

## Ralph Glaber: On the First Millenium

**Source:** C.G. Coulton, ed, *Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan, c.1910), Vol 1, 1-7 [text slightly modernized]. *Internet Medieval Source Book*, 1997, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/glaber-1000.html>> (20th August 2009).

From Ralph Glaber (985-1047), *Historiarum Libri Quinque ab Anno Incarnationis DCCCC usque ad Annum MXLIV* (History in Five Books from 900 AD to 1044 AD)

### The First Millenium

Warned by the prophecy of Holy Writ, we see clearer than daylight that in the process of the Last Days, as love waxed cold and iniquity abounded among mankind, perilous times were at hand for men's souls. For by many assertions of the ancient fathers we are warned that, as covetousness stalks abroad, the religious Rules or Orders of the past have caught decay and corruption from that which should have raised them to growth and progress... From this [covetousness] also proceed the constant tumult of quarrels at law, and frequent scandals arise, and the even tenor of the different Orders is rent by their transgressions. Thus also it comes to pass that, while irreligiousness stalks abroad among the clergy, froward and incontinent appetites grow among the people, until lies and deceit and fraud and manslaughters, creeping abroad among them, draw almost all to perdition! And, since the mist of blindness has darkened the eye of the Catholic Faith (that is, the prelates of the Church), therefore their flocks, ignorant of the way to salvation, fall into the ruin of their own perdition... For whenever religion has failed among the pontiffs, and strictness of the Rule has decayed among the abbots, and therewith the vigor of monastic discipline has grown cold, and by their example the rest of the people are become prevaricators of God's commandments, what then can we think but that the whole human race, root and branch, is sliding willingly down again into the gulf of primeval chaos? ... And because, in fulfillment (as we see) of the Apostle's prophecy, love waxes cold and iniquity abounds among men that are lovers of their own selves, therefore these things aforesaid befell more frequently than usual in all parts of the world about the thousandth year after the birth of our Lord and Saviour.

For, in the seventh year before that date, Mount Vesuvius (which is also called Vulcan's Caldron) gaped far more often than his wont and belched forth a multitude of vast stones mingled with sulphurous flames which fell even to a distance of three miles around; and thus by the stench of his breath he began to make all the surrounding province uninhabitable... It befell meanwhile that almost all the cities of Italy and Gaul were ravaged by flames of fire, and that the greater part even of the city of Rome was devoured by a conflagration. During which fire, the flames caught the beams of St Peter's church, beginning to-creep under the bronze tiles and lick the carpenters' work. When this became known to the whole multitude that stood by, then, finding no possible device for averting this disaster, they turned with one accord and, crying with a terrible voice, hastened to the Confession [*Coulton note: The part of the choir in which the celebrant makes his confession before saying mass. See Dom Martene, De Antiquis Ecclesiae Ritibus, lib. i, c. iv, art. 2, ad fin. At St Peter's of Rome, this is the space eastward of the*

*Saint's tomb*], even of the Chief of the Apostles, crying upon him with curses that, if he watched not over his own, nor showed himself a very present defender of his church, many throughout the world would fall away from their profession of faith. Whereupon the devouring flames straightway left those beams of pine and, died away... At this same time a horrible plague raged among men, namely a hidden fire which, upon whatsoever limb it toned, consumed it and severed it from the body [*Coulton note: this is St Anthony's fire, one of the curses of the Middle Ages, which modem medicine has traced to poisons generated in corrupt rye-bread.*] Many were consumed even in the space of a single night by these devouring flames... Moreover, about the same time, a most mighty famine raged for five years throughout the Roman world, so that no region could be heard of which was not hunger stricken for lack of bread, and many of the people were starved to death. In those days also, in many regions, the terrible famine compelled men to make their food not only of unclean beasts and creeping things, but even of men's, women's, and children's flesh, without regard even of kindred; for so fierce waxed this hunger that grown-up sons devoured their mothers, and mothers, forgetting their maternal love ate their babes. [*Coulton note: The chronicler then goes on to speak of two heresies which arose in France and Italy, of the piety of King Robert of France, etc., etc.*]

So on the threshold of the aforesaid thousandth year, some two or three years after it, it befell almost throughout the world, but especially in Italy and Gaul, that the fabrics of churches were rebuilt, although many of these were still seemly and needed no such care; but every nation of Christendom rivaled with the other, which should worship in the seemliest buildings. So it was as though the very world had shaken herself and cast off her old age, and were clothing herself everywhere in a white garment of churches. Then indeed the faithful rebuilt and bettered almost all the cathedral churches, and other monasteries dedicated to divers saints, and smaller parish churches... When therefore, as we have said, the whole world had been clad in new church buildings, then in the days following that is, in the eighth year following the aforesaid thousandth year after the Incarnation of our Saviour - the relics of very many saints, which had long lain hid, were revealed by divers proofs and testimonies; for these, as if to decorate this revival, revealed themselves by God's will to the eyes of faithful, to whose minds also they brought much consolation. This revelation is known to have begun first in the city of Sens in Gaul, at the church of the blessed Stephen, ruled in those days by the archbishop Leoteric, who there discovered certain marvellous relics of ancient holy things; for, among very many other things which lay hidden, he is said to have found a part of Moses' rod, at the report whereof all the faithful flocked together not only from the provinces of Gaul but even from well-nigh all Italy and from countries beyond the sea; and at the same time not a few sick folk returned thence whole and sound, by the intervention of the saints. But, as most frequently befalls, from that source whence profit springs to men, there they are wont to rush to their ruin by the vicious impulse of covetousness; for the aforesaid city having, as we have related, waxed most wealthy by reason of the people who resorted thither through the grace of piety, its inhabitants conceived an excessive insolence in return for so great benefits... At that time, moreover, that is in the ninth year after the aforesaid thousandth anniversary, the church at Jerusalem which contained the sepulchre of our Lord and Saviour was utterly overthrown at the command of the prince of Babylon... After that it had been overthrown, as we have said, then within a brief space

it became full evident that this great iniquity had been done by the wickedness of the Jews. When therefore this was spread abroad through the whole world, it was decreed by the common consent of Christian folk that all Jews should utterly driven forth from their lands or cities. Thus they were held up to universal hatred and driven forth from the cities; some were slain with the sword or cut off by manifold kinds of death, and some even slew themselves in divers fashions; so that, after this well-deserved vengeance had been wreaked, scarce any were found in the Roman world. Then also the bishops published decrees forbidding all Christians to associate themselves with Jews in any matter whatsoever; and ordaining that, whosoever would be converted to baptismal grace and utterly eschew the Customs or manners of the Jews, he alone should be received. Which indeed was done by very many of them for love of this present life, and impelled rather by fear of death than by the joys of the life everlasting; for all such of them as simulated this conversion returned impudently within a brief while to their former way of life...

After the manifold signs and prodigies which came to pass in the world, some earlier and some later, about the thousandth year from our Lord's birth, it is certain that there were many careful and sagacious men who foretold other prodigies as great when the thousandth year from His Passion should draw nigh. [*Coulton note: Glaber here goes on to relate the rival claims of the Greek Church, the growth of heresy in Italy, the success of false miracles wrought by evil spirits, and another three years of famine and cannibalism; after which a series of church councils were held for peace and reform.*] Then were innumerable sick folk healed in those conclaves of Holy men; and, lest men should think lightly of mere bursten skin or rent flesh in the straightening of arms and legs, much blood flowed forth also when the crooked limbs were restored; which gave faith to the rest who might have doubted. At this all were inflamed with such ardour that through the hands of their bishops they raised the pastoral staff to heaven, while themselves with outspread palms and with one voice cried to God: Peace, peace, peace! - that this might be a sign of perpetual covenant for that which they had promised between themselves and God; on condition that, after the lapse of five years, the same covenant should marvellously be repeated by all men in the world in confirmation of that peace. That same year, moreover, so great was the plenty and abundance of corn and wine and other fruits of the earth, that men dared not hope to have so much during all the five years next to come; for no human food was aught accounted of save flesh or choice victuals, and this year was like unto the great Jubilee of ancient Mosaic times. Next year again, and again in the third and fourth years, the fruits were no less abundant. But, alas for shame! the human race, forgetful of God's loving kindness and prone from its very beginning to evil, like the dog returning to his own vomit again or the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire, made the covenant of their own promise of none effect in many ways; and, as it is written, they waxed fat, and grew thick, and kicked. For even the princes of both orders, spiritual and secular, turned to covetousness and began to sin in theft and greed as grievously as before, or even worse. Then those of middle rank and the poorer people, following the example of the greater, declined into horrible Crime. For who ere now had heard of such incests, adulteries, and illicit alliances between close kindred, such mockery of concubines and such emulation of evil men? Moreover, to fill up the measure of so great wickedness, since there were few or none among the people to

correct the rest, and to rebuke such crimes, therefore the prophecy was fulfilled which says, "And it shall be as with the people, so with the priest"; seeing especially that all the rulers in those days, both secular and spiritual were mere boys. For in those days through them that saying of Solomon's was fulfilled: "Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child." For even the universal Pope of Rome himself, the nephew of the two popes Benedict and John who had preceded him was a boy scarce ten years old, whose money and treasures had procured his election by the Romans; by whom in process of time he was dishonourably treated and oftentimes cast forth, so that he had no power. [*Coulton note: "The foulness of his conversation and life is horrible to relate," notes Glaber about same Pope on a later page (698). This was the lowest ebb reached by the papacy until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.*] Moreover, as we have already said, the rest of the prelates in those days owed their promotion rather to their gold and silver than to their merit. Alas for shame! It is of such that the Scripture says - nay rather God's own mouth - "They have been princes, and I knew not." At this same time so innumerable a multitude began to flock from all parts of the world to the sepulchre of our Saviour at Jerusalem, as no man could before have expected; for the lower orders of people led the way, after whom came those of middle rank, and then all the greatest kings and counts and bishops; lastly (a thing which had never come, to pass before), many noble ladies and poorer women journeyed thither. For many purposed and desired to die before they should see their homes again... Moreover, some of those were then most concerned in these matters, being consulted by many concerning the signification of this concourse to Jerusalem, greater than the past age had ever heard of, answered with some caution that it portended no other than advent of that reprobate Antichrist, whose coming at the end of this World is prophesied in Holy Scripture.