

The 6th and 7th centuries: a world in change

The 5th century closed with some monumental changes to both the Christian church, the political and social situation of western and eastern Europe, and some drastic changes to life in the former Roman Empire. Before we head into the 6th century, I want to highlight some of these changes as they will affect and explain the issues and life of the 6th and 7th centuries. The Empire is now Christian. I cannot stress enough the social, political, and cultural impact of everyone practicing the same faith. As the east and west divides, the political spheres of Europe change and so does the political and militaristic influences. Within the Church, although debates continue to rage and old heresies do not die, the orthodox understanding of the faith prevails leading to greater unity and a stronger sense of the truths of the faith. The 6th and 7th centuries will be some of the more peaceful times for the Christian church for several centuries.

The effects of the Christianization of Europe

With the fall of the Roman Empire in 476, the pagan religions that characterized the Romans quickly faded into obscurity. Some people held onto their deeply held pantheistic religious practices for decades after the switch to Christianity but most had given them up. The Christianization of the Roman Empire came with many effects. The most prominent effect was the lack of support for temples and the cultic practices of Roman religion. Without the community and governmental support coupled with the ease and availability of Christianity, the Empire had no place for the old Roman religious practices. By the end of the 6th century, what was the Roman Empire will be entirely Christian.

On this note, a new story begins. The Roman Empire was largely the areas around the Mediterranean Sea. Some parts of the Empire stretched into Brittany, Gaul, and south into the African Continent but the vast majority of the Empire straddled the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, much of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa were untouched by the effects of Rome. Starting in the 6th century, a new energy emerged in the Church to evangelize and convert the peoples that surrounded the former Roman Empire. Especially in the west, the pope sent many missionaries, priests, and bishops into the northern regions of western Europe with the goal of converting the nations. Some of these missions were successful. Many, however, proved disastrous. During these centuries we have some of the biggest names in missionary efforts such as St. Patrick, St. Boniface, and St. Augustine of Canterbury.

In contrast to the west, the eastern Christians were not as missionary focused. Many factors contributed to their lack of zeal for the mission. The contrasts and divisions between the four patriarchs as well as the divisions forming within eastern Christianity led to political conflicts over missionary lands. Which patriarch or church oversaw a specific eastern land? Which patriarch is now responsible for the newly evangelized territory? The eastern Christians had many struggles that the west didn't have. The east, however, sent missionaries into the Baltic, the Slavic lands, and into the Middle East. Unfortunately for them, a new religion was on the rise: Islam. The warring tribes of the Middle East posed little threat to the eastern Christians except for their constant wars and minor skirmishes with Christians. Once Islam became dominant by the end of the 7th century, new conflicts arose throughout the Middle East prompting a different

response to this new and increasingly dominant religion. Some of the challenges were good. New philosophies from the Middle East began to trickle into northern Africa leading to new thoughts. However, the most dominant effect was the conquest of the Holy Land by the Islamic forces beginning in the 7th century.

Emperor Justinian and the attempt at unity

Emperor Justin died in 527 leading to his son, Justinian II, taking control of the Byzantine Empire. Justin was a leader and continued to lead and grow the Byzantine Empire after the fall of the Roman Empire. Justinian was very different from his father. He was a theologian and scholar. Not the best combination for a leader of an empire. His wife, Theodora, was a powerful and capable leader. Where Justinian failed, Theodora stepped in and took command. One of Justinian's main goals was the unification of the Empire and a return to the days of Nicaea. As he reflected on the effects of the last two councils on the structure and practical matters of the Church, he realized that the eastern patriarchs had been slighted. Rome, somehow, was able to rise above them, was able to settle disputes, and even decide theological matters. From this conclusion, he desired to bring the empire back together, like in the days of the Roman Empire, and elevate himself to the same level of authority of the Roman emperors of old. Theodora, his wife, was a strong supporter of the Monophysite group, which caused Justinian to be as well. In her younger years, Theodora was helped by a Monophysite priest. From this event she was deeply sympathetic towards them and reserved towards those who believe in the “two natures” of Christ.

In 532, the most dangerous riot in Byzantium's history broke out in Constantinople which destroyed the Hagia Sophia. Upset by increased taxes, military losses, and political challenges, the riot destroyed much of the city. Justinian, believing that Holy Wisdom had saved his life, rebuilt the massive basilica with new engineering and rededicated it. This became the center point of his theological leadership. Justinian's expertise was in theology and he liked to engage in theological discussions. As Emperor of the east, he built a code of laws for the Eastern churches to govern their practices, the first major set of laws for the church.

In the same year, 532, Justinian called together a number of theologians to debate the issues of Christianity, the most notable being the Monophysite controversy. Bishops who were both supporters of the Council of Chalcedon, called Chalcedonian bishops, and those who opposed it called the anti-Chalcedonian bishops, met to discuss the issue. The Chalcedonian bishops did not give much of a debate but instead quoted from St. Cyril of Alexandria and the *Tomb of Pope Leo*. The anti-Chalcedonian bishops were ready with their defense. They too quoted from St. Cyril of Alexandria and continued to promote their cause. With a stalemate looming and the chances of reconciliation dwindling, Emperor Justinian entered the debate. He wanted unification and reminded the anti-Chalcedonian bishops that if they did not reunite, then they could not return to their dioceses. Justinian made the claim that the issue was not theological but instead based on wording and scruples and therefore reunion was possible. The effect of the debate was the creation of a document called the *Three Chapters*.

Justinian knew one very important fact: his *Three Chapters*, promoting the one nature of Christ wouldn't receive any reception or weight without the approval of the pope. Therefore, a long complex series of events were planned including Theodora paying to have her man as the pope, the death of a pope, and the advance of the Visigoths upon Rome all led to one man becoming pope: Pope Vigilius. Pope Vigilius was a strong supporter of the previous four councils, an orthodox man, but not a theologian. He only spoke Latin making any confusion between Greek and Latin challenging. Hoping for unification within the church, ratification of the Monophysite beliefs, and ratification of the *Three Chapters*, Justinian called for Pope Vigilius to appear in Constantinople.

The Second Council of Constantinople

After a long journey east, Pope Vigilius arrived in Constantinople. He was warmly welcomed and given Latin documents of the controversies to read. Yet, he remained unchanged. He condemned the *Three Chapters* as well as the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia and reaffirmed the Chalcedonian teaching that Jesus has two natures. The Emperor was not pleased. Hoping this event would lead to reunification and an end to this controversy, he held Pope Vigilius in Constantinople until the debate ended. This process would take 3 years from 551 to 553. Unwilling to yield to the demands of the Emperor and the other patriarchs' understanding of this issue, Emperor Justinian called the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 to settle the dispute.

The Council was attended by eastern bishops, the Emperor, Pope Vigilius, and about 3 western bishops. The western bishops, upset that the pope had been held in Constantinople for so long and believing this controversy settled, refused to come. Questions regarding the validity of the council started to emerge. Yet, the Council persisted. During the four sessions of this council, debate over the "two natures" of Christ, the writings of Cyril and Theodore, as well as Nestorianism, and the *Three Chapters* raged. At the close of the Council, nothing new emerged. Nestorianism was condemned, the previous councils were ratified with their teachings, and everything seemed to return to normal. Justinian was not pleased. He held Pope Vigilius in Constantinople not allowing him to leave until it was settled. The exact nature of what happened next is uncertain. Pope Vigilius produced several documents explaining and clarifying his stance, but they were not sent out. Instead other documents replaced them looking like a compromise had been met. The west felt that the pope had capitulated to the Emperors demands. The east felt that they had finally won. The pope was finally set free but died on the way back to Rome.

The effects of the 2nd Council of Constantinople

Clearly issues within the church had not been settled but instead grew worse. The next several popes will have to cleverly and carefully work with this unfortunate situation caused by Pope Vigilius and yet continue to maintain the proclamations of the councils and the truths of the Gospel message. Pope Pelagius, the successor of Pope Vigilius, was the first to figure out how to work through this situation. He deftly moved around it by twisting some words to make Pope Vigilius statement correct in light of Church teachings. Yet, the divisions between the east and the west have now reached a pivotal moment. The east had assaulted and imprisoned a pope while forcing him to sign a document. They had called a council without the presence of the

western bishops. The west clearly saw that the eastern churches were no longer interested in reconciliation nor in accepting the councils of the church. The east saw this as a moment of reconciliation with the hopes of restoring their ideas and promoting their cause while advancing the power of the eastern patriarchs. This situation is bad. Enter Pope Gregory I.

Pope Gregory the Great

Back in Rome, a powerful and influential family was raising one of the greatest popes in history. Gregory comes from a long family tradition of politicians and strong Christians who governed Rome for centuries. As a young boy, his father, Gordianus, trained him for politics and to continue the family heritage of caring for the people of Rome. His mom, Silvia, was a very strong Christian woman. During Gregory's adult years, she left the political scene to live as a hermit on their property focusing on prayer and almsgiving. At first, Gregory was deeply involved with politics becoming a prefect, the third highest position in the Roman government. Following a major plague that struck the city of Rome causing the emperor and the leading officials to flee, Gregory left his position as the prefect and became a monk. On his family property, he established a monastery with five other friends and lived a life of seclusion. Many of the officials of Rome, including some of his politician friends, tried to convince him to return to the life of politics but he refused. They even went to his mother who completely supported Gregory's decision. In the monastery were the happiest years of his life. He spent a great deal of time in prayer, reading, writing, and in reflection. But, these days were not to last.

Knowing of his political abilities, Pope Pelagius II called upon Gregory to become his apocrisarius or papal delegate. Pope Pelagius sent Gregory to Constantinople to plead to the Emperor for the sake of Rome. Rome was under threat from the Vandals, had survived several raids, and just recovered from a plague. Gregory was a talented diplomat and politician. If anyone could get the ear of the emperor, it was him. For three years he lived in Constantinople trying to plead with the Emperor to no success. Eventually the Pope allowed him to return to Rome and continue his life in the monastery. Yet, this too was short lived.

Following the death of Pope Pelagius II, due to the plague, they unanimously elected Gregory to be the next pope. Reluctantly he accepted this position. Pope Gregory had many challenges to overcome. Many different groups were marching upon Rome with the hopes of sacking or conquering the city, a plague had burst out over the last year, and many theological issues swirled around the church. He went to work like he always did. His first goal was stability. He helped the victims of the plague and rebuilt the city including the water ways to provide sanitation. Then he worked on securing the city and defending it against the forces that were attacking. During the attack of the Visigoths, Pope Gregory marched into battle with only a group of people and clerics. Historical records indicate that the bravery of Gregory so amazed the Visigoth king that he signed a peace treaty with Gregory saving the city of Rome.

Pope Gregory is known for many innovations during his reign as Pope. The most notable is liturgical reform. Throughout the Christian world, many forms of the Mass were being prayed, no consistency in the celebration of the Sacraments, and uncertainty about the essential elements of the Mass. He mandated one form of the Mass, moved the Our Father to its location in our

modern Mass, moved the Penitential Act to the beginning of Mass, and created one Eucharistic Prayer to be said by all. He then reformed music into a sung, plain chant which we call Gregorian Chant. Next he set to work on resolving theological disputes. The *Three Chapters* controversy from the time of Pope Vigilius was a strange and unfortunate event for him. He saw this as a petty controversy not worth much attention. It was clear that the Church taught that Jesus had two natures, why would we assume anything else? He tried to resolve this dispute through diplomatic means but ultimately it was too much. He died in 604 and was acclaimed a saint upon his death.

The next two councils

The controversies in the church were not at an end. With the condemnation of the Monophysite heresy both with the Council of Chalcedon and the 2nd Council of Constantinople, those who sympathized with the Monophysites developed a new form of it. Monothelitism rose to power at the beginning of the 7th century with the hopes of proving Monophysitism and showing the problems with the “two natures” of Christ. Whereas Monophysitism focused on the soul(s) within Jesus, Monothelitism focused on his will. If Jesus had two souls, does that also mean that he has two wills? Can a person have two independent and functional wills? What happens when they are in conflict with each other? Does one have more strength or power than another? All of these questions entered into the debate and added new controversy to an already battered church.

What happened? The eastern part of Europe was threatened by the Persians, Agars, Slavs, and Bulgars who threatened to conquer and control North Africa, Armenia, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Emperor Heraclius took his armies and stopped these conquering forces allowing for stability in the east. Yet, stability doesn’t mean unity. With the pronouncements of the last few councils sour on the tongues of the eastern bishops, Heraclius needed a way to unify these two factions of Christians. He devised a plan. If there was a way to show that the “two natures” and Monophysite groups had a common theological point, it might bring them back together. Thus enters the Monothelite heresy. Emperor Heraclius proposed that Jesus had only one will and therefore there is only one active power within him even if he has two souls. The two souls do not act independently but as one showing their unity and division. Therefore both parties were right. Jesus has two souls but they act as one, he has two natures but they don’t act independently because he has one will that controls everything.

The eastern bishops sent their compromise of this theological idea to the western bishops who outright denied it. This denial of their teaching angered the eastern bishops and led to greater tensions between the east and the west. If these were the only issues, the controversy would have been settled differently. Instead, the Muslim forces advanced on eastern Europe intent on taking major parts of the East. The emperors sent requests for aid from the west and were received but met with silence. The next succession of several eastern emperors all fought the Arab forces until a peace treaty could be signed in 659. Yet the empire was in shambles, divisions were halted for the sake of persevering the empire, and now they needed to be addressed. The Christian world was in a new battle over the nature of Jesus. The emperor sent a letter to the Pope requesting his approval on this new issue. The Pope sent back a response saying “the Roman church has by God’s grace never erred from the pathway of the apostolic teaching, nor has it lapsed into

heretical novelties.” Then, he clearly stated that the orthodox belief is that Jesus has two natures and therefore two wills.

Emperor Constantine had enough. In 680 he forced his patriarch George, to call another council at Constantinople to address and resolve this dispute. Thus the 3rd Council of Constantinople opened in 680 to settle the matter of the two wills of Christ. At first the council was deeply divided with little success or movement on either side. Then the works of Maximus the Confessor entered the council. Maximus was a monk who had written mostly theological works on spirituality. Yet, he wrote a work on the nature of Jesus. In his work, he comments on the Agony in the Garden. During Jesus’ agony he pleaded with his father to “let this cup pass from me.” Why would the God of all creation refuse to take up the cup given to him by his Father? The answer is simple, because he is human. Jesus is speaking with his human will as he recognized the pain and suffering he is about to endure. Yet, his divine will is also active allowing him to say “but thy will be done.” Therefore, in this moment, Jesus is expressing both of his wills showing that he has two wills conforming to the belief that he has two natures. This work settled the debate leading to the council fathers accepting the belief that Jesus has two wills and finally ending the debate.

Where do we go from here?

As we leave the 7th century, the world is rapidly changing. The power and influence of the east will fade away as the Moslim forces advance in the 8th century and conquer most of it. In the west, the marauding forces of the Visigoths, Lombards, and Franks, will lead to the establishment of the papacy as a ruling force in the west but also the rise of feudalism. The divide between the eastern and western churches will continue to grow and intensify as popes and patriarchs alike challenge and insult one another. The west and the east are separating quickly.

As feudalism rises and the east fights the Arabs, a new era is dawning. The theologians that made up the Church Fathers will recede into the background. We will not see the advancements made by the Church Fathers until the 11th century. The Church is leaving the age of the patristic writers and entering into the age of missionary efforts and rebuilding. The world is moving into kingdoms and away from a unified front. We are now entering the Middle Ages.

One more controversy will emerge at the tail end of the 7th century causing one final council to be called in 787. Icons were a staple for Christianity for centuries as signs and images of holy realities. With the Arab take over of the east, a staunch support of no graven images will lead to the rise of iconoclasm. This bloody debate will call the final ecumenical Council, the 2nd Council of Nicaea, in 787 to settle the debate. The council concluded that icons are official church imagery and not blasphemy. Thus ending the debate. Now we enter into a new divided world of good and bad popes, no councils, no emperors, and many wars.

Saint of the Day: St. Maximus the Confessor

Maximus was born into a noble family in Constantinople around 580. He served for a time as a secretary to Emperor Heraclius before leaving that life to become a monk and eventually abbot. When the Monothelism debate emerged and Emperor Constans II favored it, Maximus defended Pope Honorius' decision angering the emperor. Maximus attended the Lateran Council of 649 convened by Pope Martin I as a theologian and advisor to the pope. When the emperor found out, he took Maximus prisoner to Constantinople and charged him with treason. He was then exiled from the Empire and spent six years at Perberis before being brought back to Constantinople to be tortured and mutilated. He and his companions had their tongues and right hands cut off and were sent to Skhemaris where in 662 he died.

Maximus is known for many things. First, he is a confessor. A confessor is a person who spoke the truth and suffered for it. In contrast to a martyr who died for the faith, a confessor proclaimed it to the point of being tortured. He is also known for his writings. Unfortunately, his writings have two main aspects to them. First, they are brilliant. He was a profound and powerful thinker who greatly influenced the world through his theological and spiritual works. Second, they are confusing. Some people give him the nickname "Maximus the Confuser" because his writings are so difficult to read. Third, he is known for holding the orthodox position on the nature of Jesus and influencing the 3rd Council of Constantinople.

***On the Ecclesiastical Mystagogy* – St. Maximus the Confessor**

This work is one of the finest theological works of the early Church. The terms of the title may throw you off. The term "mystagogy" comes from the Greek word for mystery, which is translated to Sacramentum in Latin. Maximus is one of four of the Church Fathers who wrote on the Sacraments of the Church. Let's be clear about one thing: it is not a commentary on the Sacraments like we are used to. Maximus takes time to build up a defense of the true Church and show its power and value in the Sacraments of the Church.

The structure of the work can be hard to wrap our heads around. Many of the works we covered thus far and will cover soon read like they are written to be read to a group. Either they are a set of lectures given to a group of newly initiated members or they are treatises for the instruction of the people. Maximus' work doesn't read like any of them. His work is truly a theological work designed to explain and expand upon our central beliefs to anyone willing to read it. *On the Ecclesiastical Mystagogy* is not a summary or scriptural defense of the Sacraments. Instead Maximus sets the Sacraments in the center of a cosmological reality where everything is summed in the very nature of the cosmos and God. He sees a broader picture for all things of the faith. This work isn't just a commentary, it is set in the liturgy itself as he brings the liturgy to a cosmic dimension and illustrates the summary of all things in the Sacraments.