CHRISTIAN HISTORY

901-1000 C.E.

May 20, 2026

Key Dates:
909 — Cluny monastery established
962 — Otto I is crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire
988 — Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv becomes a Christian, leading to the Christianization of Russia

SUMMARY OF THIS CENTURY

General Development: The geographic spread of Christianity continues to increase. Not much changes in the Eastern church. In the West, excessive corruption in church leadership is answered by a growing reform movement begun in the monastery in Cluny, France.

Key Questions: Who will control the papacy: the church, the kings, or the aristocrats of Rome? Which holds higher power: the church or the state? Can the corruption of the Western church be reformed?

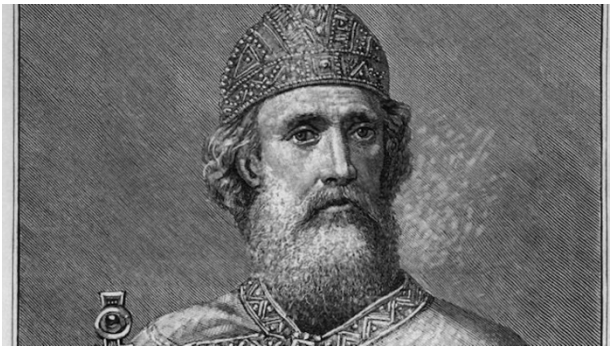
Key Places: Rome, as various powers struggle for control of the papacy • **Russia** becomes Christian in this century • **Cluny**, center of a major reform movement

Key People: Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv • Emperor Otto I ("the Great") • the powerful families of Rome, especially the family of Theophylact • the monks of Cluny

Church Leadership: In the East, the Byzantine emperor continues to control the leadership of the church. In the West, the popes and the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire struggle for highest power over the leadership and direction of the church.

1) SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

UKRAINE, BELARUS, RUSSIA: Christianity spread into Ukraine and parts of Belarus and Russia gradually and became strong there especially in the 900s. In Russia, the princess Olga (died in 969) became a Christian in 955 and influenced her grandson Vladimir (956-1015) so that he became a Christian in 988. The Orthodox Church today marks 988 as the year that Russia's conversion to Christianity began, following the mission efforts of Cyril and Methodius in Slavic lands (though some pockets of Christianity existed there from earlier times).



> [I]n 988, the Russian Prince Vladimir decided that an official religion was necessary for his country… [After a search,] The Prince accepted the Orthodox Christian Faith, was baptized, and ordered that all the idols of the nation be destroyed. It was not long before the entire Russian land became a bastion of Christian spiritual life filled with many saints. Soon golden-domed churches covered the land, and monasteries filled the vast wilderness. — *Door to Paradise: Jesus Christ in Ancient Orthodoxy* (St. Herman Press; purchased at St. John the Forerunner Greek Orthodox Monastery near Goldendale, WA), page 14

DENMARK was Christianized through military conquest by the Holy Roman Empire.

NORWAY, ICELAND, GREENLAND: Christianity spread to these lands in the very late 900s, partly through persuasion and partly by force.

BOHEMIA/CZECHIA: Christianity spread to Bohemia and the Czechs in the 900s. Wenceslas (of "Good King Wenceslas" fame) became king of Bohemia in 923/924. He had been raised as a Christian and earnestly promoted Christianity. His brother Boleslav murdered him, but Wenceslas became a national saint, and Christianity there grew.

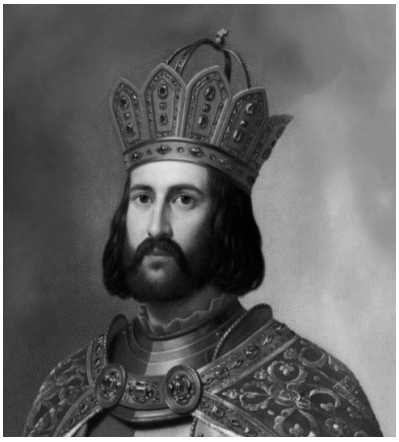
POLAND: Christianity came into Poland in the 900s.

HUNGARY: Magyars (Hungarians) invaded the Carolingian kingdom (France/Germany), Italy, and Western Europe in the 800s. By the 900s, they were surrounded by three Christian kingdoms: Saxony, Poland, and the Byzantine Empire, all of which sent in missionaries and ended up winning the Magyars to the Christian faith. The Magyars joined primarily with the Roman church.

2) BYZANTINE EMPIRE

- During the 900s, the Eastern Empire strengthened and retook Crete, Cyprus, and various areas formerly lost to the Muslims. In 915, the Byzantines took southern Italy and held it for a century.
- EXAMPLE OF IMPERIAL CONTROL OF THE EASTERN CHURCH: "[Emperor] Leo [VI] installed Nicholas (901-907) [as Patriarch of Constantinople] and removed him a few years later because he refused to sanction the emperor's fourth marriage in violation of canon law. Leo made light of the Patriarch's effort to keep him from entering the Church and deposed him, appointing Euthymius (906-911) in his place. Euthymius recognized the marriage on the grounds that the laws of the Church had to yield to state needs." — E. Glenn Hinson, *The Church Triumphant: A History of Christianity up to 1300*, page 356

3) OTTO THE GREAT AND THE (NEW) HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE



- The Frankish (Carolingian) kingdom (France, Germany, northern and central Europe) fell apart by 910/911 and was ruled by local rulers.
- Vikings from the north and Magyars (Hungarians) from the east threatened Germany in the early 900s. German dukes joined together for defense. In 919, they chose Henry the Fowler, Duke of Saxony, to be their ruler. He defeated both the Vikings and the Magyars. His son Otto (912-973) became king of the Germans in 936. He united the German vassals and helped Pope John XII against a threat to papal power (see section 4 below). John crowned Otto emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 962. Otto ruled all of central Europe from the North Sea to the Adriatic Sea. He used the church's power for his own purposes and essentially ruled the church in his lands. His empire would survive until Napoleon ended it in 1806, though as Voltaire quipped in 1756, it was never truly holy, Roman, or an empire.
- For the next 200 years, German emperors would cross the Alps into Italy to bring order in Rome and advance their own interests there. In 996, Otto III entered Rome, defeated a group of Roman nobles, and forced the election of his own cousin Bruno as Pope Gregory V.

4) CORRUPTION IN THE PAPACY

• From 900 to 1003, there were 23 popes. In 900-962, papal corruption was so bad that this period became known as "the Great Pornocracy".

> In 904, [Pope] Sergius III [904-911] had his two rivals, Leo V and Christopher I, incarcerated and killed. He had come to power with the support of one of the most powerful families of Italy. This family was headed by Theophylact [an officer of the papal court] and his wife Theodora, whose daughter, Marozia, was Sergius' lover. Shortly after the death of Sergius, Marozia and her husband Guido of Tuscia captured the Lateran palace [the pope's palace] and made John X their prisoner, subsequently suffocating him with a pillow. After the brief pontificates of Leo VI and Stephen VII, Marozia placed on the papal throne, with the name of John XI, the son whom she had had from her union with Sergius III. Thirty years after the death of John XI, that papacy was in the hands of John XII, a grandson of Marozia. Later, her nephew became John XIII. His successor, Benedict VI, was overthrown and strangled by Crescentius, a brother of John XIII. John XIV died of either poison or starvation in the dungeon where he had been thrown by Boniface VII, who in turn was poisoned.
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> For a while, Emperor Otto III was able to determine who would be the pope. His first choice was his own nephew, who became pope at twenty-three years of age, and took the name of Gregory V. Then he named the famous scholar Gerbert of Aurillac, who became Sylvester II [999-1003] and made a valiant but unsuccessful effort to reform the papacy as well as the entire church. — Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day,* page 275

• Otto I helped Pope John XII against a threat to his position as pope, and in return John crowned Otto emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 962. Otto spurred much-needed reform of the papacy to end the "Great Pornocracy", but he and his successors also tended to control the church much like the Byzantine emperors did. That created new problems for the popes and the church. Otto removed and appointed popes as he thought best, but the people and aristocrats of Rome wanted to determine who was pope, so there was constant friction between them and Otto.

• Once Otto I died in 973, powerful Italian families again tried to take control of who held the papacy. Some emperors were diligent about appointing popes and spurring reforms, and some popes genuinely tried to reform the papacy and the church. But whenever the emperor was weak or was focused on other matters, Roman nobility took control of the papacy again.

5) REFORM: THE CLUNY MOVEMENT

• By the 900s the monasteries had become wealthy through donations from rulers and common people alike—and being wealthy, the monasteries had become corrupt. The monastic ideal was now less about selfless service and more about individual salvation plus an easy life in a wealthy monastery. Many monasteries had been destroyed by Norseman (Vikings) and Hungarians (Magyars). In others, nobles and bishops used the monasteries for their own advancement. Abbots sometimes bought their positions or even killed to gain them, then lived an easy life off the monastery's wealth.

• At the same time, though, people who took their faith seriously and longed for reform tended to pursue a monastic life. Following the decline of the Carolingian (French) kingdom, such violence and corruption plagued society, the papacy, local bishops, and the church hierarchy as a whole that for people pursuing a life of faith the monasteries were often their best option. It was therefore out of the monasteries that the next reform movement arose.

• In 909, Duke William of Aquitane chartered a monastery to be set up in Cluny in eastern France. Wealthy people commonly founded monasteries, but this one was set up to be different than most. William chose Berno, a well-known church reformer, to lead his monastery. They determined that the land for the new monastery, which would be self-sustaining, would, according to its charter, be under the authority of the pope alone. Therefore this monastery would not answer to kings or bishops, but only to the pope himself. Other than that, it was to be free to exercise self-government. Local bishops and lords

would not be able to interfere with it (and the pope, being far away, would not interfere with it much). The deed for the monastery even forbade the pope from seizing the monastery or its property.

• Berno led the Cluny monastery until 926. Monks at Cluny were required to follow the Rule of Benedict, which emphasized observing periods of intense prayer and Bible study each day, along with manual labor. After Berno, other capable, conscientious abbots led Cluny for the next 200 years. The influence of Cluny gradually spread, and many other monasteries voluntarily came under the authority of the abbot at Cluny and reformed their practices to match those of Cluny. Compared with the corruption in the church's highest positions, the Cluniac movement seemed like a miracle to many—"a divine intervention to bring about a new dawn." *González 279*

• Cluniac monasteries opposed simony (the buying and selling of church offices) and nepotism (showing favoritism to relatives in appointments to office). Clergy from these monasteries had to remain single to focus on the life of the church. A series of popes backed this reform movement. Cluniac monks established good schools, which spread Latin again and made it the common language of the Middle Ages. They also started the movement that led to the Crusades against the Muslims in the Holy Land. By the 1100s, Cluny had about 1,100 monasteries under its leadership. The Cluniac movement continued until it was officially ended by legislation in 1790.