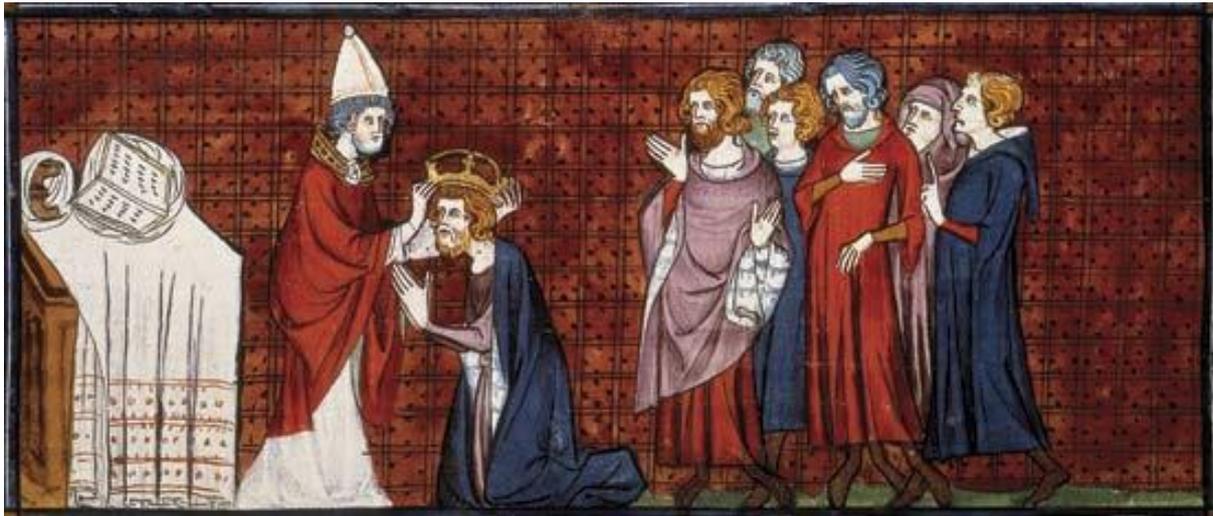


Charlemagne's Coronation 800 AD



The Culmination of Christendom

[Mark Noll, *Turning Points*]

The turning point took place at Rome in the church dedicated to St. Peter. At the end of the day's principal service, Charles, king of the Franks (in modern France and much of Germany), rose from praying before the tomb of the apostle. As he did so, Pope Leo III advanced, and in the words of an eyewitness, "the venerable holy pontiff with his own hands crowned Charles with a most precious crown." Then the people—in fact, "all the Roman people," according to the annals of the Franks—arose as one. They had been told what to say; three times a great shout rang out: "Carolo Augusto a Deo coronato, magno et pacifico imperatori, vita et victoria" (To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, great and peace-giving emperor of the Romans, life and victory). The turning point that Charlemagne's coronation represents in the history of Christianity is not on the same order as the Council of Nicaea or the founding of the monasteries. If the events on Christmas Day in the year 800 had not happened, much the same results would probably have marked the development of Christianity in the Middle Ages. At the same time, however, the event was a dramatic symbol of relationships undergoing permanent change. It stood for a new form of Christian existence that was replacing the Christianity passed on from the time of Constantine, or even of Benedict. This event also anticipated the future, for the way that the great king Charles and the pope, as supreme head of the Western church, conducted their business on that fateful Christmas Day outlined the shape of Christian life in the West for at least the next seven or eight centuries.

Charlemagne had come to Rome in the summer of 800 as the climax of fifty years of cooperation between the Frankish rulers and the bishops of Rome. His immediate purpose was to vindicate Pope Leo III from charges of corruption leveled by the Roman nobility. This task had been accomplished well before Christmas. Charlemagne was lingering in Rome to await better weather and more favorable general circumstances for returning to his court, across the Alps, in Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle). His mind was probably already on preparations for yet another summer of warfare against the Saxons, his twenty-first or twenty-second annual campaign. According to the biography of Charlemagne written by one of his most faithful diplomats, Einhard, Charlemagne did not even want the titles "emperor" and "Augustus." As Einhard put it, "He would not have set foot in the Church the day that they were conferred, although it was a great feast-day, if he could have foreseen the design of the Pope." But he did attend, the pope did give him the imperial crown, and Charlemagne

did continue to use the titles that hitherto had been reserved for the long line of Roman emperors extending from Julius Caesar to Irene, who was then reigning in Constantinople as empress of Byzantium, even as Leo placed a crown on Charlemagne's brow. The turning point in church history that this event symbolizes will be clear when three questions are answered: (1) How did the pope come to have power enough to crown a Roman emperor? (2) How had the king of the Franks risen to a position to be so crowned? (3) And how did this new relationship between the pope and the greatest ruler of northern Europe shape the centuries-long period of Western history usually referred to simply as Christendom?

The Rise of the Papacy

A subject like the rise of the papacy cannot be treated with complete objectivity. Roman Catholics, who view the bishop of Rome as the vicar of Christ bearing unique apostolic responsibilities, will obviously regard that history differently from the Orthodox, who regard the pope as only one of several key patriarchs. Perspective differs even more with Protestants, who, despite almost every other imaginable difference among themselves, agree that the pope is not the divinely designated successor of the apostles. Still, it is possible to chart the sequence of developments by which the concept of the pope as the bearer of apostolic authority emerged. Whether that emergence came about through the work of the Holy Spirit, the conniving of men, or an unfathomable combination of divine and human actions is a question to be answered more by theological conviction than historical research. The term "pope" itself has a long history. The Greek word *papas* was originally applied to high ecclesiastical officials of all kinds; for example, the bishop of Alexandria was called *papas* around the middle of the third century. In the West, the Latin *papa* was likewise a term of respect for a variety of church authorities. The Oxford English Dictionary records that as late as 640 the term was applied to Desiderius, bishop of Cahors (in southern France). **Centuries before then, however, the use of the term *papa* had begun to be reserved for the bishop of Rome. That stricter usage prevailed at least from the pontificate of Leo the Great (440–61).** After the eleventh century, the title *papa* was used exclusively for the bishop of Rome. The history of the papacy should be of interest to all Christians, even those who reject the Catholic interpretation of the pope's importance. Most of the major doctrinal and institutional developments in the history of Christianity actions from Rome that exerted broad influence appear early in the church's history. According to the Catholic Church's official list of popes, Peter was succeeded by Linus (perhaps the figure in 2 Tim. 4: 21), then Anacletus (or Cletus), then Clement. From this Clement, who may have belonged to an aristocratic household (but is probably not the Clement of Phil. 4: 3), a letter survives that admonished and encouraged the Christians in Corinth. Written about AD 96, it attempts to deal with problems related to the deposing of several presbyters in the Corinthian church. For the future, Clement's epistle was important for the pattern of influence it anticipated, with authoritative counsel reaching out from a Roman center to the boundaries of the church. Over the next several centuries, a number of events, personalities, and circumstances contributed to the growing authority of the Roman bishop. During the second century, various bishops of Rome were called upon to coordinate rebuttals to different heresies, and usually they performed that task competently. Toward the end of the second century, Victor (pope 189–98) exerted considerable influence in fixing a common date for Easter. Given the centrality of liturgy in the church's life, the person who could coordinate celebrations of a great feast like Easter was bound to reap a reward of respect. Consultation between outlying bishops and Rome also dates from an early period, but the first official decretal (or authoritative letter) from a pope in formal response to the query of another bishop did not come until 385 under Pope Siricius. Well before that action, however, different popes had begun to reflect directly on the nature of their office. Around the year 255 Bishop Stephen used a passage from Matthew—"and I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (16: 18)—to defend his own views in a dispute

with Cyprian of Carthage. After the Constantinian legalization of the church, a council in Sardica (343) ruled formally that the decisions of local councils may be appealed to the bishop of Rome. And Damasus I, who occupied the papal chair from 366 to 384, attempted to provide a formal definition of the Roman bishop's superiority over all other bishops. In an action that would have tremendously far-reaching consequences, Damasus also commissioned his secretary, Jerome, to produce a standard edition of the Bible in Latin. The resulting Vulgate became the Scriptures of the Latin Middle Ages and a key biblical version in the Catholic Church until well into the twentieth century.

Already by the fourth century it had become apparent that the ecclesiastical centrality of the Roman bishop had much to do with the political centrality of Rome. As the empire's First City, and a site of great symbolic and practical importance, even after Constantine moved the imperial capital to Constantinople in the East, Rome naturally attracted ecclesiastical influence as well as economic activity and political power. After Constantine's move to the East, the increasingly obvious failure of imperial representatives to maintain the city's dignity magnified the prestige of her bishops, who succeeded where the empire failed. The internal development of the church also underscored Rome's importance. Parts of the New Testament, although mostly written before a substantial Christian community existed in Rome, nonetheless reflect the early significance of the city for church history. The book of Acts ends with the apostle Paul arriving in Rome; the Epistle to the Romans is the fullest expression of Paul's mature theology; the Pastoral Epistles probably reflect a somewhat later view of Christian developments in Rome; and the book of Revelation that closes the New Testament contains many veiled references to Rome (perhaps as the ten-horned, seven-headed beast out of the sea in 13: 1). The early church's special attention to martyrs and the places where they died made the well-established stories that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome under Emperor Nero (during the period AD 64– 67) doubly significant. Partly for these specifically Christian reasons and partly for its strategic location as the hub of the empire, the Roman church soon became respected, wealthy, and influential. These roots of Roman ecclesiastical supremacy were nurtured by the capable activities of many popes. To be sure, some Roman bishops were nonentities or political selections who never rose above the debased conditions of their appointment. A few strayed dangerously, if not fatally, in their doctrinal opinions. But most were at least competent, and some were giants. The pontificate of Leo I, whose critical contribution to the Council of Chalcedon we have already noted, witnessed a considerable expansion of papal authority, both because of Leo's actions and because of his specific attention to this issue. In addition to his strategic role in defending Rome against invading barbarians, the doctrinal weight of his Tome on the person of Christ, and his studied assertion of papal primacy in dialogue with the patriarch of Constantinople, Leo took several steps that clarified the nature of papal authority. **Extending the earlier efforts of Pope Stephen, Leo further articulated Matthew 16: 18 as a foundation undergirding the authority of the Roman bishops as successors of St. Peter.** In addition, early in his pontificate Leo obtained from the emperor, Valentinian III, an edict that defined the superiority of the pope over all other Western bishops in matters related to civil law. In other words, **Leo increased the power of the papacy both by capably exercising and by explicitly defending papal authority.** Leo's actions set the stage for further expansion of papal authority by his successors. Gelasius I, who was pope from 492 to 496, followed Leo by participating in debates concerning Christ's person that continued to boil in the East. Like Leo, Gelasius held firmly to the combination of Christ's two natures in one person against a variety of Monophysite views. Again like Leo, he also took pains to define the nature of ecclesiastical authority. In a widely cited letter he expounded the theory that, of the two legitimate powers God had created to rule in the world, the spiritual power— which the pope represented— held primacy over the secular whenever the two conflicted. Such theories were always harder to enact than to publish, but Gelasius's words contributed significantly to theories about church– state relationships

that would mold the character of later European society. The summit of the early papacy, however, was reached in the pontificate of Gregory I (590–604), who, along with Leo, is often styled “the Great.” Gregory was born a noble Roman but, after founding several monasteries, eventually joined one himself, where he became renowned for his sanctity and sagacity. This reputation led the pope to call Gregory into diplomatic service on behalf of the church and eventually brought him to the papal chair itself. The list of Gregory’s energetic accomplishments as pope is breathtaking. Not only did he oversee Roman defenses against the attacks of the Lombards, carry out complicated negotiations with the Roman emperor in Constantinople, reform the finances of the church, and reorganize the boundaries and responsibilities of Western dioceses. He also was a passionate student of Scripture and formidable reformer of worship. **Gregory’s own biblical expositions**, especially a commentary on the book of Job, became staples of study throughout the entire Middle Ages and beyond. Their threefold method of exegesis (literal, mystical, moral) likewise established an enduring standard. His *Life of Benedict* gave monastic ideals a major boost in the West. His writings on the duties of bishops highlighted the care of souls as the key activity for all pastors. He reformed liturgical uses and regularized the celebrations of the Christian year. His efforts in promoting music in church lent his name to the plainsong “Gregorian chants” that still influence sacred music. And he was highly regarded as a preacher, especially for his ability to apply the balm of the gospel to the many tumults and disasters of his time. As if this were not enough, Gregory also oversaw extraordinarily important adjustments in the church’s missionary strategy. Through his own experience as a church diplomat, he had become disillusioned with prospects for relationships with the East, but at the same time he took advantage of other opportunities to send missionaries north and west into several strategic European centers. These missionary endeavors led, for example, to the conversion of Arian Visigoths in Spain to orthodoxy. Most famously, they sent Augustine (to be distinguished from the great North African theologian) on a missionary journey to England, which led to the conversion of the Angles and Saxons and also hastened the process whereby Rome absorbed Celtic forms of Christian faith. (The story from the Venerable Bede in the eighth century— that, upon seeing fair-haired slaves in Rome and finding out they were Angles, the future pope declared, “Non Angli, sed angeli” [not Angles, but angels] and thereupon resolved to send missionaries to England— may in fact be authentic.) The crowning glory of Gregory’s pontificate was that somehow, despite the immense responsibility that poured from every direction into his hands, he seems to have remained a humble, pious Christian. When in the midst of a controversy, Patriarch John of Constantinople insisted that Gregory address him as the “universal patriarch,” Gregory’s response was not only a telling diplomatic rejoinder but also almost certainly a genuine indication of his own spiritual concern. Gregory replied that he cared to be known only as “servus servorum Dei” (a servant of the servants of God), a title that Roman bishops have continued to use to this day.

Gregory’s pontificate established the norm for the Middle Ages, but it is little wonder that his successors fell far short of his high standard. Popes in his train might share his interest in ecclesiastical diplomacy or further the church’s outreach into Europe or even occasionally duplicate some of his sensitive spiritual concern. For the most part in the two or three centuries after Gregory, however, the papacy struggled to overcome the final decay of the Western Roman Empire and a series of debilitating economic, political, and social reversals. Significant ecclesiastical events also marked important developments for the papacy. When the Synod of Whitby (664) in England secured the agreement of Celtic Christians to follow the Roman liturgical year, it meant an expansion of Rome’s jurisdiction and led to a dynamic Celtic contribution to Roman missionary efforts. The papacy’s sponsorship of Boniface’s missionary journeys during the first half of the eighth century also drew the papacy more and more into the concerns of northern Europe. The events that led directly to the papal coronation of Charlemagne in 800 feature the popes more as subtle diplomats

than inspiring spiritual leaders. In 751 Pope Zacharias sanctioned the election of Pepin the Short as king of the Franks, in replacement of the decrepit Merovingian line. Three years later Pope Stephen II personally crowned Pepin as king, the first time such an action had taken place. In exchange, Pepin extracted Rome from its last lingering tie to Constantinople. Shortly thereafter in 756 Pepin also bestowed on the pope a special "Donation," which gave the pope control of Italian territories won by Pepin from the Lombards and also committed his successors to act as protectors of the papacy. The papal coronation of Pepin's son as emperor on Christmas Day in 800, in other words, had clear antecedents. To trace the rise of the papacy from New Testament times to the age of Charlemagne is to pose a puzzle. No one act or single line of thematic development shaped the papacy. Yet by 800 an elaborate mixing of elements had created a situation in which the Roman bishop was regarded unquestionably as the prime ecclesiastical figure in the West and as the personal representative of Western Christianity to the East. To be sure, the authority exerted by popes to the time of Charlemagne did not yet approach what would come in the following centuries. A whole series of momentous events had yet to occur before the height of papal authority was reached in the pontificate of Innocent III (1198– 1216). In the mid-ninth century Nicholas I would exert papal authority against the East (again) but also against the secular rulers who succeeded Charlemagne. The reform of church life spurred by the foundation of the monastery in Cluny in 909 would eventually see Leo IX assert Western supremacy over the East in "the Great Schism" (1054), Gregory VII secure penance from the German emperor Henry IV during a fierce contest of wills (1077), and Urban II proclaim the first Crusade (1095). **What made the papal coronation of 800 so important was not that it represented the height of papal power. Rather, it represented a strategic alliance between the papacy's gradually expanding influence and a political power that, like the pope, was also expanding in influence.** To understand why 800 represented such a strategic moment, it is necessary to step back from explicitly ecclesiastical affairs and look at the broader geopolitical picture.

The Rise of Northern Europe

The event at Rome in 800 was linked through an elaborate skein of connections to widely scattered events all throughout the Mediterranean world. It is no exaggeration to say that the course leading to the papal coronation of Charlemagne in 800 was influenced nearly as much by a non-Christian contemporary of Gregory the Great, who never set foot in Europe, as it was by Gregory and his papal successors. That contemporary was the prophet of Islam, **Mohammed, who was born about 570.** After he received what are recorded in the Koran as revelations from the angel Gabriel, Mohammed gathered a small following in and around Mecca, in the Arabian Peninsula. In 622 he and his band were driven out of Mecca by rivals. Their retreat to Medinah (the Hegira) was turned into victory, however, as more and more Arabs rallied to the cause of Allah and his prophet. In 630 Mohammed returned in triumph to Mecca. Two years later, when Mohammed died, Arabia was one-third Muslim. Two years after that, under Abu Bakr, all Arabia had turned to Islam. **Within another decade, Arab armies inspired by Islamic teaching had taken Syria, Palestine, and Persia (modern Iran) and had conducted raids as far east as the borders of India. In 642 Islam entered Egypt.** This westward move of Islam played a critical role in the history of Christianity. As we have seen, the East– West axis Christianity had grown around was already strained. Yet the Christian world was still anchored by Rome in the West and Constantinople in the East. As a consequence, the geographical heart of Christianity remained the Mediterranean. Greek was still the language of choice for refined

theological discussion. Missionary beachheads, like the one Gregory's Augustine established in Kent, England, seemed nearly irrelevant to the main centers of Christian thought, organization, and power.



When, however, Islam moved west, everything changed. Despite internal disputes in the mid-seventh century that slowed the pace of expansion for nearly a century after Mohammed's death, the westward tide of Islam seemed irresistible. Attacks began on Constantinople, still a vigorous imperial capital, in 674. By 698 Carthage, the home of Tertullian and Cyprian, was in Islamic hands. With Carthage under control, Islamic navies fanned out to subdue the eastern Mediterranean. **In 711 Islamic troops of the powerful Umayyad dynasty crossed over the narrow band of water at the mouth of the Mediterranean into Gibraltar** (or gib-al-Tarik, the "rock [gib] of Tarik," who commanded the Islamic forces). Within a decade Muslim armies had crossed the Pyrenees into what is now France. The precise impact of Muslim expansion on Christian history has been a matter of contentious debate for a long time. Yet a fairly general consensus exists on at least several aspects of the big picture.

1. The spread of Islam eastward over Egypt and North Africa was made easier by the weakness of Christianity in those regions. Heavy taxes imposed by Constantinople, as well as plundering armies from Persia, made North Africans ready for new rulers. The centuries of Christian infighting, which combined strife over doctrine with wearisome contests for power, further undermined the internal strength of the Christian community. Some historians have even speculated that the Egyptian preference for forms of Christian theology stressing the unity of God (especially Monophysitism) predisposed North Africans toward the radical monotheism of Islam. The fact that, within the norms of the ancient world, Muslim conquerors were relatively tolerant also eased the transition from Christian to Islamic rule.

2. The spread of Islam accelerated the division between Eastern and Western forms of Christianity, especially by making communications between the eastern and western Mediterranean much more difficult. As we will see in the next chapter, formal division between the Western Catholics and the

Eastern Orthodox depended upon developments in the church as well as in the broader world. Yet in that wider context, the vigorous presence of Islam in the Mediterranean was a most important factor in sundering the church. Even if the will had existed to bridge East– West, Greek– Latin, patriarchal– papal differences within Christianity, the strain in politics, military affairs, trade, and communications that an expanding Islam exerted on both parts of the church would probably have been too great.

3. Most important for Charlemagne’s coronation as emperor in 800, the expansion of Islam turned the attention of the papacy from the East to the North. **This geographic refocusing signaled papal willingness to give up on the ideals of a Mediterranean Roman Empire in exchange for a new Roman Empire of the North.** (To underscore the power of the imperial ideal associated with Rome, it is striking to note that about two hundred years later in what is now Russia, Vladimir accepted the Christian faith and soon his successors were proclaiming Moscow as “a new Rome.”) When the crowds addressed Charlemagne as Augustus, they were deliberately evoking the majesty of Rome. The popes leading up to Leo III had come to realize that the old connection between Rome and Constantinople was now bankrupt. The emperor in the East could not secure Europe against Islam; besides, it was also clear that increasingly obvious cultural differences were making East– West cooperation difficult, even if Islam were not in the picture. So it was that the papacy exchanged an eastern for a northern partner.

4. Finally, after the seventh century, it becomes impossible to understand the internal course of Christian history without bringing Islam fully into the equation. In the East, Islamic scruples against images played a role in how the Byzantine church defended its use of icons. A few centuries later, the spectacle of Islamic rulers in Jerusalem, combined with anguished appeals for help from the Eastern Roman emperor, provoked the call for crusades. Within the sphere of learning, Islam exerted a more pacific influence. When Europeans in the eleventh and twelfth centuries became curious about the philosophy and science of the ancient world, they found it more convenient to translate Arabic editions of Greek texts than to use copies of the originals locked away in Byzantium. The Western resurgence of learning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which was very much a distinctly Christian enterprise, also benefited from Islamic models in mathematics, history, and other areas of thought.

Thus, the spread of Islam had the most important impact imaginable in the transition of Western Christianity from a Mediterranean, eastern-oriented faith to an expressly European, northward-looking form of religion. This Islamic context, moreover, enables us to understand the dynamics that led to Charlemagne’s appearance at Rome in the year 800. Charlemagne’s grandfather was Charles Martel (ca. 690– 741) who, as mayor of the palace to the Merovingian kings, was the effective ruler of the Franks. Charles Martel’s memorable successes as a military and political leader provided the indispensable foundation for what would later take place under Charlemagne. On the geopolitical side, **Charles Martel was the commander who successfully led the Franks in 732 against the Islamic Saracens at Poitiers, the high-water mark of western Islamic expansion.** It would take more than seven centuries for the Muslims to be driven completely out of Europe from the Iberian Peninsula, but the tide had begun to turn. While it is possible to exaggerate the decisive influence of this one battle, it is also true that **Charles Martel, along with his successors, came to be seen as the saviors of Europe.**

On the ecclesiastical side, Charles Martel also took steps with far-ranging consequences. **Early in his career, he initiated friendly approaches to the popes as if he were leader of the Franks in fact as well as in power (approaches his son Pepin would continue after he assumed the kingship).** Charles Martel also directly assisted Boniface and other Anglo-Saxon missionaries who were busy among the

Germanic tribes of northern Europe. Since Boniface was acting in his missionary work as the direct agent of the pope, Charles Martel's support for this activity also enhanced the status of Frankish power in the eyes of Rome. Charlemagne eventually succeeded to the alliances that his grandfather had initiated and his father Pepin had developed. From the beginning of his rule as king of the Franks in 768, Charlemagne acted in concert to expand his own power and to strengthen connections with the pope. By the time he came to Rome in 800, Charlemagne's success against the Saxons to his north and east, the Spanish to his west, and the Lombards to his south had made him lord over more of Europe than anyone since Theodosius at the end of the fourth century. Thus it was that, when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne the "new" emperor, it only solidified a connection that had been developing for more than half a century. The popes had turned to the north, where a strong imperial household was emerging. In the terms of medieval society, Charlemagne never considered himself a vassal of the pope. Rather, he held himself to be responsible to God alone for the welfare of his people. But whatever Charlemagne thought of his own role, the link with Rome was now secure. For the next 800 years and more, the politics, learning, social organization, art, music, economics, and law of Europe would be "Christian"—not necessarily in the sense of fully incorporating norms of the gospel, but because the fate of the Western church centered in Rome had been so decisively linked with the new "Roman" emperor over the Alps. Charlemagne took the notion of church–state cooperation, which was a legacy from the days of Constantine, and by fixing it to Europe bequeathed "Christendom" to succeeding generations. Christendom would endure its dark days, like the political and moral chaos from around 850 to approximately 1000, or the plague decades of the fourteenth century. It would also experience periods of renewal, like the Carolingian renaissance of faith and learning in the early ninth century, the reform brought about by the friars in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, or the Renaissance and Reformation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Throughout, Christendom endured as the shape of Christian existence in the West. Even when battered by the emergence of Protestantism and the rise of the modern nation-state, even when attacked by secular trends in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even when the title "Holy Roman emperor" that dated from Charlemagne was permanently abolished by Napoleon in 1806, aspects of Christendom survived. The fact that, to this day, church establishments of one kind or another exist in most northern and western European countries, long after the majority of European people have stopped practicing the Christian faith, represents a remnant of the Christendom established by Charlemagne's coronation.

The Christianity of Christendom

The Christendom of the European Middle Ages affected the practice of the Christian faith in every way. The "medieval synthesis," as it is sometimes called, harmonized (at least in theory) what we today regard as separate sacred and secular spheres of life. The ideal symbolized by the cooperation between Charlemagne and Pope Leo III was an integrated view of life in which everything—politics, social order, religious practice, economic relationships, and more—was based on the Christian faith as communicated by the Roman Catholic Church and protected by the actions of secular rulers. The spiritual ideal that developed under the umbrella of Christendom bore strong resemblance to other major expressions of Christianity. But it also had distinct features that, not surprisingly, continue to play a tremendous role in the Roman Catholic Church as well as a significant role in all forms of the faith that descend, however tangentially, from Western Christendom. The central religious convictions of Christendom were that human beings, because they are corrupted by sin, need to be saved, and that this salvation is wrought by the merit of Christ communicated through God's grace. The distinctive medieval shape of these convictions was the belief that saving grace comes to people through the sacraments in a social setting defined by the cooperation of church and state. Sacramental theology evolved throughout the Middle Ages, but by the time of Thomas Aquinas in

the thirteenth century, earlier anticipations had assumed a formal definition. In Aquinas's terms, a sacrament was "the sign of a holy thing insofar as it makes men holy." That is, sacraments stood for spiritual realities and worked toward the salvation of those who participated in them. The theological rationale for a comprehensive sacramental system involved some elements shared by all times and places in Christian history and some that were distinct to Christendom in the Middle Ages. In the first place, the sacraments were thought to exhibit the principles of the incarnation, whereby the most important spiritual realities were embodied in a material form. Next, sacraments were thought to express the objective character of God's action on behalf of humanity. Receiving God's grace depended upon actually receiving the vehicle of that grace, and not so much on how one felt about the transaction. Finally, the sacraments were held to reinforce the essentially social structure of grace, the fact that Christ worked for his people together. This belief especially heightened the significance of the institutional church, through which the sacraments were given.

As the church formalized the sacramental practice into a system embracing seven sacraments, it became clear that the ideal of geographic comprehensiveness that inspired Christendom was matched by the ideal of a comprehensive life course. The seven sacraments of the medieval Catholic Church offered the specific touch of God's grace to all of the critical stages in a normal life. Baptism was the sacrament for birth. Confirmation was the sacrament for coming of age. Penance was the sacrament for the confession of sin. The Eucharist was the sacrament for spiritual nourishment. Marriage was the sacrament for creating a family. Extreme unction was the sacrament for death. And Ordination was the sacrament making possible a spiritual organization— that is, the church and the priesthood— to provide all the other sacraments for the critical transitions of life. In the emergence of the sacraments and of a broader sacramental theology, the witness of Scripture was not irrelevant. **Yet more important was the application of general theological principles and worship practices to the varied conditions of earthly existence. By the time learned theologians got around to providing rationales for the various sacraments and their uses, the system was already pretty much in place.** The sacramental system as it developed in Christendom required that the organized church play an indispensable role as the agent through which the sacraments brought God's grace to every stage of life. As the sacraments mediated God's grace in Christ to needy sinners, so the church was the sole mediator of the sacraments. The theology of the Middle Ages expanded upon earlier hints to show how Christ had commissioned the church to fulfill its role in distributing the sacraments and designated the ordained leaders of the church, especially the pope, to act as successors to the apostles in fulfilling the mandate of Christ to guide his people. **With its central sacramental role in the salvation of sinners, the church also assumed immense significance for every other aspect of culture.** Since the salvation of sinners is the most important imaginable task in life, leaders of the political sphere must cooperate with the church as it fulfills its spiritual tasks; those who exercise the mind must direct learning in ways that are compatible with church teaching; economic relationships should be structured to support the church in its mission; and ideals of social order will naturally imitate patterns that God has set for the church. In other words, with the widespread agreement that salvation was the most important reality, and the further agreement that salvation was communicated through and by the sacraments, it had to follow that the church, as the administrator of the sacraments, should offer a foundation for everything else in life. In practice, the comprehensive unities of Christendom's medieval synthesis rarely functioned with the harmony or the efficiency that the ideal suggested. For one thing, many of the rulers who succeeded Charlemagne and who were supposed to support the church loyally were, like Charlemagne, not keen on assuming the subordinate status they had been assigned. Many of them, in fact, either exercised or attempted to exercise the dominion that, in theory, belonged to the pope. For another, some of the institutional arms of the church, especially the vigorous orders of monks and friars that

were essential for putting the church's spiritual goals into practice, were often nearly as difficult to regulate as secular rulers. In addition, the effects of both human nature and divine grace kept the system from functioning as it came to be outlined. Dignitaries exalted to high ecclesiastical position sometimes acted like devils, common ordinary believers with no special standing in the church often reflected the work of Christ as effectively as their ecclesiastical superiors. Yet for all its failures, medieval Christendom remained a powerful ideal. At the heart of the ideal was the comprehensive presence of divine grace in all of life. And at the heart of the ideal in practice was the harmonious cooperation of the rulers of church and state. Of course, not every characteristic of Christendom that developed in the Western Middle Ages, that remains in the modern Roman Catholic Church, or that still can be found in many forms of Western Protestantism was present with Charlemagne and Leo III. Yet the symbolic import of their action— with the pope providing a crown to the most powerful ruler in Europe while invoking the memory of imperial Rome— is, in the light of history, incredibly potent. There was now a new comprehensive empire to replace the one destroyed by the drift of East– West disengagement and the armies of Islam. In this new empire, the institutional church with the pope at its head would exert immense theoretical importance. Christian reality would in fact often come close to mirroring the theoretical unities embodied in the ideal of Christendom. Eventually, after many centuries, Christendom would be fatally wounded— by the Renaissance, by Protestantism, by the modern nation-state, by Western atheism, and, most recently, by the vigorous spread of Christianity far beyond the boundaries of Europe. But as a symbol for the inauguration of a new, long-lasting, and far-reaching phase of Christian history, it is hard to top the coronation at St. Peter's in Rome on Christmas Day in the year 800.

Further reading

- [AIU Church History Class – Early Middle Ages](#)