

## **Module 203: Charlemagne**

*The Life of Charlemagne* by Einhard Translated by Samuel Epes Turner. Abridged, modernized and introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Edited and prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

**“This most powerful king.”**

### **Module Introduction**

**Although missionaries like Patrick and Augustine had made Christianity hugely successful in the British Isles, there was really only one tribe in the whole of mainland Europe who were mainstream Christians - the Franks, whose King had converted in 599. The others were all pagans or Arians.**

**All this changed when Charles the Great, or “Charlemagne” became King of the Franks, ruling from 771 to 814. He was a great military conqueror, and channeled this talent into the service of the church, for in taking over most of Western Europe and a fair bit of the east, he used military force to compel all his subject peoples to become Christian. He also sponsored more subtle missionary efforts, and encouraged the spread of Benedictine monasteries, and especially the copying of theological manuscripts.**

**The Pope crowned him Roman Emperor in 800, centuries after the ancient Roman Empire had collapsed in Europe - a move which infuriated the Eastern Emperor who still claimed to rule both east and west. His “Holy Roman Empire” shrank rapidly after his death, but it remained a major force in Europe into the Reformation. Although centered in modern Germany, its influence spread much wider.**

**Einhard, who wrote this biography, was a nobleman and a diplomat and adviser in Charlemagne’s service for over 23 years. In fact, the two were personal friends. This makes his report an invaluable source of firsthand information about the Emperor, but also alerts us to watch for personal bias.**

**Charlemagne presents Christians today with a dilemma. On the one hand, we ask, aren’t Charlemagne’s bloodthirsty ways of spreading the church completely alien to the gospel of Christ? On the other, we wonder would the church have survived if not for**

him?

[Einhard outlines Charlemagne's conquests of Aquitaine and the Lombards and his reconquest and return of lands seized from the papacy.]

## **7. Saxon War**

Now Charlemagne restarted his war against the Saxons. The Franks never fought another war with such persistence, bitterness or effort, because the Saxons, like almost all the German tribes, were a fierce people who worshipped devils and were hostile to our religion. They did not consider it dishonorable to violate any law, human or divine.

Every day there had been fighting. Except where forests or mountain ridges formed clear boundaries, the whole boundary between us and the Saxons ran through open country, so that there was no end to the murders, thefts and arsons on both sides. The Franks therefore became so embittered that they at last resolved to make reprisals no longer, but to come to open war with the Saxons [772].

The war lasted 33 years with great fury, and the Saxons came off worse than the Franks. It would have ended sooner, had it not been for the duplicity of the Saxons. They were conquered repeatedly and humbly submitted to the King, promising to do follow his commands. Sometimes they were so weakened that they promised to renounce their worship of devils, and to adopt Christianity, but they were as quick to violate these terms as they were to accept them. This kind of thing happened almost every year of the war. But Charlemagne's steadfast purpose faced good and bad fortune alike, and he was never wearied by their fickleness, or diverted from his task. He never allowed their faithless behavior to go unpunished, either fighting them in person or sending his counts' armies to get vengeance and righteous satisfaction.

At last, after conquering and subduing all who resisted, he resettled 10,000 of his subjects with their wives and children throughout Gaul and Germany [804]. This long war finally ended with the Saxons submitting on Charlemagne's terms, renouncing their national religious customs and the worship of devils, accepting the sacraments of the Christian faith and religion, and uniting with the Franks to form one people.

[Conquest of Bretons, Beneventans, Bavarians, Slavs, Huns, Bohemians, Linonians...]

### **15. Extent of Charlemagne's Conquests**

These were the wars so skillfully planned and successfully fought that this most powerful king fought during his 47-year reign. He increased the Frank kingdom so much - though it was already great and strong when he received it at his father - that more than double its former territory was added to it.

...

### **17. Public Works**

King Charlemagne, as I have showed, greatly extended his empire and powerfully subdued foreign nations, and was constantly occupied with such plans. But he also started also many public works to adorn and benefit his kingdom, and brought several of them to completion. The greatest were the Church of the Holy Mother of God at Aix-la-Chapelle, a most impressive building, and a bridge over the Rhine at Mayence, though this bridge was destroyed by fire the year before Charles died, and since he died so soon afterwards, it could not be repaired, although he had intended to rebuild it in stone. He began two beautiful palaces at Ingelheim and Nimeguen. But he cared above all for sacred buildings throughout his kingdom. Whenever he found them falling into disrepair, he commanded the priests and monks in charge to repair them. He also fitted out a naval fleet to protect Gaul and Germany from the Vikings, and Italy from

the Moors.

### **18. Private Life**

After his father's death, Charlemagne shared the kingdom with his brother, bearing his unfriendly jealousy patiently, and, to the amazement of everyone, never got angry with him.

He married the daughter of Desiderius, King of the Lombards, at the insistence of his mother, but he divorced her after a year for unknown reasons, and married Hildegard, a Swabian noble. He had three sons by her, Charles, Pepin and Louis, and three daughters, Hruodrud, Bertha, and Gisela. He had three other daughters too, two by his third wife, Fastrada, a German woman and the third by a concubine, whose name for the moment escapes me. At the death of Fastrada [794], he married Liutgard, an Alemannic woman, who bore him no children. After her death [800] he had three concubines who each bore him sons.

...

### **22. Personal Appearance**

Charlemagne was large and strong, and tall. His height was seven times the length of his foot. The upper part of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, nose a little long, hair fair, and face laughing and merry. Thus his appearance was always stately and dignified, whether he was standing or sitting. Admittedly, his neck was thick and somewhat short, and his belly rather prominent; but the symmetry of the rest of his body concealed these defects. His walk was firm, his whole carriage manly, and his voice clear, but surprisingly thin.

His health was excellent, except for the four years before he died, when he frequently suffered from fevers, and limped a little. Even then he followed his own inclinations rather than

the advice of doctors. They were almost hateful to him, because they wanted him stuck to boiled meat instead of roasts.

### **23. Dress**

He always kept to the Frank national dress. This was a linen shirt and pants as underwear, covered with a silk-fringed tunic, and trousers tied with bands, shoes on his feet, and in winter an otter skin coat over his shoulders. Over all he flung a blue cloak, and he always wore a sword, usually one with a gold or silver hilt and belt - sometimes jeweled, but only on great feast days or when entertaining foreign ambassadors.

### **24. Habits**

Charlemagne was moderate in eating, and particularly so in drinking, because he hated drunkenness in anybody, even more so in himself and his household. But he could not abstain from food for long, and often complained that fasts injured his health. He very rarely held banquets, except on great feast-days, but when he did, he invited large numbers of people. His meals usually consisted of four courses - not counting the roast, which his huntsmen would bring in on the spit. He loved this better than of any other dish. At meal times, he listened to reading or music. The readings were stories of the old days, and he was also very keen on St. Augustine's writings, especially *The City of God*.

He was so moderate in drinking wine that he rarely allowed himself more than three cups in the course of a meal. In summer after lunch, he would eat some fruit, drink a single cup, undress, and rest for two or three hours. He would wake and get up from bed four or five times during the night. While he was dressing and putting on his shoes, he not only gave audience to his friends, but if the Count of the Palace told him of a case requiring his judgment, he had them come to his room right then, and judged the case just as if he were at his court and pronounced judgment. At this

time, he would perform any of the day's duties at all.

## **25. Studies**

Charlemagne was fluent in speech, and could express whatever he had to say with the utmost clarity. He was not satisfied with speaking his native language, but learned foreign ones. He was a master of Latin, but he could understand Greek better than he could speak it. He might have passed for a teacher of eloquence. He was keen on the arts, and held teachers in great esteem, conferring great honors on them. Peter of Pisa, the elderly deacon taught him grammar. Alcuin, an Anglo-Saxon from Britain and the greatest scholar of his day, taught him other subjects. The King spent much time with him studying rhetoric, dialectics, and especially astronomy. He investigated the motions of the stars most carefully. He also tried learning to write, and used to keep tablets and notebooks in bed under his pillow, so that at leisure hours he could practice making the letters. But, though he tried hard, he was starting late in life, and had little success.

## **26. Piety**

Charlemagne was fervently devoted to Christian principles, which had been instilled into him from infancy. He built the beautiful church at Aix-la-Chapelle, which he adorned with gold and silver and lamps, and with rails and doors of solid brass. He had the columns and marbles brought from Rome and Ravenna, as he could not find suitable ones anywhere else. He worshipped there constantly as long as his health permitted, going morning and evening, even at night, besides attending mass. He made sure that all services there conducted properly in every way, and often warned the sextons not to let anything improper to be brought into the building. He provided many sacred vessels of gold and silver, and so many clerical robes that not even the lowliest doorkeepers had to wear their everyday clothes. He took great pains to improve reading and singing there, for he was well skilled in both although he never read in public, or sang

except quietly along with the congregation.

## **27. Charlemagne and the Roman Church**

Charlemagne gave a great deal of charity to the poor, and not only in his own country. Wherever he heard that there were Christians living in poverty - Syria, Egypt, Africa, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Carthage - he had compassion on them, and sent money over the seas to them. This is why he strove to make friends with foreign kings, so that he could give relief to the Christians living under their rule.

He cherished the Church of St. Peter at Rome above all other holy places, and heaped its treasury with a vast wealth of gold, silver, and precious stones. He sent countless large gifts to the popes; and throughout his whole reign his most heartfelt wish was to re-establish the ancient authority of Rome under his care and by his influence, and to defend and protect St. Peter's, beautifying and enriching it himself above all other churches. But though he held it in such veneration, he only went to Rome to say his vows and prayers four times during the whole of his 47-year reign.

## **28. Charlemagne Crowned Emperor**

His last journey there had another purpose though. Pope Leo had been mutilated by the Roman people who tore out his eyes and cut out his tongue, and he had called upon the King for help. Charlemagne accordingly went to Rome to set these affairs of the Church in order, because all was in confusion, and he spent the whole winter there. It was then that he was given the title of Emperor and Augustus. At first he had such an aversion to the title that he declared that he would not have set foot in the Church on the day they were conferred if he had known what the Pope intended, even though it was a great feast day. [Christmas 800]

The Roman emperors were unhappy about his taking this title, but he bore their jealousy very patiently. Through frequent embassies and letters, in which he addressed them

as brothers, he made their haughtiness give way to his magnanimity, a quality in which he was unquestionably much their superior.

### **29. Reforms**

After receiving the title of Emperor, Charlemagne realized that the laws of his people were defective. The Franks have two completely different sets of laws, and he decided to add what was missing, sort out the discrepancies, and correct what was wrong. He never got very far with this project, but he had the unwritten laws of all the tribes under his rule to be written up. He also had the old songs celebrating the deeds and wars of ancient kings written out for posterity.

### **30. Charlemagne's Death**

Toward the close of his life [813], broken by ill-health and old age, he summoned his son Louis, King of Aquitaine, and gathered together all the chief men of the whole kingdom of the Franks in a solemn assembly. He appointed Louis, with their unanimous consent, to rule with himself over the whole kingdom and made him heir to the imperial title.

He spent the rest of the autumn hunting, and in January he was struck with a high fever, and took to his bed. As soon as he was taken sick, he decided to abstain from food, as he always had done when he had a fever, hoping that the disease could be driven off, or at least mitigated, by fasting. Besides the fever, he suffered from pleurisy, but he still persisted in fasting, and in keeping up his strength only by the occasional drink. He died 28 January, seven days after he took to his bed, at nine o'clock in the morning, after receiving holy communion, at the age of 72 and having reigned for 47 years.

### **Discussion Starters:**

Does the benefit to the church mean that Charlemagne was justified in waging the wars he did? How can Christians know when, if ever, it is right to go to war?

What do you think it would be like too live as a Christian in Charlemagne's Europe?

How does Charlemagne come across as a person in Einhard's account? How well do you feel we get to know him?

What do we learn about Charlemagne's faith? How would you describe it?

What impression do you get about Charlemagne's relationship with the Pope? How would you describe that?

What impact do you think Charlemagne had on the history of the church?

## **Bible Verses**

**1 Samuel 8**

**Psalms 72**

**Haggai 1:1-8, 14-15**

**Matthew 5:38-48**

**Romans 13:1-7**