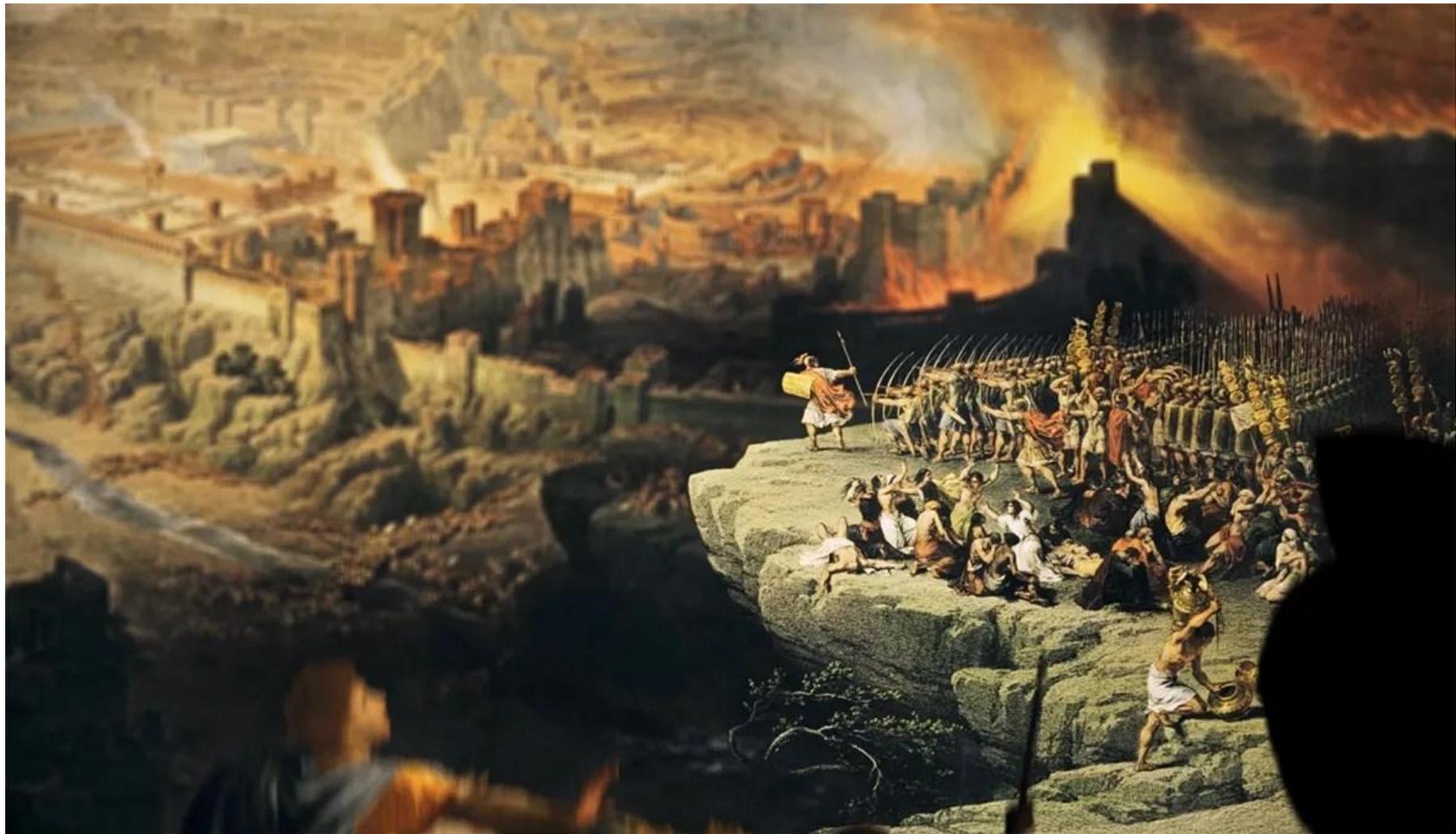


Church History: The Early Church Before the Time of Constantine

Aspirancy I - Diocese of Rockford

A Time of Persecution

- During the apostolic period, the Romans considered Christianity to be a sub-sect of Judaism.
 - Starting with the Emperor Nero, the Romans began to persecute the Christians, and this state of affairs continued on and off for the next two-and-a-half centuries.
 - According to early historical accounts, both Peter and Paul were martyred in the area of Rome during Nero's persecution.
 - This time period begins with persecution and ends with Christianity being declared legal as a precursor to its being made the official religion of the Roman Empire in the year 380.
- As time went by, it became more and more clear that the Christians were a distinct and unique group.
 - Christians weren't always actively persecuted during this time, but they were never given full formal legal protection.
 - Both Peter and Paul were associated in the early Church with the founding of the church in Rome.



Destruction of the Second Temple

- In 70 AD was destroyed by the Romans after a Jewish revolt.
- Since this time, nearly two thousand years ago, the Jews have not been able to carry out the rituals and sacrifices outlined in the Law of Moses pertaining to the Temple.
- Early church historians record that the Christians, being warned by the prophecies of Jesus, fled Jerusalem when the Romans began to surround it and, because of this, many of them were delivered from the traumas that were subsequently inflicted on the city in its siege and destruction.

Penance, Novatianism, and the Seed of Indulgences

- In the early Church, there was often a very strict discipline for those who sinned and then repented of their sin.
 - Novatian, a priest in the Church of Rome, decided that some sins were so bad they were beyond the purview of the Church to grant absolution to.
 - When Cornelius was elected Bishop of Rome in 251, Novatian had himself appointed as a rival claimant to the same see.
 - One of the great concerns of Novatian, and of many others, was what to do with people who had buckled under Roman persecution--denying Christ, worshipping the emperor or false gods, handing over Scriptures to be burned, etc.--but later repented and came back to the Church.
- Penances for serious sins were often public and could last for months and even years. But there were those who believed they should be even stricter.
 - Only God could forgive such sins.
 - For a while, the Novatianists constituted a rival sect to the Catholic Church, but the movement eventually died out entirely.
 - It became customary for those about to be martyred to write letters on behalf of those who had lapsed, asking that their own merits be accepted on behalf of the lapsed so that they might have a mitigation of the temporal consequences of their sins.

Apostolic Succession & the Authority of the Catholic Church

- Confrontation with Gnosticism had the effect of motivating the Catholic Church to articulate more explicitly the basis of her own authority as the lawful possessor and interpreter of the divine revelation and the teaching of Christ and his apostles.
 - The apostles had been taught by Christ, and they in turn had handed down authority to govern and teach the Church to bishops in various churches who succeeded them.
 - One of the greatest anti-Gnostic apologists among the Catholics during this time period was St. Irenaeus (c. 180), the bishop of Lyon in Gaul.
- The Church's defenders pointed out that the Catholic Church could trace herself historically back to the apostles in an organic line of authority that was publicly visible and verifiable.
 - In contrast to the historic pedigree of the Catholics, the Gnostic groups arose out of nowhere, usually connected with some particular founder, and they arose after the Catholic Church had already been going on for some time.

The “Catholic” Church

- "Catholic" was used as a label for the true Church and the true version of Christianity, to distinguish it from false churches and false versions of Christianity.
 - The fourth-century bishop of Jerusalem, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, commented on how God, inspiring the development of the Church's creed, gave the name “Catholic” to the Church in order to help the people of God distinguish the true Church from heretical churches.
 - The great Catholic teacher and bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa, St. Augustine makes the same point.
- The first occurrence of the name "Catholic" applied to the Church that we have record of comes from St. Ignatius of Antioch writing around the year 110 (only a little more than a decade after the death of the Apostle John).

Eusebius and the Canon of Scripture

- The Church inherited the Old Testament from the Jews. For the most part, the canon (that is, the list of books included) of the Old Testament was settled.
 - In addition to the Old Testament, the apostles and their companions had written a number of books containing the life and teachings of Jesus, a history of the early Church, and a number of letters containing apostolic teachings.
 - One of our most important sources of information on this period of Church history is the writings of Eusebius of Caesaria (published c. 314-324)
- There are a few Old Testament books over which there was some dispute in the early Church.
 - These books came to be known as the New Testament.
 - Eusebius discusses the canon of Scripture, and lists books that were universally accepted, those that were universally rejected, and those that were disputed.

Justin Martyr and the Liturgy of the Church

- The Church's liturgy was also developing during this time.
 - The great second-century apologist St. Justin Martyr, writing c. 153-155 (only about half-a-century or so after the death of the Apostle John), describes various liturgical practices of Christians in his day.
 - Found in his First Apology, chapters 65-67
- Although he is writing to the Roman Emperor and so tries to describe everything in terms a non-Christian could understand, the practices he describes will be familiar to Catholics today.

Greek Philosophy and Doctrinal Development

- Another important aspect of the doctrinal development of the Church is her growth through her dialogue with the philosophical methods and ideas of the surrounding culture.
 - As the second century rolled on, the Church saw an influx of Gentiles who were more on the intellectual side, and so the Church began to come into contact with Greek philosophy.
 - During this time period that we can begin to see the Church's doctrine developing the implications of divine revelation in more philosophical directions--asking philosophical questions, giving philosophical answers, using philosophical methods of inquiry and language, etc.
- Greek philosophy (and Roman philosophy, which followed in its footsteps) had a role in the culture similar to the role played today by the natural sciences.
 - There were also critics of Christianity (such as Celsus) who made use of philosophy in their criticisms, and Christians saw that they needed to answer the objections of these critics.
 - The Holy Spirit guided the Church's doctrinal development by means of a fruitful engagement with the surrounding culture.

The Easter Controversy

- We see the importance of Tradition.
 - We see the authority of the Bishop of Rome.
 - We also see, perhaps, that bishops of Rome do not always make the wisest practical decisions.
- Scripture says nothing about the celebration of Easter. The churches got their information regarding this important feast from the Church's Tradition, coming down from the apostles.
 - Pope Victor takes it upon himself, unchallenged by anyone, to regulate the affairs of the universal Church.
 - Many of the bishops considered Pope Victor's actions here to be overly harsh, and they remonstrated with him about it.

The Baptism Controversy

- Another controversy that arose during our time period was over baptism--particularly, the question of whether heretical baptisms ought to be accepted as valid.
 - Pope St. Stephen, the Bishop of Rome, decreed that heretical baptisms were valid. So long as the baptism was done correctly, it was valid even if it was done by people not in full communion with the Catholic Church.
 - Afterwards, the whole Church came to accept the position of St. Stephen.
- When people got baptized in heretical churches and then later came to the Catholic Church, should they be rebaptized, or did their baptism by heretics count?
 - This greatly angered some people, among them St. Cyprian, bishop of the city of Carthage, and St. Firmilian, bishop of the city of Caesaria. Both of them wrote furiously against Pope Stephen and his position.

Hierarchies of Bishops

- During this time period, we begin to see a more pronounced hierarchy develop in the structure of the universal Church.
 - The bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch come to receive the name of patriarchs--"heads or fathers of families"--because of their high authority.
 - Later on, Jerusalem and Constantinople will be added to their number, so that, as the Church matures through the centuries, we will end up with five major patriarchates with highest authority in the Church, to whom all other bishops are subordinate.
- Some seats of authority of bishops--gain more prominence and authority than others due to their special connection with an apostle or their place in the overall geography of the Church.