

# History of the Church

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will  
build my church,  
and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.  
(Matt. 16:18)

At the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost (see Acts 2), the Church began its public ministry, bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations. During these early years, the Church was primarily a community of Jewish converts. It was to them that Jesus had focused his public ministry, and to them that the apostles and disciples had first carried the Good News. Thus, the focus of the Church's ministry was centred at Jerusalem, preaching to the Jews of that great city and those that came to it in pilgrimage from their faraway homes.

## The Early Years

The Jewish focus changed with the Church's expansion beyond Jerusalem, which began about the year 36 AD. A deacon named Stephen was falsely accused of blasphemy, brought before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court of elders), and later stoned to death (see Acts 6:8-7:60). His death triggered a larger persecution of the entire Christian community in Jerusalem led by the Pharisee Saul, who would later convert and become Paul, the

Apostle to the Gentiles (see Acts 9:1-19; Acts 16:9-10). (The Gentiles were those not of Jewish descent.) As a result of this persecution, Jewish Christians fled to other major cities in the empire such as Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. As Christians spread to these places, they came into more frequent contact with Gentiles, who quickly converted. Gentiles entered the Church in such large numbers that they soon outnumbered the Jewish Christians, and tensions between the two groups began to arise. A major dispute soon arose about whether these new Gentile Christians had to follow all the precepts of the Law of Moses. It was clear that the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue) should be kept by all, but not clear about dietary laws and practices such as circumcision. These latter precepts for centuries had helped to distinguish Israel from its pagan neighbours amidst persecution and slavery. To resolve this dispute, the first Church council was called at Jerusalem, in about 50 AD. The decisions of this council made it clear that Gentiles were not bound by the law of circumcision but were bound to avoid eating meats which had been sacrificed to idols, both to ensure that they themselves would not be tempted to return to idolatry and to demonstrate respect for the traditions and customs of their Jewish brothers and sisters (see Acts 15:1-19).

## **The Period of Persecution**

The Church continued to grow and spread in the following few decades during a period of relative peace. This changed when a fire that devastated much of Rome in 64 AD was blamed on the Christians by the emperor Nero. As punishment, Nero began persecuting Christians. Many Christians were martyred during this persecution, including the two great pillars of the Church, Saints Peter and Paul. This persecution lasted only a year, but it began a general attitude of hostility on the part of Roman authorities toward Christians that continued into the 4th century. During these centuries, the simmering Roman hostility several times erupted into outright persecution in which Christians were killed for their faith. It reached a peak in the early years of the 4th century when, in the years 303 and 304, the emperor of the eastern half of the empire, Diocletian, issued three edicts initiating a violent persecution that lasted almost twenty years in some regions of the empire. In the West, the emperor Constantine was more favourable towards the Church due to the influence of his mother, Helena, who had become a Christian. Following a miraculous vision urging Constantine to fight under the sign of the cross, Constantine achieved victory over his imperial rivals. He and his eastern counterpart issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which legalized Christianity and gave it an equal status with the traditional pagan religions of Rome. Constantine eventually took control of the entire

empire, put an end to the remaining persecutions, and reunited the empire under one leader. Some historians claim that Constantine himself converted before his death.

## **The Period of Heresies**

In the wake of its new freedom, the Church was able to establish itself and begin to deal with the confusion and errors called heresies that were disrupting the lives of many of the faithful. Certain heresies, which centred around the person of Christ — whether he was God or man or both, and whether he was one person or two or a mixture of both — were valuable moments for the Church to reflect more deeply on its teaching, gain greater insight into the truth of its doctrines, and develop greater precision in the way they were expressed.

Several Church councils were convened during this time, beginning with the Council of Nicaea in 325. This council affirmed Christ's divinity, which had been denied by the proponents of Arianism, who asserted that Christ was only human and had been created at the beginning of time. Because of the vast extent of Arianism, which claimed in its ranks even many bishops, another council was called in 381 at Constantinople. This council reaffirmed the divinity of Christ and reaffirmed the creed first formulated at Nicaea, commonly called the Nicene Creed. In the following century, another heresy arose, called Nestorianism, which denied that Mary

was the Mother of God (*Theotokos*, meaning in Greek “God-bearer”) and claimed that she gave birth only to Christ’s human person. In response, the Church at the Council of Ephesus in 431 affirmed that Christ was a divine Person who assumed human nature when conceived in Mary’s womb. Mary’s title as Mother of God came not because she herself was a divine person but because she gave human birth to the Divine Person, the Son of God. Twenty years later at the Council of Chalcedon, the Church defined the way Christ assumed human flesh as a union of two natures, human and divine, in one divine Person. Pope Leo the Great’s famous Tome that was read at the Council explained that this union in Christ’s divine Person united two complete, distinct, and individual natures without any confusion. Upon hearing this, the bishops gathered there rose and proclaimed: “This is the faith of the apostles; so we all believe. Peter has spoken through Leo!”

## **The Creation of Christendom**

By the 5th century, the Church had spread to nearly every corner of the Roman Empire. Large civic halls called basilicas were converted into churches to allow for larger numbers to assemble for worship. Because the possibility of martyrdom had been largely removed when Christianity became a legal religion, some members of the Church went out into the desert, denying themselves every physical comfort as a kind of spiritual martyrdom witnessing

to their desire and faith to live and die only for the Lord. Eventually, many of the faithful were inspired to draw away from the world to—if not the desert—a secluded place where they could pray and fast. A whole new way of Christian living was born, called monasticism. Monasteries sprang up around Europe, generally seen as beginning with St. Benedict's in Monte Casino, Italy.

With the collapse of the empire in the West in 410, monasteries also became centres of education and culture. It is largely due to the work of monks who spent long hours each day copying manuscripts that Western culture was preserved for future generations. During the 5th through the 8th centuries, missionary monks were sent out to preach the Gospel all over Europe. With the work of St. Patrick in Ireland, St. Augustine of Canterbury in England, and St. Boniface in Germany, to name only a few, the Church was established in modern-day Germany, France, Spain, England, Scotland, and Ireland. By the conclusion of the first millennium of Christianity, nearly the whole of Europe had become Christian.

The collapse of the empire in the West, which had left half of Europe without any centralized leadership or government, led the Church, specifically the popes, to step in and save Western Europe from total ruin. When Attila the Hun first approached Rome in 451, it was Pope Leo the Great who met with him and convinced him to spare

attacking Rome. As the years went by, the pope as Christ's vicar (representative) on earth wielding spiritual authority was seen more and more also as an authority in affairs of the world.

The rise of the papacy's political authority eventually wed the Church and state together in the West, contributing to a rising hostility between East and West in the Church. The Pope's addition of the words "and the Son" to the Nicene Creed to describe the procession of the Holy Spirit, without the use of a worldwide Church council, was seen by Eastern bishops as a usurpation of the authority of the bishops as a whole. When Pope St. Leo III crowned Charlemagne as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire on Christmas Day 800, the hostility reached its peak. How could the Pope not only allow but also crown a French barbarian king to the throne of the Roman Empire? The Greeks in the East were furious. For the next 150 years the situation was only worsened by popes of ill repute. In 1054, the final break between Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople took place, thereby severing the Eastern (now called Orthodox) Churches from the West. Today, many of the wounds caused by this division have been healed and relations with the East have considerably improved, although the schism has not yet been ended.

## **The Rise of Islam and the Crusades**

In the 7th century, Islam was founded and began a centuries-long period of conquest in the Christian world. Within a century, Islamic warriors had taken over much of Christian Asia Minor, North Africa, and Spain, only halted by Christian military resistance at Constantinople in 717 and southern France in 732. An uneasy peace with numerous clashes prevailed for the next several centuries.

The first Crusade, launched by Pope Urban II in 1095, was a response to the plea from the Byzantine Empire (the former Eastern Roman Empire) for help against Muslim conquest of Christian holy places and attacks on Byzantine soil. The Crusaders also sought to open a passageway to the Holy Land in order to ensure that pilgrimages by Christians would always be possible in the Muslim-dominated territory. However, after initial success, the later Crusades had less honourable aims, becoming more and more materialistic. By the end of the 13th century, the Muslims had driven the Crusaders out of the Holy Land.

## **The “High Middle Ages”**

From approximately the 11th through the 14th centuries, Europe experienced its greatest period of unity and the formation of a true culture of Christianity. This period is termed the “high middle ages” (that is, a portion of the period from about the



5th to the 14th centuries), and saw as well the rise of great learning, the establishment of universities, and a greater development in trade. This is the period of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, founders of two of the Church's greatest religious orders, and the period of the greatest philosopher and theologian the Church has ever produced, St. Thomas Aquinas.

A much-needed reform of the papacy began with the establishment of the Cluny monastery in France in 910. This monastery, free from feudal control, became the model for monasteries during this time; by the mid-12th century there were over 300 monasteries modelled on Cluny. Monks from these houses began taking leadership roles in the Church, including the papacy. This led to the actions of several popes to establish the Church's autonomy from secular influence. The most notable example is Pope Gregory VII (1073- 1085). Pope Gregory, himself from a reformed monastery, sought to free the Church from the influence of Emperor Henry IV. Although Pope Gregory lost his own battle, dying in exile from Rome, his ideas remained, and the Church eventually won the war. The pinnacle of papal power in this era was probably Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). Pope Innocent did spiritual battle with King Philip Augustus of France and later King John of England, in both cases coming out the victor. The power of the Church over kings would never be greater than under this pope.

But troubles remained. In the early 14th century the papacy moved to Avignon, France, where it remained for about seventy years, heavily influenced by French monarchs. The Pope eventually returned to Rome, but there were rival claims to the papacy and by 1415 three men, each from a different “chain” of succession, claimed to be pope. Only with the Council of Constance in Switzerland in 1417 was the situation sorted out, but the damage that had been done lasted for centuries.

## **The Protestant Revolt and the Council of Trent**

A whole variety of factors in the Church came together in 1517 when the Augustinian monk Martin Luther nailed his “Ninety-five Theses” (a list of criticisms of Church practices in his day) to the Church door in Wittenburg, Germany. Initially intended only as a challenge to debate, Luther’s Theses became a rallying point for people discontented with the Church and its problems at the time. Luther and others quickly broke away from the Catholic Church, leading away from the Church many millions in German-speaking states, France, Switzerland, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia.

In response to the doctrinal challenges of the reformers, and the genuine need for reform of corrupt practices by members of the Church, the

Church convened the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which reaffirmed the doctrines of the Church with great clarity. With assistance from a new order of priests called the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), the Church launched the Counter-Reformation, which sought to reclaim the peoples and nations that had separated themselves from the Church. Although only a portion of Europe was restored to the Church, the Counter-Reformation succeeded in renewing the Church as a whole and removed many of the abuses and problems that had made the Protestant revolt possible.

Simultaneously with the problems in Europe, the Church was growing tremendously in the New World. Missionaries were sent to preach the Gospel. They not only preached but also worked to improve the manner in which both natives and those people enslaved and transported from Africa were treated, and to alleviate their burdens. The many Church condemnations of slavery, sadly, had little effect on its general practice in the New World. Nevertheless, great numbers of the oppressed population converted and entered the Church. Missionary efforts, most notably by the Jesuits, were also carried out in the Far East in India, Japan, China, Indochina, and the Philippines. The blood of many martyrs was spilt in order to establish the Church in these lands.

## **The “Enlightenment,” Vatican I, and the Early 20th Century**

The next major challenge to the Church did not come from kings and rulers but from philosophers. With the dawn of the “Age of Reason,” also called the “Enlightenment,” faith was ridiculed. The “enlightened” philosopher could not be a person of faith because religion and science, faith and reason were viewed as incompatible opposites. The consequences for the faithful were dire. Not only did outright persecutions result from the denial of God’s role in human affairs, such as that which characterized the French Revolution in the late 1800s, but more importantly the faith of many people was systematically undermined, so that today, throughout nearly all of old Christendom and the parts of the world where “Western values” predominate, a new kind of paganism has become the predominant culture, but without even the redeeming feature of belief in and worship of some kind of god.

At the Vatican I Council in 1870, the relationship of faith and reason was affirmed. The Council explained that, although the truth obtained through faith is inaccessible to reason alone, it is no less rational because of it. The person of faith does not put his or her reason aside. Rather, the light of faith purifies reason and enables the believer to use reason to make sense out of divine Revelation. Also, amidst the growing atheism of this time,

Vatican I affirmed that knowledge of God's existence could be discovered through reason alone. As Scripture says, "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20), that is, those who say they cannot discover him.

At the turn of the 20th century, a new heresy called modernism appeared that was a synthesis of many previous heresies. Pope Pius X (1903-1914) was an ardent defender of the Church's teaching in the face of modernism. His successors would find themselves occupied with the problems of two world wars and the political ideologies of Communism and Fascism that came between and after them. Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) sought to confirm the rights of Catholics under Fascist governments in Italy and Germany. Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) sought to stop World War II and saved hundreds of thousands of Jews from the genocidal evil of the Nazi regime in Germany.

During this period and in the following decades up to the present, the Church has vigorously defended human rights and promoted the value of the individual person against both totalitarian communist states, which suppressed human freedom by promoting the state over and against the individual, and states that allowed or promoted such evils as abortion and euthanasia. In the West,

the Church also faces the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel to an increasingly secular and materialistic culture. In various encyclicals (papal letters), the popes during these years have defended the value of marriage and the family and promoted the value of human labour over capital, underscoring that the person and his or her work cannot be treated as another mere raw material in the process of production. The Church has also repeatedly reminded wealthy nations of their obligation to help the poor and to work toward a more just distribution of human goods throughout the world.

## **Vatican II to the Present**

In order to adapt itself to the quickly-changing times and more successfully proclaim the Gospel, the Church held its twenty-first Ecumenical Council in 1962-1965, Vatican II. In many ways, Vatican II was the fruit of the renewal that had already begun in the areas of liturgy and biblical studies. In the wake of this Council, the Church has sought to implement its reforms and become more effective in proclaiming the Gospel to the modern world. Pope John XXIII called the Council; Pope Paul VI closed it and implemented many of its reforms. Pope John Paul II emphasized the theological, social, and political importance of human dignity and made Vatican II the rallying point of his papacy as he led the Church into the third millennium of Christianity. Pope Benedict XVI, elected in 2005, has made

Christian unity, combating the relativism of the secular culture (see handout on Errors of Modern Culture), and re-evangelisation of nations once authentically Christian important parts of his work as Universal Shepherd.

Sadly, the first several decades following Vatican II coincided with a rise in a “culture of dissent” within the Church, which even claimed that the conciliar documents somehow supported their desire to change doctrine and overthrow ancient disciplines. This culture may be on the wane, but it is the responsibility of every Catholic to fully and joyfully conform to the Church’s unchanging teaching, even when the cost is, as Jesus tells us, taking up our cross daily (see Lk. 9:23).

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