

Christianity in the Roman Empire

As the Roman Empire got bigger and new lands and people were taken into it, the conquered people added their gods or religion to the Roman **Pantheon** (the name given for the multitude of Roman gods). One such new religion was **Christianity**.



Document A

A very wealthy owner of a villa (house) in Britain was a Christian. This mosaic in the main room of her house had this picture of Christ as well as the **Chi-Rho** symbol. Chi and Rho are the first two letters of the name of Christ in the Greek alphabet.

Jesus the Christ was born in Palestine, which was then part of the Roman Empire. In about the year 26 A.D. he began to preach, telling people of the forgiveness of their sins and that he was sent from God. Around 29 A.D. Jesus was killed by the Romans, accused of inciting rebellion against Rome. He was crucified; which was a common, and very gruesome death. The followers of Jesus were soon given the nickname "Christians". Christianity went through several changes in fortune, from a popular following, to it being terribly persecuted. Unlike many other religions at the time, the Christians talked about 'peace' and 'forgiveness', not the usual 'anger' and 'punishment' of the Roman gods.

The ideas of Christianity spread, and the organization of the Roman Empire helped this in several ways:

1. It was relatively easy to move around the Empire. The Romans built excellent roads which were safe from robbers.
2. There were common languages in the Empire, Latin and Greek. This made the spread of new ideas quick and easy.
3. The Roman army never had units of soldiers based in their home country, so as not to call the loyalty of the men into question. Many of the units based in Britain were from the Middle East and so Christianity spread to Britain quite quickly, since Jesus was from the Middle East.

In the summer of 64 A.D., there was a very large fire in Rome that burnt uncontrollably for weeks. At this time, there was many bad feelings towards the Christians. The Romans were angry at the fact that the Christians said that they would go to heaven. The Christians upset others with talk of the world, and non-believers being evil in the sight of God, and that they should change their ways. In addition, the Christians refused to worship the Emperor as a god, and this was against the law. The Christians were even tortured to make them worship the Roman gods and the books of scripture were burned. For these

reasons, the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the fire of Rome and began to **persecute** them. Many were sent to the coliseum to be torn apart by wild animals, for the entertainments of the people of Rome! As many as 600 Christians were arranged around the top of the Roman colosseum to be set afire, acting as floodlights.

Document B

‘Their executions became sporting entertainment.... They were covered in wild animal skins and torn apart by dogs’

Tacitus. A Roman historian

Attacks on the Christians went on for a very long time, with them being blamed every now and then when it was convenient to blame them for some problem. The leaders were killed and even crucified and Christianity was driven to worship underground, in Catacombs in order to avoid persecution. As time passed, there began some **toleration**, or acceptance, of Christianity, but it was not until the Emperor Constantine that Christianity was truly accepted.

Just before a crucial battle in 312 A.D., Constantine said that he had a dream where he was told to paint the Christian symbol on the shields of his soldiers. He did this, and won the battle! He then, later in the year 337 decided that, in thanks to God, he would allow the whole Empire to worship any religion freely, including Christianity. The future of Christianity was assured when Constantine himself converted to Christianity. As you might expect, the old religions did not disappear all at once, but Christianity did spread fast throughout the Empire.

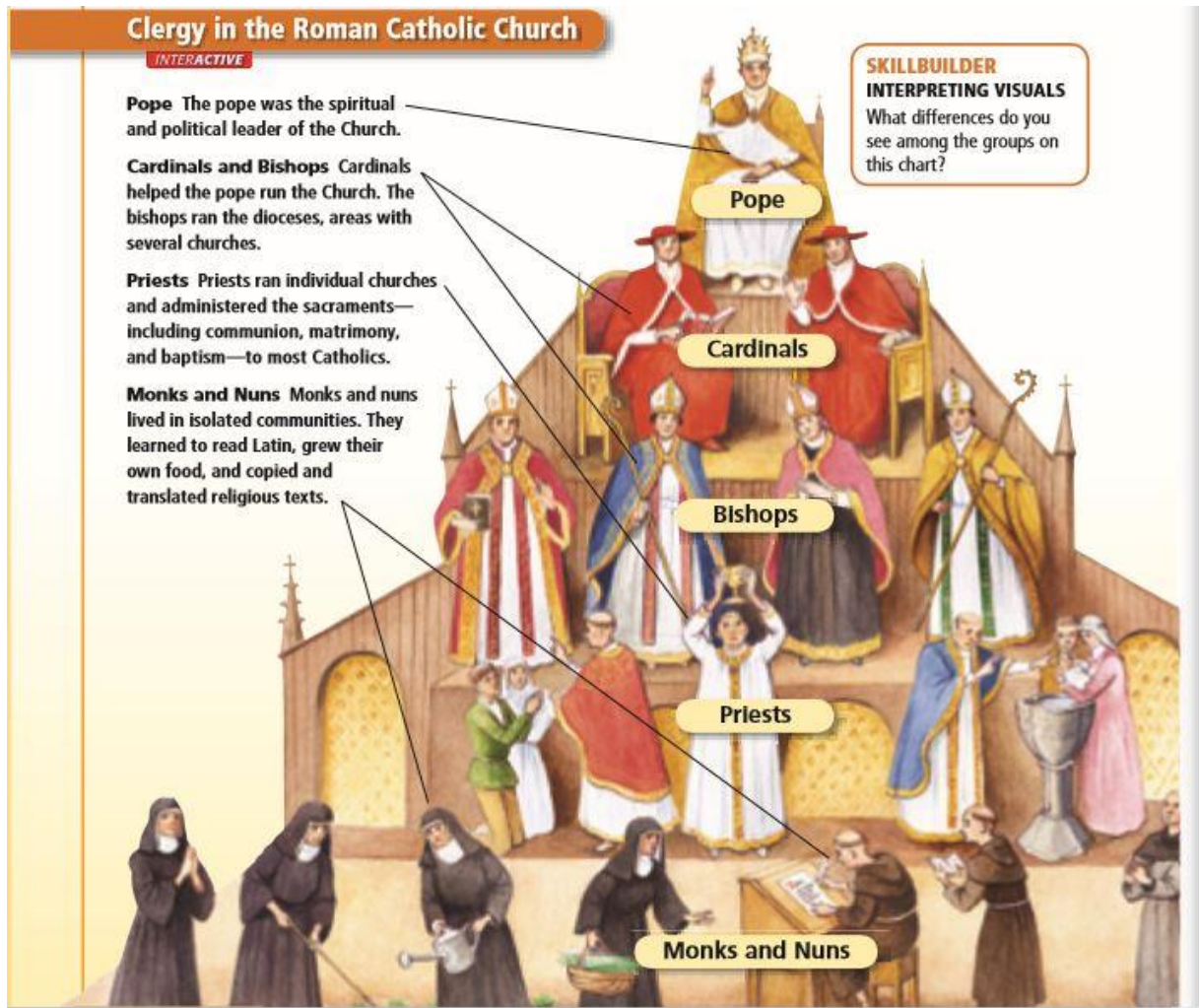
Document C

Modern day image



It certainly could be said, that without the Roman Empire, Christianity would not have spread so quickly. That it was because of the Empire that it spread

throughout the Empire and beyond (remember the points above - #s 1-3). Part of the Roman Empire eventually became known as the Holy Roman Empire due to the influence of Christianity. This is why the largest branch of the Christian Church throughout the world has been, and is called the Roman Catholic Church. The Church has its heart in Rome’s Vatican City, and a worldwide shepherd in the form of a Pope, or Papa for father.



Document D

A textbook graphic of the Roman Catholic Church Structure

Questions:

1. What was the Roman Pantheon?
2. What does persecution mean?
3. In what ways were the Christians persecuted?
4. Look at Document A. How do you know that the owner of the house was a Christian?
5. What helped the spread of Christianity?
6. Look at Document C. Why do you think Constantine had the troops paint the Christian emblem on their shields?
7. Which of the Documents are Primary sources? Why?
8. What does Document A tell you about the spread of Christianity?