Conversion of Germanic Peoples to Christianity

One major goal of the Church during the early Middle Ages was to convert the various Germanic peoples who settled in western Europe to Christianity. The Germanic groups were polytheists, worshipping many male and female deities associated with nature. For example, the chief god of many of these people was Woden (also spelled Odin), who was said to have created the world and the first man and woman. His wife was Frigg (also known as Freya), queen of the heavens and the deity of the household. Among their children was Thor, the god of thunder, war, and strength. (Students in Core Knowledge schools may have learned about some of these Norse and Germanic gods and goddesses during their study of Norse mythology in Grade 3.)

Among the groups who converted were the Franks under Clovis I, who accepted Christianity in 496 CE. A century later, Pope Gregory the Great, who reigned from 590 to 604 CE, sent missionaries to most of the Germanic groups and other nonbelievers. These missionaries were so successful that by 1000 CE, most western Europeans were Christians. The main exceptions were Jews who had settled in various parts of Europe, and Muslims who had settled in much of Spain.

Charlemagne

Clovis’s descendants ruled the Frankish kingdom for several generations, but by the late 700s CE, the kingdom had passed into the hands of a king known as Charlemagne (the name means “Charles the Great”). Charlemagne extended the boundaries of his kingdom by annexing Bavaria in Germany, routing Muslims from a section of Spain, and, at the request of the pope, subduing the Lombards in northern Italy.

On Christmas Day in 800 CE, Charlemagne was crowned emperor of the West in Rome by Pope Leo III, whose enemies Charlemagne had defeated. In a sense this was a ceremonial title, since the Western Roman Empire had in fact collapsed hundreds of years earlier. However, the coronation of Charlemagne served two purposes. It was an attempt at extending the rule of law across western Europe, but it was also a carefully calculated move by the papacy. In bestowing the title of emperor of the West on Charlemagne, Leo was also affirming the power of the pope to crown a king.

Charlemagne was well suited to his new title. He felt a strong moral responsibility to support the Church and to encourage missionaries to the Germanic people, as well as to others, such as the Slavs and the Saxons. He set up a highly efficient government structure to administer his empire and instructed his officials to govern justly. Agriculture, manufacturing, and commerce flourished under his rule.

Charlemagne was also interested in furthering education and the arts. Both had suffered in the centuries since the disintegration of the old Roman Empire. Charlemagne set about establishing his court at Aachen, located in present-day western Germany, as a center of learning.

In 781 CE, Alcuin of York, theologian and scholar, took over direction of the palace school and devised a course of study based on classical (ancient Greek and Roman) learning that included grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music.

Cross-curricular Teaching Idea

Have students do research in library print materials and online to write a report about Charlemagne. They should include information about why he was crowned emperor of the West and how he used this position to try to unite western Europe. Student reports should present a main idea and supporting details and use clear paragraph format. You may also have them create a bibliography listing the sources they used to create the report. Encourage students to share their reports with the class.
II. Europe in the Middle Ages

After Charlemagne died, many stories were invented and told about the adventures of the king and the knights who served him, such as Roland. These stories are known as the *chansons de geste*. Some famous versions of these stories can be found in the French epic poem “Song of Roland” and in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. Children’s versions of the stories are also available.

Rise of Monasteries

The crowning of Charlemagne in 800 CE as the emperor of the West exacerbated tensions with the emperor in the East. Since the time of Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565 CE, no emperor had attempted to rule both the eastern and western portions of the former Roman Empire, but the emperor of the Byzantine Empire considered himself the only legitimate heir of the old Roman Empire. The patriarch of Constantinople, who had authority over the Church in the eastern empire, was subservient to the emperor, unlike the pope in the West, who considered himself more powerful than any monarch. Over time, the differences between the pope and the Byzantine emperor increased as both became more powerful.

In addition to political considerations, there were doctrinal differences between East and West. Priests in the Eastern Church were able to marry, whereas those in the Western Church were not. In an effort to bridge their differences, a meeting was called in 1054 CE between representatives of the Western and Eastern Churches. However, the attempt ended with the pope and the patriarch excommunicating each other. Thus began a schism, or separation, between the two branches of church, a schism that still continues today.