

CHURCH HISTORY

(Study Notes)

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ALOKULUM, October 1979
MANILA, November 2011

THE APOSTOLIC AGE (33-100 AD)

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THE CHURCH AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE (100-476 AD)

I. EXTRAORDINARY SPREADING OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE:

Reasons:

- a) The Jewish and pagan **expectations**;

- b) The Jewish *DIASPORA* and the political **unity** of the Roman world under the Roman emperors: one common Language (*koiné*) and roads;
- c) The extraordinary **appeal** of the Christian message and the Christian example of life.

II. PERSECUTIONS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE:

- a) The main reason of persecutions in the refusal of the Christians to practice the official pagan worship and the **worship of the emperor** which the emperors regarded as a sign of loyalty to their authority. To refuse meant to rebel and be punished.
- b) The main persecutions:
 - **Nero**: St. Peter & Paul;
 - **Domitian**: St. John;
 - **Trajan**: Pope St. Clement, Ignatius of Antioch;
 - **Marcus Aurelius**;
 - **Septimius Severus**;
 - **Decius**: Saint Lawrence
 - **Valerianus**;
 - **Diocletian**: Saint Agnes.
- c) The persecution lasted for 250 years: “*The blood of Martyrs is seed of new Christians*” (Tertullian). Not all the Christians were martyrs. Many more were “*lapsi*” meaning fallen Christians. Dealing with the “*lapsi*”, the Church developed the PENITENTIAL DISCIPLINE.

The many thousands of martyrs and especially some of them of special importance became **object of veneration**: Mass was said over their bodies or relics, they were looked upon as examples of Christian life and they were considered as intercessors in front of God. This is the origin of the CULT OF THE SAINTS in the Catholic Church.

- d) The Persecutions ended in the year 313 AD, with the **Edict of Milan** by emperor Constantine, after his victory over Massentius at the battle of Milvian Bridge.

III. INTERNAL DIVISIONS –HERESIES- AND THE STRUGGLE TO OVERCOME THEM.

a) **Theology** (*Faith looking for understanding*) is the study of the Christian message or doctrine. In the early Church, theology was at its beginning. Many questions were still unanswered and different opinions about Christian truth gave origin to divisions: *heresies*. The struggle to overcome these divisions was very hard. It was conducted especially through the ECUMENICAL COUNCILS and the study and writings of the FATHERS OF THE CHURCH.

b) **Main Heresies:**

(1) **ARIANISM:** it was started by a certain **Arius**, who was a priest at Alexandria in Egypt, around the year 318 AD. The idea was that Jesus is not God, but a very good man possessed by God, but a mere creature.

An ecumenical (general) council was summoned at NICAEA (325 AD). There the divinity of Christ was proclaimed “as one in substance with the Father” (*omousious*) and the famous CREED OF NICAEA was composed. The most outstanding bishop who fought against Arius was ST. ATANASIUS who was exiled many times by the emperors who were in favor of Arianism.

(2) The heresies connected with the understanding of the **unity of divine nature and human nature in Christ:**

i. **NESTORIANISM:** from **Nestorius**, patriarch of Constantinopolis, who did not fully recognize the divine nature in Christ and was saying that Mary was not the mother of God (*Theotokos*) but only the mother of Christ (*Christotokos*). In the year 431AD, a council was called at **Ephesus:** the unity of Christ’s person, the second person of the Holy Trinity, was defined where human nature and divine nature meet. Christ was called *theanthropos* (God-Man) and Mary *theotokos* (mother of God). A great bishop who fought against Nestorius was Cyril of Alexandria.

ii. **MONOPHYSICISM:** was an exaggeration on the other side: only the divine nature was stressed, reducing Christ’s humanity to nothing. The champion of this theological view was **Eutyches**, abbot of a

monastery near Constantinopolis. In the year 451AD, the ecumenical council of CHALCEDON put an end to the controversy and, under the influence of pope LEO THE GREAT, it defined that in Jesus Christ, the divine and human natures are present in the unity of one person: the person of the divine Logos or Word. In this union (*Hypostatic union*) rests the whole redemption by Christ: the doctrine of salvation.

(3) Heresies connected with the **doctrine of salvation** (*Soteriology*):

i. PELAGIANISM: from **Pelagius**, a British monk. He was saying that the human nature is good and that Jesus helped us only with his good example. Man can reach salvation with his own strength; the grace of Jesus is only a help.

ii. MANICHAISM: from **Mani**, a Persian of the III century, he took up the pagan doctrine of the two principles: the God of Evil (O.T.) and the God of Goodness (N.T.). The body comes from the principle of evil; consequently, Mani preached extreme severity against the body up to the point of forbidding marriage.

iii. DONATISM: **Donatus**, a bishop in Northern Africa, was the beginner of a schism which opposed an organized church of the PURE or SAINTS to the official Church. St. Augustine, The great bishop and Father of the Church, was defeated in his efforts to overcome *Donatism* with peaceful means and was driven to the position of justifying the intervention of the public authority (*coercion or force*) in order to stop *Donatism*. This principle will bear poisonous consequences in the following centuries of the history of the Church. The Arabs arrived in North Africa, during the VII century and found a church divided and weak and destroyed it.

St. Augustine had fought successfully against *Pelagianism* with his principle: QUI CREAVIT TE SINE TE NON SALVABIT TE SINE TE / God who created you without your cooperation will not save you without your cooperation. The doctrine of grace and freedom remained somehow opened and it will be taken up by Luther and the Protestant Reformation.

(c) This time sees also the **developing of Theology** and the appearance of great figures of scholars and bishops in the Church, who with their teachings and writings, helped to overcome the heresies and developed theological and

biblical studies and constitute the backbone of Christian TRADITION. They are called the **FATHERS & DOCTORS of the Church**.

The most famous ones are:

- for the Western Church: - St. Ambrose of Milan;
 - St. Augustine of Hippo;
 - St. Jerome;
 - St. Gregory, the great (pope);
- for the Eastern Church: - St. Athanasius;
 - St. Basil;
 - St. Gregory Nazianzen;
 - St. John Crysostom.

IV. THE BARBARIANS AND THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. THE CHURCH AND THE BARBARIANS.

During this time, the great institution of the Roman Empire comes to an end.

1. The capital is transferred to Bysantium (Constantinopolis) by emperor Constantine. Nowadays it is called Istanbul.
2. The Roman population had become corrupt and soft.
3. New peoples were pressing at the borders of the empire: primitive tribes, coming from the North and from the East of Europe and Asia: VANDALS, HUNS, OSTROGOTHS, LOMBARDS, FRANKS, VISIGOTHS. They were very fierce and were attracted by the richness of Rome. First they were kept outside the borders by the Roman Army. Then they started invading the territory of the empire:
 - 410 AD: The Vandals of Alaricus destroy the city of Rome, looting;
 - 452 AD: The Huns of Attila are stopped by Pope Leo, the great, just outside Rome.
 - Eventually, they spread all over the empire: - Visigots and Vandals in Northern Africa; Franks in France; Lombards in Italy; Huns in Hungary, etc.
4. The authority of the empire being far away at Constantinopolis (the Western Empire had collapsed in 456), the only defender of the people was the Church: the Pope and the Bishops. Far from being destroyed by the BARBARIANS, the Church fought to convert them to Christianity and, at the same time, to save the great works of the Roman civilization. The great missionary movement for the conversion of the new peoples includes some famous names:
 - St. Patrick in Ireland;

- St. Boniface in Germany;
- St. Cyril and Methodius in the East (Slavic peoples);
- St. Augustine of Canterbury in Britain;
- And some famous women, too: St. Clotild in France (wife of Clovis, king of the Franks); St. Theodolinde, wife of Theodoricus, King of the Lombards.

But with the missions to the Barbarians, we enter in a New Era:
THE MIDDLE AGES.

THE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE AGES

DIVISION AND BASIC STRUCTURE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

(500 – 1500 AD)

1. The Middle Ages is the period which goes from the fall of the Roman Empire to the eve of the Protestant Reformation or Revolution. During this long period, the Church had to face **the conversion of the new nomadic peoples** who emerged from the territories of Eastern Europe and Asia and entered Europe and North Africa (The Barbarians).

2. The decline of the political influence of the Roman Empire is replaced by **a new power**: the German tribes, which are unified under the leadership of the Franks and their king: CHARLEMAGNE(Charles The Great), giving birth to the so-called WESTERN HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE.

3. During the course of these happenings, we have **the origin of the PAPAL STATES**, which were born out of the effort to keep the pope's independence and freedom among the political confusion of the ages, but which will bring also very many problems to the Papacy throughout the following centuries.

4. The appearance of MOHAMED AND THE MOSLEM RELIGION is one of the greatest features of the Middle Ages: the Moslem conquest of the Middle East and North Africa constituted **a threat to the very existence of Christianity**. Against the Moslems, there is the movement of the CRUSADES.

5. The effort of the Church to free herself from the influence of the Political Power gave rise to a **terrible tension and struggle between the Pope and the Emperor** in the so called QUESTION OF INVESTITURES. The Pope comes out on top. The Church enters an age of splendor and revival, but the unity of Europe is broken because of the decadence of the Holy Roman Empire. We have the emergence of **the different national states**.

6. The climax of the Christian Middle Ages brings about a revival in the life of the Church, especially with the appearance of the so called MENDICANT ORDERS: **The Franciscans and the Dominicans**. A great step forward in philosophy and theology coincides with the flourishing of the first UNIVERSITIES. The appearance of the VERNACULAR LANGUAGES is

THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN AGE

THE OPENING OF A NEW ERA

The **three new elements** which contributed to the change into a new era in the history of the Church and of the world, from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age, are:

I. The Renaissance

This word means **re-birth** and it describes the new interest, among the educated people of the XV and XVI centuries, in the **ancient civilization of Greece and Rome**. Italy was the leading country in the Renaissance Movement.

The followers of this movement were called humanists. The works of the ancient literature and art were studied and imitated very much: as a consequence a great **revival of art and literature** took place. Church people, especially Bishops and Popes, were very much involved in this movement.

Beautiful churches were built, among them the famous basilica of St. Peter in Rome. The greatest artists of that time were Michaelangelo, Leonard of Vinci and Raphael. But, unfortunately, the work of building and producing such nice things put stress on material prosperity and brought an **exaggerated pressure on the faithful because of taxations**.

Moreover, the mentality of the Church Leaders was affected by the pagan influence of the Greek and Roman civilizations. The moral behavior of the Church Leaders became very loose and **great scandals** appeared in the Church. The Renaissance Popes became notorious for their low moral behavior: especially immorality, greed for money and nepotism. The worst of all was Pope Alexander VI (Borgia).

The reaction against exaggerated taxes and **the desire of a reform in the Church** were among the reasons which provoked the Protestant Reformation.

II. The Discoveries

The 12th October 1492, Christopher Columbus, captain of three small ships (Nina, Pinta, Santa Maria) belonging to the King of Spain, after crossing the Atlantic Ocean, reached **America**. He thought that he had reached Asia (Japan), but afterwards it became clear that a NEW WORLD had come in touch with Europe.

The consequences of this discovery were enormous: **new peoples and civilizations came to the knowledge of the old world**: new crops and materials (e.g. Tobacco, rubber, cocoa, potatoes etc.) were known; and a new dimension was achieved in the idea of the world. Traveling especially by sea increased very much and eventually a **new great missionary era** took place for the Church.

Two nations of Europe were very much involved in the discoveries: Spain and Portugal. A sailor by the name of **Vasco de Gama** was the first to sail around Africa (circumnavigate): he was a Portuguese. As a consequence of their activity, the great sub-continent of Latin America is now having the largest Catholic population in the world and the Philippines is the only Catholic/Christian country of Asia.

III. The Protestant Reformation (Revolt/Revolution)

Germany was the country which contributed most to the third and most important movement of the age: the Protestant Reformation or Revolt. This brought about the **BEAKING UP OF THE UNITY** in the visible body of the Church and the birth of the Protestant Churches.

A. Some reasons which favored the Protestant Reformation:

(1) The corruption in the Leadership of the Church and in religious life.

The Popes and the Bishops were very much involved in worldly matters, like buildings and wars, harassing the Christian countries with taxes. **The main offices in the Church were in the hands of nobles families**, which were distributing them to their relatives without thinking if they were fit or not. In this way, bad Cardinals were electing bad Popes and bad Popes were choosing bad Cardinals. It was a vicious circle. **Many good people in that time, even Saints, were hoping and struggling for a Reform in the**

Church; but the Leadership of the Church fell short of it. When it came, it was too late in order to avoid the division.

(2) The emergence of the different nationalisms as a consequence of the decadence of the idea of empire and the desire to break away from the financial and political pressure of papal Rome. Especially kings and princes resented the interference of the authority of the Church in worldly matters. The Protestant Reformation, when it came, was favored by the civil authorities in their desire **to grab the properties of the Church and to be free from its influence.**

(3) Bad theology and poor quality of the popular devotion (piety).

Against the corruption of the Church at that time: there developed some Trends in theology and in devotion or piety which prepared the Protestant Reformation:

- The stress on the “**spiritual and invisible church**” or the “Church of the Holy Spirit;
- The tendency towards **personal devotion or individual piety** (DEVOTIO MODERNA) without much concern about the Sacraments, the Mass and Liturgy;
- **A distrust of human reason and human nature** as totally incapable of Reaching God: only God’s grace and faith, as we find them in the Holy Scripture, can be a foundation for theology and spirituality or spiritual life.

These trends of thought were present in the Church at that time and they were not necessarily meant to provoke a major crisis in the life of the Church, if it were not for **the action of one person** who turned them deliberately against the official Church. This person is an Augustinian priest and religious by the name of MARTIN LUTHER, the beginner of the Protestant Reformation.

THE HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE PROTESTANT

REFORMATION OR REVOLUTION

1. MARTIN LUTHER (1483-1546), an Augustinian monk, as an individual and a theologian, was **obsessed by the problem of justification** and by the fear of damnation. (Luther's private agony).

2. At a certain moment (the experience of the tower), he was struck by St. Paul's words (Rom, 1:16-17): *"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God saving all who have faith-Jews first, but Greeks as well- since this is what reveals the justice of God to us: it shows how faith leads to faith or, as scripture says, 'The upright man finds life through faith'.* Luther conceived justification as coming exclusively from God's grace, to be achieved by faith alone (*sola gratia; sola fides*). The individual is assured of his salvation by the words of the Scripture, **without the mediation of the Church** (*sola scriptura; individual interpretation*).

3. In 1517: the spark which gave origin to the Protestant Revolt is the stand that Luther took against the collection of money through the preaching of indulgences. **He wrote 95 Propositions** and sent them to the Bishops, expounding his new Doctrine about justification by faith alone and not by any good work including indulgences.

4. 1520: Pope Leo X sent the letter EXURGE DOMINE, telling him to retract his wrong ideas, under threat of excommunication. Instead Luther wrote three pamphlets, condemning the Pope and the Central Government of the Church and asking the German Princes to rebel against Rome. In December of the same year, **he burned publicly the letter of the Pope**, cutting himself from the communion of the Church and becoming a rebel. He felt strong because he had many followers especially among those who wanted a reform in the Church.

5. 1521: The emperor CHARLES V called Luther to a meeting in WORMS and asked him to submit to the Pope. Luther refused, saying that he will only obey the Scripture. On his way back from the meeting, he was kidnapped by the soldiers of prince Frederick the Wise of Saxony, his protector, and taken to WARTBURG CASTLE secretly, saving him in this way from the hands of the Emperor. There **Luther translated the New Testament into German** and directed the movement of revolt which spread everywhere in Germany. Emperor Charles V, who was supposed to enforce

THE COUNCIL OF TRENT (1545-1563)

1. The Council had been conceived and hoped for as an occasion for clearing the points raised by the Protestants. The Reformers (or Rebels) were meant to be there. But when it was, at last, summoned, **things had already gone too far.**

The Protestants appeared only in 1552, during the second session, and they wanted the Council to discuss everything again by the authority of the Scripture alone. Moreover they wanted the Bishops to be free from the authority of the Pope. **A dialogue was no longer possible.**

The Council of Trento was therefore an internal affair of the Catholic Church, meant to establish the true Catholic doctrine and to take the disciplinary measures in order to reform the bad state of the Church.

2. The Council was faced with two tasks: **and to answer the Protestants to reform the Church.** The two tasks were carried out simultaneously or at the same time in the three Sessions of the Council. In answering the Protestants, the Council did not enter into argument or polemic, neither did it mention their names. It only clearly established the Catholic doctrine about the points which were attacked by the Reformers. It also condemned heretical doctrines opposed to the teaching of the Council, but without mentioning the names of any heretic.

3. THE POINTS TOUCHED BY THE COUNCIL ARE:

a) **The sources of Revelation are two: Church Tradition and Holy Scripture:** both to be considered with equal reverence and love and to be interpreted under the authority of the Church. This was against the protestant idea of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone).

b) With the Original Sin, Human nature was **wounded but not absolutely corrupted.** Man is free to answer God's initiative of salvation and to cooperate with it. Therefore, Justification comes completely from God and from our free cooperation, not from God's grace only, as a cloak which covers our sins (*sola gratia, sola fides*). The believer who stands in grace and who acts out of faith and out of love, can perform rewarding good works.

c) The Sacraments, as channels of grace together with faith, were stressed and **their number (7)** was fixed authoritatively against the Protestants who believed only in Baptism and Holy Communion.

d) Eucharist was upheld as sacrifice and meal. The real presence of Jesus was defined by means of **the doctrine of transubstantiation**, i.e. the bread and wine are really and substantially changed into the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ.

e) The sacramental character of absolution in Penance was stated together with the sacrament of Order or ministerial Priesthood (Deacons, Priests, Bishops) and the sacrament of Marriage.

4. THE DISCIPLINARY LINES FOR THE REFORM OF THIS CHURCH WERE AS FOLLOWS:

- the establishment of **Seminaries** for training the ministers of the Church (Priests);
- the rule and obligation of **residence for Bishops and Parish Priests**;
- the reform of Liturgy: the Missal, the Breviary and the Ritual;
- auricular confession;
- the canonical form of Marriage in front of a priest;
- the Catechism of the Catholic faith to be taught in the parish schools of **Christian Doctrine**.

CONCLUSION:

All these decrees and regulations contributed to a renewal of the Church and shaped the face of Catholicism up to the present time (II Vatican Council).

But **the Council of Trent was only the beginning of a great wave of renewal and Religious fervor**: the Holy Spirit raised up a great number of holy men and women who implemented the decrees of the Council especially by the example of their lives.

THE CHURCH IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

THE CHURCH AND THE REVOLUTIONS

The modern world in which we live is the result of some **great historical happenings which brought much change** in the relationship between people and in their way of life.

The main ones are:

- The French Revolution (XVIII century);
- The Industrial Revolution (XIX century):
- The Russian Revolution (XX century).

The Church was caught up in these revolutions in different ways: as Christian community, it lived through them: it suffered from them, contributed to them and was enriched by them. Sometimes these historical movements appeared to be **against the Church as an institution or even against Christianity itself**. But eventually they contributed to the growth of the Church and of mankind as a whole, offering new opportunities to the preaching of the Gospel and contributing to the development of the world of the present time.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (1789 – 1815)

A. THE ENLIGHTENMENT:

The French Revolution is the consequence of the Enlightenment which developed throughout the whole XVIII century. **The Enlightenment is a movement of thought or ideas which stressed the power of the human reason as the dominant force in human affairs**. The Church contributed very much to the Enlightenment through the studies of many Christian scholars, priests and religious. Modern **science** (the knowledge of the laws of nature) and **technology** (the way of applying this scientific knowledge to the needs of human life in order to improve it) started to grow at a great speed.

Especially the dignity of the human person was very much enhanced by means of the **Declaration of Human Rights**. When these ideas were applied to the political systems of government, they gave origin to great changes (revolutions), sometimes in a peaceful way, sometimes violently.

I. The first Declaration of the Human Rights took place on the occasion of the Declaration of **American Independence** and the birth of the United States of America (1776).

II. The second and most important one took place **during the French Revolution which had a great impact in the history of Europe and of the world**. We shall study the main features of the history of the Church during the French Revolution.

B. REASONS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION:

The movement of the French Revolution was mainly a political one, aimed at **changing the form of government**: from monarchic and aristocratic to democratic (from the power of the king and few rich people to power sharing by the majority of the people); from monarchy (the rule of the King) to republic (the rule of the representatives of the people).

I. The French Revolution with the Church:

The main reason of the French Revolution was the increasing divorce or gap between the institutions of the state and the real way of life of the French people. The political power was held by the king, the nobles and the higher clergy. But the economic power was in the hands of the III Estate: the BOURGEOISIE (the traders, artisans and some workers). The expenditure of the state was too high and the **king Luis XIV called a meeting of the three General Estates: the Clergy, the Nobles and the Bourgeoisie** in order to find a solution to the problem.

The meeting started with a solemn procession of the Blessed Sacrament. 47 Bishops and 208 Parish Priests were present in the meeting.

The meeting gave origin to the revolution when the III Estate and the clergy decided to join forces in order to oppose the nobles and to give France a Constitution (20th June 1789). This was called the **Oath of the Tennis Court**.

As a consequence, the meeting became NATIONAL ASSEMBLY with the aim of giving France a Constitution. The new constitution opens with the declaration of the right of man and of the citizen. The Ideals of the French Revolution are summarized in the motto: **Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood** (*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*).

II. The French Revolution against the Church:

Very soon a strong group in the National Assembly turned against the Church:

1. They voted the taking over of the Church property in order to rescue the bankruptcy of the state. Church property were sold at low cost.
2. They interfered in the condition of the religious: suppression of convents and Religious homes.
3. The CIVIL CONSTITUTION OF THE CLERGY: independence from the Pope; Bishops and priests chosen by the people; oath of loyalty to the Constitution of the French State.

The majority of the French Bishops and Priests refused to take the oath and started to live a clandestine life or to go into exile. The Church became divided between JURORS and NON-JURORS. The King signed the Constitution but then he regretted, and, especially after the Pope had condemned the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, he tried to escape but was captured. The nations around started waging war against France. The Government was in a confused state.

In September 1792: massacres of priests and religious took place in many parts of France.

III. The French Revolution against Christianity:

Against the threat of foreign invasion, the government was taken over by a special Meeting called the NATIONAL CONVENTION and then the COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC SAFETY: monarchy was abolished, the King and Queen were executed (January 1793). From that time up to 1795 it was the reign of TERROR. Thousands of people (nobles, priests, loyal Christians) were executed by means of the guillotine. The men responsible

for the terror were MARAT, DANTON and ROBESPIERRE. **They wanted to crash Christianity.** They changed the name of months, and of days, they abolished Sunday and made attempts to start a new Religion:

November 10 1793, the goddess REASON was enthroned in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris and Christianity was officially abolished. This was the darkest point of the French Revolution. But the people got tired of abuses and killing. Robespierre was executed and the republic was taken over by a committee of five men called the Directory. The persecution decreased but the conditions of the Church was poor especially because of lack of priests and religious and division among the Bishops.

IV. The French Revolution against the Pope:

In the meanwhile, the French Army obtained victory against the enemies and started to invade the other countries of Europe and to spread the ideas of the French Revolution. This happened because of a young general by the name of NAPOLEON BONAPARTE. **Rome was captured and the Pope Pius VI was taken prisoner and died in exile (1799).**

In that moment, many people thought that he had been the last pope. His death, they thought, was the death of the Church and of Christianity as well.

But it was not so. A new Pope was elected in a conclave in Venice, Pius VII, a holy man. He went back to Rome and was welcome by the people. Meanwhile Napoleon became First Consul in France and, during the short years of peace (1802-4), he understood the need of bringing peace to the hearts of the French people. Therefore, he negotiated a CONCORDAT with the new Pope (1801). Christianity was declared the religion of the majority of the French people, the division among the Bishops was healed, and, with the new freedom, the Church improved very much.

In the year 1804, Napoleon declared himself emperor and started waging war to many countries in Europe in order to bring them under his control. Only England remained free. When he invaded the Papal States, the Pope excommunicated him and Napoleon took the pope to France as his prisoner.

Napoleon invaded Russia and was defeated (1815). **He died in a small island (St. Helena) reconciled with the Church. Pope Pius VII went back to Rome in triumph.**

C. CONSEQUENCES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION:

1. **The democratic and republican ideas of the French Revolution spread throughout the world** and gave origin to the movements of national independence in many countries of Europe and America. As a consequence, many revolutionary movements came into being and undermined the old system of government.

2. The new system of Government was more in the hands of the people(democratic) and it favored the separation of the state from the Church.

3. As a consequence, the Church lost much support and wealth, but **gained in freedom** and became closer to the conditions of life of the common people.

4. Bishops and priests became more united, coming from every level of the population and **there was an extraordinary flourishing of new religious congregation dedicated to social and missionary work.**

5 The thousand of French priests and religious who went into exile in England and America, contributed to the progress of the Church in those countries. **The end of the French Revolution coincides with the beginning of an extraordinary missionary age of the Church.**

6. **The devotion to the person of the Pope** and his authority increased enormously all over the world as a consequence of the Pope's unjust suffering and of his final victory against Napoleon. It was a moral authority based not on political or military power, but on the spiritual prestige of the Popes.

7. The persecution which the French Revolution caused to the Church, made the authority of the Church suspicious of the new current of modern ideas and inclined to be conservative in outlook especially in its relationship with LIBERALISM.

THE CHURCH AND LIBERALISM (XIX Century)

1. The century that followed the French Revolution (1814-1914) was one of great changes in different dimensions of life: political, social and economic. In some ways it was the continuation of the process started by the Enlightenment and spread by the French Revolution and Napoleon's ventures. The movement of ideas that underline these changes is called LIBERALISM and the Church had to face it.

2. The word "Liberalism" comes from the Latin word "*Libertas*" which means FREEDOM and it shows the main feature or characteristic of this ideology which influenced every aspect of man's life: **the stress on man's freedom in every field.**

3. **Political Liberalism:** During the XIX century we see the development of the INDEPENDENCE movements: many countries of Europe and South America become independent from foreign domination and united.

At the same time, there is a movement towards DEMOCRACY: that is the rule of the people themselves against the authority of the kings. In the different countries, new CONSTITUTIONS appear, following the example of the American and French constitutions. These constitutions were meant to limit the power of the Rulers and to make the people share in the government of the countries.

This took place completely especially with the coming of the **general elections and the appearance of political parties.** This change was very important and it prepared the political atmosphere of the present, contemporary world in which we live.

(a) The CONSEQUENCES for the life of the CHURCH were:

- separation of the state from the church: this separation is based on the principle of freedom of religion. Sometimes it was done in a friendly spirit, like in England and America, leaving the Church free to possess material goods and exercise its pastoral mission. Other times it was hostile: persecuting the Church, taking the Church's properties and preventing the Church from doing its pastoral work.

- Freedom of speech, press and association: this new climate gave the Church a new chance of announcing the Gospel, but it was also a danger for religion because many anti-Christian ideas were spread among the people.

(b) **THE ROMAN QUESTION**: the hottest political question of the XIX century was **the problem of the Papal States (or Roman Question)**. Through the movement brought by Liberalism, Italy was becoming united and freeing itself from foreign domination. An obstacle to this aim, was the presence of the Papal States right in the middle of Italy. On one side, the Italian patriots, many of whom Catholic, wanted their country to be united and **to have Rome as its capital**; on the other side, the Popes believed that they couldn't renounce the territory of their state which they believed was necessary for the independence of their universal mission as heads of the Catholic Church.

The tension was terrible and it explains, in a way, the hard feelings which developed between the Popes and Liberalism. In the year 1870, the Italian government occupied militarily Rome and put an end to the temporal power of the Popes and to the Papal States. The Pope retreated in the Vatican and considered himself a prisoner. This tense situation continued up to the year 1929, when Pope Pius XI signed an agreement with the Italian government (**Lateran Treaty**) by which **the small state of VATICAN CITY was created in order to insure the independence of the Pope and peace was restored**.

The political power of the Pope was reduced almost to a nothing, but his moral and spiritual authority increased in a way unheard of before.

4. **Intellectual liberalism**: The tendency towards freedom which, in the political field, was directed against the authority of the kings, in the field of ideas (like science, philosophy, etc.) tended to eliminate the influence of the authority of Religion and to stress the autonomy (independence) of every discipline.

A. Development of science and technology

- **Science**: The XIX century is a great one for the development of science, especially medicine, chemistry, biology, physics, etc...

- The new discoveries in the field of science were applied to the needs of human life by technology: many inventions of new machines (like the steam engine, telephone, etc.) increased the power of human beings over nature and the environment, contributing to the rising of the present industrialized society.
- This wave of discoveries made humanity proud: there arose the idea that we could solve all our problems with science, and therefore there is **no need of Religion any more**. This idea is called SCIENTISM. **Religion was seen as a product of ignorance.**
- It was believed that we could improve not only our material life but even our moral and spiritual life by means of science and this improvement will have no end (the myth of PROGRESS).
- There came the idea that everything developed from matter, including human beings (MATERIALISM and the theory of EVOLUTION) and that there is no God, but man is god to himself (ATHEISM).

B. The attitude of the Church:

Many scientists were good Christians and many Christians contributed to the development of modern ideas of progress and freedom. But the general attitude of the Church was one of mistrust and opposition to the modern mentality.

The Popes, especially Blessed Pius IX, fought bravely against the anti-Christian ideas of the age:

(1) **December 8 1854: the proclamation of the dogma of Immaculate Conception of our Lady.** This religious happening was interpreted as a challenge to the unbelieving ideas of the time. The dogma was accepted with joy by the Christian people and contributed to increase the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary as defense against the materialistic mentality which was threatening the Christian Faith. In 1858, the apparitions of our Lady to a young girl Bernadette Soubirous, at Lourdes, France, seemed a confirmation from heaven of the courage of the Pope. Huge crowds of people started going to Lourdes in pilgrimage, up to the present day and many miracles of healing happened.

(2) **In the year 1864: the SYLLABUS:** This is a list of the wrong ideas of liberalism which was published by the Pope in order to warn the Christian people. This document was very much opposed because it seemed to condemn not only the errors against Religion, but also the achievement of the age which were becoming the way of life of modern society: democracy, freedom of speech, press, opinion, etc....

Although it encouraged the idea that Christianity is the enemy of progress, the Syllabus was a courageous step in order to show that **everything in human life (economy, politics, ethics) is under the authority of God and cannot be free from it.**

(3) The most important happening of the time was the **FIRST VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (1870)**, in which 750 bishops, out of about 1000, from all over the world, took part. The Council was meant to react against the errors of the time, especially materialism and atheism. As we have seen before, the great Ecumenical Councils of the past had dealt with the problem of Christ, God and Man; of the Holy Trinity in God; of Justification and the Sacraments.

Vatican I spoke about four main points: God, Revelation, Faith and the Relationship between reason (science) and faith.

- God, who is one, free and personal, is the Creator of all things, distinct from them and independent of them.
- There are two kind of truth: those in the natural order, which reason can attain by itself; and those in the supernatural order, which Revelation alone can teach us.
- The act of faith is rational and free; it is an act both divine and human. The domain of faith and reason (of science and religion) have definite boundaries and there cannot be disagreement between faith and reason, since God is the author of both orders of truth.

But the main topic of the Council was **the definition of the primacy and infallibility of the Pope when he speaks “*ex chatedra*” as head and spokesman of the Church about matters of faith and moral.** Never before the spiritual authority of the Pope had been in higher consideration in the whole Catholic world.

Great masses of people left the countryside and came to work in the factories, swelling up the population of the cities. **There were no laws to protect the workers**, because, according to the principles of Economic Liberalism, the salaries were fixed through bargaining between the bosses (capitalism) and the workers (proletarians) who were in this way terribly exploited. They could be forced to work up to 15 hours a day, children and women were also engaged without protection; no social securities, insurances and pensions were in existence. This was called THE SOCIAL QUESTION.

The State had nothing to do with the regulation of work because the main liberal idea of the time was non interference (*laissez-faire*): the State had only to favor the free play of the market place, of the market laws.

Society had changed profoundly and a new outlook was necessary. We see therefore the development of **SOCIALISM: a social theory which intends to abolish the private property of the means of production and come to the rescue of the workers.**

2. KARL MARX AND COMMUNISM

The most important of the socialist thinkers is Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist, the founder of the modern Communist movement, who, **in 1848, published the famous Communist Manifesto with the motto: “Workers of the whole world, unite!”**.

According to K. Marx, the only true reality is the economic reality. He sees the history of mankind as the struggle between people for the possession of material goods (class struggle). Because of the law of private property, mankind is divided into exploiters (bosses or masters) and exploited (workers). The new industrial revolution and capitalistic movement has brought the tension to a breaking point: **accumulation of wealth on one side, and accumulation of misery on the other side.**

There will come a moment, when, through a violent revolution, the workers will abolish the private property of the means of production and start a new order in which no person will exploit another, but property will be in common and everyone will receive according to his needs. **THIS IDEAL SITUATION IS COMMUNISM.** The Communist Party is the union of the workers in order to overthrow the capitalistic world and bring about this revolution.

3. COMMUNISM AND RELIGION

K. Marx was a materialist and an atheist. He said that the only reality is matter, and human beings build up their life through work. But, in the capitalistic system, they are robbed of the fruit of their work by the bosses. Because of this we are unhappy and alienated. Private property is a theft and the original sin of society. Religion is the instrument of the capitalists because it helps them to dominate the workers and keep them quiet with the hope of heaven. **God does not exist and religion is the opium of the people.**

When the workers will overthrow the capitalistic system, abolish private property and start the communist society, they will enjoy the fruit of their work, they will be happy and religion will disappear.

The main work of K. Marx is a book called THE CAPITAL which became like the Bible of the new messianic religion of the Communists. We shall see later on how the ideas of K. Marx were implemented in Russia and how Communism became known and practiced by many other countries in the world. **The communist movement was the greatest movement of ideas and change which appeared in the modern world and because of his international success, it can be compared only with the spreading of Christianity itself.**

4. THE CHURCH AND THE SOCIAL QUESTION

The success of the communist and socialism movements was possible only because Christians were slow in understanding that the new social problems needed a new approach. The preaching of the Church was still based only on the principle that the rich had to come to the help of the poor out of charity. **Because of this delay, a gap was created between the Church and the working class which is not yet healed.**

But in the second part of the XIX century, the social teaching of the Church developed enormously and Catholic movements started organizing the workers in TRADE UNIONS in order to fight for a new social order. **This social movement on the part of the Christians was encouraged by POPE Leo XIII, with his encyclical: RERUM NOVARUM (The new**

things), 1891, which applied the Christian principles of the Gospel to the new social condition.

The Pope condemned the materialistic and revolutionary ideas of Communism and, at the same time, the liberal ideas. He said that work is not a good to be put on the market, but it is connected with the dignity of the human person. He spoke of just salaries, or working hours, working regulations, of the right of the workers to organize themselves in trade unions so as to improve their conditions and of their right to go on strike if necessary. He spoke of the social function of private property and of the duty of the state to bring about social laws and reforms in order to bring equality and harmony among different social classes.

The teaching of the Popes about social matters developed throughout the decades up to the present day. The most important documents are the encyclicals of the last Popes: John XXIII: *Mater et Magistra* (The Church, Mother and Teacher); Paul VI: *Populorum Progressio* (The Progress of the Peoples); John Paul II: *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Labor).

5. THE WELFARE STATE IN THE FREE WORLD

Meanwhile the social movement of the Christians prevailed in the Western World, also because of the political commitment of the different Christian Democratic Parties. Without the communist revolution, the most advanced industrialized countries of the world like the United States of America and the countries of the European Community are those in which **the conditions of the working class are far better off than in any part of the world, communist countries included.**

This came about also because of the Social-Democrats Movement by which, since the last decades of the XIX century, Socialists abandoned the revolutionary ideas of K. Marx and followed a path of loyalty to the democratic institutions of the State and of social advancement through reform. This course was influenced to a large extent by the Christian Social Doctrine.

In this way, **Social Catholicism contributed to the defeat of the Communist threat and to the very survival of Christianity** and showed that the principles of the Christian Religion far from being the OPIUM of the

peoples, could express an astonishing vitality in solving the problem of the modern age.

6. THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE SPREADING OF COMMUNISM

An extraordinary chance for the implementation of K. Marx' communist ideas came in Russia, in the year 1917, when the Tzarist Monarchy collapsed as a consequence of the Russian defeat in the World War I (1914-1918). The Marxist ideas had remained largely only on paper up to that moment, because in the most advanced industrialized countries, the social-democrat and Christian-democrat movements had made the workers take a different direction.

But in Russia, a small group of Marxists called BOLSHEVICS, led by LENIN, gave origin to the Russian Revolution which overthrew the corrupt tsarist regime and started the first communist government.

The Russian revolution brought about a violent change with millions of dead; private property was abolished, religion was crushed and atheism was imposed as the only ideology of the Russian people. Great improvements in the life of the people were the result of the Revolution and Russia became a great industrial power under the communist rule. But freedom was lost for the Russian people and a bloody dictatorship took hold of the country especially during the long rule of Stalin who enforced his iron grip by means of secret police, executions and concentration camps.

The influence of Russia became worldwide through the organization of communist parties throughout the world. Wherever a communist party came to power, Christianity was crushed, Bishops and priests imprisoned and killed, Catholic organizations abolished, churches and seminaries closed.

This happened in Mexico (under Calles, 1924), Spain (civil war 1936), Cina (1948), and in the countries of Eastern Europe which fell under Russian domination after the World War II (1939-1945). **Because of the systematic persecution and the overwhelming number of martyrs, the Communist threat to the survival of Christianity can be compared only to the one under the Roman emperors.**

The Popes condemned atheistic communism on several occasions, especially Pius XI with the encyclical: *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) and Pius

The period immediately following the conclusion of WWII saw an **extraordinary expansion of the Church**. The missionary wave which had started under Gregory XVI continued during the second part of the XIX century and the first half of the XX. **The largest harvest was gathered in Africa**, but also in all part of the world the missionary effort brought about abundant fruits.

The sign of this was **the establishment of the local churches with their bishops** all over the world. When the more than 2500 bishops gathered in Rome for the opening of the Council (250 from Africa) the development of the Catholic Church became apparent and it was clear that **the Church, for the first time since Pentecost, ha reached the ends of the earth**. The vocations were many both to the diocesan priesthood and to religious life and the moral authority of the popes, especially Pius XII, was enormous.

The world had emerged from the trauma of WWII, the wind of independence was blowing for the so called colored peoples. The first country to become independent from Great Britain was India. The independence of most of the countries of black Africa is contemporary to the starting of Vatican II. The United Nations seemed to represent the beginning of an era of peace, prosperity and respect for the Human Rights. This is also the time of an extraordinary economic boom in the European countries and in North America. The threat of Communism coming from Russia seemed to be contained. **A wave of optimism was sweeping on the face of the world**. To this positive approach, pope John XXIII meant to respond with the Ecumenical Council which intended to be of a pastoral nature since it didn't aim at counteracting any special heresy or error.

The event of the Council and the Council Documents.

Vatican II was opened officially by John XXIII on October 11 1962. It lasted for four sessions. **After the first session, pope John XXIII died and it was pope Paul VI who took over the great commitment of the Council and brought it to a happy conclusion**. It was officially closed on December 8 1965. After the second session, in January 1964, Paul VI went in a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where he met with the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras: two strong signs of inspiration for the Council: the going back to the Gospel origins and the promotion of Christian unity. Vatican II was an extraordinary time for the Catholic Church and had a great

impact on the world at large. The media were present at the Council in strength and representatives of all Christian denominations were invited as observers.

Vatican II produced 16 Documents: 4 Constitutions, 9 Decrees and 3 Declarations. The most influential document is the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*. The emphasis on the Church as identified with the “People of God” in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit had wide and deep consequences. The pyramidal concept of the Church, usually identified with the Hierarchy and only in her institutional aspect, gave way to the Church as “sacrament (sign and instrument) of the communion with God and unity among all men”.

In different forms the Council promoted consultation among the hierarchy and the involvement of the laity. The collegiality of the Bishops found its main expression in the Synods. At diocesan and parish level, the respective councils acquired a juridical status. The mission of the laity was recognized as coming directly from their baptism: they are the priestly people of God. The baptismal priesthood of the laity is expressed in the post-conciliar time especially by the Small Christian Communities and the Movements (Opus Dei, Focolare, New Catechumenal Way, Community of Sant’Egidio, Communion and Liberation, etc.). **However, the new era of the Church needs new Saints, like the era of the Council of Trent.** That was the conviction of pope John Paul II himself who proclaimed more saints during his pontificate than all the other popes before him together.

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Verbum Dei*, was the result of the revival of the interest about the Bible in the Catholic Church and a promotion of the biblical knowledge and devotion among the faithful. It was boosted by **the innumerable translations of the Holy Scriptures into the vernacular languages** also at the service of the church’s liturgy now celebrated in the various languages of the faithful.

The Constitution on the Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was the first to be published and its implementation gave the most evident sign of the change brought by the Second Vatican Council. **The Liturgy in the vernacular languages and the main celebrant facing the congregation were momentous changes of a way of worshipping that had lasted more than a thousand years.**

It was generally well accepted and appreciated and stimulated the creativity of the peoples of different cultures to equip their celebrations with new songs as expression of their own sentiment and cultural background. The Missal, the Breviary and Ritual were reformed and in 1983 the New Code of Canon Law took in the changes and the terminology of the Council in juridical form.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* is the document that attracted the greatest interest and attention of the world public opinion in as much as it embodied the Church's social doctrine and touched very crucial aspects of life as atheism, culture, and the total condemnation of war. **The first sentence of this constitution is perhaps the most famous expression of the Council: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well”.** The document is expression of a positive, optimistic perception of the modern world and its progress.

Of the other documents, the most remarkable are the Decree about Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* that promotes the cause of the unity of Christians by considering the different Christian denominations in what they have that unites more than in the differences. The same approach we find in dealing with the non-Christian religions in the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. Very important and the sign of a great change is the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* by which the Catholic Church accepts the principle of freedom.

The implementation of Vatican II and the present situation of the Church

The time of Vatican II represented the peak for the Catholic Church. Very soon the implementation of the Council especially in the reforms regarding its internal life(e.g. Priests and Religious) brought about **an unexpected wind of rebellion that gave origin to the largest exodus of priests and religious to be compared only with what happened at the time of the Protestant Reformation.** Dogmatic and moral theologians ventured in uncharted and controversial fields causing reaction and polarization in the Catholic Church. The implementation of the Council was the commitment and the anguish of the popes: the subtle and tormented Paul VI and especially the powerful and charismatic Blessed John Paul II in his very long

pontificate of 27 years. It is still the challenge of the present pope Benedict XVI.

In 1985 a Special Synod of Bishops was convened to evaluate the impact of the Council and its implementation. **The evaluation was substantially positive.** John Paul II had expressed the same position earlier the same year: “Vatican II remains the fundamental happening of the contemporary Church: fundamental in order to deepen the spiritual riches entrusted to her by Christ himself who through her and by means of her prolongs and shares with us human beings the *Mysterium Salutis*, his redeeming work. Fundamental also for the fruitful contact with the contemporary world for the purpose of evangelization and dialogue at all levels and with all people of good will”.

A very important moment in the life of the contemporary Church was the **celebration of the great jubilee of the 2000 years of Christianity** when Pope John Paul II officially asked forgiveness for the sins of the Church committed in the previous centuries and once again managed to visit the Holy Land and perform emotional signs of dialogue with the Jews and the Moslems. The preparation of the Great Jubilee stimulated the search and documentation about the Christians who had witnessed Christ through martyrdom. An impressive documentation was collected that showed how the XX century had been a century of martyrs.

The fundamental orientations of Vatican II constitute the official position of the Church in its leadership and in the body of the faithful: Ecumenism and the search for unity among the Christians, respect and tolerance and dialogue towards the non-Christian religions and acceptance of the principle of freedom in the civil life of society and collaboration with the positive forces in society for justice and peace. But **new challenges to Christian life and the life of the Church are again appearing in the world’s changed circumstances.**

The population explosion and the movement of migration have increased considerably the non-Christian population of the world and brought large numbers of non Christians into the traditional areas of Christianity especially in Europe. The process of secularization and the spreading of materialism and consumerism has eroded the Christian practice in Europe and North America. A wave of militant atheism is claiming the minds of the members of the developed countries. **Pope Benedict XVI is the champion in the**

THE CHURCH IN ASIA

1. THE ASIAN CONTEXT in the document *Ecclesia in Asia* by Blessed John Paul II:

“The Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, took place in a definite historical and geographical context, Palestine, a country of the Near East, in Asia. The history of the Church in Asia is as old as the Church herself, for it was in Asia that Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon his disciples and sent them to the end of the earth to proclaim the Good News and gather communities of believers.

Following the Lord’s command, the Apostles preached the word and founded Churches. From Jerusalem, the Church spread to Antioch, to Rome and beyond. It reached Ethiopia in the South, Scythia in the North, and **India in the East, where tradition has it that Saint Thomas the Apostle went in the year 52 A.D. and founded Churches in South India.** The missionary spirit of the of the East Syrian community in the third and fourth centuries, with its center in Edessa, was remarkable. The ascetic communities of Syria were a major force of evangelization in Asia from the third century onwards. They provided spiritual energy for the Church, especially during time of persecution.

At the end of the third century, Armenia was the first nation as a whole to embrace Christianity. By the end of the fifth century, the Christian message had reached the Arab kingdoms, but for many reasons, including the divisions among Christians, the message failed to take root among these peoples. Persian merchants took the Good News to China in the fifth century. The first Christian Church was built there at the beginning of the seventh century. During the T’ang dynasty (618-907 A.D.), the Church flourished for nearly two centuries. The decline of this vibrant Church in China by the end of the first millennium is one of the sadder chapters of the history of God’s people in the continent.

In the thirteen century the Good News was announced to the Mongols and the Turks and the Chinese once more. But Christianity almost vanished in these regions for a number of reasons, among them the rise of Islam, geographical isolation, the absence of an appropriate adaptation to local culture, and perhaps, above all, the lack of preparedness to encounter the great religions of Asia. The end of the fourteenth century saw the drastic

diminution of the Church in Asia, except for the isolated community in South India. The Church in Asia had to await a new era of missionary endeavor.

The apostolic labors of Saint Francis Xavier, the founding of the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* by pope Gregory XV, and the directive for missionaries to respect and appreciate local cultures all contributed to achieving more positive results in the course of **the sixteen and seventeen centuries.**

Again in the nineteenth century there was a revival of missionary activity. Various religious congregations dedicated themselves wholehearted to this task. *Propaganda Fide* was reorganized. Greater emphasis was put in building up local Churches. Educational and charitable works went hand in hand with the preaching of the Gospel. Consequently the Good News continue to reach more people, especially among the poor and underprivileged, but also here and there among the social and intellectual elite. New attempts were made to inculturate the Good News, although they proved in no way sufficient. Despite her century-long presence and her many apostolic endeavors, the Church in many places was still considered as foreign to Asia, and indeed was often associated in people's minds with the colonial powers.

This was the situation at the eve of the Second Vatican Council; but thanks to the impetus provided by the Council, a new understanding of mission dawned and with it a great hope. The universality of God's plan of salvation, the missionary nature of the Church and the responsibility of everyone in the Church for this task, so strongly reaffirmed in the Council's Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*, became a framework of a new commitment.

During the Special Assembly, the Synod Fathers testified to the growth of the ecclesial community among many different peoples in various parts of the continent, and they appealed for further missionary efforts in the years to come, especially as new possibilities for the proclamation of the Gospel emerge in the Siberian region and the Central Asian countries which have recently gained their independence, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

A survey of the Catholic communities in Asia shows a splendid variety by reason of their origin and historical development, and the diverse spiritual

and liturgical traditions of the various Rites. Yet all are united in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, through Christian witness, works of charity and human solidarity. While some particular Churches carry out their mission in peace and freedom, others find themselves in situations of violence and conflict, or feel threatened by other groups, for religious or other reasons. In the vastly diversified cultural world of Asia, the Churches faces multiple philosophical, theological and pastoral challenges. Her task is made more difficult by the fact of her being a minority, with the Philippines as the only exception, where Catholics are in the majority.

Whatever the circumstances, the Church in Asia finds herself among peoples who display an intense yearning for God. **The Church knows that this yearning can only be fully satisfied by Jesus Christ, the Good News from God for all nations....**The Spirit of God, always at work in the history of the Church in Asia, continues to guide her. The many positive elements found in the local Churches, strengthen our expectation of a new “springtime of Christian life”.

One solid cause of hope is the increasing number of better trained, enthusiastic and Spirit-filled lay people, who are more and more aware of their specific vocation within the ecclesial community. Among them, the lay catechists deserve special recognition and praise. The apostolic and charismatic movements too are a gift of the Spirit, bringing new life and vigor to the formation of lay men and women, families and the young. Associations and ecclesial movements devoted to the promotion of human dignity and justice, make accessible and tangible the universality of the evangelical message of our adoption as children of God (Romans 8:15-16).

At the same time, there are **Churches in very difficult circumstances**, experiencing intense trials in the practice of their faith. The Synod Fathers were moved by reports of heroic witness, unshaken perseverance and steady growth of the Catholic Church in China, by the efforts of the Church in South Korea to offer assistance to the people of North Korea, the humble steadfastness of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, the isolation of Christians in such places as Laos and Myanmar, the difficult co-existence with the majority in some predominantly Islamic states.

The Synod paid special attention to the situation of the Church in the Holy Land and in the holy city of Jerusalem, “the heart of Christianity”, a city dear to all the children of Abraham. The Synod Fathers expressed their

belief that the peace of the region, and even the world, depends in large measure on the peace and reconciliation which have eluded Jerusalem so long.

I cannot bring to an end this brief survey of the situation of the Church in Asia, though far from complete, without mentioning **the Saints and Martyrs** of Asia, both those who have been recognized and those known only by God, whose example is a source of spiritual richness and a great means of evangelization. They speak silently but most powerfully of the importance of holiness of life and readiness to offer one's life for the Gospel. They are the teachers and the protectors, the glory of the Church in Asia in her work of evangelization.

With the whole Church, I pray to the Lord to send many more committed laborers to reap the harvest of souls which I see as ready and plentiful (Cf. Matthew 9:37-38). At this moment, I call to mind what I wrote in *Redemptoris Missio*: **“God is opening before the Church the horizons of humanity more fully prepared for the sowing of the Gospel”**. This vision of a new and promising horizon I see being fulfilled in Asia, where Jesus was born and where Christianity began. (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 9, 1999).

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN ASIA

THE MISSION IN ASIA DURING THE ANCIENT AND MIDDLE AGES.

THE NESTORIAN MISSION.

Since the beginning Christianity was brought to Persia (Cf. Acts 2:9 “Parthians, Medes, Elamites and inhabitants of Mesopotamia”), according to a legendary account, by Peter and Thomas, more probably by Bartholomew and Thaddeus and it developed. The center was Edessa. Ephrem the Syrian, saint and doctor of the Church, was a teacher at the theology school of Nasibis. Unfortunately, this Church became follower of the heresy of Nestorius, but it kept its vitality with monasticism and missionary activity.

The Nestorian missionaries spread Christianity in Central Asia and there were Episcopal sees there like in Samarkand. **The Nestorian missionaries reached China in 631.** They received permission from the emperor to spread the “*Luminous Doctrine*”, as Christianity was then known in China.

People were converted, monasteries and dioceses were erected. Something of its history was recorded in the Nestorian Monument erected in 781 and discovered in 1625 near the capital Sian. Later, the opposition of the emperors and the spreading of Islam eroded the Nestorian Church. By the 10th century it disappeared.

MISSION TO THE MONGOLS AND CHINA IN XIII AND XIV CENTURIES.

In 1206, Gengis-Khan unified the Mongols and conquered almost the whole of Asia. After his death his kingdom split. China and Mongolia remained under the so called Great Khan and the capital was Karakorum and then Khambaliq (Beijing). Since the beginning, the popes had sent envoys to the Mongols, like fray John of the Pian del Carpine (1245-7). **Mark Polo**, a Venetian merchant, reached the Great Khan in his several journeys described in his book “The Million”. Catholic priests were invited to go there and spread Christianity.

Fray John of Montecorvino and companions reached there and started a Christian Church which developed to the point of having up to 30.000 faithful. But then isolation and the new dynasty of hostile emperors were an obstacle and eventually the Christian community practically disappeared. The great hopes for the conversion of the Mongols were dashed by the army of Timur-Leng (Tamerlan) who conquered Central Asia and turned to Islam with his people, in this way cutting off communications with the West.

The Dominican and Franciscan mission to the Mongols of XIII and XIV centuries, although not successful, was remarkable because it was a very courageous one, without military and diplomatic coverage. **The first opening of the West to the East, made overland.**

THE MISSIONS IN ASIA AT THE TIME OF THE RENAISSANCE AND PROTESTANT REFORMATION.

Saint Francis Xavier arrived in India in 1541. He came from the South and by sea. He worked in Southern India, destroying pagan temples and doing mass conversions. He then was in other areas. In 1549 he started the church in Japan. He died in an island facing China where he intended to reach in 1552. He was only 46 years old.

In the course of his missionary experience he developed a better method preparing the way of the modern missionary style: learning the language of the people one evangelizes and using local personnel as helpers. He also wrote extensive reports that gave a sense of continuity to the missionary work and are a source of information for the historians.

The mission to Japan and China continued with Fr. Alexander Valignano SJ. The Jesuits were famous for their capacity to adapt to the local customs and cultures. In China the most famous missionary was Matthew Ricci (Li-Ma-To) and in India Robert De Nobili. Both found problems about certain local rites that they accepted, especially connected to the ancestors. This attitude attracted many people to Christianity: but then, they provoked a controversy: first approved then condemned and finally again approved.

These controversies made the missionary work among those populations lose momentum. Then, eventually, much ground was lost when the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was suppressed in 1760. **Goa was the center of the Catholic Church in Asia:** the Goanese clergy was formed in the seminaries of the Franciscans, Dominicans and Jesuits. When the Jesuits were suppressed, Goanese priests took their place in the missions in Asia and even in Africa. The arrival of the Dutch (1636) and English Protestants (1639) reduced the influence of the Portuguese and Spanish missionaries and damaged the expansion of Catholicism.

INDONESIA

The islands of Indonesia were under the Portuguese influence but the Muslims had spread already and then the Dutch Protestants took over... **The Moluccas (Spice Islands) are properly a group of islands in Easter Indonesia, famous for the spices (cloves, mace and nutmeg).** Discovered by Ferdinand Magellan in 1511 (10 years before the Philippines), they were evangelized by Portuguese missionaries and settlers, but the success was limited given the prevailing presence of the Muslims and later the occupation by the Dutch Protestants (XVII century). **At present, there are some islands with majority of Catholic like Flores and East Timor.** Elsewhere, there are minority groups of Christians.

JAPAN.

Saint Francis Xavier arrived there in 1549. He was enthusiastic of the character of the Japanese. Other Jesuit missionaries followed, they learned

the language and adopted the customs: great impact, many converts. After 50 years, there were **almost one million Catholics. But there was slow pace in forming the local clergy.** In 1601 the first three Japanese priests were ordained. By 1640 they were only 50 of whom only 10 diocesan. The territory was first under Goa, then Macau; in 1596, Nagasaki became the center.

The divisions among missionaries, Franciscans and Jesuits and especially the arrival of the Protestants provoked a persecution. In 1597, there is the first group of 26 martyrs with Paul Miki. The persecution became more cruel and caused thousands of martyrs. The Christians were forced to tread on the image of Christ (“efumi”). In 1637-39, the Christian chiefs (“daimyo”) they rebelled but were defeated (*Shimabara Rebellion*). Thirty thousand Christians were executed.

Some Christian groups survived, but the absence of priests and the isolation and the passing of time affected their beliefs. **When the Christian missionaries came back to Japan around 1850, some of these Christians could not flow back into the new Catholic communities and remained separated in a kind of sect: *the Kakure Krishitan*.** Only in 1941, Christianity was recognized as one of the religions in Japan.

Catholics are now around 400.000 and are becoming more numerous because of the immigrants like the Filipinos. The profile of the Catholic Church is high in the estimation of the Japanese people, also because of education and charity works. **The weak points are lack of vocations to the ordained ministry and the same threat that is in the European and North American Churches: materialism and secularization.**

CHINA.

The Portuguese occupied Macau in 1554. There was a prohibition for foreigners to enter the Chinese territory. S. Francis Xavier died in 1552, trying to enter China. Permission was given in 1583 to Frs. Matthew Ricci and Michael Ruggieri, Jesuits under Fr. Alexander Valignano. They learned the language and the Chinese literature, they presented themselves like Buddhist monks and then like Chinese scholars and professors.

Ricci wrote in Chinese: “*The True Doctrine about God*”, a small book that became a classic of Chinese literature. Ricci drew the world map with China in the middle position and baptized the first learned man, Paul Hsu. In

1601 the Jesuits were at the court of the emperor in Beijing. There they were allowed to build a church and worked as scientists at the court.

Many other Jesuits followed Ricci and Barbieri. They evangelized and baptized tens of thousands Chinese and built churches in every major city. The rivalries with other religious orders and the question of the Chinese rites regarding the ancestors (rites that were accepted by Ricci and condemned by pope Benedict XIV in 1704) brought persecution from the emperor. Eventually, the suppression of the Jesuits in 1775 caused the crisis of the Chinese missions. **The formation of the local clergy was delayed and they were very few when they were badly needed.** The persecution brought about the prohibition for foreign missionaries to enter China. Consequently, the number of Christians who survived was small.

COREA

In 1784, a Korean person, coming back from Beijing where he had met the Catholic Church, brought with him some Christian writings. From this episode, **the first group of believers in Christ originated, without a priest.** The first priest, later on, fell victim of persecution, but Christianity survived and spread.

INDOCINA

There was Malacca that was the seat of a bishop, but the presence of Islam was an obstacle. In the north, Christianity spread more easily, especially in Vietnam where French missionaries developed the area. **A great missionary was Alexander De Rhodes.** Local priests and religious were started and developed rapidly. But persecution struck and many martyrs gave their witness of blood. **Thailand** was barren land because of the strong Buddhist tradition, **Tibet** and **Nepal** were touched but with little results.

CRISIS AND RE-AWAKENING OF THE CATHOLIC MISSION IN ASIA.

The French Revolution brought the Catholic missions to a standstill. Even the office of *Propaganda Fide* was moved to France by Napoleon in 1808. The revival came with the fall of Napoleon and the Restoration. Four factors contributed to the revival and the success of the missions: 1. **The interest and the involvement of the laity:** the Pontifical Mission Societies

(Propagation of the Faith, Saint Peter for the formation of the Clergy and the Holy Childhood) were substantially lay initiatives of support for the missions by means of prayer, financial fund-raising and vocations.

Very famous the French woman Pauline Jaricot who is the founder of the Work of the Propagation of the Faith. 2. **The extraordinary blossoming** of religious congregations and Societies of Apostolic Life dedicated to the Missions. One of them is that of the Comboni Missionaries dedicated to the African Missions. 3. **The impulse given by pope Gregory XVI**, Mauro Cappellari, who had re-opened Propaganda Fide in Rome (1817) and then was made pope. The “patronado” was abolished and the “Ius Commissionis” gave opportunity to the different religious institutes to work more orderly and efficiently.

There was another important factor for the spreading of the missionary work: 4. **The European countries tended to occupy and submit the rest of the world (Colonization)**. The largest unit was the British Empire. Then France, Germany, etc... This is the time of Colonialism. On the one hand, it helped the spreading of Christianity, especially because of the involvement of the missionaries in education and health care. On the other, it was an obstacle because the colonial mentality tended to despise the other cultures and civilizations. We are at present suffering from a reaction to the colonization: this partly explain the persecution of the Christian communities wherever they are minorities.

INDIA

Under the British rule, the Christian and Catholic Church enjoyed freedom and developed schools and hospitals. But the obstacle of the division of society into castes closed the way to the Gospel to a great majority of Indians: only the lowest castes and the tribal peoples entered the Church. India became independent in 1948. The ancient rites of the Christians of Saint Thomas were recognized by Rome (*Malabaric* and *Malankaric* rites). **In 1952, the first Indian cardinal was nominated in the person of his eminence Valerian Gracias. At present, Christianity is represented by about 20 million Catholic and about 80 million Protestants.**

Minority Churches are in **Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma)** often facing hostility and discrimination. Almost inexistent is the Church in **Cambodia and Laos**, but strong in **Vietnam** with almost 10 million faithful and many vocations, but with difficult

relationship with the communist government. In **INDONESIA** there are flourishing Catholic communities in some islands (Flores, Timor) with many vocations, but with sometimes difficult relationship with the Muslim majority.

CHINA

It was always a privileged target of the missionary effort of the universal church. The interference of the colonial powers, especially France, was a liability for the missionary work and there were strong reactions like the massacre of Tin Sin (1870) and especially the Boxers Rebellion (1900) with the killing of about 30.000 Christians. The growth of the Church was steady. **In 1926 we have the consecration of the first Chinese bishops and the acceptance of the Chinese rites under the pontificate of Pius XI.**

The person who prepared this was a great Belgian missionary, Fr. Vincent Lebbe (Lei-Ming-Yuang i.e. Thunder in the distance). This had not happened since the consecration of the first Chinese bishop in absolute, Gregory Luo Wenzao, in 1685 by Mons. Bernardine Della Chiesa, vicar apostolic of Beijing. **In 1946 the local church in China was honored by the choice of the first Chinese cardinal Thomas Tien.** Then came the civil war with the victory of the Communists with Mao-Tse-Tung. All the missionaries were expelled (1948) and the attempt was made to create a national church cut off from the Pope.

At present, the situation is substantially the same. **The Catholic population has grown to about 12 million.** In the meantime, Christianity is also spread within the Chinese society by many protestant groups, given their greater mobility and the system of the house church. Christians in China are thought to be more than 100 million.

A consistent and lively Catholic community is present in **Singapore** and **South Korea**. Minor groups of Catholics are present in the islands of the Pacific Ocean. **We remember here the hero, Saint Damian De Vesteur, the apostle of the lepers in the island of Molokai (+1889) who became a leper himself).** At present, the local church with local hierarchy is present everywhere. In Asia, however, with the exception of the Philippines, Christianity is the religion of a tiny minority of about 3% of the population.

The situation of vocations to the priesthood and religious life is good but the revival of the non-Christian religions oftentimes brings with it persecution of the Christian minorities (India, Indonesia, China, Vietnam, Myanmar, etc...). Moreover, the frontline of mission is also for Asia the spreading of materialism and secularism caused by globalization and the consumer society.