

## 5.1 Introduction

When the tenth century dawned, Europe was almost precisely at the mid point of its darkest age. The tide of civilization had receded and was now at low ebb. Charlemagne's Empire lay in ruins and there was no central civil or religious authority to unite the peoples of the continent. The cities had declined and the overwhelming majority of the population dwelt in the rural areas, where they lived in grinding poverty. Most of the land belonged to members of the nobility, who were little better than robber barons. They had private armies at their disposal and their principal occupation was that of maintaining a state of perpetual war with others like themselves. Amid all of this, the peasantry, who were little better than slaves, bore the brunt of the suffering.

The faith of most people during this epoch seems to have been even more superficial than at other periods of history. In Western Europe, most people were descended from tribesmen who had been baptized en masse at the time of the great "conversions". Neither their faith nor the faith of their descendants had ever been deepened to any significant degree, because the Carolingian renaissance had lasted for all too short a time.

The clergy, who should have been devoting themselves to this task, were often ignorant and incompetent. In theory, the priests who served the parishes were trained at the school associated with the principal church of the diocese, but in this period most of the cathedral parishes did not maintain schools. Most priests picked up what little training they received from those who had been priests before them in the village - often their fathers, since the law of celibacy was frequently not observed. The knowledge of Latin was not widespread among these priests; many of them knew barely enough to mumble the words of the Mass with little or no comprehension. The Bible was not even read, much less understood. These priests received part of their support from fees charged for the administration of the sacraments, and this opened the way to multiple abuses. In other cases, noble families had set aside property, and arranged that the rents from this property should be used to support the priest who served the area. However these benefices as they were called, were often given