Chapter 1

Our Roman Heritage

On September 4 of the year 476, the sixteen-year-old boy-emperor Romulus Augustulus stood before the notables of the Roman senate assembled at the city of Ravenna and resigned the imperial office. In its long and glorious history, few of Rome's emperors had ever given up the imperial power voluntarily, and Romulus Augustulus was no exception. His resignation was under the compulsion of the powerful barbarian chieftain Odoacer. Odoacer had killed the emperor's father—a notable general—and seized the imperial capital of Ravenna. With his father dead and the capital overrun with hostile barbarians, Romulus Augustulus had little choice. The imperial insignia were handed over to the triumphant Odoacer while Romulus Augustulus skulked away into obscurity.

Odoacer could have donned the imperial purple and proclaimed himself the new emperor. Rather than do this, however, the insignia were sent to the Eastern Roman emperor at Constantinople with the message that the West no longer had need of an emperor. Odoacer then dubbed himself "king of Italy" and began the arduous process of erecting his kingdom upon the rubble of the Western Roman Empire.

The deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476 marks the date that historians traditionally assign to the fall of the Roman Empire—at least its western half. After 476 there were no longer any vestiges of official Roman power in western Europe. In the years leading up to 476, the Western Roman Empire had gradually been replaced by a series of independent barbarian kingdoms. These new kingdoms under their rough barbarian overlords became the seeds from which medieval Europe would grow.

But the full flower of the medieval world was still a long way off. Despite his grandiose plans for an Italian kingdom, Odoacer was himself deposed by another barbarian conqueror and murdered at a banquet in 493. And what of the exiled boy-emperor, Romulus Augustulus? Historians are not certain what became of him. The prevailing theory seems to be that he was allowed to retire to a spacious seaside villa outside Naples and may have even been given a generous pension by Odoacer. There, by the warm waters of the Mediterranean, he lived out the rest of his days in ease, vanishing into the sunset of history with the empire he represented.

The image of Romulus Augustulus fading out of history at his seaside villa is an apt symbol for how the Roman Empire itself vanished from history. The Roman Empire did not end with a spectacular collapse—and even though we can cut the thread of the Western Roman Empire's existence in 476, it had been in decline for many decades prior to this. The empire went out not with a bang but with a slow, long whimper.

Up Close and Personal:

ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Perhaps the greatest figure in the Catholic Church during the collapse of Rome was St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Augustine was born in the Roman province of Numidia in North Africa, the son of a pagan father and a Christian mother. After a riotous youth and detours through paganism, Manichaeism, and neo-Platonism, he finally found his way to the Catholic Church with the help of St. Ambrose of Milan and the prayers of his mother, St. Monica. Augustine entered the priesthood and in 396 became bishop of the African diocese of Hippo, a position he would hold for the remainder of his life.

In St. Augustine's day, Rome was in obvious collapse. In the year 410, the barbarians under Alaric sacked the city of Rome itself—something that had not happened in eight hundred years. Christians were shaken. By 410, Rome had been a Christian empire for several generations—and yet it was falling apart. "Why would God do this to his kingdom?" Christians wondered. "Shouldn't God protect his people?"

St. Augustine's thoughtful response was his magnum opus, *The City of God*. Spanning twenty-two books and written over a period of two decades, *The City of God* addresses the fundamental question of why God permits calamities to befall his own—why bad things happen to good people. St. Augustine's answer to this dilemma is a masterful explanation of the difference between the world ("the City of Man") and the Church ("the City of God").

Augustine goes on to say that, though the Roman Empire of his day had become Christian, it would be fundamentally wrong to associate God's kingdom with any earthly dominion. Though the earth will have a multitude of political kingdoms, only the Church is God's kingdom in the truest sense. Everyone who does not belong to the Church belongs to the City of Man, which is under the dominion of the devil. But these two cities are not easily distinguishable in this life; members of the City of God and the City of Man live and work side by side. For this reason, we can't so easily identify a single kingdom—like the Christian Roman Empire—with God's own kingdom. Rather, the wheat and the tares grow together in this world, each moving toward the final moment when God will sift them.

As long as we are in the world, we cannot expect to be free of calamities and misfortune. These things happen to the good and evil alike, but Augustine says they have different outcomes. For the faithful, misfortune serves to strengthen faith; for the unbeliever, they are a kind of punishment for sin.

Augustine's arguments were timely. In 430, as he lay dying, his own city of Hippo was besieged by the barbarian Vandals.

It would fall to them even as the great African bishop departed this life. St. Augustine's *City of God* reminds us that, no matter how positively we may view our own country, no place on this earth is God's kingdom. The Church is the true City of God, and our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20).

Rise of the Church

Yet though one institution was coming to an end, another was about to blossom forth into full bloom. We are speaking, of course, of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church had grown up side by side with the Roman Empire. The earthly life of the Son of God coincided with the rule of the first two Roman emperors while the Church he founded made its earliest converts during the long period of Roman peace—the Pax Romana—that spanned almost two centuries, from the time of the Emperor Augustus (d. AD 14) to the death of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (d. 180).

But the peace of the empire was not always the peace of the Church. Christians suffered localized persecution periodically throughout the Pax Romana, usually at the whims of some emperor or local magistrate who wanted to make an example of Christians for their obstinate refusal to worship the official gods of Rome. Persecution became more broad and systematic during the middle of the third century. Alarmed by the growth of the new sect, the Emperor Decius (249–251) brought the entire apparatus of the Roman state grinding down upon the Church in an effort to stomp it out. Further persecutions would follow, culminating in the so-called Great Persecution of the emperor Diocletian, which lasted from 303 to 313.

The Great Persecution turned out to be the last gasp of Roman paganism, however, for the year 313 brought the newly converted Constantine to power in Rome. Constantine issued the famous Edict of Milan, ending the

Great Persecution and legalizing Christianity. From 313 onward the Catholic Church would only grow, so much so that in 380 the emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire—and not just any sort of Christianity but "that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter"[1]; in other words, the faith professed by the successors of St. Peter in the Church of Rome.

Despite the conversion of the Roman Empire, circumstances in the West had deteriorated beyond the point of being able to preserve its existence—and Rome continued to decline until that fateful day in 476 when Odoacer sent Romulus Augustulus packing.

By the late fifth century, the Catholic Church was undoubtedly the biggest, best organized, and most influential institution in Europe.

While western Europe was disintegrating, the Church was alive with activity. Besides the continued spread of the Christian faith among the pagans of the countryside, the bishops of the Church were energetically bringing greater clarity and order to the Church's theology and governance.

Two Councils

Two ecumenical councils of the fifth century brought finality to long-standing arguments about the nature of Jesus Christ. The Council of Ephesus, held in 431 in the eastern city of the same name, was summoned in response to the heresy of Nestorianism. Nestorius of Antioch, the archbishop of Constantinople at the time, had objected to calling Mary "Mother of God." This in turn led him to deny the important unity between the divine and human natures of Christ. The Council of Ephesus delivered a stinging rebuke to Nestorius and his followers, declaring that Mary was indeed the Mother of God and that the person of Christ was a true and full union between his divine and human natures.

The second ecumenical council of the fifth century—the 451 Council of Chalcedon—addressed the heresy of the Monophysites. The Monophysites argued the opposite of Nestorius: whereas Nestorius had denied the real union between the human and divine natures of Christ, the Monophysites said this union was so complete that the human nature of Christ was dissolved into his divine nature. The image the Monophysites preferred for explaining this was the way a single drop of water is dissolved into the ocean; just so, they proposed, Christ's humanity was completely absorbed by his divinity. Against this heresy the Council of Chalcedon proclaimed that Christ was fully God and fully man, an irrevocable union of divine and human that has come to be known as the Hypostatic Union. The Council of Chalcedon was extremely controversial—the Monophysites of Antioch and Alexandria went into schism over it—but it was instrumental in settling the Christological controversies that had troubled the Church for more than a century. Though debates about the nature of Christ would continue in the East into the seventh century, Chalcedon put an end to them in the West.

Besides Ephesus and Chalcedon, a series of local councils throughout the fourth and fifth centuries finished the important work of definitively establishing the biblical canon. The Council of Rome, held in 382 during the papacy of Pope St. Damasus, formally codified the canon of the New Testament; further councils at Carthage in 393 and 419 reaffirmed this decree. These councils were not, however, promulgating a new teaching but rather affirming what had been the consensus of the Church for many years. After these important councils, there was unanimity throughout the Church regarding which books belonged in the New Testament.

The Papacy

We must also mention the growing importance of the institution of the papacy in western Europe. While the four of the great patriarchal sees

were located in the Eastern Roman Empire (Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria), Rome was the solitary patriarchal see of the West. Founded by the apostle St. Peter and consecrated by the double martyrdoms of St. Peter and St. Paul, the Church of Rome had been venerated with a kind of preeminence from apostolic times. In the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyon wrote, "It is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority."[2] St. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) had called the Church of Rome "the root and matrix of the Catholic Church."[3] Thus had the successors of St. Peter always been acknowledged as the focal point of Catholic unity by virtue of Christ's promise to St. Peter: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18).

But by the fifth century, the Church of Rome was growing in temporal importance as well. With the collapse of Roman government in Italy, the most educated men of the age were found not in the government but in the service of the Church. The Roman pontiffs, hallowed by their apostolic lineage from St. Peter and the prestige of presiding over the spiritual center of the Christian world, became de facto rulers of the city of Rome and lands surrounding it. When Attila the Hun invaded Italy in 452, it was not the Roman emperor but the venerable Pope St. Leo I who was sent forth to negotiate the fearsome warlord's withdrawal from the peninsula. After the formal end of the Western Roman Empire in 476, the popes would become increasingly important, not only as the spiritual heads of Christendom but also as the temporal head of central Italy.

A Living Link to Rome

It is worth mentioning that many elements of old Roman civilization were preserved within and by the Catholic Church. Foremost among these was the use of the Latin language. For centuries Latin had been the dominant

language in the empire. In the West, the entire bulk of patristic commentary had been composed in Latin. Thus mastery of Latin was necessary to access the Church's rich theological and devotional corpus.

Furthermore, the precision, majesty, and aesthetic of Latin made it especially suited for use in the Church's worship, especially among the educated. This meant that even though Latin as a spoken language eventually fractured and evolved in the European romance languages (Spanish, French, Italian, and so on), Latin as a literary and liturgical language continued to be preserved within the Catholic Church. This enabled the Church to nourish a living connection with its remote past. This also gave the Church a unity that transcended the various kingdoms over which it found its members dispersed. When Catholic bishops from regions as diverse as Spain, Britain, North Africa, Italy, and Gaul assembled in Rome for a synod in 382, they were all able to deliberate in the Latin language. Thus, while Europe fragmented into various barbarian kingdoms, the Church maintained a vibrant internal unity.

Roman jurisprudence, as well, lived on in the Church's canon law. As Christianity grew during the Roman era, it became necessary for bishops to formulate principles upon which to govern the Church. The leaders of the Church often turned to the principles and terminology of Roman civil law to express the Church's canonical tradition. While the content of the Church's canon law reflects the principles of Catholic tradition, its structure, vocabulary, and procedures very strongly reflect old Roman law, the soil from which the Church's canon law sprung forth.

Finally, we should mention the fact that the literary works of Roman antiquity were preserved by Catholic monks painstakingly copying the ancient manuscripts in their monasteries. But we will have more to say about this when we address Benedictine monasticism. There are many other things we could add, but it suffices to note that all of the best elements of classical Rome were taken up and preserved within the Catholic Church and are so to this day.

YOU BE THE JUDGE:

Did Christianity cause the collapse of the Roman Empire?

Enlightenment era historian Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) famously concluded that the Christian religion was responsible for the decline of the Roman Empire. Christianity, he argued, made men weak and focused their energy too much on the world to come instead of redressing the political problems of their own day. Talented individuals went into the service of the Church instead of the empire, creating a kind of "brain drain" that deprived the empire of much needed civil servants.

While it is probably true that the Church provided a more promising career than the imperial administration in the late empire, we must not mistake the cause for the effect. If people preferred to focus their energy on the next life, if men of talent preferred the clergy to the civil administration, the question is *why*?

The truth is the political situation in the late empire was rapidly deteriorating and had been for a long time. The sheer quantity of barbarian tribes pouring over Rome's frontiers stressed the Roman military to its limit. Birthrates in Rome—long in decline—meant that it was increasingly difficult for the empire to find the bodies necessary to maintain its military without recourse to foreign mercenaries. In addition, the fact that the Roman Empire had never settled on a clear method of imperial succession meant that ruinous civil wars were a constant facet of Roman life from the late second century onward. The disruption caused by all of these calamities affected the economy as well; Roman coinage was increasingly debased into the late empire, causing inflation and debt to spiral out of control. Emperors such as

Diocletian (r. 284–305) attempted to control this by increasingly socializing the economy and expanding government bureaucracy, but these measures only made matters worse.

Given this chaos, it is not surprising that people found consolation in the Church and preferred to serve an institution that was vital and expanding rather than an empire that was in its death throes, at least in the West.

Furthermore, if Christianity truly was so detrimental to the Roman Empire, it is hard to explain how the Eastern Roman Empire—which had been Christian longer than the West—not only survived the tumults of the fourth and fifth century but also actually went on to enjoy a long and prosperous existence of almost another thousand years as the Christian Byzantine Empire.