



## **From A Bishop's Journal (688) Moved by the Spirit (4)**

### **“From Jerusalem to Europe and Africa”**

**T**here were persecutions throughout the Roman Empire. Christians could not worship the emperor-god, and they could not submit to the laws and decrees of the divine emperors. In Nero's days, Christians were accused of setting fire to the city of Rome. A number of Christians were thrown to the beasts to be eaten alive. On this we have the invaluable testimony of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch who was forced to leave his community and was then martyred. He begged his friends not to stand in the way of his being thrown to the beasts. We also have the witness of the martyrs of Lyon, especially of Saint Blandina who died for Christ. The martyrdoms of Agnes and Lucy are a precious heritage of the Christian communities.

### **Period of Peace**

After more than two hundred years of persecution, a period of peace was finally won by the Christians. Emperor Constantine recognised Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire. Cities and rural areas were evangelised, and the influence of certain saints is still with us today, for example, that of Saint Martin of Tours who was famous for his kindness and generosity, Saint Ambrose of Milan, and Saint Augustine whose writings and sermons still constitute a precious teaching, today. Several Christian communities were founded in North Africa. Despite having disappeared in the course of the centuries, these communities still challenge us today. What happened, that these once-flourishing communities died out? Could our own communities meet a similar fate?

### **Barbarians and Divisions**

The Barbarian Invasions were a terrible cultural shock to the Christian countries. History tells of the popes intervening to avoid such a catastrophe. For years Rome was like a deserted village; archeological finds continue to uncover what really happened. With what lay buried under meters of earth and debris, we can today reconstitute the Empire's glorious capital. At the turn of the millennium, the situation worsened and tensions mounted between East and West. Misunderstanding increased, and in 1054 the Great Schism occurred. It was only in 1965, during Vatican Council II, that the mutual anathemas pronounced by the heads of the Eastern and Western Churches were raised.

## **Other Divisions**

After the Middle Ages, communications were not as easy as today. Risk of misunderstanding remained, and different theological viewpoints threatened Church unity once again. Faced with a series of scandalous situations in the Church – the conduct of certain popes, the sale of indulgences, etc. – various areas needed answers. Luther and Calvin were leaders of the new communities which became known as “Protestant.” Personal problems of King Henry VIII of England caused the Church founded by Saint Augustine of Canterbury in 597 to separate from the Mother Church of Rome. A council was needed, and it took place at Trent from 1545 to 1563.

## **Current of Holiness**

It is great to realise how the Holy Spirit raises in the Church men and women who through the centuries, left their stamp not only close to them but throughout the Church. People like Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) who, through the example of his life urged the Church to come back to Gospel basics. And there is Clare of Assisi (1193-1252): she was only 18 when she begged Brother Francis to share his life with her. She was put up in a dilapidated house near the church of St. Damien, at the Assisi town gates. Their influence is still felt today: thousands of communities are still inspired by their spirituality. This same Spirit continued to raise up saints in the Church: St. John Bosco, St. John Vianney, St. Peter-Julian Eymard. Powerful spiritual currents developed in the Church, through the power of the Spirit. We think here of St. Benedict, the patron saint of Europe, who merged together prayer and work. Today, the monastic ideal is still a treasure for the Church. We think also of Saint Dominic who founded a new family in the Church when he invited his preachers “to contemplate” the mysteries of faith. During the Wars of Religion that devastated Europe, especially France, the Holy Spirit raised saints like Vincent de Paul and John Eudes: through their preaching, these men renewed the Christian faith of the people. We must also mention St. Louis-M. Grignon de Montfort who contributed to the Church’s renewal by his hymns, sermons, and devotion to the Virgin Mary.

## **Gospel of the World**

To close this all-too-short remembering of the Holy Spirit’s work in the Churches of Europe and Africa, I want to make mine the hymn which the [French] liturgy has for feasts of pastors: “Church of always, listening to the world, do you hear simmering the voices of history? The earth is wracked by a dull violence, starving for unity, and yearning to be delivered. Church of always, in service to the world, root the faith in the hollows of our distress. Unbind the hope that is at work, as it strives along the path of anxiety and promise. Church of always, Gospel of the world, free from fear the world that gives birth. Baptise in the Spirit the sprouting of its seed. Flow on as a river of peace, and carry our history.”

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