



**W**hen historians speak of the Dark Ages they generally mean the period within the Middle Ages known as the Early Middle Ages (AKA the Low Middle Ages)—a time in Western Europe when intellectual pursuits waned in the face of superstition. A malaise settled over Western Europe that hindered progress in science, art and other humanistic pursuits. Science was viewed with suspicion by the Roman Catholic Church which misinterpreted Scripture in a manner that exacerbated ignorance of the natural world. Illiteracy, starvation and disease were rampant. But dramatic changes were on the way.

The eleventh century saw the Dark Ages begin to give way to a new interest in intellectualism. It was the beginning of the High Middle Ages, a time of small steps toward renaissance which formed the basis for the yet future European Renaissance. This was a time which saw intellectual advancement in various areas of industry, trade, science and technology in Western Europe as a result of changing political, social and economic philosophy. The twelfth century saw a dramatic shift in philosophical Christianity as new technological discoveries led to the development of grandiose architectural achievements, particularly in the construction of churches and cathedrals.

As the Roman Catholic Church continued to solidify its political power over European culture, its authority became more centralized within European cities as impressive edifices of worship elicited the awe and admiration of the masses. Grand cathedrals housed ecclesiastical power centers under the bishops, all of whom were subject to the Roman Pontiff. No longer did the image of the humble servant of God characterize the bishops. As anti-Christ worked to increase the power of Romanism throughout Western Europe, the office of bishop was transformed even more into one of authoritarianism over local politics as well as over the spiritual welfare of the people.

Although as early as the eighth century, Christian armies had been raised to stem the tide of the Muslim invasions into

Western Europe, the company of soldiers that would come to be called “Crusaders” was not established until the year 1071 when the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine army and cut off Christian access to Jerusalem, destroying many sites sacred to Roman Catholicism.

In the eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII (c. 1015/1028-1085) struggled with the idea of waging a “holy war” contrary to the Lord’s commands to love one’s enemies. Eventually he decided that “justified violence” was acceptable in defense of Christians who were being persecuted in the Holy Land. Gregory VII was an admirer of Augustine of Hippo whose writing, *The City of God*, justified the use of force in the service of Christ. *The City of God* has been used over the centuries to the present time by Christians who believe it is “the Church’s” responsibility to conquer the nations for Christ even by force if necessary.

In 1095, fearing that all Asia Minor would be conquered by Islam, the Byzantine emperor, Alexios I Komnenos called upon Pope Urban II to come to the rescue of Constantinople and to recover Jerusalem from the Seljuk Turks. The pope responded by calling throughout Western Europe for Roman Catholic military units to drive out the Muslim invaders.

Urban II called the Council of Clermont at which he defined the concept of the crusades and called for the princes throughout Europe to wage a holy war in the Holy Land. He granted plenary indulgences to the hundreds of thousands of Crusaders that heeded his call to battle. (The indulgences were somewhat ambiguous in that it was never made clear if it was necessary to die in the battle to recover Jerusalem in order to receive them.)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An indulgence is the partial or full (plenary) remission of temporal punishment which the Catholic Church believes must be endured in a place of temporary suffering called Purgatory. Plenary indulgences are granted by the Catholic Church in specific cases that it believes warrants full remission of such punishment so that, should the penitent die in the state of grace imposed through the indulgence, he will immediately be ushered into Heaven without having to suffer in Purgatory.

Urban II's call to arms was not entirely based on the spiritual benefits promised to those who would follow that call. He based much of his speech at Clermont on appeals to avenge fellow Christians under the Muslim invaders and on non-spiritual motives promising material rewards in the way of land, wealth, power and influence. His appeal included his assessment that the Turks could be easily defeated. It was upon this rhetoric that those in the council elicited chants of "*Deus vult!*" ("God wills it!"), which became the rallying cry of the Crusades.

Anti-Christ's plans for the Crusades exceeded those even of the pope. The furor unleashed by Urban II's impassioned appeal to arms was not limited to Muslim invaders only, but expressed itself in the killing of Jews and the persecution of eastern Orthodox Christians.

The Crusades succeeded in aiding the planting of the Roman Catholic form of Christianity throughout Europe by the end of the eleventh century. Although that form of Christianity had many faults (and still does), it did establish the biblical ethic upon which European society based its laws and culture. Anti-Christ gained some victories in the process, but he also lost ground in the hearts of individuals whose faith, although greatly stunted, allowed for the growth of Christianity.

During this time the thirteenth-century Italian Dominican priest and philosopher, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), among others, rediscovered the works of Aristotle which led to the development of scholasticism patterned after the ancient Greek schools of philosophy. Thus the Roman Catholic Church was impelled further into integrating Scripture with human wisdom, particularly the Hellenization of Christianity.

By the end of the thirteenth century the fervor of the Crusades began to wane as succeeding popes conjured justification of political and territorial power grabs throughout Western Europe.

The fourteenth century is generally regarded as the Late Middle Ages—a time when the medieval world began to transition into the modern world. It was a century that saw incredible change wrought by exploration, revolt, wars, plagues and further progress in science and technology.

Localized famines occurred in France and England during the early fourteenth century, but the Late Middle Ages saw the worst of these when there occurred the Great Famine, the first of a number of calamities to strike Europe. The Great Famine decimated populations west-to-east from France to Russia, and north-to-south from Scotland to Italy. From 1315 to 1322 the Great Famine caused millions of deaths, bringing to an end the prosperity Europe enjoyed during the previous three centuries. Prolonged heavy periods of rain throughout Europe caused widespread crop failures. There was little food for livestock as well as people. Food prices doubled within a few months, and it wasn't long before peasants couldn't afford the basic staples to sustain life, including bread, let alone more expensive foods. The excessively wet weather continued throughout 1316 and into the summer of 1317. When it finally abated, the European population had lost nearly all resources to sustain itself. Children were abandoned and there were many incidents of cannibalism.

The Catholic Church suffered the displeasure of a populous that had begun to lose faith in the institution. No amount of prayers, no number of masses or appeals to God by the pope, were able to stem the prolonged suffering. Corruption within the church was to blame in many minds. The Great Famine brought to a halt a period of unprecedented growth in the European population that started during the mid-eleventh century.

Criminal activity increased significantly during the Great Famine as people took any means possible to feed themselves, leading to a breakdown in the culture. Chivalry, a trademark of the earlier medieval period, was abandoned, warfare became more brutal and death claimed even the lives of nobles who had previously been treated with deference.

The notable Hundred Years War began in the fourteenth century and ended in the fifteenth century (1337-1453), fought by Edward III, king of England, for ascension to the French throne following the end of the Capetian Dynasty in France.

During this time a peasant girl who believed she received divine guidance through visions led the French army to important victories against the English. She was captured by the Burgundians who turned her over to the British for a ransom. She was put on trial by Pierre Cauchon, a pro-British bishop of Beauvais, for charges of "insubordination and heterodoxy." She was nineteen years old when she was burned at the stake for heresy.

Anti-Christ gained many victories through the protracted wars between allegedly "Christian" nations against each other. As the Hundred Years War dragged on, Europe suffered more terrible calamities which man would classify as "acts of God."

The Hundred Years War ended with the French triumphant, and at its end the English were embroiled in a dynastic struggle which pitted the House of Lancaster against the House of York for the throne. The Wars of the Roses were fought between 1455 and 1485, further decimating the population of England.

Weakened by the starvation experienced during the Great Famine, and the early stages of the Hundred Years War, Europeans were ripe for another calamity that would decimate the population even further—an invisible invader known as the Black Death.

The Black Death—commonly believed to be bubonic plague—struck Europe in October, 1347, and spread rapidly throughout all of Europe and into Scandinavia and Russia by 1350.

Where the Black Death started is open to speculation, but it is generally believed to have started somewhere in Asia, possibly in China. From there it spread to Italy, then to the rest of Europe through fleas that lived on plague-infected rats that came to Europe through international trade on ships. The plague presented in other ways known as pneumonic and septicemic forms. Pneumonic plague could be spread with a sneeze or other means of carrying germs through mucous and saliva; septicemic plague spread through contact with open sores.

The estimated number of Europeans alone who died from the Black Death is 20 million—about one-third of the population. Some cities lost as many as 40% to 60% of their populations.

Through the Black Death, anti-Christ succeeded in decimating almost half of the European Christian population. Yet it must be conceded that this could not have happened were it not for God's consent.

Superstition played a large part in people's beliefs regarding the cause of the Black Death. The most common belief was that it was an omen from God—punishment for the sins of the people. Some accused the Jews of poisoning the wells, leading to terrible persecution that even the Roman Catholic Church found difficult to stop. Scientific attempts to explain the plague failed miserably simply because there were no scientific instruments to help identify the microscopic culprits. After diligent study by the University of Paris, the Paris Consilium attributed the plague to earthquakes and astrological influences.

In spite of the horrific dangers presented by the Black Death, it is recorded that violence and debauchery increased greatly. While a large number feared the plague, they evidently didn't fear God.

Anti-Christ gained a significant victory in the further establishment of the Roman Catholic Church which, although losing a large number of adherents, realized monetary gain through bequests upon their deaths. The large number of indulgences meted out for prayers and masses for the dead and other priestly services also added greatly to the coffers. Yet in spite of these anti-Christ practices of selling indulgences, the groundwork was laid for the coming Protestant Reformation.

The Catholic clergy were unable to effectively minister to those affected by the Black Death, but were quick to charge money for their services, thus resulting in resentment. One man who saw the futility and the evil in charging money for those services was a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther, but he would not come onto the scene until the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In the wake of the Black Death unstable economic conditions led to the restriction of wages in an attempt to stem the tide of rising costs for goods and services, particularly those demanded by skilled laborers. In England the king issued the Statute of Laborers (1351) in which the wages of the common people were set at pre-plague levels. This led in the spring of 1381 to the Peasants Revolt which threatened the feudal system under which the English economy operated. Although technically considered free men, peasants were bound by law to work the land on which they lived and were subject in every respect to the nobles who owned that land. They could not leave the land under the threat of imprisonment. In essence, they were slaves to the nobles regardless of being called freemen. In the face of this adversity many nobles flaunted their wealth and made conditions worse for their subjects. The church, wishing to appease its wealthy benefactors, encouraged the peasants to keep their place.

In the meantime, greater animosity was developing between the papacy and the monarchs of England, France, Castile and Aragon. As the church lost the confidence of the common people due to its inability to stem the destruction from the Great Famine and the Black Death, the monarchs became bolder in asserting their secular authority. Philip IV of France challenged the papacy's authority over priests accused of criminal acts. The

church had traditionally claimed the right to discipline its clergy in civil and criminal matters. Philip also challenged the church's claim to tax exemption based on the idea that the church enjoyed the use of secular services and the country's infrastructure of roads, bridges and harbors.

Boniface issued two papal bulls in which he asserted the church's superiority over secular governments, and forbade Catholics to pay taxes to any government unless ordered to do so by the pope.

In response, Philip convinced the French bishops and archbishops to side with him. Boniface threatened to depose Philip who, in turn, had his chief prosecutor, William de Nogaret, to bring against Boniface charges of ethical, moral and legal crimes. He had Boniface arrested and thrown into prison. This act sparked outrage among the people who, in spite of much discontent, still considered the papacy a revered office. To ward off rebellion, Philip released Boniface who died shortly afterward.

The church suffered much loss of face during these trying times, which were the beginning of the end for papal power over secular governments.

In the 1370s, John Wycliffe began writing treatises in which he challenged the power of the papacy. This caused respect toward the church to decline even further, particularly among the common people.<sup>2</sup>

Although most of Europe declined culturally during the fourteenth century, Italy became the major catalyst for the coming European Renaissance that would arise at the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> A trend toward humanism and away from the sacred began to be reflected in Italy's art under the masterful talents of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo whose realism exceeded anything prior.

The fifteenth century saw the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, while the Moors were driven from Spain, seemingly for good. The Jews were also expelled.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus set sail for the East Indies, hoping to find a shorter trade route for Spain by sailing west.

The end to the Middle Ages would occur during the sixteenth century which saw the most significant movement to impact Christianity up until that time.

<sup>2</sup> There is a dichotomy evident in that biblically the Roman Catholic Church was correct in urging the peasants to keep their place rather than revolt against their masters. But the church failed terribly by not instructing the nobles to treat their serfs with respect and dignity, and to make sure that they did not lack any basic needs for food, shelter or clothing, and to go beyond that to help them maintain a quality of life that would sustain health and well-being. Although Scripture condemns all forms of rebellion, it also affirms the need for the stronger to bear with the weaker. We might not expect that in a non-Christian society, but Europe was decidedly Christian, at least nominally, and the church had the obligation to instruct in righteousness for all.

<sup>3</sup> Historian Charles H. Haskins wrote extensively about this pre-Renaissance period. He says about the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Europe that it "was in many respects an age of fresh and vigorous life. The epoch of the Crusades, of the rise of towns, and of the earliest bureaucratic states of the West, it saw the culmination of Romanesque art and the beginnings of Gothic; the emergence of the vernacular literatures; the revival of the Latin classics and of Latin poetry and Roman law; the recovery of Greek science, with its Arabic additions, and of much of Greek philosophy; and the origin of the first European universities. The twelfth century left its signature on higher education, on the scholastic philosophy, on European systems of law, on architecture and sculpture, on the liturgical drama, on Latin and vernacular poetry.