

THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY

Long before the incursion of the German tribes, certain Roman thinkers had forsaken the ideas inherent in polytheism, though polytheism still lingered on as the national religion of the Roman Empire. The grammarian, Maximus, was only one among many who reached the conclusion of Abul-Fazl, the Vizier of Akbar, that the true God is praised in every tongue and by all people. Writing to Augustine, Maximus said,

"Who then is so foolish and crazed as to deny the absolute certainty of a One and Only God, without beginning, without natural offspring, the great and glorious Father? Whose forces scattered throughout the world we invoke under many names, since His real name is unknown to all, for God is a name common to all religions. So doth it come to pass that while invoking the parts singly, piecemeal, separately, we manifestly worship the Whole."

The Augustan "pax" at the time of Christ's birth made the Roman world ready for a religion which could be accepted by the various races and classes under the rule of the Emperors. The seas were open and the great state highways assisted the passage of ideas, while the Greek language ensured a speedy sifting of thought. Christianity was quick to benefit by the organisation of Rome, and when the gospel message spread through Asia Minor and Greece, to Rome itself, the problem of the Christian House of God became important. First the dogma and its essential ritual must be understood, and then the means by which it found expression in architecture, sculpture, and wall painting. As the task of Christianity was to restate the truths of the Greco-Roman philosophers and the teachings of Eastern mysticism in terms of personality, that the union of the individual man and his Creator might seem possible, so the task of the Christian architect was to create a meeting place in which the mystic mood should not clash unduly with the elements which recalled the humanity of the worshipper.

It was Paul, a Romanised Greek of Tarsus in Asia Minor, who found in Christianity a religion fitted for the Roman world. He visualised the idea of the God-Man allied with the organisation of Rome and the philosophic artistry of the Greeks. But the unity of the human and the divine through this Messiah was only accepted by the Roman world when the subtle philosophy of the Greek was added to the vision of the Jew. At first Christianity had more than one rival. It had to struggle not only with the cult of Osiris and the cult of Mithras, which had arisen from the sun-worship of Persia, but other Eastern religions. Humanly speaking, it was as a new mystery religion, rather than as the Jewish faith in Jehovah, that Christianity spread through the Roman world when Greco-Roman polytheism proved inadequate for the realm of the Casars.

Tertullian, writing as a Christian theologian about A.D. 200, described the place where the Sacrament of the Mass was celebrated as the Theatre of the Pious."Accepting the vivid phrase, the Greek orchestra became the Christian choir, the *skene* or tent behind being the priest's vestry. Whereas the orchestra had been circular because the primal rite in Greece was a dance around an altar, the Christian Church developed a form suitable to the ritual of the Mass. At first, there was no division in a Christian Church between the actors in the sacred mystery and the congregation. The early apostles were only leaders in a rite. As the ritual increased in complexity, a place for the actors in the Christian sacrament was evolved, apart from the congregation and even from the singers who represented the Greek chorus. As the Greek drama had been an effort to recover the emotion arising from the fabled histories of tribal demi-gods, so the Mass was a synthesis of the story of Christ's passion, ever keeping in mind the life and message of the Christ. The faith inspiring the Christian architect did not differ from that of the celebrant at the high altar. As a mystic union with the invisible Trinity was achieved through the Sacrifice of the Mass, so the architect, the painter, the sculptor and the goldsmith worked together to make the Christian ritual real for all who gathered within the four walls of a church.

At first advance was slow. Christian communities were numerous but relatively small and scattered

widely throughout the Roman world. Christian architecture made little advance while the meeting-place was the house of one of the wealthier converts, as was common during the first three centuries after Christ. The first chantry was a domestic chamber, used for the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine. In the New Testament we read of "The church in the house of Chloe." The house of the Senator Pudens in Rome, where St. Peter was reputed to have lodged, became the Church of St. Pudenziana, a daughter of Pudens. It is reputed to have been consecrated by Pius I. in A.D. 145, and in early times was the cathedral of the Christian city. Where stood the house of St. Clement, the third bishop of Rome, arose the Church of San Clemente, the oratory built by Clement on the Esquiline Hill being rebuilt as a basilica after Constantine. Under the church of the fourth century may still be found traces of a Roman house of the Imperial period, in which one chamber served as a holy shrine and was arranged as an oratory. Near by is a room roughly fashioned into the semblance of a cave for the celebration of the rites of Mithras. The Christian and pagan shrines below the church of San Clemente were not used at one and the same time. Probably Mithras was an intruder into the Christian home and was expelled when Christianity triumphed under Constantine.

The house of a well-to-do Roman was readily adapted to a Christian service. The colonnaded open court with its *impluvium* served as a place of baptism; later it became the *atrium* of a basilican church, the open court with its colonnaded arcade being in course of time transferred from the front to the side of a church, when it became the cloisters of a mediaeval minster. The house under Santa Maria Antiqua, excavated in 1900 near the Roman Forum, may be compared with San Clemente. In Hadrian's time it was a typical Roman dwelling house. By the sixth century it had been transformed into a church by converting the vestibule into a *narthex* in front of the *atrium*, while an apse was hollowed out from the brickwork of the *tablinum*.

<http://archeoroma.beniculturali.it/sar2000/sma/eng/gallery2.html>

The *scholae*, or private meeting halls of the industrial colleges, also were used as Christian assembly places in early times. A *schola* as a rule possessed a memorial chapel in which was an apse where members of the fraternity were buried. Dr. Baldwin Brown, in his *From Schola to Cathedral*, has demonstrated the importance of the *schola* in the development of the basilica church of early mediaeval times. If the taking of refreshment in a private house suggested the *agape* or "feast of charity," so did the hall of the *schola*, in which the fraternity dined and shared the memorial bread and wine in recollection of dead comrades. "The feast of charity" had a special significance as the festival in memory of dead friends. The will of a pagan Roman provided that a *cella* should be built, with an alcove containing a statue of the dead man in marble. Under the alcove was to be set a couch with two marble seats and here a feast was to be held on the birthday of the dead, the celebrations including the issue of festal garments, cushions and rugs. In the Acts of Martyrdom of St. Polycarp (A.D. 155) may be found a further reference to the "feast of charity" in early Christian custom.

"We took up his bones, more precious than costly jewels, and more highly approved than tried gold, and laid them in a fitting place, where, so far as possible, the Lord will grant us to assemble together with rejoicing and praise to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in remembrance of those who have fought the fight and for the practice and preparation of those whose time is coming."

As has been said, the dominant conception in Catholic ritual is the altar as the Hill of Calvary, the altar as the place where the Supreme Sacrifice is renewed daily in obedience to the ordinance of Jesus himself. If the ritual of the Mass had profound effects upon Christian architecture, the plan of the Christian Church was also evolved under the guidance of the fact that apostles, saints and martyrs often found a resting place near the high altar of a church. From very early times, Christians have sought to associate their saints and martyrs with the central mystery of their faith. Tertullian had said: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." It was natural that the relics of those who had died for the Faith should be enshrined beneath the altar whereon the Supreme Sacrifice was daily renewed, *per sacramentum*, and equally natural that

architects, sculptors and decorators should not be forgetful of those who were laid to rest near the high altar. When the Edict of Milan established Christianity throughout the Roman Empire in A.D.313, many churches were built above the burial places of martyrs.

The early Christians did not burn their dead. They preferred to inter them after the Jewish manner in the garden of some wealthy member of the community. This was "the hospitality of the tomb." There was first an original family tomb; later, corridors were cut in the tufa and fitted with narrow shelves upon which the dead were placed, the body being sealed in with plaster, or a slab of marble, inscribed with such a phrase as "She Sleeps," or "He Went to God." At times, a section of the underground crypt was hung with lamps and used as a chapel, or a small oratory was raised above the entrance. St Peter's, at Rome, stands on the site of the cemetery of the Vatican; St. Paul's stands over the catacomb of St. Lucina; San Lorenzo over those of St. Hippolytus and St. Cyriaca. This custom gained the highest authority when Constantine built a church above the Holy Sepulchre and made Jerusalem the place of Christian pilgrimage, which it remained for a thousand years.

Zenobius, the architect employed by Constantine, built the Anastasis, or Sanctuary of the Resurrection. About the same time, Constantine caused a great basilica, the Martyrium, to be built behind the Sanctuary of the Cross, this being a great courtyard surrounded by cloisters in which the True Cross was shown to those who were making pilgrimage. A trefoil-ended church was also built above the Cave of the Birthplace at Bethlehem. In these buildings were enacted the beautiful memorial ritual described by Eucheria, a cousin of the Emperor Theodosius, who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem about A.D. 385 and wrote an account of her journey to the Sisters of her "religious-house" at Etheria, in Spain. The *Peregrinatio Etheriae* is included in Mgr. Duchesne's *Christian Worship*. The purposes served by a House of God in the century after Constantine cannot be studied more conveniently than in the travel-diary of Eucheria, which narrates in detail the daily services as well as the special ritual followed during Lent and Easter-tide. The original church of the Holy Sepulchre seems to have included a small dome supported upon a ring of twelve columns, the columns representing the twelve apostles. The form was repeated in the well-known Church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna. The *motif* of the twelve columns upholding a church is found again and again in Christian architecture, notably in Sainte Chapelle, Paris. The present church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem was built by the Emperor Constantine Monarchus, who raised a circular church above the tomb of Christ about 1040. When the Crusaders, in 1099, added a chancel to the circular church, the form familiar in the church of the Knights Templar in London was complete. There are similar circular churches, derived from Constantine's church of the Holy Sepulchre, at Cambridge, Northampton, and Little Maplestead.

For all their beauty, circular domed buildings would seem to be ill-fitted for Christian worship, at any rate as it developed in Western Europe, if only because it offered no natural place for the altar and no natural divisions for keeping the various elements in the congregation apart from each other, and from the officiating priests and the choir. A new type of building had to be devised, based upon and yet differing from anything known in earlier architecture. In Italy, during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., the basilica form proved to have conveniences for Christian worship. The basilica was a rectangular building supported by four walls and divided by two rows of columns into a central nave and two side aisles, the nave being higher than the side aisles. The only departure from the simple rectangular design was a small semicircular apse, which held the Holy Table, the main doorway being at the opposite end of the church, usually flanked by smaller doorways leading to the aisles. In the outer court stood a fountain under a baldachino in which worshippers washed their hands and lips before entering. This was the *cantharus*. At times the outer court (*atrium*) was colonnaded, but it was often reduced to a narrow portico across the end of the church forming the *narthex*, as the entrance portico was called in the Eastern Empire. The Baptistry was usually a small domed building apart from the church containing the *piscina*, or tank, for immersion. As this could not conveniently be placed in the church, separate octagonal or circular buildings were constructed, the *piscina* being sunk in the floor. The practice of separate baptisteries continued until the seventh century, when the font was placed in the portico of the church.

Within the church the apse was reserved for the officiating priest and the elders who sat on the stone

benches around the circular head of the church, the apse being surrounded by an "arch of triumph" and reached by a flight of steps. The bishop's chair, *or cathedra*, occupied the middle of the apse, facing the table-shaped altar which was covered by a permanent canopy supported on marble columns, the *ciborium*. At St. Peter's, Rome, this system is still followed. The Pope's throne is in the apse and he recites the Mass at the High Altar, under Bernini's baldachino, facing the congregation. In general, however, the altar occupies the place the bishop's throne once had. Beneath the altar of the early basilica was an excavation for relics or a sarcophagus. In front of the altar, separating it from the nave, were low marble screens, *cancelli* (the word gives us our "chancel"), the enclosed space being reserved for the clergy. At the head of the nave was a reserved space for the choir, this space being also railed in by *cancelli*. Within the nave, too, on either side of the nave screen, were two stone pulpits (*ambones*) used for reading the Gospel and the Epistle. An *ambo* was also used for the sermon, if this was not given from the apse. The congregation thus occupied the aisles, the men being on the south side and the women on the north. The back of the nave was reserved for catechumens who had not been baptized, while penitents were confined to the portico. If the women in the congregation more than filled their aisle, they used the upper gallery or *triforium*. Lighting in a basilica came from the pierced stone slabs in the clerestory and gave a beautifully mellow and diffused light. The floor was decorated with marble mosaic of the familiar Roman type, and the blank wall spaces above the columns of the nave were covered with mosaics picturing familiar Bible stories. The rounded apse was decorated with scenes showing our Lord in glory, surrounded by the saints and martyrs, indicative of the life to come.





San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, Rome

A description of an early Christian service, quoted by Baldwin Brown from the Apostolical Constitutions II. 57 (translated in the Ante-Nicene Library, Vol. XVII.), suggests the problems before an early Christian architect when designing a meeting place fitted for Christian ritual.

"Let the house of assembly be long in shape and turned towards the East, with its vestries on each side at the eastern (entrance) end, after the manner of a ship. Let the throne of the bishop be placed in the midst and on each side of him let the presbytery sit down, while the deacons stand beside with closely girt garments, for they are like the sailors and managers of the ship. In accordance with their arrangement, let the laity sit on the one side with all quietness and good order, and let the women too be in a place apart and sit in order, keeping silence.... Let the porters stand at the entrances of the men and give heed to them, while the deacons stand at those of the women, like shipmen and if anyone is found sitting in the wrong place let him be rebuked by the deacon as manager of the foreship and removed into the place proper for him, for the church is not only like a ship but also like a sheepfold and as the shepherds place all the brute creatures distinctly . . . so it is to be in the assembly. Let the young men sit by themselves, if there be a place for them, but if not let them stand upright, but let those already advanced in years sit in order and let the children stand beside their mothers and fathers. Let the younger women also sit apart if there be a place for them and if not let them stand behind the elder women. Let those women who are married and have children be placed by themselves, while the virgins and the widows and the elder women stand and sit before all the rest and let the deacon be the disposer of the places that everyone that comes in may go to his proper place and not sit at the entrance.... In like manner let the deacon oversee the people that nobody may whisper nor slumber nor laugh nor nod, for all ought in the church to stand wisely and soberly and attentively, having their attention fixed upon the word of the Lord. After this let all rise with one consent and looking towards the East, after the catechumens and penitents are gone out, pray to God eastward.... As to the deacons, after the prayer is over, let some of them attend upon the oblation of the eucharist, ministering to the Lord's body with fear. Let other of them watch the multitude and keep them silent.... (During the celebration). Let the door be watched, lest any unbeliever, or one not yet initiated, come in."

The basilica of San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura was built above the catacombs of St. Cyriaca by Constantine, and on this account is one of the seven pilgrimage churches of Rome. Under the High Altar, which is reserved for celebrations by the Pope, rest the bodies of St. Lawrence, St. Stephen and St. Justin. The church was enlarged in the fifth and sixth centuries and was rebuilt by Pope Honorius in the thirteenth, but many parts recall the basilica of early Christian days. The nave roof is supported by twenty-two Ionic columns, taken from classical buildings, as were the magnificent fluted columns in the choir, which belong to a rebuilding by Pelagius II in 578. The ancient Papal Throne and the *ambones*, from which the gospel and epistle were chanted, are other early features. The apse of the original basilica was destroyed during the rebuilding in the thirteenth century but the mosaic upon the face of the chancel arch dates from about A.D. 590. It pictures Pope Pelagius offering the church to the Saviour, who is surrounded by saints.

Other early basilican churches in Rome contain relics of classical art or craft. The church of Santa Pudenziana has fourteen ancient columns of grey marble and in St. John Lateran are the bronze doors from the Senate House in the Roman Forum. Here, too, may be seen a statue of Constantine from the Baths on the Quirinal. San Pietro in Vincoli, built in A.D. 442, contains twenty fluted Doric columns of Hymettian marble. The marble throne in the chancel was once in the podium of the Colosseum.

Before the outlook of the practical Roman associated itself with early Christian thought, Christian art was symbolic rather than representational. Being the religion of a small sect, with little opportunity for attracting proselytes, this was natural enough. Symbolism makes a special appeal to communities of initiates. They are flattered by its mysteries, for they alone have the knowledge. In times of persecution, too, the fantastic symbols and mysterious formulae which enshrine the faith can be readily hidden. This early symbolism has nothing in common with the art for which we are searching, as may be seen by recalling a single example, the manifestation of the Deity, known as Abraxas, represented upon Gnostic amulets by a cock's head emblematic of the sun, a human body, two serpents instead of legs, and carrying a shield and whip in his hands. Gradually, the representational methods familiar throughout the Greco-Roman world were introduced into Christian usage, and figures from Bible story and church history became common, both in painting and sculpture.

It has been said that St. Peter's, Rome, and the basilica of St. Paul without the Walls were originally memorial *cellae* of the martyrs. St. Peter's existed in the time of Pope Anacletus at the end of the first century. Above it Constantine built the basilica of St. Peter which was destroyed in the sixteenth century, when Michelangelo's church was put in its place. These are the terms of the donation of the site by Constantine, as set out in the life of Sylvester :

"At the same time Constantine Augustus made a basilica to blessed Peter the apostle, near the Temple of Apollo, the tomb with the body of St. Peter being thus covered over. The tomb itself he shut in on every side with Cyprian bronze, so that it was built up with masonry : at the head 5 feet, at the feet 5 feet, at the right side 5 feet, at the left 5 feet, beneath 5 feet and above 5 feet. Thus he enclosed the body of blessed Peter the apostle and covered it over. And he adorned the altar above with porphyry columns and other columns carved with vines which he brought from Greece. And he made an apse shining with plates of gold, and above the body of blessed Peter, above the bronze which enclosed it, he made a cross of purest gold weighing 150 pounds."

For 1100 years St. Peter's was the first church in Christendom and affected church planning in all parts of western Europe. It had a square *atrium*, a pillared nave with four aisles, an arch decorated with mosaic, a transept and baptistery, an apse containing the high altar and the tomb of St. Peter, and, at the extreme western end, the papal throne. The honour of being the church of the Popes, however, belonged to St. John Lateran, owing to the fact that the Lateran Palace was the home of the Popes from the days of Constantine until 1308, when the palace was burnt and the popes left Rome for their long exile at Avignon. The Popes were crowned in St. John Lateran until 1870. The original basilica was part of the Palace of Fausta, Constantine's Queen, and contained statues of Our Lord and the twelve Apostles, each cast in silver and 5 feet in height. A second silver statue of Christ, also in silver, was set up in the apse. Four silver angels stood near by, with jewelled eyes and lances in hand. The great candelabrum before the altar had fifty

golden lamps. Five hundred pounds of gold were used for lining the roof. Seven silver altars were disposed about the church. Unfortunately, though there are many historical memorials in the church, little of the original fabric remains. The Baptistery contains the font of green basalt in which Constantine is reputed to have been baptized. The cloisters, with a ninth century well in the central garth, are of rare charm.

During the century after Constantine, Christian basilicas were built in all parts of Italy and, indeed, throughout the Roman world, none being more interesting than those which St. Ambrose built in Milan. The son of a Gaulish prefect, Ambrose was born at Treves in 340, and, in early manhood, became prefect in the Milan district. It chanced that the Arian bishop of Milan died and a contention arose regarding his successor. Ambrose was called in to decide between the followers of Arius and those who favoured the orthodox faith of Rome, and during the conclave a cry was raised, "Ambrose is Bishop." The young prefect fled from the gathering, appalled at the very idea of such an office, but he was brought back and instituted as bishop, though he had not even been baptized. As Bishop of Milan, Ambrose proved himself a great statesman, countering the Roman Emperor and Empress, when the secular aims ran counter to the interests of Christendom. The public penance which the Emperor Theodosius did at the instance of Ambrose was only less memorable than the triumph of Gregory VII at Canossa 700 years later.



Sant' Ambrogio, Milan

Ambrose prided himself upon the beauty, and magnificence of his services and was the first Churchman to introduce the chant into public worship. Apart from the foundation which later became Milan Cathedral, St. Ambrose built the basilica of Sant' Ambrogio in 386, outside the walls of Milan, and here he was buried. The basilica has been rebuilt more than once since and the greater part of the existing church dates from the twelfth century. But the east end belongs to the ninth century so that, apart from historical associations, Sant' Ambrogio belongs to an early type of Christian architecture.

San Lorenzo, Milan, is also associated with the great days when St. Ambrose and St. Augustine of Hippo dictated Christian faith and action in the Roman world. San Lorenzo is an octagonal church similar to San Vitale, Ravenna. The aisle around the octagon is built in two stories, and the cupola, which was restored in the sixteenth century, rises from an eight-sided dome. Four apses complete a plan of singular charm and interest. Gregory of Tours, who died in AD 594, gives details of the early churches in his own diocese and tells that Gratian, the first Bishop, who lived at the time of Decius, ministered in underground rooms and caves. Litorius, the second bishop, built the first church in the diocese, a basilica formed from the dwelling-house of a certain senator. St. Martin, the third bishop (A.D. 371) built numerous churches, while his successor built the basilica in which Martin was buried and which, eventually, developed into the well-known church of St. Martin, Tours.