

SOME QUESTIONS FOR TODAY:

What appeals to you about this 6th century liturgy?

And, what doesn't?

What cultural, political, or popular influences can you see in this celebration of a 6th century liturgy?

What cultural, political, or popular influences can you see in our own modern version of the eucharist?

HISTORICAL RUN-UP TO 6TH CENTURY LITURGY: THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND THE CHURCH OF ROME

By 285 C.E. the empire was too large to govern efficiently, so it was divided by the Emperor Diocletian into two parts: Eastern and Western. The Eastern empire was today's Greece, Turkey, Eastern Europe, the Near East, North Africa, and some of Central Asia. The Western empire included Italy, Northern Europe (British Isles, Spain, France, Portugal, and Germany), and western North Africa.

Between 285 C.E. and Constantine's early 4th century rule, which unified the empire once more (as Eastern and Western), there were considerable periods of misrule, corruption, conflict, further division, and struggle against the tribes of various conquered peoples.

After Constantine declared Christianity to be the religion of the state in ca. 318 C.E., he left his empire to his three sons in 337 C.E., Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans, who divided the Roman Empire between them but soon fell to fighting one another. In these conflicts, Constantine II and Constans were killed. Constantius II died later after naming his cousin Julian his successor and heir. Emperor Julian ruled for only two years (361-363 CE) and, in that time, tried to return Rome to her former glory through a series of reforms aimed at increasing efficiency in government. Julian rejected Christianity and blamed it for the decline of the empire. While he officially proclaimed a policy of religious tolerance, Julian systematically removed Christians from influential government positions, banned the teaching and spread of the religion, and barred Christians from military service. His death, while on campaign against the Persians, ended the

dynasty Constantine had begun. He was the last pagan emperor of Rome and came to be known as 'Julian the Apostate' for his opposition to Christianity.

Christianity was re-established after Julian's death, and under the Emperor Theodosius (379-395 C.E.) pagan worship was outlawed, pagan temples were turned into churches, and the famous Academy of Plato was closed. These efforts were not popular with more conservative Roman citizens, who saw the pagan pantheon of Roman gods as a stabilizing influence among human affairs, while Christianity removed divine influence to some far away heaven.

During this period and the next 80 or so years, constant wars with the Goths, Vandals, Picts, Scots, Franks, Huns, and the Visigoths depleted the strength of the Western empire and it slowly declined in confusion and disarray until its end in ca. 476 C.E. with the conquest of Rome by a Germanic king.

(The Eastern, or Byzantine empire, continued as such until 1453 C.E., but was much different in character and culture from the Western section of the empire. The Eastern empire was Greek-speaking, while the Western used Latin. The Eastern empire was never as centrally governed as the West.)

Today's liturgy is a product of the Western Roman empire and its turbulent history of the 5th century. Amid the ups and downs, twists and turns, fears and doubts of the Western empire's populace, the Christian Church offered the average Roman citizen a source of stability, a beacon of hope, and an opportunity for spiritual peace while under threat.

What are some of the changes we can see? The Western liturgy was more fixed . . . that is, predictable and set, partially as a response to theological controversies and also as an antidote to the changes in the civil order and in the culture. The lessons had been reduced from four to two. In Rome, preaching as a part of the liturgy was no longer practiced. The "Kiss of Peace" had moved to the "Breaking of the Bread". A formal blessing of the people at the close of the liturgy had become fashionable.

Although some seating would be provided for the elderly and infirm, the congregation would have stood during the rite, and some perhaps sat on the floor. There would be visiting among the people before the liturgy began, during the administration of communion, and after the exit of the clergy. During the prayers the congregation would hold their hands in the "orans" position along with the clergy.

The power of the Church had grown as the empire's civil order was breaking down. Bishops and clergy became more important in public life, because of their exemplary values and their generosity toward those in need. But while the Church was a bulwark against threatening change, the liturgy was becoming shorter and more convenient for the people as familiarity squeezed out repetitive parts of the service, and shortened the attention span. In the next few centuries the liturgy would shorten even more. (*for example, the Litany would shrink to just using the Kyrie eleison*)