

be on the verge of collapse in this period, but the grace of God proved to be more powerful than any situation, bringing the Church through many perils and blessing it with growth and victory. Political forces prevented this from being a period of missionary expansion beyond the boundaries of Europe and Byzantium (the eastern Mediterranean area), but it was a time of the establishment of Europe as a Christian continent and of the preservation of the Christian faith in the East in the face of the spread of Islam.

THE SEVENTH CENTURY

The collapse of the old Roman Empire did not discourage Saint Gregory the Great, pope from AD 590 to 604, who laid the foundation for the Church in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. When secular rulers failed, Pope Gregory took control of central Italy and saved Rome many times from plunder by the Lombards. He sent delegates to the churches in the West to encourage them and strengthen their allegiance to the pope. His theological and spiritual writings shaped the thought of the Middle Ages.

Pope Gregory I personally sent a Benedictine monk, Augustine, to convert the Angles and Saxons in England. Soon afterward King Aethelbert of Kent was baptized, and Augustine was named first bishop of Canterbury. The Irish or Celtic monks, led by Saint Aidan and Saint Cuthbert, assisted in the conversion of England, which soon became a Christian nation. The *History of the English Church and People* by Saint Bede, a Benedictine monk, tells the story of England's conversion and the spread of Christianity. Soon England was sending mission-

aries to Europe, such as the Benedictine monk Willibrord, who became known as the Apostle to the Netherlands and was made the bishop of that territory in AD 695.

In Eastern Christianity the Sixth Ecumenical Council of bishops was held in Constantinople in AD 680-681 (the Third Council of Constantinople). The bishops condemned the belief that Jesus had only one will, the divine will—a heresy called Monothelism. If Jesus had both a divine and human nature, he had to have both a divine and human will.

Politically Islam was a dark cloud on the horizon. Mohammed had died in AD 632, his followers were growing in military power, and they threatened to invade Europe. Only their defeats by the Eastern Christian forces at Constantinople in AD 674-678, and again in AD 717-718, and by Charles Martel, father of Pepin, at the Battle of Tours in AD 732, prevented Europe from being conquered by the forces of Islam.

THE EIGHTH CENTURY

The conversion of the tribes of Europe continued in the eighth century under the leadership of the English Benedictine monk Winfrid, better known as Saint Boniface, the Apostle of Germany; he evangelized from AD 723 to 739. There is a well-known story that when Boniface cut down a tree the people thought to be sacred, the Oak of Thor, in order to use the wood for building a church, everyone converted to Christianity because Boniface wasn't struck dead by the gods. Boniface was only one example of hundreds of Benedictine monks who worked and died to establish the Catholic faith in Europe under the direction of the pope.