited Upper Egypt in 311-12 AD, describes what the persecution there was like:

I myself also saw, when I was in those places, many people executed in a single day - some by beheading, some by burning - so that the murderous axe was blunted, and the executioners were worn out with fatigue and had to give one another rest-breaks. And that was when I observed a most marvellous eagerness and a truly divine power and zeal in those who had trusted in the Christ of God: for during the sentencing of earlier ones, others would leap up from one direction after another to the tribunal in front of the judge and confess themselves Christians, paying no attention to the dread consequences and the many and varied kinds of torture, but speaking freely and without fear about reverence towards the God of all things, and receiving their sentence of death with joy and laughter and gladness so that they sang psalms and hymns and gave thanks to the God of all things until their last breath.<sup>83</sup>

In the *Martyrdom of Apaiousle and Pteleme*, Count Sebastianus moves south into Egypt with an army to enforce obedience - then finds that even his soldiers are not unanimously behind the decree. The Coptic story may have improved in the telling but the delicate loyalty of provincial people when faraway rulers demanded anti-

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<sup>83</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.9.4-5

Christian violence is clear. Persecution may have united communities in the days of Polycarp, but in 311 AD it was divisive.

### **1.3.1 Constantine's conversion**

Constantine told Eusebius about a dream which had prompted him to adopt a Christian sign for his army. His father had been a monotheist, and Constantine (at some point between his father's death and the battle of the Milvian Bridge) made the decision to pray to only one God - his father's. He prayed, Eusebius says, for revelation and aid.

Lactantius puts Constantine's dream right before the battle and adds that he ordered his soldiers to mark the 'chi-rho' monogram on their shields - which Eusebius does not mention. Maxentius's army was larger, but Constantine's men got the upper hand, and as Maxentius tried to retreat across the river, his bridge of boats gave way. Maxentius was drowned, his army decisively defeated, and Constantine made a ceremonial entry into Rome the next day.<sup>84</sup>

News of Constantine's victory was unwelcome at the eastern court and Maximinus Daia manoeuvred to manage the consequences. In the west, Licinius and Constantine met at Milan in June 313 AD and issued the edict which definitively made Christianity a legal and privileged religion:

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<sup>84</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors* 44.1-12; Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 38 and *Ecclesiastical History* 9.9.1-11

Already long ago, when We were watching that liberty of religion should not be denied, but that to each one's thought and desire authority should be given to practise divine things according to each individual preference, We ordered that both to Christians ... and to non-Christians should be conceded the freedom to maintain the faith of their own sect and religion. Since, however, many and various conditions seem to have been added to the rescript (order) in which such authority was granted to the said persons, perhaps some of them have been deterred from the maintenance of such faith.

When I, Constantine Augustus, and I, Licinius Augustus, had met happily at Milan and were conferring about all matters advantageous and related to public security, among the matters which We saw would benefit most people - or rather, first and foremost - we believed that ordinances should be issued on matters involving reverence for the Deity; that is, that We should concede, both to Christians and to all, an unrestricted possibility of following whichever religion each person wishes, so that whatever Deity exists in its celestial abode may be placated, and may be propitious to Us and to all who are placed under Our authority.

Accordingly We have believed with sound and most correct reasoning that We should follow this course of action: that freedom of worship should be denied to no one at all who has given his mind either to the religion of the Christians, or to that religion which he himself thinks most suited to himself; in order that the Supreme Deity, whose worship with free conscience We follow, may vouchsafe to Us in all things his accustomed favour and benevolence.

Wherefore it is proper that Your Excellency should know that it has pleased Us that all the conditions which were contained in letters previously sent to Your Devotion concerning the name of Christians have been completely abolished. Thus those things which seemed truly unfavourable and alien from Our Clemency may be removed, and now each one who shows the said purpose to observe the religion of the Christians may lively and simply exert himself in such observation without any inquietude or molestation to himself. And We have believed that these things should be made known to Your Diligence in the fullest manner, that you may know that We have granted to the said Christians free and unconditional facility to practise their religion. When you perceive that We have made this grant to the said persons, Your Excellency will understand that similarly open and free authority has been granted to others too for their own religion or observance, in keeping with the peacefulness of Our times, so that each one may have free facility in practising what he has chosen. We have done this in order that We may not appear to have detracted anything from any rite or any religion.

Further, We have resolved that the following ordinance shall be established in relation to the persons of the Christians: if any appear at an earlier period to have purchased, whether

from Our fiscus or from any source whatever, the places at which they were formerly accustomed to assemble, and about which a definite formulary was established in a letter previously sent to Your Devotion, such places shall be restored to the Christians, without money and without any demand for payment, disregarding all deception and doubtfulness. Any person who has obtained these by gift shall restore the said places to the said Christians as soon as possible; those who have bought these places from Us, or acquired them by gift, should apply to the vicarious, if they have any claim from Our Benevolence, in order that thought may be taken for them also, by Our Clemency. All these things are to be delivered to the corporation of the Christians through your intervention, immediately and without delay.

Since, furthermore, the said Christians are known to have had not only those places at which they have been accustomed to assemble but also other places belonging to the legal right of their corporation (that is, of the Churches, not of individual persons), you shall command, under the law which We have expressed above, that all these shall be restored, absolutely without any doubt or dispute, to the said Christians, that is, to their corporations and assemblies: preserving always the aforesaid condition, namely that those who return the said places without compensation may, as we have said, hope for indemnification from Our Benevolence.

In all these things you shall be bound to exercise your most effective intervention for the above-mentioned corporation of Christians, that Our command may be fulfilled as speedily as possible, and that in this matter thought may also be taken for the public tranquillity by Our Clemency. So shall it result that, as has been expressed above, the divine favour towards Us, which in so many matters We have experienced, shall for all time steadfastly and prosperously attend Our successes together with the happiness of the State.

It shall moreover be fitting, in order that the form of this Our Benevolence's ordinance may be able to come to the knowledge of all, for you by your own edict both to publish everywhere what has been written, and to bring it to the attention of all people, in order that this Our Benevolence's ordinance cannot escape notice.<sup>85</sup>

Full legality and the return of Churches and burial places were probably the most any Christian had hoped for. Compensation for buyers who had bought confiscated Church property from the treasury helped to prevent future arguments and

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<sup>85</sup> Lactantius, *The Deaths of the Persecutors* 48.2-12

disputes. With the edict Constantine also made large gifts: in Rome, he gave the Lateran Palace to the Church and it was the residence of the bishops of Rome for the next thousand years. Elsewhere, there were cash subsidies for Church costs.

Licinius in 313 AD had marched against Maximinus and defeated his army. Maximinus escaped and tried to regroup but committed suicide when his situation became hopeless. A later civil war was to pit Constantine against Licinius and leave the empire under Constantine's sole rule from 324 AD. Before then, however, Constantine brought in decisive changes to Christianise the Roman Empire. Clergy were freed from the costly obligation better-off Romans had to serve on town councils;<sup>86</sup> gladiator shows were outlawed;<sup>87</sup> and Sunday was made a public holiday.<sup>88</sup>

Some aspects of public life were slower than others in adjusting to the Christian takeover. Coins minted for Constantine until 317 AD in the west and 324 AD in the east have SOLI INYICTO COMITI ('For the Unconquered Sun, his Companion') stamped on the reverse and in 321 AD Constantine confirmed that it was still correct to ask soothsayers what it meant when part of the imperial palace was struck by lightning.<sup>89</sup> His commitment to Christianity was clear. It was the religion which delivered divine support to his campaign against Maxentius, as the inscription on the Arch of Constantine, dedicated at Rome in 315 AD, shows:

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<sup>86</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 10.7

<sup>87</sup> *Theodosian Code* 15.12.1

<sup>88</sup> *Justinian Code* 3.12.2

<sup>89</sup> *Theodosian Code* 16.10.1



To the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus, who, by the prompting of the Deity and by the greatness of his mind, with his forces avenged the State in a just war against the tyrant and all his party.

But there was more to his conversion than gratitude for his victory. In his *Speech to the Assembly of the Saints 22*, given (probably to a gathering of bishops) between 317 AD and 325 AD, he outlines his motivations:

We strive to the best of Our ability to fill with good hope those who are uninitiated in such doctrines, summoning God as Our helper in the undertaking. For it is no ordinary task to turn the minds of Our subjects to piety, if they happen to be virtuous, and to reform them, if they are evil and unbelieving, making them useful instead of useless. So, rejoicing in these undertakings, and believing it the task of a good man to praise the Saviour, I reject everything which the inferior state of fortune irrationally imposed by the mischance of ignorance, deeming repentance the greatest salvation. I should have wished that this revelation had been vouchsafed me long ago, since blessed is the man who from his earliest days has been steadfast and has rejoiced in the knowledge of things divine and the beauty of virtue.<sup>90</sup>

This describes his conversion to Christianity, refers to Jesus, affirms repentance and rejects the convert's former life. It is such a clear personal statement that it ought to lay to rest the doubts sometimes still expressed about the sincerity of Constantine's Christianity.

Constantine's conversion led to the conversion of the whole Roman world to Christianity. In 313 AD the Churches had good numbers in the cities, and Christians were well represented in the civil service. This was thanks partly to a

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<sup>90</sup> Constantine, *Speech to the Assembly of Saints* in McKechnie, Paul. *The First Christian Centuries*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), p.238

usually unmolested presence there dating from the mid-first century and partly to Diocletian having recruited so many new staff from a sector of society to which Christianity had proven attractive from the beginning. These advantages helped to offset the fact that the Roman political class was almost entirely polytheist when Constantine was converted.

Constantine, in his reign, was to make big changes. He intervened in theological deliberation, not only by being there, but more importantly by providing publicly funded travel for clergy to and from meetings such as the Councils of Arles (314 AD) and Nicaea (325 AD). Large-scale face-to-face meetings of this kind had never been practical before: 'creeds, councils and controversies' (to borrow the title of J. Stevenson's sourcebook) were, in resource terms, a by-product of the Christian empire. Constantine's other important initiative was to build Constantinople - a New Rome, and a permanent eastern capital for the empire, but equally importantly a city without polytheist temples. It was a strong statement of intent.

In the Roman world as a whole, the change Constantine's conversion brought was never effectively reversed. The Emperor Julian (361-363 AD) tried to bring polytheism back but did not live long enough to make much progress.

Advised by Hosius of Cordoba, Constantine decided early on to restrict gifts and legal privileges to Catholic Christians. From the time of the New Testament, Christians had been at work at endeavouring to control the Church and now

government joined in. Diversity expressed itself in new ways in the fourth century. There were new divisions (Catholics versus Donatists, Catholics versus Arians, and so on), while older fringe Christianities (except Manichaeism) shrank, or lived on only in books as theories for anti-heretical writers to attack. In a sense, therefore, Constantine's commitment was made to a Christian Church which was reasonably united, and was identifiably the organization which Jesus had set up. A vigorous, highly adaptive movement since its inception, the Church had won the argument against illegality, and, as a result, Christianity was shown more favour as a religion of the Roman Empire.

### **1.3.2 Constantine's Tolerance**

Without difficulty, we can find examples of Constantine's tolerance towards the North African Church in several historical records, such as, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius and *The Theodosian Code* of Pharr. In 313 AD, Constantine proclaimed, in accordance with the Edict of Milan, the restitution of property to the Church and exempted the Catholic clergy from all taxes and any obligations to contribute to municipal levies.<sup>91</sup>

In 321 AD, the Emperor permitted the Church complete freedom to accept legacies and the Christians freedom to bequeath to the Church.<sup>92</sup> Apart from wealth given from bequests and grants, the Church gained numerous privileges under

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<sup>91</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* X. 5, 7.

<sup>92</sup> *Codex Theod.*, xvi. 2. 4. re-stated in W.H.C.Frend, *The Early Church*, pp. 236-238.

Constantine and his sons. The alleviation of an obvious hardship in the form of an obligation to billet soldiers in 343 AD,<sup>93</sup> was followed in 349 AD by the exemption of clergy and their children from all financial burdens in respect of their city.<sup>94</sup> Soon after, the Church was granted a share in the general taxes paid in kind by the provincials<sup>95</sup> and equated with state officials for using the public posting services. Slaves might be emancipated with legal effect in the presence of a bishop.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, the bishops of the Church were now great officers of State, and were paid 720 solidi (10 pounds of gold) a year, like a provincial governor.<sup>97</sup> The Bishop, literally meaning 'overseer', aimed to extend the activities of the Church and became more political in function.<sup>98</sup>

### 1.3.3 The Status of the Church

Owing to Constantine's toleration, Christianity was now the official religion of the empire. As a result, in the fourth and fifth centuries Christianity made progress among the indigenous peoples, like the Berber, as well as among those of Latin and Phoenician descent. Augustine describes the expansion of Christianity in Hippo:

there are housed in our town in which there is not a single pagan to be found and there is not a single house where there are no Christians.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Codex Theod.*, xvi. 2. 4. Re-stated in W.H.C.Frend, *The Early Church*, pp. 236-238.

<sup>94</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* X. 5, 7; *Codex Theod.*, xvi. 2. 9.

<sup>95</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* X. 6.

<sup>96</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Light in the West* (London: Paternoster, 1952), p. 16.

<sup>97</sup> W.H.C.Frend, *The Early Church* (London: SCM, 1996), p. 238.

<sup>98</sup> Philip Stafford Moxon, *From Jerusalem to Nicaea*, p.65ff

<sup>99</sup> Augustine, *Sermon* 302.21; re-quoted in J.G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church*, pp.276-77.

From this view of Augustine, all trades and professions seemed to be represented within the Christian community. However, in this era, North African Christianity remained permanently a Latin one, and was consequently a means of Romanisation of the Punic or Berber speaking classes.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Christianity came to be paganised in worship and liturgy due to the mass conversion of Pagans.

The Church system began to be organised more systematically and showed a tendency towards a hierarchical form. Frend points out the example of the continued employment of laymen as assessors, treasurers and judicial counsellors of Churches.<sup>101</sup> He goes on to say that in Africa there were *defensores ecclesiae*, lawyers who were prepared to defend their particular Church's interests in the courts.<sup>102</sup>

These measures and the allowance of legacies enabled the Church and the clergy to amass very considerable wealth during the fourth and fifth centuries. The ecclesiastical income seems to have been divided into quarters, one for the bishop, one for the other clergy, one for services and edifices, and one for the poor.<sup>103</sup> Based on Possidius' record, Frend considers that the wealth of the Church caused the hatred of the Vandals, that "the Church was hated because of its lands".<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Knut Schäferdiek, 'Christian Mission and Expansion,' in *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to AD 600*, ed. by Ian Hazlett (London: SPCK, 1991), pp.70-71.

<sup>101</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church*, p.238.

<sup>102</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church*, p.238.

<sup>103</sup> W. Walker, *A History of Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), p.165

<sup>104</sup> Possidius, *Life of St. Augustine*, 23. re-stated in W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church*, p. 27.

Furthermore, the Vandal King Huneric (477 AD - 484 AD) regarded Afro-Roman nobles and Catholic priests as more or less synonymous.<sup>105</sup>

## **1.4 Under the Vandals and the Recovery of Byzantine (430 AD - 642 AD)**

### **1.4.1 The Church under the Vandals (430 AD - 533 AD)**

Our knowledge of the Church under the Vandals is based mainly on Victor's work, *Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae*, written in 486 AD. In his book, Victor describes in detail the persecutions which took place under Arian rulers. The Vandals, originally Germanic Arian Christians who had accepted Arianism, crossed to Africa from Spain in 429 AD, captured Carthage in 439 AD, and ruled until 533 AD.<sup>106</sup> Under the Vandals, the Church, except for occasional peaceful eras, was severely damaged and a huge number of the clergy were put to death or banished from their country.

Under Genseric (439 AD - 476 AD),<sup>107</sup> the first ruler of the Vandals in Africa, the Church suffered enormous persecutions due to his anti-Christianity policy. Firstly, although some Churches were used for the purposes of Arian worship, most Church buildings in North Africa were destroyed and the estates and investments of the Church were confiscated. Furthermore, a number of the clergy and Catholics

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<sup>105</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church*, p237

<sup>106</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p.399

<sup>107</sup> Genseric sometimes expressed with Gaiseric (by B.J.Kidd)

were captured and deported to Rome and Naples under the Vandal rule.<sup>108</sup> Secondly, Genseric proclaimed the prohibition of public ceremonies of Christian worship and forced Arian worship upon Christians. The worship service, however, still took place in secret hideaways amongst Christians.

Genseric, during his reign, seems to have granted the Church permission to elect a bishop of Carthage in 454 AD and to re-open some Churches and use the Latin language in the service in 474 AD. However, his tolerance did not continue long enough to resuscitate the Church, for the Church was closed and the clergy were exiled again.<sup>109</sup>

Under Huneric (477 AD - 484 AD), who succeeded Genseric, the Church began to meet testing times. During Huneric's reign there were two warrants of arrest for Christians who were continuing the worship service despite a prohibition order. According to Victor of Vita, (we are unsure when it took place), 4976 or 4996 Christians, including bishops, clergy, and laity were arrested and banished to Mauritania, the Moors of the southern frontiers.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, on the first of February 484 AD, Huneric called a conference of the episcopate on the pretext of discussing controversial issues with the Arians. In the course of the conference, on the first of June, Huneric proclaimed the penal law against heretics, including Christianity:

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<sup>108</sup> See B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church*, pp. 374-79; Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, pp. 399 - 402; Victor, *History*, 1.5; James Craigie Robertson, *History of the Christian Church* (London: John Murray, 1854), pp. 455-60.

<sup>109</sup> Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p.432.

<sup>110</sup> James Craigie Robertson, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 457; Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p. 438.

...no more meetings for worship, no more religious ceremonies, either within the towns or outside them; the confiscation of Churches; the seizure and destruction of religious books; the expulsion and exile of the bishops and their clergy; and incapacity for any Catholic.<sup>111</sup>

The actual aim of Huneric's proclamation was to destroy the Catholics and, as a result, some opposing bishops, probably nine, were put to death; forty six bishops were exiled to Corsica; and three hundred and two bishops were banished to the inland of Africa as labourers and slaves; eighty eight were surrendered to Huneric.<sup>112</sup>

As for the laity, they were forced to convert to Arianism. To achieve this, Huneric seems to have adopted the policy of *libellatici*, a certificate of conformity, which had been used at the time of the Decius persecution in 251 AD. Without presenting it, nobody could do a business deal or involve any public work. As a result, a huge number of the laity were re-baptised to Arianism.<sup>113</sup> Over all, during the reign of Huneric, the Church was damaged severely and huge numbers of clergy were banished from their Churches. M. L. Duchesne views that the anti-Christianity policy of Huneric brought about the end of the episcopate.<sup>114</sup>

Until the restoration of the Byzantine Empire in 533 AD, and after Huneric's time, there were four other Arian rulers in North Africa: Guntamund (484 AD - 496 AD); Trasamund (496 AD - 523 AD); Hilderic (523 AD - 530 AD); and Gelimer (530 AD - 533 AD). On the one hand, during these periods, the Church enjoyed some degree

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<sup>111</sup> Re-quoted in Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p. 440; James Craigie Robertson, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 458.

<sup>112</sup> See Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p. 441; James Craigie Robertson, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 458.

<sup>113</sup> Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p. 441

<sup>114</sup> Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p. 441



of peace: returning from exile and reopening the Catholic Church under Guntamund; and being permitted to attend worship services under Hilderic.<sup>115</sup> On the other hand, under Trasamund, 220 clergy were accused of violating a law prohibiting the consecration of bishops, and were later banished.<sup>116</sup>

With regard to this general anti-Christianity policy, K. S. Latourette and M. L. Duchesne agree that the persecution was 'as much political as it was religious,' in terms of its motivation.<sup>117</sup> The Vandals regarded the conquest of North Africa as a good opportunity for revenge on Christianity and the Christians who had previously persecuted them. As Christians had supported the Empire and persecuted the Arians in the territories of the Vandals under the rule of the Empire, the Vandals identified Christians in North Africa with latent rebels and oppressed them. As a consequence of the Vandals invasion, the Churches were handed over to Arian worship, sacred books were destroyed, and the Church leaders were banished. These influences of the Vandals, in turn, seem to provide a key to explain the declension of the North African Church.<sup>118</sup>

#### **1.4.2 The Church under the Byzantine Empire (533 AD - 642 AD)**

With regard to the state of the Church under the Byzantine Empire in North Africa, we have little information. Therefore, this dissertation attempts to rely on

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<sup>115</sup> Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p. 430-444; James Craigie Robertson, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 459-60.

<sup>116</sup> James Craigie Robertson, *History of the Christian Church*, p. 460.

<sup>117</sup> See M. L. Duchesne, p. 433; K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, p. 196.

<sup>118</sup> B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church*, pp. 378-79; B. J. Kidd sees that the invasion of the Vandals gave rise to the destruction of the Church; and the drain of spiritual springs due to the destruction of the Bible.

secondary sources studied by several historians.<sup>119</sup> Some sources from Islamic groups might be helpful in our understanding of the ecclesiological and social conditions just before the conquest of Islam.

#### **1.4.2.1 The Status of the Church**

In 533 AD, the emperor Justinian attacked the Vandals and restored the territories which had belonged to Christianity, with the consequence that a new relationship between the Church and the state was re-established during the rule of the Byzantine Empire. Like Constantine's edict of Milan, Justinian, on 1 August 535 AD, also proclaimed the restoration of all privileges and benefits of the Church to the condition which existed prior to the invasion of the Vandals.<sup>120</sup>

As a result, new Church buildings were rebuilt all over North Africa between 535 AD and 550 AD in accordance with the edict. The estates and investments which had belonged to the Arian clergy were confiscated and were given to the Church and the Clergy. Furthermore, the social position of the bishop was changed politically and regarded as second to that of the governor. Besides Church ministry, bishops seem to have been responsible for diverse public works: inspecting public affairs, administering charitable work and securing the freedom of the oppressed.<sup>121</sup>

As a consequence of the endeavour of Justinian, Carthage filled with more of the

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<sup>119</sup> See K.S. Latourette, *A History of the Christian Church* 2, pp. 229-231; W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 832-34; Robin Daniel, *This Holy Sex*, pp. 402-6; and J.C. Thiessen, *A Survey of World Mission*, pp. 174-185.

<sup>120</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p.833.

<sup>121</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 834.

established Churches and North Africa seems to have been re-Christianised as in the times of Augustine.

During the times of Byzantine, there emerged some differences in the condition of the Church, compared to that of the fourth and fifth centuries, especially, in terms of the meaning of Church and the form of worship. In the view of Justinian, the building of the Church and liturgy were conceived as the distinct expression of visible unity between people and people, nation and nation. They were not a simple construction.<sup>122</sup>

Furthermore, they believed that the more beautiful the Church building, the more God's glory obviously emerged, with the consequence that church construction was encouraged by the government but, as Robin Daniel points out, the word of God was never taught to the native people.<sup>123</sup> Consequently, it was the rites and religious ceremonies that were highlighted. A formal recitation of Latin liturgies was led by the selected clergy in the public service and the congregations were held back from being fully involved.<sup>124</sup> Nobody seems to have understood the meaning of the liturgies because, at that time, Latin was no longer a spoken language in North Africa. In other words, Christianity was merely a religion for the small Latin-speaking population, and not for the indigenous people.<sup>125</sup> Hence Robin Daniel assesses the spiritual condition of the Church as the 'foreshadow of medieval Catholicism': nominalism and mysticism.

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<sup>122</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 404; W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 835.

<sup>123</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 404.

<sup>124</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 404.

<sup>125</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 404;

The people attended, for the most part, not to give thanks to their Creator, nor to learn how to be better servants of Christ: they came rather to admire the awe-inspiring architecture and the music of the choir and to receive the sacraments which they believed ensured their salvation.<sup>126</sup>

Although the congregations were ostensibly large, the Church seems to have been unhealthy and spiritless due to the influences of the Byzantine Church.

#### **1.4.2.2 The Social Condition**

Abdulwahid Dhanuin Taha, in his book, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain*, maintains that there were severe tensions between the Byzantine and the Berber due to Byzantine policy. These included the policy of control of the territory of the Berber and the double taxation for the Byzantine army and for the Church, included Church construction.<sup>127</sup> Such a conflict with the Berber made the influence of the Byzantine weaken in North Africa, leading the Berber to favour ancestral traditions.<sup>128</sup> In turn, it seems that the Byzantines were not the dominant power in North Africa and at the same time, Byzantine Christianity was never absorbed by the Berber.

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<sup>126</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 404.

<sup>127</sup> Abdulwahid Dhanuin Taha, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 30.

<sup>128</sup> Abdulwahid Dhanuin Taha, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1989), p.31.

## 1.5 The Destruction of the Churches (642 AD - 709 AD)

When the Muslim Saracens began their invasion in 642-43 AD, they realised that the main power in North Africa were the inland Berbers. Accordingly, they adopted the policy of assimilation and co-operation with the Berbers. In order to control the country and to defeat the Byzantines, the Arabs recruited the Berbers into their army and sent Muslim missionaries amongst the Berber tribes. As a result, many Berbers cooperated with the Arabs and were converted to Islam.<sup>129</sup> Consequently, when the Muslims commenced their spread toward the north of Africa, they had to fight only one battle to destroy the Byzantine army in Subaytila.<sup>130</sup> The Muslims took Carthage in 698 AD, and had completed the conquest by 709 AD.<sup>131</sup>

## 1.6 Summary

As has been described above, the Church commenced and grew with the spirit of martyrdom, until the victory of Constantine. However, the union of the Church with the state brought both advantages and disadvantages to the Church. North Africa had also been invaded several times during its long history. Invaders, such as the Romans, Vandals, and Byzantines, tried to control as much territory as they could of this enormous area but they never succeeded in occupying more than the coastal towns and only a few inland strongholds. It would seem that the Christians

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<sup>129</sup> Abdulwahid Dhanuin Taha, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 55-83.

<sup>130</sup> Abdulwahid Dhanuin Taha, *The Muslim Conquest and Settlement of North Africa and Spain* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 31.

<sup>131</sup> David F. Wright, 'The North Africa Church,' in *The History of Christianity*, p. 211.

were never the real power in North Africa even prior to the spread of Islam. Appearing to be under the control of Christianity, huge areas of North Africa remained, in fact, in the native African Berber's hands.

## Chapter 2

### **Distinctive Features of the North African Church**

The present chapter proposes to view the status of the North African Church in terms of its relationship with the indigenous culture, its associations with the State, its ecclesiological features, and its theological schisms. Accordingly, the chapter is based on the hypothesis that these four elements were probably the most decisive factors in leading the Church into decline prior to the spread of Islam.

#### **2.1 The Relationship between the Church and North African Culture**

The life of the North African Church could not be conceived without considering its fanatical devotion to religion, which had from early times pervaded the peoples of North Africa. To this end, we deal with three major opinions when attempting to understand North African Church history from the perspective of the African religious tendency.

J. S. Mbiti, the well-known Kenyan theologian, in his book 'Bible and Theology in African Christianity', evaluates the status of the Church in North Africa as unification between Christianity and African Culture. Mbiti regards the form of early North African Christianity as a combination of certain characteristics of apostolic Christianity based on Latin Christianity with the actual realities of ancient

African cultural elements.<sup>132</sup> He argues that early North African Christianity apparently had different forms, as compared with the Roman Church, but they were forms rather obviously associated with African culture. He says: 'African Christianity is the outcome of a marriage between the two: the Biblical Christianity; African traditional religions, and the African is born out of and into this union'.<sup>133</sup> Mbiti maintains that the monotheistic concept of God in the African mindset helped the North African people to accept Christianity easily.<sup>134</sup> At the same time, he makes it clear that the traditional attitudes of respecting a prophet as a representative of gods, or, making much of prayer as a channel connecting the dead and the living, played a key role in achieving the Christianisation of North Africa. His idea, that the North African Church in the early century was built on the background of the African religion, is generally accepted by most African Church historians including Elizabeth Ischei.

As to the reasons for the expansion of Christianity, Frend, in his book 'The Donatist Church', focused his attention on the similarity between rigorous Christianity and traditional religious attitudes: monotheism; respect for the prophet; sacrifices for the dead; and the monotheistic concept of God.<sup>135</sup> Frend views the enormous growth of Christianity as the result of both the decline in the worship of Saturn, the all-powerful national deity, after the mid-third century, and Saturn worshippers' mass

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<sup>132</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: OUP, 1986), pp.67-97; 98-133.

<sup>133</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, pp.87-88.

<sup>134</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, pp.67-97; 98-133. There, Mbiti makes clear that the significance of prayers in traditional life is taken over among Christians and continued in their daily life and the life of the Church. Furthermore, he noted that the concepts of God, too, were easily absorbed in many African societies, for they already had the concept of only one God, the Creator of all.

<sup>135</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: OUP, 1952), pp.77-80.



conversion to Christianity.<sup>136</sup> He refers to factors relating to mass conversion, such as fasting, miracles, asceticism, pilgrimage, martyrdom, and other religious forms.<sup>137</sup> However, he argues that conversion did not mean the severance of religious relations between African traditional religious factors and Christianity, but rather their modification from Saturn to Christianity.<sup>138</sup> In turn, he concludes that African Christianity was built on nominal African traditional religious attitudes; consequently, African religious assimilation led the Church into confusion and the eventual decline of the North African Church. Frend's idea is generally supported by several missionary historians, including Robin Daniel.<sup>139</sup>

F. J. Foakes Jackson views the distinctive tendencies of African Christianity as 'fervour of affection', 'stern fixity of purpose', and 'fiery and uncompromising fanaticism'. These seem to have resulted from the inhabitants of ancient Carthage.<sup>140</sup> Jackson regards the fiery disposition of the North African people as a key factor in causing martyrdoms, schisms, and separations in the Church. He argues that North African Church history could be conceived of by means of these inherent characteristics: Cyprian, criticising the lapsed as deserter; Tertullian, repudiating the Roman bishop Stephen's charitable view of heretical baptisms; and Augustine, stimulating puritan life.<sup>141</sup> Jackson based his idea on the fact that the North African viewed life as a fierce struggle between light and darkness, and was marked by a

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<sup>136</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 348.

<sup>137</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp. 97-104.

<sup>138</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 104.

<sup>139</sup> See also, Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, pp. 45-57.

<sup>140</sup> F. J. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church* (Cambridge: J. Hall & Son, 1924), pp.288-89.

<sup>141</sup> F. J. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church*, p. 264; 289.

powerful zeal for purity of life and doctrine.<sup>142</sup> Such an idea, that much emphasis has been placed on the extreme rigorous mettle of African Christianity, is supported by several Church historians, including W. Ward Gasque and N. Needham.<sup>143</sup>

As has been mentioned above, it seems safe to assume that we could not conceive of African Church history without considering its relationship to the traditional African religious attitude. From this point of view, it is likely that the outstanding expansion of Christianity in the first four centuries resulted from the modification of their traditional beliefs, rather than from a real conversion to Christianity. However, it is not sufficient to state that the reasons for the decline in the Church was simply the relationship with local culture, because there were other influential factors, such as social, political, and religious elements.

## **2.2 The Church-State Relations**

The close association between the Christian Church and the secular government began after the enthronement of Constantine. To inquire into the relationship between the Church and the Christianised Roman Empire, this study, therefore, attempts to focus on the special favours enjoyed by the Church under Constantine, on the premise that the so-called benefits he brought were probably a decisive factor in leading the Church into eventual decline.

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<sup>142</sup> N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, p.126.

<sup>143</sup> See W. Ward Gasque, 'The North Africa Church' in *A Lion Hand Book: The History of Christianity*, p.95; N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, p. 126.

In January 313 AD the two Roman emperors - Constantine ruling the West and Licinius the East - met in Milan. They produced a joint agreement with the intent of bringing peace to the Roman world after years of upheaval, war and persecution. This agreement became known as 'The Edict of Milan'.

The two emperors determined, first of all, to attend to "the reverence paid to the Divinity." This required a guarantee of full religious freedom to the Christians, giving them equality with those who followed other religions. This marked the Roman Empire's final abandonment of the policies of persecution of Christians. The age of the martyrs was at an end.

The following is part of the Edict of Milan:

"Our purpose is to grant both to the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each person has desired, whereby whatsoever Divinity dwells in heaven may be benevolent and propitious to us, and to all who are placed under our authority. Therefore we thought it salutary and most proper to establish our purpose that no person whatever should be refused complete toleration, who has given up his mind either to the cult of the Christians or to the religion which he personally feels best suited to himself. It is our pleasure to abolish all conditions whatever which were embodied in former orders directed to your office about the Christians, that every one of those who have a common wish to follow the religion of the Christians may from this moment freely and unconditionally proceed to observe the same without any annoyance or disquiet."<sup>144</sup>

The edict goes out of its way to ensure even-handed treatment for all:

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<sup>144</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp. 284-285.

“This has been done by us that no diminution must be made from the honour of any religion.”<sup>145</sup>

The strongly pro-Christian flavour is recognized in the instructions to restore to the Christians all property that had been seized during the persecution. This applied to property belonging to individual Christians as well as to Churches - and without regard for the present owners, who could apply to the state for compensation.

In implementing these rulings the governor was to give the Christians his “most effective intervention,” making sure the terms were published to all. By these actions, Constantine and Licinius concluded, that

“the Divine favour toward us, which we have already experienced in so many affairs, shall continue for all time to give us prosperity and success, together with happiness for the state.”<sup>146</sup>

Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, tells of the exemption and privileges of the Churches that Constantine wrote of in a letter to Anulinus:

‘... we have resolved that those men who gave their services with becoming sanctity, and the observance of this law, to the performance of divine worship, should receive the recompense for their labours... it is my will that these men, within the province, entrusted to thee in the Catholic Church, over which Caecilianus (bishop of Carthage) presides, who give their services to this holy religion, and whom they commonly call clergy, shall be held totally free, and exempt from all public offices, to the end that they may not by any error or sacrilegious fault...’<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp. 284-285.

<sup>146</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp. 285-286.

<sup>147</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp. 288.

The clergy were also given special financial support by Emperor Constantine. In a letter to Caecilian of Carthage the Emperor writes:

Forasmuch as it has been our pleasure in all provinces....the African, the Numidian and the Mauretanian, that somewhat be contributed for expenses to certain specified ministers of the lawful and most holy Catholic religion, I have despatched a letter to Ursus, the most distinguished finance minister of Africa, and have notified him that he be careful to pay over to thy Firmness three thousand 'folles'....when thou shalt secure delivery of the aforesaid sum of money, give orders that this money be distributed among all the above-mentioned persons in accordance with the schedule sent to thee by Hosius. But if, after all, thou shalt find that there is aught lacking for the fulfilment of this my purpose in respect of them all, thou shouldst ask without doubting whatsoever thou findest to be necessary from Heracleides, the treasurer of our estates. ....And since I have learned that certain persons of unstable mind are desirous of turning aside the laity of the most holy and Catholic Church by some vile method of seduction, know that I have given such commands to Anulinus....and not suffer such an occurrence to be overlooked....so that they may turn these people from their error. May the divinity of the great God preserve you for many years.<sup>148</sup>

Here, Caecilian, is instructed to distribute 'state monies' to 'certain specified ministers'. He is further instructed to apply for more financial help if the amount is not enough. There is a hint that some ministers have met with the Emperor's displeasure and this may refer to the Donatist movement.

As a result of this Edict the clergy were protected from most public burdens which were a responsibility for everyone at the time, such as military duty, labour, and taxes for the Church. This was a major concession and Constantine did this in the belief that the clergy

'shall not be drawn away by any deviation and sacrifice from the worship that is due to the divinity.... for it seems that, rendering the greatest possible service to the deity, they most benefit the state'.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp. 287-288.

<sup>149</sup> Quoted in Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome*, vol. 1, p.367.

It was this favour that led many wealthy men to enter the ministry so that they would be excused from paying taxes. This, in turn, led the government to forbid rich men from becoming ministers.<sup>150</sup> However, the declaration did not include all of the bishops of North Africa, but rather distinguished between the Catholic and Donatist bishops.<sup>151</sup>

Constantine sent these letters to North Africa instructing bureaucrats to restore Church properties and he appointed the Bishop of Carthage to distribute welfare. Constantine clearly gave Christians preferential treatment:

- He exempted the clergy from all military and municipal service.
- He removed all Church properties from the tax rolls.
- He promoted the freeing of slaves and simplified the necessary actions.
- He set aside the first day of the week as a legal day of rest.
- Constantine contributed heavily to Church construction.
- He abolished death by crucifixion. He did nothing about gladiatorial combats until he made Constantinople the imperial capital.
- He outlawed Jewish stoning of Jews professing Christ as Saviour and Messiah.
- He promoted the copying and distribution of the Scriptures.

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<sup>150</sup> Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p.96.

<sup>151</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp. 288; 'over which Caecilian presides'.

Jacob Burckhardt and several other writers deny Constantine's conversion. They suggest he 'converted' only to further his own interests citing his last minute baptism as evidence. It is true that Constantine delayed his baptism until just before his death in 337 AD. He became ill in the spring of that year and requested baptism. Following his baptism he died 22 May, 337 AD.

Delaying one's baptism, however, was a common practice. Known as 'clinical baptism', some of the best known Church fathers waited until near death for baptism. Most likely the concept that baptism washes away all sin contributed to the desire for delay - after all, why not wait and wash them 'all' away. Furthermore, there were some doubts about salvation if one sinned 'after' baptism. Many believers simply thought it was safer to wait until near death for baptism.

Charles Freeman suggests that Constantine might have had a deeper personal commitment to Christ. The *Oration to the Saints* may well have been a standard speech that he used on occasions when he lectured his court on the evils of polytheism, the importance of worshipping Christ and the need to repent:

"Be it my special province to glorify Christ, as well by the actions of my life, as by that thanksgiving which is due to him for the manifold and signal blessings which he has bestowed."<sup>152</sup>

Constantine stood to gain little by becoming Christian. The Empire was still nominally pagan and, although its citizens grew tired of Christian persecution,

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<sup>152</sup> H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, Baltimore, MD, and London, 2000, pp.292-305, for a full discussion of the Oration.

traditional religious alignments stood strong. Roman law, seeking to encourage families, levied a fine on bachelors but Constantine exempts Christian clergy. As early as 314 AD Christian symbols began making their appearance on Roman coins. For a period of about nine years both Christian symbols and pagan symbols appear on coins. By 321 AD the sign of *Sol Invictus* began disappearing and by 323 AD only Christian symbols appear on coins. Constantine goes on to recognize Church legal cases tried before bishops as binding and he makes it legal for Churches to inherit property. One more important fact is that Constantine provides a Christian education for his children.

Secondly, in 313 AD Constantine not only ordered the restoration of a Church or buildings which had been destroyed under the persecutions but also approved that the Churches should receive legacies in 321 AD.<sup>153</sup> As a result of his success at the Milvian Bridge he marked his new commitment to Christianity by building his first Church on imperial land. This was the Church of Christ the Redeemer, now St John Lateran in Rome. It was built as an all-purpose meeting hall which could be used for audiences or the administration of law. An octagonal baptistery, which is still intact today, was placed alongside the basilica. Close by, Constantine's mother Helena had her own Church. Constantine, perhaps under the influence of his mother, showed great interest in the Holy Land and it was at his command that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built and others were built on sacred sites.

Another initiative of Constantine involved building Churches over the burial places

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<sup>153</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, p. 262-264.



of martyrs. On the Vatican hill in Rome, for example, he ordered a great basilica to be placed over the presumed resting place of Peter.

Furthermore, Constantine permitted the donations of money, or grain, to support both the clergy and the building of African Churches.<sup>154</sup> Consequently, the Church became independently wealthy and came to own the tenth part of all the landed property.<sup>155</sup>

Thirdly, under the influence of the new relationship, the social position of the clergy changed rapidly. 'The legal validity of the Episcopal jurisdiction' was generally denounced from the time of Constantine.<sup>156</sup>

Constantine does seem to have had an ambiguous relationship with the Church. The Emperor stated once that he was a bishop for those outside the Church, not for those already inside, and it does appear that he usually kept his distance from the institution. The bishops attended him, not he their Churches. They often offended him by their stubbornness and intransigence. 'You, the bishops, do nothing but that which encourages discord and hatred and, to speak frankly, which leads to the destruction of the human race,' was one remarkable outburst he made.

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<sup>154</sup> See Philip Schaff *History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p.97; Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, pp. 431-32, 'Constantine Augustus to Caecilianus bishop of Carthage. As we have determined, that in all the provinces of Africa, Numidia, and Mauritania, something should be granted to certain ministers of the legitimate and most holy catholic (universal) religion, to defray their expenses, I have given letters to Ursus, the most illustrious lieutenant-governor of Africa, and have communicated to him, that he shall provide, to pay to your authority, three thousand folles.'

<sup>155</sup> See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* vol. III, p.98; Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, pp. 138-39

<sup>156</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, p. 264.

However, he soon showed that he was ready to give positive support to the bishops of the Church. As a result of privileges offered the number of bishops multiplied in these years - it is estimated that there were two thousand of them in the empire by the mid-fifth century. In those parts of the empire that had experienced schism, northern Africa, for instance, where even as late as 411 AD over three hundred Donatist bishops turned up to a council held at Carthage, there might have been two or more rival bishops in a small town.

The Church now offered a viable and prestigious career with many bishops being recruited directly from the civil service. Ambrose of Milan and Paulinus of Nola had both held governorships in Italy, while the bishop of Cyzicus, Eleusius, had served in the imperial civil service. Martin of Tours and several of his fellow bishops in Gaul had been army officers. Augustine held the prestigious post of city orator in Milan before his conversion. There were even cases of distinguished civil servants being 'awarded' a bishopric as an end-of-service post. Often the traditional roles of the elite were absorbed in the work of the bishop. Basil of Caesarea is found negotiating tax exemptions for petitioners in much the same way a patron would have done in earlier days.

The central responsibilities of a bishop, however, lay where they had always been, with the care of their junior clergy and congregations. They had responsibility for the administration of the sacraments, or, 'discharging the venerable mysteries' as one fifth-century bishop put it, and the overseeing of the needs of the Christian poor.

There had been much discussion by the earlier Church fathers over the nature of a bishop's authority. Clement of Alexandria had taught that it could only grow out of a life based on an imitation of Christ. His instincts as a philosopher led him to define three roles: one of contemplation, one of fulfilling the commandments and one of leading others towards virtue. Origen went further in stressing the importance of the ascetic lifestyle, in essence the transferring of bodily desires into a mind that transcended them and released new spiritual and mental energies as a result.

The problem lay in reconciling these holy men with the messy politics and power struggles of everyday life in the Church. Spiritual power and administrative ability did not often mix. Those who had transcended the material world were not always eager to engage in the networking needed to secure election as a bishop and the ascetic living a withdrawn life in the desert was always a potential threat to the authority of the more worldly bishops.

For others, however, the public display of their status seemed to dominate. Many bishops' palaces echoed those of provincial governors with their audience halls and separate rooms for banqueting. Their Churches were even more magnificent and it was during this period that there was an enormous shift of resources towards Church building.

From this time, not only had the bishops the right to settle disputes between Christians in their own courts, but they also had the authority to intercede for

prisoners, criminals, and others accused in the secular courts.<sup>157</sup> The metropolitan bishop, or patriarchal bishop, was regarded as a high-ranking officer of State, paid 720 solidi (10 pounds of gold) a year, like a provincial governor, and had a position equal to that of magistrates.<sup>158</sup>

Over all, the needs of the Church were no longer met by the sacrifices of its own members, but were received from the state and from the Church's own properties. The clergy became influential amongst communities and received even higher honours than the officials of the state received.<sup>159</sup>

The bishops did not, however, always use their authority wisely. Several used their power in ways that brought division to local communities. In 415 AD, Severus, the bishop of Mahon in Minorca, set on fire a synagogue filled with its congregation after they had refused to debate with him.

Alexandria, in particular, was known for its tempestuous bishops and the volatility of its population and the combination could be explosive. In 392 AD a Mithraeum had been demolished to make room for a new Church. This caused a riot against the Christians in which hostages were taken and concealed in the complex of the Serapeion, the vast temple that dominated the city. The bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, ascended the steps of the building and read out a letter from the emperor apparently denouncing the pagan gods. (This was presumably derived

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<sup>157</sup> See Philip Schaff *History of Christian Church* vol. III, pp.102-108; H. R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, pp. 138-39.

<sup>158</sup> J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church*, p.188; W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church*, p.238.

<sup>159</sup> H. R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, p. 139.

from Theodosius' anti-pagan legislation of that year.) It is not clear whether the pagans scattered or killed the hostages but Theophilus gave the signal to attack the statue of the god Serapis and then the buildings were razed to the ground. Part of the great library of Alexandria was included.

These stories of violence conflict with traditional pictures of bishops as 'respected upholders of good order.' Although there were many factors that made city life violent - scarcity of food, increases in taxation, or the flooding in of refugees - some were related to the rise of the Church as an alternative centre of authority which found itself competing with other longer established communities in the cities. With the support of emperors from Constantine onwards the Church felt that the tide was flowing in its favour. There was a confidence, even a self-righteousness, in the way bishops assailed their opponents. Once again the Old Testament provided a mass of texts that condoned the violence by providing examples of a jealous God wreaking vengeance on his enemies: "Ye shall destroy their altars, break down their images, and cut down their groves. . . for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" as Exodus puts it (34:13-14).

The two main areas where bishops provided the most effective service to the wider community were the law and care of the poor. Constantine had seen the opportunity to extend the role of the bishops as local magistrates in the community. Ambrose was to complain that he had to judge cases involving money, farms and even sheep. Augustine is found arbitrating between landlords and peasant tenants.

The basis of all jurisdiction remained Roman law. Many bishops had, of course, absorbed a legal training as part of their education. Ambrose was doing no more than transfer into an ecclesiastical context the skills he had already practised as a provincial governor. In the early fifth century the Church courts took on an increasing responsibility for the enforcement of morals and the laws against pagans and heretics.

Bishops appeared ready to adopt a very definite 'Christian' approach to their duties, especially in talking of the need to temper the harshness of traditional law with Christian charity. Others, notably Augustine, went further in backing judgements with reference to scripture. The Old Testament provided a host of references to the justice of the king, especially in upholding the rights of the oppressed. There is an emphasis in some records of the episcopal courts taking on reconciliation, in marital cases, for instance. Again there is fragmentary evidence from the 430s AD that the state encouraged the Church courts to deal with the protection of orphans.

One traditional role of the clergy that remained intact was their concern for the poor. Jesus had taught that care for the sick and needy was central to the Christian mission. 'For now, by God's will, it is winter', preached Augustine. 'Think of the poor. Think of how the naked Christ can be clothed. Pay attention to Christ in the person of the poor, as he lies in the portico, as he suffers hunger, as he endures the cold' The Old Testament precedents of the just king hearing the cries of the oppressed may have been an influence here.

One of the most important developments of the age, initiated by Constantine, was the extension of the charitable functions of the Church to encompass this established provisioning of food for the poor. There was, however, a different emphasis. Grain handouts by the emperors and other patrons tended to be targeted at a particular city and distributed primarily to buy off discontent in the hope of preserving the security of the wealthy and elites. Christians talked instead of the poor as a group to be privileged with help because of their poverty.

It is hard to know whether the numbers of poor were increasing in this period. Standards of living in the empire were comparatively high compared to what they would become after its collapse and recent archaeological evidence shows many communities were still thriving. However, marginal groups were acutely vulnerable. The Mediterranean climate was variable and famine often struck, and often made worse, the physician Galen reported, by the greed with which city dwellers stripped the rural areas for their own needs. The disruptions caused by wars and invasion were leading to a refugee problem. When Christians turned their focus on the poor with an intensity that had been lacking in pagan society, they found a mass of destitute, 'shivering in their nakedness, lean with hunger, parched with thirst, trembling with exhaustion and discoloured by undernourishment', as one preacher put it.<sup>160</sup> John Chrysostom estimated that ten per cent of the population of Antioch lived in absolute poverty.

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<sup>160</sup> Peter Chrysologos, quoted in P. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, Hanover and London, 2001, p.46

When Cyril of Alexandria launched a major programme of bribery to ensure that the emperor Theodosius supported him in a theological dispute in 431 AD, the gold and other exotic gifts involved could have fed and clothed nineteen thousand poor for a year. This was the inevitable consequence of a Church that now saw itself as a major player in a society where wealth and opulent display brought prestige and influence. Even ascetics who surrendered their wealth did not necessarily commit it to the needy. The enormously rich Melania settled on one of her estates in North Africa and began renouncing her wealth by endowing a local Church so extravagantly that 'this Church which formerly had been so very poor now stirred up the envy of all the other bishops in that province'.

However, what was achieved should not be dismissed. As the role became more institutionalised, each diocese seems to have drawn up its own list of deserving poor (the *matricula* as it was known in the Latin west) so that three thousand widows and orphans received help in fourth-century Antioch and there were 7,500 named poor in Alexandria in the early seventh century. The bishop's special role in helping prisoners is highlighted in an early fifth-century law in which the emperor orders the local governors to give clergy free access to prisons.

So, the bishops were faced with many challenges. The Church was attempting to expand its own boundaries against resilient and often resentful communities of Jews and pagans as well as the many Christian groups that had now been excluded by Theodosius' laws.



The coming of Christianity involved much more than the extension of the teaching of the gospels to society. It required major shifts in the way power was exercised and wealth distributed – ways that often seemed in conflict with each other. None of this involved a radical re-ordering of society. Very gradually bishops became the core of a conservatively structured society and with lasting effect.

## 2.3 The Ecclesiastical Features

### 2.3.1 A Hierarchical System of Clergy

The Church of North Africa, during the first four centuries, was generally known as a Church of bishops.<sup>161</sup> Compared with other Christianity-dominant areas, there were a large number of bishops in a well-organised system in the North African Church.<sup>162</sup> This Episcopal bishop system, already introduced in the first century, seems to have matured in the middle of the third century under the teaching of Cyprian. Tertullian maintained a universal priesthood, claiming for the laity the common priestly privilege of all Christians, emphasising the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>163</sup> Compared with Tertullian, however, Cyprian understood the episcopacy in close connection with the view of a special priesthood and sacrifice.<sup>164</sup> Emphasising the oneness of the Church, Cyprian saw its unity as expressed and guaranteed by the consensus of its bishops, saying; ‘the bishop is the Church, and the Church is the

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<sup>161</sup> Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 37.

<sup>162</sup> See Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 38; J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, p.10.

<sup>163</sup> See Tertullian, *On the Priesthood of the Laity, De Exhortatione Castitatis*, 7. in *Documents of the Christian Church*. ed. by Henry Bettenson, (London: OUP, 1959), pp. 100-104.

<sup>164</sup> See Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*, in *Documents of the Christian Church* ed. by Henry Bettenson, (London: OUP, 1959), pp. 102-104; Philip Schaff, *The History of Christian Church* vol. II., p.150.

bishop, and if anyone is not with the bishop he is not the Church'.<sup>165</sup> Cyprian considered bishops as the 'bearers of the Holy Spirit', who passed from Christ to the apostle.<sup>166</sup> At the same time, he emphasised the equality of the bishops, arguing that every bishop has full liberty and complete power in his own Church.<sup>167</sup>

However, with the proclamation of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the structure of Church government was developed systematically and had a distinct leaning toward hierarchy.<sup>168</sup> Bishops were no longer equal but altered to a hierarchical form where they were to be graded into an order of greater and less importance.<sup>169</sup>

According to Boer, the clergy developed into three large groups: the lower clergy, consisting of exorcists and readers; the higher clergy, covering deacons and presbyters; and the episcopate. This Church system seems generally to have been accepted in North Africa for, in 424 AD, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, had in his Church six deacons and three priests. A short while later, in 427 AD, he had seven priests, of whom two had been deacons in 424 AD and had since been ordained.<sup>170</sup>

Boer also states that the episcopate consisted of the bishops of the Church: the country bishop, the lowest in rank; the city bishop, the next in order; the archbishop, controlling both the country bishops and the city bishops; and the patriarchal

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<sup>165</sup> Cyprian, *Epist.* lxvi.3.

<sup>166</sup> See Cyprian *On the Unity of the Church* 4-6, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. by Henry Bettenson, pp. 101-104.

<sup>167</sup> See Cyprian *On the Unity of the Church* 4-6, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. by Henry Bettenson, pp. 101-104: However, this view made Cyprian repudiate the Bishop of Rome, Stephen, in dealing with the controversy of re-baptism.

<sup>168</sup> See W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church*, p.238; F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop* (New York/ Evanston: Harper & Row, 1961), p.225; Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, pp. 134-147; Philip Scahff, *History of Christianity* vol. II, pp. 123-132.

<sup>169</sup> N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, p.178.

<sup>170</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p.225.

bishops, the highest in rank.<sup>171</sup> Accordingly, the Bishop of Carthage was regarded as a patriarch, having great authority, not only upon the rest of the Roman African Church, but also over the Christian community, and having majesty, authority, and power.<sup>172</sup>

In turn, the North African Church, before 313 AD, seems to have had no common government, no common Church law, and no common Church action under the influence of Tertullian and Cyprian. Nevertheless, it is likely that a hierarchal system of the Church set its basis on the restricted priesthood view of Cyprian, and was reorganised systematically after Constantine's enthronement in 313 AD.<sup>173</sup>

### **2.3.2 Paganism in the Church**

Latourette believes that Christianity was modified by its environment.<sup>174</sup> From his point of view, it is likely that the traditional beliefs: the worship of Baal, Saturn, Roman gods and other African pagan elements, seem to have been very common in North Africa.<sup>175</sup> We can find proof of pagan influence on the early North African Church from Tertullian's '*On Idolatry*'.

'*On Idolatry*' was written against the background of the imperial persecution of the Church, and it was intended to instruct the Romans concerning the true nature of the

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<sup>171</sup> Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Christianity*, pp. 134-37.

<sup>172</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 129-30; 323.

<sup>173</sup> Philip Schaff *History of Christian Church* vol. II, p. 128.

<sup>174</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity 1*, p. 366.

<sup>175</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed* p.70; 51.

Christian faith. Tertullian criticized imperial edicts and the manner in which they had been implemented by the courts; in effect, he pleads for “freedom of religion”. Ordinary offenders, he says, are tortured to make them confess their crimes but Christians are tortured to make them deny their beliefs. The whole judicial procedure thus becomes a farce. Tertullian's argument has a positive and a negative side. On the one hand, the author gives a careful, detailed exposition of the beliefs and practices of the Church of his day; on the other hand, as a former pagan, well-placed for observing Roman society, he gives a telling expose of the immorality and irreligion of those who put the Christians to death.

Christians are charged with not believing in the gods of the Romans. This is true, says Tertullian, but it is no scandal. There are tribes throughout the Empire which do not believe in the Roman gods, yet they have permission to practice their religion. Moreover, philosophers, such as Socrates, are held in honour, in spite of the fact that they deny the gods. According to Tertullian, Christians worship “the One God” who by His word and power has created and sustains the world. Although He is not visible, every man has some notion of Him because He is manifest both in the works of nature and in the native testimony of the soul itself. In evidence of the latter, Tertullian cites such pagan expressions as “God is great and good”, “May God give!”, and “I commend myself to God”. But, says Tertullian, for our better knowledge of Him, God has also given us a written revelation of Himself. Tertullian stresses the antiquity of this revelation, which was given to the Hebrews. It

antedates Homer, the tragic poets, and philosophers, who, in Tertullian's opinion, probably drew upon it.

As to the pagan divinities, Tertullian holds the view, known anciently as euhemerism, that the gods are men who, after their death, were made objects of worship. There are, then, in actuality, no gods other than God. But, according to Tertullian, there are devils, which take advantage of men's idolatrous inclinations and appear to them as gods in order to enslave their souls to darkness. The simplicity of Christian worship must be difficult to grasp for those who are accustomed to the florid festivals of Gaia or of Bacchus, writes Tertullian.

The service of Christ consists in reading the Scriptures, in prayer, in exhortation and censure. Once a month, Christians gather donations for the poor and the unfortunate. They call one another "brethren", not in the hypocritical manner of those who curry favour of one another, but because of their common mother, Nature. Thus, Christians think of pagans as their brothers and sisters; but they feel special kinship toward those who have been led to the common knowledge of God.

More serious, perhaps, was the charge that Christians were disloyal to Caesar, inasmuch as they refused to offer sacrifice to him as to a god. Tertullian insists on the distinction made in the Gospels between that which is Caesar's and that which is God's. Christians are even willing to call Caesar "lord", so long as it is understood that this is not a title of divinity. These Christians also pray for Caesar and for the

preservation of Roman rule. The same kind of reply is brought to the charge that, in causing the sacrifices to be neglected, Christians are responsible for various natural calamities. The charge had better be turned against the heathen themselves, says Tertullian, considering the hypocritical and perfunctory manner in which they perform their religious rites. If the well-being of the Empire depended on the gods, as is maintained, then the pagans should take it that those disasters are warnings to themselves. In any case, says Tertullian, there were natural catastrophes before there were Christians.

Tertullian criticises idolatry as ‘adultery of truth and fornication’ and other sexual vices of pagans.<sup>176</sup> At the same time, Tertullian refers to a type of pagan religious worship, ‘the Brazen Serpent,’ taking place in the Church.<sup>177</sup> Later, in the time of Augustine, the legacies of paganism such as public revelry and festivals affected the Christian Church and remained strong in Christian life.<sup>178</sup> Among them, a particular feature in the North African Church, in the fourth century, was the worship of martyrs and saints.<sup>179</sup> Augustine, too, points out that banqueting and revelling were practised daily in honour of the martyrs by the entrance of the heathen masses, and he thinks that this weakness must have been indulged from respect for the ancient customs of the pagans.<sup>180</sup>

One of the first things that would have likely confused a new convert in Carthage

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<sup>176</sup> Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol III. ed. by. James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp.61-77.

<sup>177</sup> Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol III. ed. by. James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp.61-77.

<sup>178</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, pp.46-47; K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity 1*, pp. 195-197.

<sup>179</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church* vol III, p.429.

<sup>180</sup> Augustine, EP. 22 and 29; re-quoted in Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church* vol III, p.436.

was the fact that the same people who filled the Churches on feast day also filled the theatres on days of heathen festival, both places being occupied to capacity on these occasions. The temples (of the cults) were closed, but the old gods still ruled on the stage, in the schools, in the secret drug shops and at all festivals.<sup>181</sup>

The multitudes converted from their pagan belief to Christianity brought their pre-Christian customs, beliefs, and life-styles. Against this pagan intrusion, the Church had tried to struggle, but without success.<sup>182</sup> As a result, the legacies of paganism, seemingly removed from the life of Christians, still dominated early African Christianity.

## 2.4 Worship by the Church

We have little information about the worship of the North African Church, especially in the fourth century, compared to that of the Roman Church. However, some writings of Augustine, Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, and of modern Church historians give us some knowledge surrounding this topic.<sup>183</sup>

In the writings of Eusebius the worship service seems to have been divided into two parts: 'the service of the Catechumens,'<sup>184</sup> consisting of prayer, scripture reading,

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<sup>181</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p47.

<sup>182</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1, p. 368.

<sup>183</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 558-561; Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, pp. 361-371; Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, pp. 141-147; Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church* vol. III, pp. 469-74; W. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, pp. 167-70.

<sup>184</sup> *Missa catechumenorum*

and preaching, including catechumens, and 'the service of the faithful,'<sup>185</sup> consisting of the Communion - only for the communicants.<sup>186</sup> On Sunday, in the public service, the Bible was read by the clergy, with selection from the Gospels and Epistles. After readings from the New Testament the Bishop announced a psalm. Each line was chanted in a nasal tone by one appointed to that task and the congregation sang out the refrain at the end of the line. After the ministry of the Word, which would last between half an hour and an hour, the communicant would stand at the front altar,<sup>187</sup> and bless the 'offerings'. Then, the Alleluia would be sung; the Bishop would administer the Communion to the congregation and dismiss it with a benediction.<sup>188</sup>

The worship service, including the sermon, seems to have been held in Latin with the Latin-liturgy; not in the native language.<sup>189</sup> In these cases some of the clergy mispronounced their prayers and, on occasion did not even know the meaning of the words they were uttering.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, the Church concentrated more on religious ceremony and outward elements, such as the architecture, music, art, and others. In this way, the masses who entered the Church were pleased with the ceremony and beauty without actually understanding its inner meaning.<sup>191</sup> Consequently, preaching was sometimes regarded as less solemn than the

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<sup>185</sup> *Missae fidelium*

<sup>186</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church* vol. III, p.469; James Craigie Robertson, *History of Christian Church*, p. 319.

<sup>187</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 559: Frend thinks that the altar might have housed the relics of martyrs

<sup>188</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 362.

<sup>189</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p. 226; Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, pp. 141-147; B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church*, p. 111; Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, p. 52; Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church* vol. III, pp. 517-25.

'Liturgy means, in ecclesiastical language, the order and administration of public worship in general, and the celebration of the Eucharist in particular; then, the book or collection of the prayers used. The Latin Church calls the public eucharistic service *Mass*, and the liturgical books, *sacramentarium, rituale, missale*, also *libri mysteriorum*, or simply *libelli*.' (See, Philip Schaff, pp.518-19)

<sup>190</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p. 226.

<sup>191</sup> Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, pp. 141-147.



Communion.<sup>192</sup>

When the Church of Carthage first comes into view in the late second century, the literary evidence shows established orders of ministry largely comparable with those found in other centres at the same time. There are bishops, presbyters and deacons, and some members of what would later be termed “minor orders.” The formal roles taken by these in liturgy, sacraments and leadership are again similar to those suggested by the early Church Orders, or implied and described by contemporary writers elsewhere such as Irenaeus, Clement and Origen.

All the pre-Cyprianic documents suggest or at least allow significant catechetical roles for lay Christians, for instance. The most significant documents, namely the corpus of Tertullian and the *Passion of Perpetua* and her companions, are explicit about confusion and conflict.

The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, the earliest literary evidence of Christianity in Roman Africa, do not mention the status or office of those charged. Speratus, apparently a leader of the group, had a satchel with Pauline writings and seems to quote 1 Tim 6:16 – “to Him be honour and might forever”. Speratus may have a role related to teaching or reading (a century or so later readers in Circa are attested keeping codices at home), and possibly, but not necessarily, a particular office, although that of lector is attested in Carthage soon after. Speratus also appears as a

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<sup>192</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church* vol. III, p. 473.

cultured person in the work, if this can be relied upon as reflecting him and not only its author; his response to interrogation is cultured as well as articulate.

## **2.5 Theological Features**

Gerald Bonner defines schism as a 'division within a Christian community, which may lead to external separation but does not involve disagreement over fundamental doctrines'.<sup>193</sup> African Church history could be described as a history of persecutions and schisms, which commenced in the third century, and lasted until the spread of Islam.

Frend points out, that the controversial issues of the Churches were relative to the nature of the Church and its membership, rather than to theological issues.<sup>194</sup> Here, then, we will examine two main schisms: the Novatian schism and the Donatist schism, which generated controversies in North Africa based upon the ideal of a pure Church. This study assumes that 'schisms' were one of the most decisive factors leading the Churches into decline, and, also, resulted from the native African religious attitude.

### **2.5.1 The Novatian Schism**

The African Novatists schism, originally inaugurated by Novatian of Rome and

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<sup>193</sup> See Gerald Bonner, 'Schism and Church Unity' in *Early Christianity*, ed. by Ian Hazlett, pp. 218-227.

<sup>194</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 655.

gaining supporters in North Africa, was a rigorous puritanical movement. It pursued a pure holy Church consisting of holy people and doctrines. The schism resulted from how should 'lapsed' Christians who had denied their faith during the Decius persecution be treated.

Christians were torn between their traditional exclusivity and a strong desire to please the powerful, while prominent Romans were caught between interest in and suspicion of Christian intentions. The situation was bound to produce extremes of fortune.

Trajan Decius was an energetic senator and provincial governor who seized power as Emperor in 249 AD. He attributed the empire's troubles squarely to the anger of the old gods that their sacrifices were being neglected. For Decius the solution was simple: enforce sacrifices on every citizen, man, woman and child, or at least the head of a household in the name of all its members - a radical escalation of a traditional practice whereby emperors ordered every community to offer sacrifices on their accession. It is obvious that Christians systematically avoided sacrifices. The confrontation which now took place turned a spotlight on an intransigence which had often previously been unobtrusive.

In 250 AD the new imperial policy was implemented with bureaucratic efficiency. Those who sacrificed were issued with certificates of proof, some of which have

been preserved for us in the rubbish pits and desert sands of Egypt.<sup>195</sup> The order was coupled with punishment, usually imprisonment but in some cases death, for those who refused. The Christian Church was severely damaged, not so much in terms of death and suffering, because few died outside a small group of leaders, but in terms of morale.

The truth is that the overwhelming majority of Christians gave way. This might have been predicted, because the same thing had happened when, for instance, Pliny the Younger had arrested Bithynian Christians back in 112 AD. It was only natural to wish to obey the emperor for most Christians felt a deep reverence for the empire and did not wish to cause trouble. Moreover, the Church as a whole was not used to persecution, or certainly not a systematic campaign directed from the centre. Trouble did not end when persecution ended and the Church's leadership began picking up the pieces for now the bishops' authority was at stake. Some bishops had followed the Lord's command recorded in John's Gospel to suffer martyrdom bravely and had been killed (including the Bishops of Antioch, Jerusalem and Rome). Others had followed the Lord's seemingly contradictory advice to be found in Matthew's Gospel to 'flee from city to city'.<sup>196</sup> They included such important figures as the Bishops of Carthage and Alexandria.

Those who had fled were likely to come in for plenty of criticism from those who had stayed and suffered for their faith. Accordingly, from the Roman technical

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<sup>195</sup> J. Stevenson ed., *A New Eusebius*, pp.214-215: The whole episode of persecution from Valerian to Gallienus, Cyprian and Novationism is well covered on pp. 213-251.

<sup>196</sup> John 12:25; Matthew 10:23

legal term for someone who pleads guilty as accused in court, these steadfast Christians were termed 'confessors'. Confessors provided the troubled Church with an alternative sort of authority based on their sufferings, particularly when arguments began about how and how much to forgive those Christians who had given way to imperial orders - the so-called 'lapsed'. Many of the lapsed flocked to the confessors to gain pardon and re-entry to the Church, and the bishops were not welcoming to this at all.

Disputes broke out in Rome and Carthage over the especially important issue of forgiveness. Faced with both defiance from some confessors and the election of a rival bishop, Bishop Cyprian of Carthage engaged in pamphlet warfare, producing statements about the role of a bishop in the Church which were to long outlive this particular dispute. He came to see authority for forgiveness of sins as vested in the bishop and he stressed that the bishop was the focus for unity in the whole Catholic Church, a successor of the Apostles in every diocese. In Rome the argument was mainly over whether there could be any forgiveness at all for those who had lapsed. The priest Novatian, a hardliner on this issue, opposed the election of his colleague Cornelius as bishop, since Cornelius held that forgiveness was possible at the hands of a bishop. The Church was bitterly divided as to whom to support. Cyprian and Cornelius, who had arrived at similar conclusions about the powers of a bishop, allied with each other and the supporters of Novatian found themselves an isolated minority.

Matters became worse when, in their initial enthusiasm, the Novatianists started making new Christian converts in North Africa as well as in Rome. When many of their sympathizers decided that the division had gone too far, and the newly baptized applied to re-join the Church in communion with Cyprian and Cornelius, Carthage and Rome were faced with the problem of deciding the terms. Was Novatianist baptism valid? Cyprian thought not, but a new Bishop of Rome, Stephen, wishing to be conciliatory to those who were coming in, disagreed with him.

A furious argument broke out between them, due partly to an expression of Rome's growing feeling that the North African bishops were inclined to think too well of their own position in the Church. Stephen not only called Cyprian Antichrist, but in seeking to clinch the rightness of his own opinion, he appealed to Christ's proclamation in Matthew's Gospel "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18-46). It is the first time known to us that the text had been used in this way by a Bishop of Rome.

In the end, North Africa and Rome agreed to differ on the issue of baptism. The North Africans stated that valid baptism could take place only within the Christian community which is the Church, while the Romans stated that the sacrament belonged to Christ, not to the Church, and that therefore it was valid whoever performed it if it was done in the right form and with the right intentions.

Comparative peace then descended on the Church for several decades and it is likely

that the steady expansion of Christian numbers was one significant factor in the decline of traditional religious institutions during that period.

When Cyprian returned in 251 AD, a council of Bishops decided strict terms for re-admitting lapsed Christians to the Church. The condition was that only the Bishop could make decisions admitting any lapsed person to communion.

Contrary to the decision, Novatianists took a very rigid line, and refused to receive any lapsed people who had surrendered under persecution. They called themselves '*Cathari*', meaning 'pure one', to distinguish themselves from all other Churches that had a non-resisting attitude towards sinners, or *libellatici* (meaning 'an apostasy'). They asserted that those who joined the Novatianists had to be re-baptised as a sign of their membership of the only true Church.

To oppose their actions, Cyprian wrote his major work, *The Unity of the Catholic Church*, arguing that the Church is a unity and therefore, there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church.<sup>197</sup> He rejected the validity of baptism performed outside the Church and asserted the re-baptism of the convert from outside the Church.

Although the schism was subdued by the persecution of Valerian, the schism did bring the African Church to two outcomes: one, the split of the Church; and, the other, the theological confusion of re-baptism and the validity of baptism outside the

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<sup>197</sup> Cyprian, *On the Unity of Church*, in *A New Eusebius*, pp.228-230.

Church.

### 2.5.2 The Donatist Schism

The Donatist schism was a protest movement, standing for a holy Church, purification of discipline and unflinching defiance of godless rulers. The Donatists took the line, after the persecutions under Diocletian, similar to that taken by the Novatians half a century before.<sup>198</sup>

In 311 AD, a new bishop named Caecilian had been ordained in Carthage. One of the bishops who participated in the ordination was Felix of Aptunga, who was accused of surrendering the scriptures and of handing over sacred literature for destruction. The accusers of Felix objected to the consecration of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage. While the Church officially supported Caecilian, many bishops opposed him. The North African Church was split in two. The seventy bishops of Numidia, the opponents of Caecilian, elected their own bishop named Marjorinus, inaugurating a purified Church movement. They believed that they constituted the true Church and that the Catholics were apostates.<sup>199</sup>

Emperor Constantine I, unfortunately, learned to his cost that Christians were now inclined to imperil the unity which their religion proclaimed. The first instance of this came as a result of the Great Persecution: renewed quarrels about how to heal the

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<sup>198</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Light in the West*, p. 14.

<sup>199</sup> See Optatus, *On the Schism of the Donatists*, I. 15-19 in *A New Eusebius*, 269.



wounds to the Church's self-esteem. In Egypt, hardliners were so shocked at the Bishop of Alexandria's willingness to forgive the repentant lapsed that around 306 AD one of them, Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis, founded his own rival clerical hierarchy, which disrupted the Church in Alexandria for decades.<sup>200</sup>

An even more serious split took place in the North African Church, where issues of forgiveness were combined with the problem of who had legitimate authority to forgive. A disputed episcopal election took place in Carthage. This was a product of complicated arguments about who had done what in the crisis, combined with personality clashes. The Churches in Rome and elsewhere recognized Caecilian as Bishop. One of the prices of his recognition was his abandonment of the view of baptism which Cyprian had upheld independently in North Africa. The opposition, furious at what they saw as this final proof of Caecilian's unworthiness, rallied behind the rival bishop, Donatus. The centuries-long Donatist schism in the North African Church had begun.<sup>201</sup>

Constantine's interventions in this intractable dispute have a remarkably personal quality, as the ruler of one of the most powerful empires in world history suddenly found himself confronted with subjects who appealed to a higher authority than his power. The dissidents were of course used to doing so, but the Emperor had not expected such ingratitude after he had ended the Great Persecution. If he knew nothing else about the Christian God, he knew that God was One. Anything which challenged

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<sup>200</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp.277-78: For Athanasius's angrily distorted version of Miletus's break with colleagues, pp.297-312.

<sup>201</sup> These events are usefully summarised in J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, pp. 297-312.

the unity of the Church was likely to offend the supreme One God, and that might end His run of favour to the Emperor.

Each side had excommunicated the other and faced with petitions from the Donatists, in 313 AD Constantine made a decision of great significance for the future. Rather than make a judgement for the Christians with the help of the traditional imperial legal system he would use the expertise of Church leaders, asking them to bring the matter 'to a fitting conclusion'.<sup>202</sup> He adapted the North African Church's well-established practice of submitting disputes to councils of Bishops, with the difference that now for the first time they were gathered from right across the Mediterranean.

Constantine's first summons of a council was to Rome, in 313 AD. Both sides had appealed to Constantine at that time to settle the dispute and he accepted their appeal and called a synod to meet in Rome. It declared Felix to be innocent of the charges made against him and decided in favour of the election of Caecilian. The matter was complicated by the fact that Constantine had given financial assistance to the Church in Carthage but not to the new Church of Marjorinus. The Church split remained, and indeed, it became worse.

The Donatists ignored the result, since it went against them, so Constantine tried again the following year in 314 AD. The Emperor called a much larger assembly to meet in the city of Arles in Gaul in what is now southern France. It was the first

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<sup>202</sup> J. Stevenson, ed. *A New Eusebius*, p. 304; for these events generally, see pp.302-07.

council to meet in the city of Arles, and supported Caecilian as well. The schism in North Africa only increased in its extent and bitterness.

Once more the council did not succeed in appeasing the Donatists, and in the course of much muddled negotiation with Donatist leaders, the Emperor was provoked into ordering troops to enforce their return to the mainstream Church. The first official persecution of Christians by Christians therefore came within a year or two of the Church's first official recognition, and its results were as divisive as previous persecutions by non-Christian emperors.

In 316 AD, Constantine intervened forcibly. He took away the Churches of the protesters and exiled all their bishops. They were named Donatists, after Donatus, who succeeded Marjorinus, and they inaugurated the separatist movement. Constantine's action did not bring peace.

In 321 AD, Constantine gave up on his efforts to enforce his decree and began to persecute the Donatists. Despite the persecution of Constantine, the Donatists were at the time far more powerful in Africa than the Catholics, and it seems that they lasted until the invasion of Islam.<sup>203</sup>

Most Donatists stayed loyal to their own independent hierarchy, nursing new grudges against the North African Church, which remained in communion with the rest of the Christian Mediterranean Churches and which appropriated to itself the

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<sup>203</sup> F. J. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church*, p. 498.

title of Catholic. The split was never healed, and it remained a source of weakness in North African Christianity for centuries until the Church in that region faded away.

There have been various attempts to understand the Donatist Schism amongst historians. Latourette regards the Schism not only as a theological debate but also as a social-class conflict, maintaining social classification of both classes, the Catholics from the Roman elements and the Donatists from the non-Latin speaking ones.<sup>204</sup>

Stephen Neil sees the motivation of the Schism as a linguistic and racial matter.<sup>205</sup> Philip Schaff sees the Schism having an ecclesiastical-political character, causing the split between the Roman Church and the North African Church.<sup>206</sup> F.F. Bruce evaluates this schism as a national spiritual resistance – ‘African nationalism against Roman imperialism.’<sup>207</sup> Bonner attempts to conceive Donatism from the perspective of social and psychological factors.<sup>208</sup> Frend, in particular, interprets Donatism as a vehicle for Berber patriotism and for socio-economic protest based on regional and racial factors: the protest of the urban poor and the rural peasant in Numida against the Carthagian Church identified with the landowning classes; and the Berbers against the Romans. Frend maintains that these factors helped the Donatists continue their influence in Africa.

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<sup>204</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. I, p. 196.

<sup>205</sup> Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p. 38.

<sup>206</sup> See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III, pp.360-70.

<sup>207</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Light in the West*, p. 15.

<sup>208</sup> See, Gerald Bonner, ‘Schism and Church unity,’ in *Early Christianity*, ed. by Ian Hazlett, p.218-228.

From these various points of view, it is likely that schisms could not be conceived of without considering the 'rigorous strand in North African Christianity', regarding life as a fierce struggle between light and darkness. Therefore, a powerful zeal for the purity of life through the martyrs and the doctrine of the Church was encouraged as the ideal Christianity.<sup>209</sup>

African Christianity, in turn, seems to support the position of Tertullian and Cyprian. Tertullian believed that Christians should be a gathered remnant, avoiding entirely the corruption of a tainted world, and also of Cyprian, who described the Church as an 'Ark' for salvation.

## **2.6 Summary**

As we have seen, during the first five centuries, the North African Church cannot be conceived of without considering both its inter-relationship with the African culture and its close relationship to the Latin Roman Empire. The former seems to have brought the pagan elements into, and caused the schisms to, the Church, while the latter gave rise to imperial Christianity in North Africa, and seems to have instigated a hierarchal corruption.

Outwardly healthy, the Church inwardly was unhealthy, due to its hierarchical clergy system, its pagan elements and its prolonged theological controversies. These features are inseparably related to each other, and seem to have played a key role in

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<sup>209</sup> N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, p.126.

leading the Church into the decline. These matters shall be analysed and discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3

### The Decline of the North African Church

In the previous two chapters, we have described in outline both the history of the North African Church and also its distinctive features. In this chapter, we attempt to analyse the principal reasons for the decline of the Church. This is based on the evidence that the North African Church had already been in long decline before the spread of Islam. If the Church was already in decline, we ask which principal factors gave rise to this.

The decline and total disappearance of this flourishing Church in North Africa is a sad fact of history. The Arab Muslim invasion of North Africa, which began around 643 AD, was completed by the capture of Carthage (698 AD) and Ceuta (709 AD). The Moslems gradually brought about the extinction of Christianity, reducing the number of bishoprics to three for all Africa by the time of Pope Gregory VII (1073 AD - 1085 AD). Even these three bishoprics disappeared entirely by the 13th century.

What are the reasons which could possibly explain this tragic disappearance of the Church in North Africa?

#### 3.1 The Remote Causes

Among the *remote* causes, I note the following:

**The presence of Donatism** in the Church in North Africa reduced the Church's interior strength considerably. In spite of the Catholic victory over the Donatists held in Carthage in 411 AD, Donatism never completely disappeared, and was still to be found in North Africa during the 6th century. A very important lesson that could be learnt from this sad situation of the Church in North Africa concerns the crucial importance of promoting, with vigilant and unflagging solicitude, the intimate bonds of communion among all the faithful in the Body of Christ which is the Church.

**The Vandal persecution of the Church** inflicted upon the latter a spiritual and moral damage which weakened the Church considerably - a weakness from which the Church never really recovered.

The North African Church **never translated the Bible and liturgy into native languages** (Berber and Punic), or incorporated elements of local culture to form a national Church. Latin provincial culture was received by the inhabitants along with the Christian Faith.

It is here that one can see a fundamental difference between the North African Church and the Church in Egypt. In Egypt and Ethiopia the Christian faith was very soon expressed (Bible, Liturgy, etc.) in the Coptic and Ethiopian languages, even the minority ones. If the Bible and the Liturgy had been translated into the Berber



language, it is quite possible that Christianity would have survived in North Africa, in spite of Islam, as it did in Egypt and the Middle East.

### 3.2 The Immediate Causes

The *immediate* causes of the decline and disappearance of the Catholic Church in North Africa included the following:

**The Arab-Muslim invasion** brought about a serious decline in the Christian population, due to casualties in battle and the flight of many to Italy and Gaul.

Another cause is the **pressure exerted upon Christians** and pagans to convert to Islam. In North Africa, following the Arab-Muslim invasion, Christians were permitted free exercise of their religion on payment of a tax and agreement not to proselytize. Around 720 AD very heavy pressure was exerted by Caliph Omar II on the Christian Berbers to convert to Islam. This led to a rapid conversion of the Moors, followed by a gradual process of attrition and, Islam succeeded in weakening the Church in North Africa which, in turn, led to its total disappearance.

During its development and growth the Christian Church in North Africa was characterised by a large degree of collegiality.<sup>210</sup> The decline of the Church in this region

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<sup>210</sup> Tilley, Maureen A., "The Collapse of a Collegial Church: North African Christianity on the Eve of Islam", *Journal of Theological Studies*, 62 (2001)

was due to a number of different reasons - from both East and West, from Byzantine emperors, Vandal invaders, and even bishops of Rome.

It has been suggested by some scholars that the decay of the Church during the Vandal administration (439 AD - 533 AD) and Byzantine reoccupation (533 AD - 647 AD), coupled with the incursions by the Berber raiders during both periods, set the stage for the rapid advance of the Arab Islamic military forces in the mid-seventh century.<sup>211</sup> Other scholars mention factors much more closely related to the nature of North African Christianity, such as the purportedly limited influence Christianity had on the country and rural areas of the region<sup>212</sup> or the insufficient indigenization of Latin Christianity among the Berbers.

While investigating the collapse of North African Christianity consideration needs to be given to the coming together of features internal to the distinctive structure of the Christian Church in North Africa in addition to external pressures. The collegial and episcopal structure of the North Africa Church was weakened by persecution during the Vandal occupation between the fifth and seventh centuries. The structure was, it seems, confronted by two factors: from the East, by changes in relationships between the African bishops and political power of the Byzantine Empire; and, from the West, by attempts of the bishops of Rome to have much more influence in their role in the Church of North Africa. Between these two groups, the leadership structure of the North African Church was severely weakened well in advance of Islam.

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<sup>211</sup> L. R. Holme, *The Extinction of the Christian Churches of North Africa* (1898; repr. New York: Franklin, 1969) 4 and 77.

<sup>212</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952; repr. 1970) 333-35.

From its beginnings, Christianity in North Africa seems to have taken on a hierarchical structure in its Church life that relied strongly on bishops. The bishop was considered to be the leader and focus of the Church while appointed priests were accountable to the bishop and rarely exercised any independent judgment. When Cyprian went into exile in 249 AD - 250 AD, a number of presbyters along with the confessors tried to fill the power vacuum, but with the return of the bishop, the normal course of leadership in the Church was restored.<sup>213</sup> Even in Augustine's time, a priest-delegate of the larger episcopal college could care for a rural diocese, but only temporarily, and he would not have the authority of or respect due a bishop. Priests were not even allowed to witness the formal vows of virgins without prior consultation with their bishop.

Bishops were seen to have the responsibility for pastoral care in all the villages and towns. Bishops seemed to be present in towns of any size, and few towns had priests. In North Africa bishops in even the smallest and most rural of towns exercised full jurisdiction and authority. Their power seems to have gone unquestioned. They were well integrated into the life of the community, as leaders whose authority, both civil and ecclesiastical, depended as much on the personalities and family connections as on their offices.<sup>214</sup>

From the earliest years of Christianity in Africa, candidates were selected by councils of bishops for episcopal ordination. These same councils made provincial policy and

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<sup>213</sup> On the number of presbyters, see Graeme W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, 1: Letters 1-27, *Ancient Christian Writers* 43 (New York: Newman, 1984) 39-41.

<sup>214</sup> Ocker, Christopher "Constantine, Episcopal Interests and the Papacy in Late Roman Africa", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42 (1991) 179-201, at 183--85.

took care of disputes between priests and other members of the clergy. While there were outstanding theologians, both young and old, at their councils, speakers were only to be heard according to seniority.

In the third century Cyprian acted as a kind of primate for Africa as an undivided ecclesiastical province. His successors as bishops of Carthage continued this sort of leadership. In the fourth century the civil province of Africa was divided into two, Proconsularia and Numidia, and the ecclesiastical administration followed suit - each new province had its own bishop.

This particular and peculiar structure was submerged because of persecution during the time of the Vandal occupation but was restored during the time of the Byzantines. Though close to being supreme in their own dioceses, bishops of all the North African provinces assembled together often, as regularly as circumstances would allow, to decide issues of mutual interest and promulgate common policy.

It should also be noted that Roman interest in North Africa, even before the advent of the Vandals, was more than that of a sister Church. Not only did Roman bishops have jurisdiction in the region but the bishop of Rome had also been gifted with many estates throughout North Africa and thus had some stake in religious affairs in various places from Byzacena in the east to Mauretania in the west. It is likely that these estates were legacies and bequests of Romans who owned North African properties and assets rather than being legacies and bequests of North Africans.

Although the Vandals were Arian Christians with their own hierarchy, at first the persecution of Catholic Christians seemed to have more to do with native wealth coveted by the invaders than with their religious affiliation. The Vandals did bring, however, persecution. During the period 439-454 AD the presbyters of the diocese were persecuted and in 475 AD they were given the choice of going into exile or being made slaves.

In 479 AD, Huneric permitted the election of Eugenius as Bishop of Carthage. This was not entirely straight-forward and the conditions surrounding the ordination were a compromise. He allowed the Arians to continue their missionary efforts, especially in non-Romanised areas, but no Arians were allowed to convert to the Catholic faith.

The end of persecution was not without price - literally. As long as a bishop lived he was allowed to occupy his see, but when he died no new bishop was allowed to be elected without the Vandal government taking over the assets and property of the diocese. Only when a large sum of money had been paid might the newly elected bishop be consecrated but there was no guarantee. Eventually the wavering Huneric sent several thousand members of the clergy of all ranks into exile in the desert.

In the years immediately following this mass exile, Huneric again alternated between toleration and persecution. While he allowed Eugenius of Carthage to remain in his see, he gave the order for all the remaining Catholic bishops in his

territory as well as the Arian bishops to assemble for a conference on June 25, 484 AD, to debate Christology.<sup>215</sup> While all bishops were invited there were only a few representatives who were allowed to speak. Cyrila, the Arian "patriarch" presided and his verdict was a foregone conclusion.<sup>216</sup> He pronounced against the Catholics and sent their remaining bishops back into exile again, together with the Catholic monks.

During their bishops' exile many of the Catholic laity lapsed and converted over to follow Arianism. In the absence of leadership in North Africa, Felix I, the Bishop of Rome, called for a synod at the Lateran basilica in Rome during 487 AD. Only four exiled African bishops were able to be in attendance and the Italians endeavoured to create a policy to govern the return of the Catholics who had lapsed and wished to return.

An example of the disaster of the Vandal occupation is found with Carthage. Between the time of the fall of the city in 439 AD and the accession of its first bishop after the liberation of the city by Belisarius in 533 AD, a span of 94 years, the city had no bishop, resident or in exile, for 41 years. The other cities of North Africa also suffered the martyrdom or exile of their bishops and the prohibition of elections in similar fashion. They were not only deprived of their bishops but also of their lower clergy. The most outspoken and courageous of the clergy were martyred, leaving only the less well-trained and courageous for the next round of purges. New bishops

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<sup>215</sup> Tilley, Maureen A., "Dilatory Donatists or Procrastinating Catholics: The Trial at the Conference of Carthage," *Church History* 60 (1991) 1-19.

<sup>216</sup> L. R. Holme, *The Extinction of the Christian Churches of North Africa* (1898; repr. New York: Franklin, 1969) p.131-135.

were repeatedly installed and then removed from the cities, villages, and towns. The carefully cultivated collegiality could not endure for very long under these circumstances.

For the first thirty years of the sixth century, the final days of Vandal domination, and throughout the period of the Byzantine reconquest (533 AD - 548 AD), Berbers pushed their attack more relentlessly from the southern desert. Catholics were subject to the same dangers as the Vandals themselves. When the Berbers attacked from the frontiers, they did not differentiate the Arian Vandals from the native Catholics. So, even after being set free from the Vandals, the African hierarchy, together with its people, were attacked.

Under the administration of the Byzantines, bishops who returned to Africa had to deal with the effects of a century of repeated disruptions to ecclesiastical government. Their major task was the reorganization of the Catholic Churches. Part of their responsibility involved the recording of dates of appointment and accession of clergy for the purpose of being able to define who was the most senior. Among other responsibilities were the marking out of diocesan boundaries, and drawing up the rules and regulations for the relationship between diocesan bishops and monasteries.<sup>217</sup>

Around the start of 544 AD Justinian ordered that all the Church properties taken by the Vandals be restored to the Church and that new monasteries and Churches could

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<sup>217</sup> L. R. Holme, *The Extinction of the Christian Churches of North Africa* (1898; repr. New York: Franklin, 1969) p.158-160.

be erected. Church councils regained their ancient status and the Church once again received financial support. Carthage recovered the privileges it previously had and clergy were to be judged only by the Church courts. Imperial officials were obliged by law to accept that they were under the authority of the bishops.

However, Justinian's openness was grounded in the notion that he was the absolute ruler of both state and Church. As such, he exercised a much stricter and tighter control over the internal Church affairs than that to which the Africans had been previously accustomed to - either before or during the Vandal occupation. He displaced the primates and the emperor convoked and presided at councils and approved their legislation. Displacing the bishops in council, he made ecclesiastical law and composed formulas of faith. While re-establishing the freedom of the Church from Vandal oppression, he brought it under more control and tied it much more tightly to Constantinople.

The Bishop of Carthage was now expected to impose his own authority on the bishops of Proconsularia on behalf of the emperor. The primate of Byzacena was no longer expected to act in concert and consensus with other bishops of North Africa but was to report directly to the imperial throne in Constantinople. As for the properties that were restored to the Church, bishops could claim them back only if they paid years of back taxes due on them.



The bishops of North Africa had been used to a large degree of freedom and had been able to achieve their own disciplinary consensus. At times they acted independently of the larger Church without splitting from it - for example, on the question of rebaptism in the third century. There were other times when they sought the formal approval of the emperor - for example, the ordination of monks, or the approval of other Churches, as seen when they asked for overseas approval in details of the reintegration of Donatist bishops, both approved in the late fifth century. Whether it was achieving consensus at home or reaching out to overseas bishops, it was always at their initiative. They were not accustomed to receiving orders from outsiders. Nevertheless, Justinian imposed his own interpretations of faith and order and forced bishops to submit on both doctrinal and disciplinary issues.

In 544 AD Emperor Justinian ordered the bishops of East and West to join him in the act of condemning the writings of theologians deemed to have favoured monophysitism, the Three Chapters of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, and Ibas of Edessa, who were considered Nestorian sympathizers.

In North Africa, Arianism was less a theological problem than it was part of the culture of the Vandals who had arrived and occupied the lands. In the wake of the Vandal defeat, North African and Italian bishops needed to consider and provide for the integration of Arians into the larger body of the Church. It was a sensitive task even without the complication of a thoroughly foreign Christological problem. The

bishops did not see the writings of the Three Chapters in the same light as the East. In fact, they refused to condemn posthumously men whose works they had accepted as orthodox within their lifetimes. They saw a condemnation of the Three Chapters as a betrayal of the decisions made at Nicaea whose doctrines differentiated them from Arians. On both theological and political grounds they reacted quite negatively to Justinian's demands of them.

All over the region of West Europe bishops resisted. In Rome, there were similar pastoral problems; similar opinions to that of North Africa, and similar pressure from the emperor, Justinian. The Roman bishop Vigilius resisted for several years, including time under arrest in Constantinople, but was then forced to condemn the Three Chapters in 548 AD. The Africans were able to hold out longer. In 550 AD they assembled at a general council and proclaimed themselves defenders of the Three Chapters. They excommunicated Vigilius and sent their solemn protest to the emperor.

Not to be outdone, Justinian summoned the leadership of North Africa to Constantinople. Once there, Reparatus of Carthage was deposed and exiled to Euchaita in Asia where he died, and Primasius of Hadrumetum, the delegate of the ailing primate of Byzacena, was sent to a monastery in Constantinople where he too perished. Verecundus of Iunca ran away from the capital. Firmus, the primate of Numidia, was first swayed to condemn the Three Chapters, but later, thinking the

better of it, he withdrew his support and died on the return voyage to Africa. The abbot Felix died in prison at Sinope on the Black Sea.

With the leaders of the North African Church detained, in exile, or dead, Justinian was free to place pressure on the North African Christians more directly. He exiled both bishops and abbots who refused to do his will. He removed others and installed new bishops by force, jailing some clergy and forcing others to flee for fear of exile among the Berbers or in other inhospitable places. At Carthage, he installed Primosus the deacon as bishop, in place of Reparatus. Primosus received his position (against the will of the clergy and the laity of the city) with the charge that he was to secure the acceptance of the condemnation of the Three Chapters. Justinian was then able to bring his own handpicked North Africans to Constantinople to act as Western representatives to Chalcedon. When some of these refused to sign the condemnations, he sent them into exile.

Persecution by the Vandals and pressure from the Byzantines were not the only attacks on the authority of North African bishops. From the early fifth century onward, they saw their authority being eroded by encroachments from the West, especially from Rome. While Rome expressed its concern for the African Church it sought to undercut the methods by which the African bishops were trying to rebuild the Church in their own territory.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Jane Merdinger, *Rome and the African Church in the Time of Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University, 1997) chap. 8.

In the demoralizing period of the early Vandal occupation, Rome continued to assert its perceived responsibilities for the oversight of the North African Church. During this time, the bishops of North Africa attempted to cope with the long vacancies of bishops in dioceses.

In 446 AD when the opportunity came for elections, the bishops of Caesarea Mauretania moved quickly to fill vacant dioceses with able administrators. In imperious language Leo the Great (Bishop of Rome) reprimanded them. He did not think their elected candidates worthy. He objected to the election of men who had not served long enough in previous rank and he rejected men who had been remarried.<sup>219</sup> However, he was prepared to recommend his own dubious candidates, one a former Novatianist, and another a former Donatist, provided that they expressed their loyalty, not to the Orthodox Church, holy doctrine, or even their metropolitan, but to Leo personally.<sup>220</sup>

As the African bishops attempted to exercise their influence in rural areas against both the Arian episcopacy and the non-Christian Berbers, Leo wrote them a letter upbraiding them for the multiplication of dioceses and for having bishops resident in small towns and villages. For Leo, the rural residence of bishops diminished their honour by attaching them to small towns as opposed to great cities. (It also meant that the bishops were less accessible to Leo's control and oversight.) In addition, Leo

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<sup>219</sup> Leo, Ep. 12.2-4 in *St. Leo the Great: Letters*, trans. Edmund Hunt, Fathers of the Church 34 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957) p. 50-51.

<sup>220</sup> Leo, Ep. 12.2-4 in *St. Leo the Great: Letters*, trans. Edmund Hunt, Fathers of the Church 34 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957) p. 54.

wrote, subdividing a larger diocese to create a small rural one brought the senior urban bishop into disrepute and dishonour by reducing the area he controlled.

Leo's counter-recommendation that priests, not bishops, should be sent to smaller towns directly overturned the emphasis of the North Africans that bishops, not priests, should have authority even in rural areas of small populations.<sup>221</sup> He ended his letter with the command that the bishops send him a report indicating that his orders had been followed.<sup>222</sup> We do not know whether the bishops took notice of the letter, but the conditions that Leo found troubling give witness to the attempt of the North African bishops to maintain a hierarchy that relied heavily on bishops. They did not, generally, seek to substitute presbyters as leaders for local, especially rural, communities.

Following Leo, Gregory the Great (590 AD - 604 AD) was also anxious for the Church of North Africa, but his understanding of good order also flew in the face of North African tradition. He often sidestepped the bishops and appealed directly to the Byzantine governor Gennadius to maintain ecclesiastical discipline.<sup>223</sup> He also requested Gennadius to order the bishops to change the method of choosing their primate. He wanted the primate to be attached to a particular see.<sup>224</sup> The bishops of Numidia protested against this interference by Gregory very strongly. This was the age-old custom of how they elected their most senior Bishop, and Gregory backed

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<sup>221</sup> Leo, Ep. 12.2-4 in *St. Leo the Great: Letters*, trans. Edmund Hunt, Fathers of the Church 34 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957) p. 55-56.

<sup>222</sup> Leo, Ep. 12.2-4 in *St. Leo the Great: Letters*, trans. Edmund Hunt, Fathers of the Church 34 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957) p. 57.

<sup>223</sup> Gregory, Book 4 Ep. 7 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2nd series 12.146-47; hereafter NPNF).

<sup>224</sup> Gregory, Book 1 Ep. 74 (NPNF 2nd series 12.98).

down. His sole concern, he later said, was that the customary rule of seniority not lead to a former Donatist becoming primate.<sup>225</sup> He wrote directly and often to his correspondent Bishop Columbus in Numidia regarding abuses that allowed the Donatists to keep their episcopal lines in succession.<sup>226</sup> He tried to undermine the authority of the primate of Numidia by appealing to other bishops in his area.<sup>227</sup>

Whatever the issue was, the appearance was one of Rome trying to refashion the North Africans on its own model, against the pattern that the North Africans themselves saw as being most useful.<sup>228</sup> Like Leo, Gregory was concerned with the quality of men being ordained and he even tried to force Roman models of authority on the North African bishops' relationships to abbots.<sup>229</sup>

While Leo and Gregory might be cast as spiritual reformers who had the best interests of the North African Church at heart or simply landowners concerned about the property and assets they had inherited, their methods of effecting Church reform worked against the very developments of the North African tradition that the African bishops themselves promoted. By denigrating the authority of the bishops as individuals and as a collegial body, both Roman bishops served to weaken the episcopacy in Northern Africa in the days preceding the rise of Islam.

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<sup>225</sup> Gregory, Book 1 Ep. 75 and 77 (NPNF 2nd series 12.98-99).

<sup>226</sup> Gregory to Columbus, Book 2 Ep. 47 (NPNF 2nd series 12.115-16).

<sup>227</sup> Gregory to Columbus, Book 12 Ep. 8, 28 and 29 (NPNF 2nd series 12.87-88 and 89-91).

<sup>228</sup> Gregory, Book 1 Ep. 75 and 77 (NPNF 2nd series 12.98-99).

<sup>229</sup> Gregory, Book 3 Ep. 48 and 49 (NPNF 2nd series 12.134--35) and Book 7, Ep. 35 (227).

### 3.2.1 Paganised Christianity

As we have seen in the previous chapter, from the beginning of the North African Church there seems to have been elements of paganism, and this seems to have played a key role both in contributing to the people accepting Christianity and hence, through the dilution of doctrine, in leading the Church into decline.<sup>230</sup>

On the one hand, in an affirmative view, some elements of paganism, such as monotheism and the prayer form, seem to have helped the people to accept Christianity.<sup>231</sup> Also, the pagan religious enthusiasm, even 'uncompromising fanaticism', was expressed by puritanical Christian attitudes rejecting the worldliness of the Church; emphasising the purity of the Church; and respecting the martyrs as ideal Christians.

On the other hand, however, paganism that was absorbed without filtration into the Church brought religious syncretism to the worship and faith of the North African Church.

With this point of view, the assessment of J. S. Mbiti seems correct: African Christianity was a combination of apostolic Christianity and ancient African culture.<sup>232</sup> In the times of Tertullian, Cyprian, and even Augustine, there is evidence of the relics of paganism, such as idolatry, prayer for the dead, respecting martyrs,

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<sup>230</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1, p. 330.

<sup>231</sup> See J. S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, pp. 67-97; W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp.77-80; W.H.C. Freud, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 97-104; F. J. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church*, pp. 288-89.

<sup>232</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, pp. 67-97.

and festivals.<sup>233</sup>

Early North African Church leaders during the first five centuries had condemned paganism and struggled to remove it thoroughly out of Christianity, but their efforts seem to have failed.<sup>234</sup> So, although there was a massive conversion of pagans in the first three centuries, this did not mean a complete severance from their former paganism. It meant, rather, a modification of their native religions to suit Christianity. Accordingly, the relics of paganism seem to have undermined biblical teaching and seem to have contributed to the Church's theological confusion.

We can assume that the influence of paganism was coupled to the secularisation of lay Christians. Cyprian, in his *De Lapsis*, writes of the Christian life, as follows:

Individuals were applying themselves to the increase of wealth; and forgetting both what was the conduct of believers under the Apostles, and what ought to be their conduct in every age, they with insatiable eagerness for gain devoted themselves to the multiplying of possessions... The hearts of the simple were misled by treacherous artifices, and brethren became entangled in seductive snares; ties of marriage were formed with unbelievers; members of Christ prostituted to the heathen. Not only rash swearing was heard, but even false; persons in high place were swollen with contemptuousness, poisoned reproaches fell from their mouths, and men were sundered by unabating quarrels.<sup>235</sup>

Although Tertullian believed that Christians were a gathered remnant avoiding all the corruption of a tainted world, the lives of Christians seem to have been influenced by pagan culture. For example, the way Tertullian described the agape

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<sup>233</sup> Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Cyprian, *De Lapse*; Van der Meer, *Augustine*.

<sup>234</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p.392.

<sup>235</sup> Cyprian, *De Lapsis* 5,6 in *A New Eusebius*, ed. by J. Stevenson, pp. 229-230



meal demonstrates the difficult line which he, and others, took in addressing their pagan contemporaries.

On the one hand, he contrasted the drunken excesses of pagan banquets with the modesty and moderation of the Christian agape (Christianity is better than paganism). On the other hand he implied that Christianity was no threat to the order of society because the agape was an ordinary Roman meal (Christianity was no different) where the Christians first prayed, then reclined at the tables, eating a modest amount and talking as if God were overhearing them.

After washing their hands, and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God, either one from the holy Scriptures or one of his own composing – a proof of the measure of our drinking.<sup>236</sup>

The invocation of gods, reclining whilst eating and talking, the washing of hands and music were all common features of Greek and Roman banquets (and of many Jewish celebratory meals as well). It seems very likely that Christians adapted the practices of the ancient culture and that the order of their meals followed that of a Roman feast translated into a Christian mode.

It is easy to exaggerate the contrast between Christian and other religious communities. Many features of the early Christian congregations - the initiation rite of baptism and a communal meal such as the Eucharist (*agape* meal) - would have been recognisable in other religious fellowships. The reading of texts at weekly meetings was a well-established Jewish practice even if there is no record of any pagan cult having such an

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<sup>236</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 39

extensive reliance on sacred writings. Neither was the worship of a single all-powerful god unique to Christianity and Judaism. One study of Anatolia makes the point well:

‘Outwardly, at least, there was much in common between the paganism of late Roman Asia Minor and contemporary Judaism and Christianity. God was an awesome, remote and abstract figure to be reached through the agency of divine intermediaries, such as angels, or human ones such as prophets. The language which men chose to describe the supreme god of both pagans and Christians was sometimes indistinguishable, and had close affinities with language that was taken over and elaborated in the philosophy of the age.’<sup>237</sup>

Belief in a single supreme god penetrated to quite humble levels. Many tomb inscriptions mention *theos hypsistos*, ‘the most high God’, a term used by Jews from the second century BC. By the second century AD, this might also refer to the god of both pagans or Christians. An inscription from the tomb of one Neikatoris from Mysian Hadriani proclaims that he ‘had gained greatest honour among all men, and brought joy to the holy people of the highest God, and charmed them with sacred songs and readings, and who sleeps now immaculate in Christ's place’.<sup>238</sup>

Nor did the Church encourage sudden conversions. Two texts from third-century Roman sources, Rome and Carthage, show that an elaborate ritual was in place for converts in the western empire.<sup>239</sup> Applicants for admission to the community would present themselves to the teachers with sponsors to vouch for their sincerity. They must distance themselves from pagan rituals and occupations that require them to respect these. In the process of instruction, which might take three years, catechumens would be

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<sup>237</sup> S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men and Gods*, vol. 2, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995

<sup>238</sup> Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity*, p. 131

<sup>239</sup> The two texts are Tertullian ‘*On Baptism*’ and the ‘*Apostolic Tradition*’ of Hippolytus, both of which are dated to the third century.

continually interrogated for evidence of good conduct. They would be repeatedly exorcised as if there was a persistent fear that the devil would infiltrate the Church through the medium of unworthy applicants. A successful commitment would be followed by 'hearing the gospel'. A final exorcism would lead to the day of baptism on Easter Sunday followed by the first participation in the Eucharist. This, then, is a slow process by which an individual moves from one state of mind and code of behaviour to another. This was a world where spirituality was flexible, where new cults and beliefs rose and fell and drew from each other.

F. Van der Meer describes the life of Christians in the time of Augustine, as follows: *'Anybody here could call himself a Christian - the drunkard, the miser, the cheat, the gambler, the adulterer and the evil liver, and the theatre-maniac.'*<sup>240</sup> However, Meer's assertion seems to conflict with Augustine's claim that *'there are no pagans'*. Criticising Augustine's imperialistic view, Meer does not regard the masses living in Carthage as real Christians, but thinks of them as pagans. He believes that the reason underlying the increasing number of nominal Christians resulted from the over-hurried mass conversion of Africa to Christianity in less than a hundred years.<sup>241</sup> That is to say, whilst the benefits of the state to the Church were getting more numerous, the Church's spirituality was declining. In turn, it is likely that, in North Africa, Christianity was not thought of as a unique religion, but, rather, as a 'phase' in its religious history due to the co-existence of Christianity with paganism.<sup>242</sup> Thus, when Islam invaded North Africa, African Christians converted to Islam without hesitation, on the basis that there were some

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<sup>240</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p.47.

<sup>241</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p.46.

<sup>242</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 77; Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p. 226; K.S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, p. 94. Latourette maintains that Africans regarded Christianity as one of the cults surrounding them.

similarities between their traditional religions and the teaching of Islam.

We have seen that the North African Church was deeply influenced by paganism, and that it had a key role in leading the Church and Christians away from the doctrinal purity of the gospel. The Church “lost her purity to the world through illicit intercourse with pagan culture.” The Church might have lasted if she had protected her purity and recognised the intrusion of paganism into the Church.

### **3.2.2 Ecclesiastical Corruption**

This part is considered in two sections. They focus on the secularisation of the Church and the corruption of Church leaders. Ecclesiastical corruption seems to have occurred mainly during the fourth century, but could also be found even in the times of Tertullian and Cyprian.

### **3.3 The Secularisation of the Church**

Evidences of the corruption of the Church are readily seen from the records of Church - leaders, like Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine, and from Eusebius’ works.<sup>243</sup> It is certain that the immunities to and the privileges of the Churches under Constantine were a starting point of both ‘profit’ and ‘loss’ to the Church.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> See Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, Cyprian, *De Lapsi*, in *A New Eusebius*; Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*.

<sup>244</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* vol. III, pp.95-146.

During the rule of Constantine, the Church received special benefits from the state and these enabled the Church to amass wealth during the fourth and fifth centuries. During the reign of Constantine, the Church had become a major landowner, employing thousands of labourers. Against the enrichment of Churches, Augustine warned the clergy of the spiritual distraction and criticised its materialism, saying, 'the Church is not a trading company.'<sup>245</sup> There is no doubt that the spiritual benefits of the state brought numerical growth and enrichment to the Church, but also promoted the loss of the missionary mind, and increased its moral corruption and spiritual decay.<sup>246</sup> There were serious problems inhibiting the establishment of a 'puritanical Church'.

We can assume that the loss of the missionary mind was followed by the secularisation of lay Christians. During Augustine's time, there were many who attended Church merely in order to find a Christian employer, or to marry a Christian wife, or to gain a Christian client or some other individual purpose.<sup>247</sup> In another of Augustine's writings, namely *Letter 124:1*, we can easily infer that the morale of the North African Christians was not high. Augustine says: '*The people of Hippo are almost so utterly feeble that the slightest difficulty is enough to overwhelm them*'. It seems to have been normal that when a rich man became a Christian, the Church of the region nominated him directly as an elder.<sup>248</sup>

Although the Church seems to have been filled with Christians, they were never real

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<sup>245</sup> See Augustine, *Letter 226:9*.

<sup>246</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III, p.99. 'According to the spirit of its proprietors and its controllers, it might be used for the furtherance of the kingdom of God, the building of Churches, the support of the needy, and the founding of charitable institutions for the poor, the sick, widows and orphans, destitute strangers, and aged persons, or become perverted to the fostering of indolence and luxury, and to promote moral corruption and decay.'

<sup>247</sup> See Augustine, *Sermon 3:1*, re-quoted in Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 383.

<sup>248</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 388.

Christians, but rather attendants - in order to get their personal purpose. It is likely that religious freedom brought into the Churches a changing understanding of both 'Christian' and 'faith', which have nothing to do with the call of God and the moral standards of Christ, but rather, were related to the need of the world.<sup>249</sup> In this spiritual drought, the Church could not protect herself from powerful oppositions, such as the invasion of the Vandals and the spread of Islam.

### 3.3.1 The Secularisation of Church leaders

The corruption of the clergy in the North African Church seems to have begun when the Church leaders were affected by materialism, secularisation, and the loss of the pastoral mind.<sup>250</sup> However, it is ironic that in the North African context, not only after 313 AD, but also before 313 AD, we can find evidence of the secularisation of Church leaders even in the time of Cyprian in the third century. Cyprian tells of the worldliness of some bishops in *De Lapsis*, written in 250 AD:

The bishops were wanting in religious devotedness, the ministers in entireness of faith; there was no mercy in works, no discipline in manners... Numerous bishops, who ought to be encouragement and example to others, despising their sacred ministry, engaged themselves in secular vocations, relinquished their Chair, deserted their people, strayed among foreign provinces, hunted the markets for mercantile profits; tried to amass large sums of money, while they had brethren starving within the Church, took possession of estates by fraudulent proceedings, and multiplied their gains by accumulated usuries.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> F. J. Foakes Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church*, p. 567. Here Jackson argues that the 'faith' was conceived as accepting baptism at the peril of one's life, but after the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, the faithful person was destined to enjoy all the advantages of wealth, respectability, and prestige.

<sup>250</sup> See Tertullian, *On Idolatry*; Cyprian, *De Lapse*; Augustine, *Letter and Sermon*.

<sup>251</sup> Cyprian, *De lapsis* 5,6 in *A New Eusebius*, pp. 229-230.

Cyprian highlights the loss of evangelical faith and the moral corruption of the bishops. However, the condition of secularisation in the fourth century seems to have been more serious than in the time of Cyprian.

We could assume that the corruption of Church leaders, specifically after 313 AD, resulted not only from the special favour that the state gave the Church and clergy, but also from the influx of unqualified clergy into the Church. Under Constantine, the clergy became a privileged class exempted from the public burdens of taxation. Hence, a few un-vocational peoples, such as a member of *decurion* (town councillor), were ordained as clergy merely in order to get immunities and exemptions from taxes in the Roman Empire.<sup>252</sup>

We might also infer that the increase of unqualified clergy was one of the factors which led the Church into weakness.<sup>253</sup> Based on the Council of Carthage, in 397 AD, the African Church seems to have required of prospective clergy a wide theological knowledge and an inward vocation, but its regulations were not fulfilled.<sup>254</sup> In the time of Augustine, some clergy used to mispronounce their prayers and on occasion did not even know the meaning of the words they were uttering, because of the Latin-liturgy.<sup>255</sup>

According to Van der Meer, the country priests seem to have had no education at all,

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<sup>252</sup> See *Codex Theodosianus in A New Eusebius* 285.

<sup>253</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III, p. 257.

<sup>254</sup> See, Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, re-stated in Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church*, vol. III. p. 235.

<sup>255</sup> Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p. 226. Meer also says some clergy seem to have found a source of amusement in the barbarianism, solecisms and faulty pronunciation.

because they were merely ordained according to the need of the land owner, and most country priests seem to have been elected among the natives, and were not affected by Latin.<sup>256</sup> These unqualified clergy failed to teach biblical truth and failed to give 'spiritual nourishment.' Also the position of the clergy, specifically the bishops, was changed politically, as now they had a judicial power.<sup>257</sup> Moreover, the Church system transformed from a universal priesthood to a restricted priesthood. It became a hierarchal system. In other words, the effect of the favour was not helpful to either the Church or the clergy.

In some ways, we might say that the North African Church was an unhealthy Church from beginning to end in respect of both spirituality and morality. With the passing of time, there was a lack of clear doctrinal preaching and the Christian gospel was gradually smothered under a growing sacramental system. Consequently, Church leaders lost their missionary mind, and their spirituality and morality declined. As a result, they did not concentrate on their inherent ministry, the congregations could not get a supply of spiritual nourishment, and the congregations were weakened.

### **3.3.2 Imperial Christianity**

There is also the proposition that one of the main reasons for the decline in the North African Church was its failure to evangelise the native people. That is, those people

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<sup>256</sup> Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p. 227.

<sup>257</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of Christian Church*, vol. III. p. 131.



who were not affected by Latin culture. Amongst these indigenous Berber and Punic inhabitants, the gospel seems to have spread very slowly.

### 3.3.2.1 Failure to indigenise native Africans

In the first chapter, we have already considered three main social groups in North Africa: the Berbers, the Phoenicians, and the Romans. The Romans were the main powerful ethnic group of North Africa, dwelling in the towns and the coast, speaking Latin. They were mainly Christians. In the mountains and deserts, however, the majority population was Berber, speaking the indigenous Berber language. They still believed in Saturn. Although the Church in the city was full of Christians, that Church seems to have focused little attention on the native Berbers. It is uncertain whether or not the gospel was preached in the Punic and Berber tongues. In the view of the natives, Christianity was always regarded as a Latin religion of the Romans, and to be Christian simply meant Latinisation, and nothing more.<sup>258</sup>

Another factor that failed to enlist the Berbers was the Latin liturgy, which was used in public service during the times of Augustine and the Byzantine Empire. Using the Latin Liturgy, the native Africans, or non-Latin speaking peoples, not only could not understand its meaning, but also had a tendency to treat the liturgy in a mythical way. Hence, K. S. Latourette believes that the problem of the early North African Church was the absence of a Church suitable for the Berber:

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<sup>258</sup> Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, p.84; Monsignor Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, vol. I. p. 285.

The Punic and Berber populations became Christian only to the degree that they became Latinised and that the Latin language was the sole vehicle of Christian preaching. Possibly, as the great landed proprietors, Romano-Africans, became Christian, some of them furthered the conversion of the people on their estates.<sup>259</sup>

It is certain that evangelisation seems to have taken place only in urban and upper classes, that is, in those who understood Latin. In turn, although the majority tribe of North Africa was Berber, not only did the Church not take account of the indigenous people, but also made little effort to challenge the Native peoples. The Church in North Africa identified itself with the Romanised colony, but failed to reach the Berber culture.

So, although we can easily find testimonies concerning the conversion of the pagans to Christianity, their conversion was merely a social assimilation.<sup>260</sup> As a result, the strong rural Punic and Berber populations still ignored Christianity and were ignored by it.<sup>261</sup>

The failure to indigenize the gospel attributed to the fact that few Berbers had accepted Christianity. Boer asks if it is possible that the Church in Carthage did not see any need for the gospel to be proclaimed in the Berber language because it was barbarian in comparison with their Latin. No portions of Scripture or other Christian material was translated in Berber. It shows that another policy in regards to the local population was followed here as in Egypt.

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<sup>259</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. I, p.93.

<sup>260</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* pp. 90-91

<sup>261</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* pp. 90-91

In the first three centuries, the African Church grew very quickly, despite several persecutions, but failed to evangelise the Native peoples. The North African Church was too 'latinised' to embrace widely those who had nothing to do with Latin culture.<sup>262</sup> Consequently, when Islam spread, many of the Christians, mainly Romans, and upper class, as well as the Church leaders, escaped to Europe, while those who remained, mainly the natives, surrendered to Islam without any hesitation. Hence, the failure of the Church to evangelise the native peoples eventually led the Church into decline. The Church might have lasted if she had concentrated on the evangelisation of inland native Berber and Punic peoples.

### **3.3.2.2 Failure to evangelise Native Africans**

The failure to reach the Berber tribes with the Gospel played a major role in the disappearance of the Church. This failure must be laid at the doors of both the Egyptian and North African Churches. Some mission efforts were made by the Church in Egypt to reach the upper class in cities like Alexandria. However, conflict with the Latinised Church in Carthage meant that they seemed not to show an interest in evangelising the region west of Egypt. It also seems that the Church in Carthage did not endeavour in any active way to reach the pastoralist Berbers to their south.

When the Christian upper class of Carthage fled to Europe the Muslim invaders found that the Berber tribes were largely unevangelised. The few Berber Christians

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<sup>262</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol I, p.256; Cecil Northcott, *Christianity in Africa*, pp. 57-58.

had very little depth and could be swayed easily. Groves draws the following lesson from the North African Church's lack of serious evangelism:

If the interpretation we have set forth of the historic situation be correct, then there is no more vivid warning than to fail to share the faith with all around is to let it die.<sup>263</sup>

### **3.3.2.3 Failure to translate the Bible into native Berber**

The presence of a Latin Bible in Africa before 200 AD testifies to a very considerable dispersion of Romanised Christians in the area. The early Church spread the message to many places. In most places, the believers translated the Gospel into the local languages: into multiple dialects of Coptic, Syriac, and Aramaic, and into Latin. When they encountered people speaking languages that were not written, the early Christian missionaries preached the message in the spoken languages, and in many cases they developed alphabets and translated the Bible into them. These include Ethiopic, Nubian, and others.

When Saint Jerome (c327 AD - 420 AD) translated the Bible into Latin, he did not use the Literary Latin used in all books up to that time; instead, he wrote in a colloquial Latin so that the common people could understand it. Lamin Sanneh describes the principle followed by the early Church:

The general rule that people had a right to understand what they were being taught was matched by the view that there was nothing God wanted to say that could not be said in

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<sup>263</sup> C.P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, vol.1, p.89.

simple everyday language. God would not confound people about the truth, and that made the language of religion compatible with ordinary human understanding. The gospel proclamation stripped religious discourse of the hocus-pocus and elevated the voice of the [common people].<sup>264</sup>

If these people groups had not been given God's Word in their own spoken languages, their knowledge of the biblical faith would have been weak and unsustainable over the generations. This is evident from one of the tragedies of history, namely that the Scriptures were not translated by the early Church into Persian, Arabic,<sup>265</sup> Himyaritic (ancient Yemeni) or Berber, even though there were many believers among them and many Churches and clergy. The Churchmen in these places, many of whom were foreigners, insisted on presenting God's Word in prestigious languages, namely Syriac, Greek and Latin. The result was that everyday believers lacked a good understanding of God's Word and were vulnerable to other winds of doctrine.

The Bible translation for the Berber or the Punic was never achieved in their Church history because Latin was regarded as the only proper channel for the gospel.<sup>266</sup> Failing to translate the Bible is regarded as one of the most important factors in leading the Church into weakness.<sup>267</sup>

The Bible had not been translated into Punic, much less into Berber. Little evangelism was done among the poorer Punic people or indigenous Berbers. As we shall see, this

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<sup>264</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, pp. 98.

<sup>265</sup> In *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, author Kenneth Cragg points out that Arabs were present at Pentecost and that Arabian bishops attended the Council of Nicaea.

<sup>266</sup> Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed*, p. 230; Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, p. 84.

<sup>267</sup> Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission*, p. 52; Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission*, p.37; Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, pp. 285-286; B. J. Kidd, *A History of the Church*, p. 111; L. E. Elliott-Binns, *The Beginning of Western Christendom*, p. 159; Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, p. 84; J. C. Thiessen, *A Survey of World Mission*, p. 174.

relationship between Christianity and the people remained characteristic of the North Africa Church.<sup>268</sup>

It is a wonder that although the great strength of North African Christianity was among the Punic-speaking inhabitants and even the country clergy spoke Punic, not Latin, that the Bible was never translated into their native tongue, as had been done in Egypt.<sup>269</sup>

K. S. Latourette believes that the spread of the gospel to the indigenous people of Alexandria and the translation of the Bible into their tongue was decisive in protecting the Alexandrian Church from the influences of Islam.<sup>270</sup> The Christians' use of Coptic made Egyptian not only accessible to their teaching of the native people, but also protected them from Islamic intrusion.<sup>271</sup> We might have found a flourishing Berber Church in existence today if the Church had translated the Bible into the native African tongues.

It could therefore be said that the North African Church was too much associated with the Roman Church, and not with the indigenous people. By emphasising the use of Latin for teaching and for worship, and by reading only Latin, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine made the fatal mistake of ignoring the needs of the native Berber peoples. In other words, the failure to establish an indigenous Christian Church and the absence of a Bible translation for the Berbers could be regarded as

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<sup>268</sup> Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, p.84

<sup>269</sup> F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, p.228.

<sup>270</sup> K. S. Latourette, *A History of Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1, p. 91.

<sup>271</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, p. 286.

one of the most decisive factors in leading to the decline of the Church.

### **3.4 The Fall of Rome and the Conquest by the Vandals**

Another contributing factor was the fall of the Roman Empire and the conquest of North Africa by the Vandals. By 409 AD the Vandals pressed on further south, heading towards Africa, the granary of Europe and by nature the richest region in the Western world. In the spring of 429 AD, led by Geiseric (their ruler from 428 AD to 477 AD), they crossed the Straits of Gibraltar. By the following year they had advanced along the coast from city to city through Mauretania and Numidia and were besieging Hippo in Augustine's last days. Within a few years they had gained control of a large swath of imperial North Africa, and in 439 AD they seized Carthage itself.

From this base this previously inland people became the strongest maritime power in the Western Mediterranean, able to cause major problems for shipping and control the progress of vital trade in corn, oil, and other commodities between Africa and Europe. All the while the Western authorities were weak in their attempts to deal with the crisis, and even ambitious efforts from the East failed to achieve success. The Vandals' dominance of the seas caused major shortages in Italy and enabled them to launch an attack on Rome in 455 AD, when Pope Leo managed to plead with Geiseric's forces to show some restraint in their treatment of the city. Looting was impossible to prevent, but at least Rome was spared wholesale

massacre and destruction.

In North Africa, a great deal of the Vandals' fierce energies went into their attempt to impose their Arian faith. The policy was launched by Geiseric and taken still further under his successor, Huneric (477 AD - 484 AD). Catholic clergy were exiled, monasteries were dissolved, and pressure was brought to bear on Christians who resisted the demand for conformity. Some did comply; others fled; many suffered severely for their defiance. Refugees included both clergy and laity; the latter were typically members of the landowning class who had been dispossessed of their property. They found sympathy from fellow believers abroad, and everywhere they went they took the stories of the Vandals' atrocities with them.

Some of the most important Christian literature from African writers of the later fifth century was produced by victims of the Vandals' attempts at doctrinal totalitarianism. Among works were the writings of Churchmen in exile, such as Victor of Vita, who wrote a valuable history of the persecution while removed from his Church in the late 480s. Vigilius, Bishop of Thapsus, was banished by Huneric in 484 AD and fled to Constantinople, where he produced a number of texts in defense of orthodox doctrine, though most of these do not survive.

Under the Vandal rulers Gunthamund (484 AD - 496 AD) and Thrasamund (496 AD - 523 AD) there was less violence, but Arianism continued to be pushed strongly, and Catholic believers continued to experience problems on one account or another.



In the early years of the sixth century the scholarly Augustinian Fulgentius, Bishop of Ruspe, suffered a fate common to many earlier Catholic leaders and was banished to Sardinia for championing Nicene teaching. While he was in exile he wrote various tracts against Arian and Pelagian views. He was, however, allowed to return to Africa under Thrasamund's somewhat more tolerant successor, Hilderic (523 AD - 530 AD), who reversed the policy of hostility to Catholic bishops and allowed Catholic believers to meet publicly for worship once again.

Hilderic was unpopular as a ruler with the Vandals themselves, and he was deposed in 530 AD. He appealed to Constantinople for help, and in 533 AD - 534 AD that help proved decisive. The Vandals' pirate state was finally crushed by Justinian's general Belisarius. The efforts of its rulers to stamp out Catholicism had not succeeded. There had been strong popular resistance, a powerful core of determined clergy, and genuine intellectual and spiritual strength on the Nicene side. The Vandals' policies had caused enormous upheaval and many difficulties for the orthodox Christians of the region, but in the long run their actions had contributed to some important sharing of personal contacts, doctrinal ideas, and spiritual teaching between North Africa and other Churches in the West. Many of the banished clergy and monks in particular made significant contributions to the life of Churches in Spain, Gaul, and Italy.

### 3.5 Theological Confusion

In the first five centuries, a fanatical zeal for Christ and the purity of the Church, created a rigorous extreme Church and caused several serious schisms, which left severe divisions in the Church, even until the spread of Islam in the seventh century.<sup>272</sup>

The Novatian Schism, after the Decius persecution in 250 AD, split the relationship between the African Church and the Roman Church, while the Donatist Schism, after the Diocletian persecution in 303 AD, divided the North African Churches into the Catholic and the Donatist Churches. These Schisms racked the North African Church for generation after generation and left it seriously weakened when Islam arrived.<sup>273</sup>

It is ironic that although Christian leaders emphasised the pure Church and its membership, the Church not only fell into division, but also lost its theological purity. Accordingly, these schisms could not be dealt with simply by theological arguments or debates. During the times of the schisms, the North African Church could not afford to concentrate her power on mission for the inland people, like the Berber, but consumed her energy in defending the 'purity of the gospel'. As Cecil

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<sup>272</sup> See W. Ward Gasque, 'The Challenge to Faith', in *The History of Christianity*, ed. by Tim Dowley, p.95; Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, p.34.

<sup>273</sup> See W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp.335ff; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III, p.360; Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Mission* p.38.

Northcott points out, the Church spent its life-blood on internal controversies.<sup>274</sup> Consequently, the schisms could not avoid the charge of helping to lead the Church to eventual decline.

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<sup>274</sup> Cecil Northcott, *Christianity in Africa*, p.57.

## Chapter 4

### CONCLUSION

In the two centuries before the advent of Islam (429 AD - 647 AD), the episcopacy in North Africa was severely weakened by two factors:

#### **4.1 Persecution**

First, persecution by the Vandals decimated the episcopacy either by exile or death and diluted the pool of energetic leadership. Especially hard hit were the more talented and outspoken of the bishops.

Less than 20 years after the defeat of the Vandals, the leadership of the African episcopacy was once again attacked, this time by Justinian in the controversy over the Three Chapters.

#### **4.2 Leadership**

Secondly, when the episcopal talents of North Africa were at their lowest ebb, and bishops seemed to be scraping the bottom of the barrel for priestly appointments, the papacy demoralized the Africans with attacks of the qualifications of their clergy. Even the structure of episcopal leadership was attacked as Gregory the Great advocated the removal of bishops from the villages and towns where they were the only effective pastoral agents.

It is little wonder then that Islam made inroads in North Africa as nowhere else in Christian lands. Repeated challenges to episcopal authority proved too much for the bishops, and their number and influence declined. In this power vacuum North Africans lacked the leadership necessary to maintain widespread allegiance to Christianity.

## Chapter 5

### Implications and Lessons

If this analysis is substantially correct, then the only thing remaining is to explain why the Churches of the Middle East thrived in the early centuries of the Islamic empire vis a vis the rapid decline in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

The following factors are relevant to the survival or decline of the Churches in the early centuries of the Islamic empire:

#### 5.1 Majority faith

Christians in the East were in the majority during the first century or two after the Islamic conquest.

#### 5.2 Indigenisation

The degree to which Christianity was practiced by the common people also played a role. The Syrian Church was the most indigenised Church. Religious diversity was there, but the faith was held sincerely by a great number of the common people and worship was in their language. This is in marked contrast to both North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

### **5.3 Language**

Linguistic and sociological disparity with the Muslim conquerors seemed to have played a key negative role in North Africa, and a key positive role in the Middle East. The nearness of Aramaic to Arabic gave the Christians of the East an enormous advantage over Christians in North Africa in coming to terms with the Arab conquerors. Prior to the Islamic invasions Aramaic was widely understood and spoken by the Arabs, and the Aramaic speakers were able to rapidly learn Arabic. Very soon there was a push by the Churches to write and communicate the faith in Arabic and to produce Christian Arabic literature.

However, this factor by itself was not sufficient to guarantee continuity because the greatest degree of linguistic and cultural homogeneity with Islam was in the Arabian Peninsula, and that is where the Churches declined most rapidly and disappeared most completely.

### **5.4 Politicisation**

The alignment of Churches with Rome, the rival political power to the Islamic Empire, seemed to work against the Churches in North Africa. It would be interesting to trace the relative fortunes of the Orthodox (Melchite) Churches in the Middle East with the Jacobite and Nestorian Churches, which were not identified with the rival power.

## **5.5 Organisation**

The organizational status of the Church hierarchy seems to have played a consistent role in early survival. The Churches of the Peninsula were the most isolated and had the weakest leadership, and they declined the fastest. The Churches of North Africa were likewise disorganized from the rapid military and political changes of the time leading up to the Islamic invasions. The Churches of the East had the best organization and connectivity.

## **5.6 Orthodoxy**

With regard to the theological aspect, conformity to Orthodoxy did not seem to guarantee continuity or longevity. It is likely that many people, including Church historians, have instinctively, and perhaps mistakenly, associated dissidence with failure. There may even have been a reluctance to consider dissident Churches to be true Churches, thus dismissing them from consideration in “Church” history.

## **5.7 Islamic tax (jizya)**

Then there is the question of the pressure put on the Churches by the Islamic millet system, or dhimma system. The system can be portrayed by a skilful (Muslim) polemicist to be just and reasonable. The idea behind it was that religious groups identified in the Qur’an as having received revelation (the Qur’anic phrase is “The



People of the Book”) would be allowed to continue in their religion, and that the Islamic state and armies would protect them in exchange for the payment of a tax, called the ‘ jizya’. However, the system is a “ratchet” that applies unrelieved pressure, holding steady until there is an opportunity to tighten another notch.

There is a strong sense, looking at the historical data and the factors related to the decline of the Churches, that the reasons for the death of the Churches lay outside of human responsibility. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that little could have been done to ensure survival.

The factors given above are certainly useful as we work for and pray for the revival of Christianity in Muslim lands. The indigenization of the Church in its leadership and language must be key to survival and thriving. Organization of Churches is essential to health. Pursuit of doctrinal purity is an outworking of love for the God of truth. Training in responding to the kinds of relentless pressure exerted by Islam might play an important role in helping new Churches to survive and thrive. However, there is little hope in mere human methods and strategies. A stray war or an outbreak of civil unrest and violence during economic or political crises cannot be anticipated or prevented. And above all, Islam is still strong and growing stronger. It will require a profound work of God to overcome these barriers to the planting and growth of Churches in Islamic countries.

Finally, the history of the Churches in North Africa, the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula should instil a sense of humility and watchfulness in us, and cause us to turn our eyes in faith and hope to the God who will one day put all things under the feet of Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:8b-9)

## 5.8 Summary

As has been mentioned above, we can conclude that the decline of Christianity in North Africa was not so marked due to external factors, such as the invasion of Vandals or Islam, but was, rather, in consequence of its internal problems. As Phillip Schaff says, the decline of the Churches was due to 'problems of theology and religion'. This seems appropriate, especially if the former relates to the several controversial schisms rooted in the nature of the Church and its membership, and the latter is based on the cultural condition of North African religion. Besides, it would seem that imperial Christianity and ecclesiastical corruption were two of the main decisive factors in weakening the North African Church.

Although the North African Church was built upon the 'blood of the martyrs', during the long period of peace which followed, the Church lost its inherent mission and began to collapse. The Church might have lasted longer if she had kept

protecting the 'purity of the Church' and if the clergy had fulfilled their ministry and calling.

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