

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

‘No one is honoured before him’

THE RISE OF THE BISHOP

‘THE PEAK OF NOBILITY IS TO BE RECKONED AMONG THE SONS OF GOD.’ This extraordinary statement made by Hilary, bishop of Arles between 429 and his death in 449, sums up the dramatic change of status that Constantine brought to the bishops. Hilary is echoed by John Chrysostom, the bishop of Constantinople: ‘Prefects and city magistrates do not enjoy such honour as the magistrate of the church; for if he enters the palace, who ranks the highest, or among the matrons, or among the houses of the great. No one is honoured before him.’ The resources that were now available to the church underpinned this elevated status. The patronage of the emperors, the surrender of their riches by ascetics, the offerings of the faithful, contributed to the creation of a wealthy community. Ammianus Marcellinus describes how the bishops of Rome ‘are assured of rich gifts from ladies of quality; they can ride in carriages, dress splendidly and outdo kings in the lavishness of their table’.

Clearly this was not the whole picture. The number of bishops multiplied in these years — it is estimated that there were two thousand in the empire by the mid-fifth century. In those parts of the empire that had experienced schism, northern Africa, for instance, where even as late as 411 over three hundred Donatist bishops turned up to a council held at Carthage, there might have been two or more rival bishops in a small town. The remoter of the cities were unpopular assignments. When Basil of Caesarea appointed his friend Gregory of Nazianzus to the town of Sasima in Cappadocia, Gregory was deeply offended. One can imagine the condescension in his voice as he describes ‘an utterly dreadful, pokey little hole, a place wholly devoid of water, vegetation and the company of gentlemen’. He refused to move there, retiring to a monastery instead. He was as dismissive of his fellow bishops in such areas, complaining of former labourers, money changers, sailors still smelling of bilge water and blacksmiths who had not yet washed the soot off their backs,

‘dung-beetles headed for the skies’ as he snobbishly put it. Whatever the brilliance of his mind, it had not tempered the disdain of his class towards those without *paideia*.

The church now offered a viable and prestigious career with many bishops being recruited directly from the civil service. Ambrose of Milan and Paulinus of Nola had both held governorships in Italy; the bishop of Cyzicus, Eleusius, had served in the imperial civil service; the father of Gregory of Nazianzus, another Gregory, had been a magistrate before becoming bishop of Nazianzus. Martin of Tours and several of his fellow bishops in Gaul had been army officers. Augustine held the prestigious post of city orator in Milan before his conversion. There were even cases of distinguished civil servants being ‘awarded’ a bishopric as an end-of-service post. Often the traditional roles of the elite were absorbed in the work of the bishop. Basil of Caesarea is found negotiating tax exemptions for petitioners in much the same way a patron would have done in earlier days.

Yet the core of a bishop’s responsibilities lay where they had always been, with the care of their junior clergy and congregations, the administration of the sacraments, ‘discharging the venerable mysteries’, as one fifth-century bishop put it, and the overseeing of the needs of the Christian poor. The effective bishop had to add spiritual charisma to any administrative skills he might have. There had been much discussion by the earlier church fathers over the nature of a bishop’s authority. Clement of Alexandria had taught that it could only grow out of a life based on an imitation of Christ. His instincts as a philosopher led him to define three roles: one of contemplation, one of fulfilling the commandments and one of leading others towards virtue. Origen went further in stressing the importance of the ascetic lifestyle, in essence the transferring of bodily desires into a mind that transcended them and released new spiritual and mental energies as a result. The problem lay in reconciling these holy men with the messy politics and power struggles of everyday life in the church. Spiritual power and administrative ability did not often mix. Those who had transcended the material world were not always eager to engage in the networking needed to secure election as a bishop and the ascetic living a withdrawn life in the desert was always a potential threat to the authority of the more worldly bishops.

A good example of a bishop who retained his saintliness despite the pressures to exploit the status of the position is the aristocratic Paulinus, a former governor of Campania (c.354–431). Paulinus renounced his vast estates, was ordained and

eventually became bishop of Nola, in southern Italy, where he created a shrine to the local saint, Felix, alongside a hospital and other benefactions to the local community, including an aqueduct. He thought deeply about how to convey the teachings of Christ and his hero Felix to pilgrims to the shrine. On each of Felix's anniversaries he would compose a poem for his visitors that praised the more humble of Christian virtues. Paulinus is the first known clergyman to use the decoration of his church for instruction of the illiterate. Over the apse was a mosaic depicting the Trinity, with God as a hand from above, Christ as a Lamb and the Holy Spirit as a dove. In a portico facing an adjoining courtyard, a cycle of frescoes from the Old and New Testaments was designed to offer simple moral guidance 'for those not able to read and long accustomed to pagan cults'. Figures from the Old Testament were included to provide examples of holy living with accompanying texts for those who could read.

For others, however, the public display of their status seemed to dominate. Many bishops' palaces echoed those of provincial governors with their audience halls and separate rooms for banqueting. Their churches were even more magnificent. While city life was on the whole losing vitality (this has to be a generalisation as many cities in the east were still flourishing into the sixth century but Ambrose, for instance, describes the once prosperous cities along the Via Emilia in northern Italy as 'corpses') there was a massive shift of resources towards church building. Many initiatives were local. Eugenius, bishop of Laodicea, a former provincial administrator who married into a senatorial family, had the opportunity to build a new church in Constantine's reign. In his epitaph he proclaimed that he 'had built the whole church from its foundations and provided all the adornments around it, namely the colonnades, the porticoes, paintings, mosaics, the fountain and the atrium'. Others had the support of the emperor. So the brilliantly decorated Golden Octagon in Antioch, completed in 341, was next to the imperial palace and acted both as a cathedral and a focus for the emperor's ceremonial occasions when he was in residence.

The greatest builder of all was Ambrose in Milan. He had inherited a vast cathedral built earlier in the century but he ringed the city with new basilicas built on the burial places of martyrs, following a pattern already established in Rome. This was an ambitious programme and established the bishop as a major employer of labourers, especially craftsmen skilled in stoneworking and mosaic-laying. It was typical of the man that he is the first bishop recorded to have built a church, the Basilica Ambrosiana, for the reception of his own bones. He was innovative in making

relics a prominent focus of all his churches, obtaining *branded*, cloths which had touched sacred bones, in this instance, those of Peter and Paul, for his Basilica Apostolorum. Theodosius gave him relics of the apostles John, Andrew and Thomas, for his foundations. This was a new and important way of advertising a church and city's presence to the wider world and those churches with the most prestigious relics became the focus of pilgrimage. This meshing of spiritual and political power was to prove essential for the long-term survival of the church, especially in the west when the structure of imperial government collapsed there.

A building programme less centred on self-glorification was the 'new city' that Basil built outside Caesarea (in Cappadocia) for the poor and lepers. This was begun in about 370 and was gradually extended over the next decade so it contained not only a large church but an impressive residence for the supervisor of the complex and his clergy (so grand, Basil writes, that magistrates themselves would be happy to reside there), hospices for visitors and the sick and accommodation for nurses and physicians. In his Funeral Oration for Basil (delivered in 379), Gregory of Nazianzus compares the city with the Seven Wonders of the World, suggesting it surpasses them because, unlike pagan shrines, it provided its patron with a swift ascent to heaven.

This Funeral Oration is often considered the finest of the age and marks the culmination of classical rhetoric, now transferred to a Christian setting. The speakers had learned their craft in the very best schools. John Chrysostom had been a pupil of the famous Antioch orator Libanius; Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus trained in Athens; Ambrose and Jerome were educated in Rome. Augustine studied rhetoric for three years in Carthage before becoming a teacher of rhetoric and then the city orator in Milan. These vast churches provided the bishops with a stage on which they could exercise their oratory and this enabled them to use congregations to achieve their spiritual and political ends. When there were tax riots in Antioch in 387 and statues of the emperor were defaced it was Bishop Flavian who hurried to Constantinople to plead, successfully as it turned out, with Theodosius for mercy. So here was a refocusing of an ancient art to new ends.

Perhaps the most accomplished orator of the age was John, known since the seventh century as John Chrysostom, John of the Golden Mouth. John was a superb speaker, coming down from his *cathedra* into the body of the church to magnify his effect. His sermons with their vivid imagery (he complained of how the rich were using silver chamber pots for their excrement while the poor maimed their

own children in the hope of alms) brought continuous applause. John had made his reputation in Antioch with his dramatic sermons during that tense period in 387 when the city waited to see if the emperor would retaliate against those who had defaced his statues during the aforementioned tax riots. This, John warned his nervous audiences, would be how the Last Judgement would feel and they should learn from the experience. On a more scholarly level, he was one of the first preachers to explore Paul's letters in depth, again through a long series of sermons, and so helped give the apostle the prominence in Christian thought that proved permanent. (Augustine, as will be seen, was involved in much the same task in the west.) John's approach to the scriptures was literal, in contrast to the more allegorical Origenist approach adopted in Alexandria, and his sermons resonated with his audiences so well that some nine hundred, most of them from his time in Antioch, from where he was transferred to Constantinople in 397, have been preserved.

There were difficult boundaries here. The incentive to use rhetoric to arouse emotions often proved too great. The major targets, especially after 381, were pagans, heretics and Jews and the invective used against them was sweeping and polemical. The Jews were particularly hard hit. Many Christians still attended the synagogues or, in defiance of Nicaea, celebrated Easter on the same day as the Passover. John Chrysostom was furious. A series of sermons that he preached in 386 in Antioch is shocking in its tasteless denunciations of the synagogues as equivalent to brothels or dens of thieves. Accusing the Jews of every kind of perversity (including, of course, the murder of Christ) John dredged his way through the Old Testament in search of any displeasure shown by God to Israel, often taking texts out of context to do so.

These oratorical campaigns became part of the new Christian ideology. In 415, Severus, the bishop of Mahon in Minorca, set on fire a synagogue filled with its congregation after they had refused to debate with him. Many bishops played a leading part in the destruction of the pagan world. Alexandria, in particular, was known for its tempestuous bishops and the volatility of its population. The combination could be explosive. In 392 a Mithraeum had been demolished to make room for a new church. This caused a riot against the Christians in which hostages were taken and concealed in the complex of the Serapeion, the vast temple that dominated the city. The bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, ascended the steps of the building and read out a letter from the emperor apparently denouncing the pagan gods. (This was presumably derived from Theodosius' anti-pagan legislation of that year.) It is not clear whether the pagans scattered or killed the hostages but

Theophilus gave the signal to attack the statue of the god Serapis and then the buildings were razed to the ground. Part of the great library of Alexandria was included.

These stories of violence conflict with traditional pictures of bishops as respected upholders of good order. Although there were many factors that made city life violent — scarcity of food, increases in taxation, or the flooding in of refugees — some were related to the rise of the church as an alternative centre of authority which found itself competing with other longer established communities in the cities. With the support of emperors from Constantine onwards the church felt that the tide was flowing in its favour. There was a confidence, even a self-righteousness, in the way bishops assailed their opponents. Once again the Old Testament provided a mass of texts that condoned the violence by providing examples of a jealous God wreaking vengeance on his enemies: ‘Ye shall destroy their altars, break down their images, and cut down their groves ... for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a Jealous God,’ as Exodus puts it (34:13-14).

When the news of the destruction of the Serapeion reached him, Theodosius attempted to regain the initiative. He dismissed the city prefect, Evragius, for not preventing the violence and urged his successor to deal firmly with the rioters. Bishops who were determined to destroy paganism now had to act more carefully. Porphyry, the bishop of Gaza, went as far as to visit Constantinople to ask for imperial troops to help demolish the most important pagan temple there. By now Theodosius’ son Arcadius was on the throne and, like his father, was reluctant to support such blatant destruction. He was prevailed upon by his empress, Eudoxia, and even her baby, the future Theodosius II, apparently made a sign that was taken as a gesture of approval. The tearing down of pagan statues became a badge of Christian holiness and Porphyry’s triumph in Gaza was written up soon after his death in a hagiographic biography.

There was another catalyst for violence. As bishops held their thrones for life, in contrast to the local governors who were often replaced after a year or two, promotion was slow and the death of a bishop might be the only moment when ambitious clerics could gain control of their local churches and their resources. Almost every election of which we have records was a violent one. Gregory of Nazianzus deplored a conflict that had broken out over even so unattractive a bishopric as Sasima. ‘It was a no man’s land between two rival bishops ... an occasion for the outbreak of a frightful brawl. The pretext was souls, but, in fact, it

was desire for control, control of taxes and contributions which have the whole world in miserable confusion.’ Damasus achieved the bishopric of Rome in 366 only after pitched battles in the streets following which 138 bodies were found in a basilica. Ambrose was appointed bishop of Milan, even before he had been baptised as a Christian, primarily to prevent unrest between squabbling factions. Bassanius, bishop of Ephesus, found himself assailed by a mob at Easter 448. He was taken from his church, beaten up and thrown into prison. A rival was installed and later some of Bassanius supporters were found lying dead by the church door.

One of the most vicious power struggles was that which took place on the death of Theophilus in Alexandria in 412. His nephew Cyril was determined to succeed but faced intense opposition. He emerged triumphant but then launched violent attacks on his former opponents. These spread to the Jewish quarter of the city where synagogues were seized and Jews driven from their homes. The city prefect, Orestes, complained to the emperor (Theodosius II) about the disorder and the relationship between the church and state authorities broke down completely.

The matter had to be resolved if the secular administration was to retain its authority. It was an ancient custom that in times of unrest the city prefect would consult the philosophers of the city, who would give their counsel. They were promised *parrhesia*, complete freedom to speak their mind. Cyril claimed that the Christians had now assumed the role of advisers but Orestes snubbed him by choosing to consult the most respected of the pagan intellectuals of Alexandria, Hypatia, a woman of great integrity who was also an impressive mathematician and thoughtful commentator on the nature of religious belief. It was said that she backed Orestes in his refusal to support Cyril. Cyril in his turn spread rumours that Hypatia had cast spells on the Christians. In the rising tension, a deacon called Peter organised a lynching party. Hypatia was hauled from her carriage, her body was dragged through the streets and she was dismembered and burned. A seventh-century source describes how Cyril was hailed as ‘the new Theophilus’ in that he had followed the example of his predecessor and had now destroyed the last symbol of paganism in the city.

It was indeed a crucial moment in the conflict between traditional pagan thought and Christianity. The fate of Hypatia has been seen as the symbolic end of the era of Greek mathematics. It was particularly tragic as Hypatia had welcomed both Christians and pagans to her school and after her death many of her pagan students left for Athens to study there. As calm returned, even Christians began to realise

the enormity of what had happened and we find the church historian Socrates, normally a supporter of church authority, openly criticising Cyril. The shocked emperor Theodosius tried to bring things back into order by commanding Cyril to reduce his 'bodyguard' to five hundred. It may be that it was outrages such as this that gave rise to a law in which Christians (named as such) who 'dare to lay violent hands on Jews and pagans who are living quietly and attempting nothing disorderly or contrary to law' are subject to heavy penalties.

The two areas where bishops provided the most effective service to the wider community were the law and care of the poor. Constantine had seen the opportunity to extend the role of the bishops as local magistrates. A law of 318 deals with the procedures under which a case could be transferred from the secular to the ecclesiastical courts. At first this could take place if both parties agreed but later one party alone could take the initiative, in effect allowing a Christian to have his case judged by a man of his own faith. There is some evidence that the poor found it easier to have recourse to these courts and they became popular. Ambrose was to complain that he had to judge cases involving money, farms and even sheep. Augustine is found arbitrating between landlords and peasant tenants.

Very little is known of the legal procedures used by the courts. The basis of all jurisdiction remained Roman law. Many bishops had, of course, absorbed a legal training as part of their education. Ambrose was doing no more than transfer into an ecclesiastical context the skills he had already practised as a provincial governor. In the early fifth century the church courts took on an increasing responsibility for the enforcement of morals and the laws against pagans and heretics. Yet many of the cases involved arbitration and bishops appeared ready to adopt a specifically 'Christian approach to their duties, especially in talking of the need to temper the harshness of traditional law with Christian charity. Others, notably Augustine, went further in backing judgements with reference to scripture. The Old Testament provided a host of references to the justice of the king, especially in upholding the rights of the oppressed. There is an emphasis in some records of the episcopal courts taking on reconciliation, in marital cases, for instance. Again there is fragmentary evidence from the 430s that the state encouraged the church courts to deal with the protection of orphans.

One traditional role of the clergy that remained intact was their concern for the poor. Jesus had taught that care for the sick and needy was central to the Christian mission. 'For now, by God's will, it is winter', preached Augustine. 'Think of the

poor. Think of how the naked Christ can be clothed. Pay attention to Christ in the person of the poor, as he lies in the portico, as he suffers hunger, as he endures the cold.' The Old Testament precedents of the just king hearing the cries of the oppressed may have been an influence here.

There were, of course, pagan traditions by which 'bread and circuses' had been provided for the masses, not least to maintain social harmony. The emperors knew too well that hardship and subsequent rioting had resulted from any delay of the grain ships arriving in Rome each year. One of the most important developments of the age, initiated by Constantine, was the extension of the charitable functions of the church to encompass this established provisioning of food for the poor. There was, however, a different emphasis. Grain handouts by the emperors and other patrons tended to be targeted at a particular city and distributed primarily to buy off discontent in the hope of preserving the security of the elites. Christians talked instead of the poor as a group to be privileged with help because of their poverty.

It is hard to know whether the numbers of poor were increasing in this period. Standards of living in the empire were comparatively high compared to what they would become after its collapse and recent archaeological evidence shows many communities still thriving. However, marginal groups were acutely vulnerable. The Mediterranean climate was variable and famine often struck, made worse, the physician Galen reported, by the rapacity with which city dwellers stripped the rural areas for their own needs. The disruptions caused by wars and invasion were leading to a refugee problem. When Christians turned their focus on the poor, as they did with an intensity that had been lacking in pagan society, they found a mass of destitute, 'shivering in their nakedness, lean with hunger, parched with thirst, trembling with exhaustion and discoloured by undernourishment', as one preacher put it. John Chrysostom estimated that 10 per cent of the population of Antioch lived in absolute poverty.

The poor had, of course, to compete with others for funds. The vast building programmes ate into resources that might have been spent on charity. One calculation of the cost of the gold alone for the apse vault of St John Lateran equates it to the provision of food for a year for twelve thousand poor. The revenues for the lighting of the basilica would have fed another fourteen hundred. When Cyril of Alexandria launched a major programme of bribery to ensure that the emperor Theodosius supported him in a theological dispute in 431, the gold

and other exotic gifts involved could have fed and clothed nineteen thousand poor for a year. This was the inevitable consequence of a church that now saw itself as a major player in a society where wealth and opulent display brought prestige and influence. Even ascetics who surrendered their wealth did not necessarily commit it to the needy. The enormously rich Melania settled on one of her estates in North Africa and began renouncing her wealth by endowing a local church so extravagantly that 'this church which formerly had been so very poor now stirred up the envy of all the other bishops in that province'.

However, what was achieved should not be dismissed. Basil of Caesarea's great complex was symbolic of numerous smaller projects, where bishops took it upon themselves to be 'the governor of the poor'. As the role became more institutionalised, each diocese seems to have drawn up its own list of deserving poor (the *matricula* as it was known in the Latin west) so that three thousand widows and orphans received help in fourth-century Antioch and there were 7,500 named poor in Alexandria in the early seventh century. The great parchment volume on which Gregory kept his list of poor in Rome survived until the ninth century. The special role of the bishops in helping prisoners is highlighted in an early fifth-century law in which the emperor orders the local governors to give clergy free access to prisons. There are even cases of clergy interviewing inmates to select those deserving of appeal, while Bishop Paul of Gerasa built a new prison to separate prisoners who had not yet been tried from those convicted.

Bishops were faced with many challenges. The church was attempting to expand its own boundaries against resilient and often resentful communities of Jews and pagans as well as the many Christian groups that had now been excluded by Theodosius' laws. It is fascinating to see the range of strategies they employed. On the one hand Ambrose survived, if precariously, his confrontations with the emperors. In Constantinople, on the other, John Chrysostom succeeded in building up a mass of support from the poor through the power of his sermons but, when challenged by rival bishops who exploited the offence he had caused the empress Eudoxia (see p. 299), the rioting that broke out in his favour only damaged his case. Unlike Ambrose, he had never learned how to build up a wider community that he could control to his own ends. He finished his life in exile. Other bishops, like Basil of Caesarea, were more successful in combining the traditional role of patron with a programme of charitable works that made their position unassailable. The Homoian emperor Valens respected the Nicene Basil so highly for his efficiency and keeping of good order that he even used him on official business.

The coming of Christianity involved much more than the extension of the teaching of the gospels to society. It required major shifts in the way power was exercised and wealth distributed — in ways that often seemed in conflict with each other. None of this involved a radical reordering of society. Very gradually bishops became the core of a conservatively structured society and with lasting effect. Twenty-six senior bishops of the Church of England are still entitled to places in the British House of Lords and over the centuries have often acted as upholders of aristocratic tradition.