



Third Sunday of Easter April 14, 2013 C

CHURCH HISTORY

The *Acts of the Apostles* from which our first readings during the Easter Season is taken, is sometimes called the first Church history since it tells us about the beginnings of the Church. Recently, I have been writing some articles on the history of our Church.

The following are some excerpts from the first two articles.

Why study Church history?

Cicero (106-43BC) once said: *“To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?”* Applying Cicero’s words to the study of Church history, we can say that Church history helps us to connect the *Church of today* with the *Church of the past*.

In studying Church history, we learn over and over the remarkable story of the Church’s *durability*, how down through the centuries it has survived attacks from within and from without. We learn how the Church has not only endured but has grown stronger through various crises. We learn how Christ has been faithful to his promise to be with his Church until the end of time and not to allow the gates of hell to prevail against it (Matt 28:20, 16-18).

In studying Church history, we learn about the challenges that our Catholic ancestors faced in every age as they tried to live their faith and spread it to the ends of the earth.

Initially a new sect within Judaism. Like Jesus and the Apostles, the first Christians are all Jews. For some years they continue to live like pious Jews: they pray at the temple, observe the Mosaic dietary laws, and practice circumcision. In short, they most likely see themselves as a new sect within Judaism, namely, the “Nazoreans.” They are characterized by their belief in Jesus’ Resurrection, their baptizing in Jesus’ name, their high regard for the Apostles’ teachings, the breaking of the bread (Eucharist), and holding all things in common (Acts 2:31-37). The first Christians are a new breed of Jews who believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Tension and persecution. Gradually, the growing impact of “the new breed” of believers in Jesus starts to worry the leaders of Judaism who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah nor was he raised from the dead. In Acts 4:1-4, we

read: *“While they were still speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees confronted them, disturbed that they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They laid hands on them and put them in custody until the next day, since it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word came to believe and the number of men grew to about five thousand.”*

When the Apostles are ordered to stop speaking about Jesus, Peter and John assert with courage that they cannot obey such an order. They say that it is impossible for them to be silent about what they have seen and heard (Acts 4:18-21). The next time the Apostles are dragged before the Jewish leadership, they are flogged (Acts 5:40). The warning issued by Jesus in Mark 13:9 is now coming to fulfillment: *“They will hand you over to the courts. You will be beaten...because of me.”*

Paul. Concerning Paul, Michael Pennock in his book *This is our Church*, writes: *“St. Paul is a towering figure in early Christian history. Approximately 60 percent of the Acts of the Apostles recounts his life’s work, and roughly half of the New Testament books were written by or attributed to him. He was a vigorous missionary, courageous defender of the faith, brilliant theologian, builder and sustainer of Christian communities, and a brave martyr.”*

Council of Jerusalem

The first big *internal* problem that the early church experiences has to do with Gentiles (non-Jews) who want to convert to Christianity. Should Gentiles who want to become Christians have to first become Jews and keep the laws of Judaism? Some leaders like Paul and Peter (as a result of a vision narrated in Acts 10) believe that Gentiles do not have to become Jews, whereas, some leaders, like Bishop James of Jerusalem, is convinced that they do. To resolve this issue which could have caused the first big split in the new religion, the first Church Council is convened in Jerusalem (Acts 15). The issue is peacefully resolved in favor of not demeaning Gentiles from becoming Jews before becoming Christians.

The Council of Jerusalem is a *major* event in early Christianity. It results in the severance of ties between the Christian faith and Judaism. From thence, no one has to be uprooted from one’s own culture to receive the Gospel. The Council’s decision paves the way for an explosion of growth within the Christian Church.

Final break with Judaism. In 70AD, in retaliation to a Jewish rebellion, the Romans set fire to Jerusalem and destroy the temple. After this event, Jews who survive feel betrayed by Jewish Christians for not coming to their aid. After this, Jewish Christians are no longer welcome in the synagogues.

Formation of Christian Scriptures. The last decades of the first centuries see the gradual formation of Christian writings which in time become known as the New Testament. It will be the end of the fourth century before Church leaders decide on which writings belong and do not belong in the canon of the New Testament.

Three degrees of hierarchical ministry

The three degrees of ordained ministry that exist in our Church today start to take on definite form by the end of the first century. We know this from the still existing seven letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, a heroic martyr of the early Church at the time of the Apostles. Tradition has it that he may have known St. John the Evangelist. His seven letters stress, among other things, the importance of the bishop's role in the Christian community and of the community's faithfulness to their bishop. Ignatius writes:

Follow your bishop, every one of you, as obediently as Jesus Christ followed the Father. Obey the presbyters (the college of presbyters) as you would the apostles; give your deacons the same reverence that you would a command from God. Make sure that no step affecting the church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop's sanction. The sole eucharist you should consider valid is one that is celebrated by the bishop himself, or by some person authorized by him. Where the bishop is to be seen, there let all his people be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is present, we have the Catholic Church. Nor is it permissible to conduct baptisms or agapes (a meal of support and fellowship with a religious significance but different from the eucharist) without the bishop. On the other hand, whatever does have his sanction can be sure of God's approval (Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans, 8).

Ignatius is the first person to refer to the Church as the "Catholic Church."

Deaconesses

It should be noted that deaconesses also ministered in the early church. (See the book *How to Read Church History*, p. 45 for quote on the ministry of deaconesses).

Bishop of Rome. Before Jerusalem is burned by the Romans in 70AD, the bishop of Jerusalem is considered the most important bishop in the Church. After the fall of Jerusalem, Rome gradually becomes the capital city of Christianity, the place where Peter and Paul are martyred. It is the capital of the Empire. The bishop of Rome is seen as the successor of Peter. In the second century (130-202),

St. Irenaeus of Lyons (in present-day France) says of the Roman See: "Every other (local) church must be in harmony with this church (Rome) because of its outstanding pre-eminence." In the middle of the third century, Bishop Cyprian of Carthage writes: "To be in communion with the bishop of Rome is to be in communion with the Catholic Church."

Despite these words of Irenaeus and Cyprian, it will take many centuries before all the bishops in a growing Church come to recognize the jurisdiction of the Church of Rome over all other churches—something the bishops of the Eastern Church never fully recognize. Instead, these bishops, especially the bishop of Constantinople, see themselves as equal to the bishop of Rome. Eastern bishops reject the belief that the bishop of Rome has universal jurisdiction. This tension between the East and West reaches a climax in 1054 when the leaders of both sides excommunicate each other.

God raises up great teachers to deal with heresies

In several of his writings and speeches, Paul warns the early Christians about the danger of false teachers. In Acts 20:30, we read: "From your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them. So be vigilant...." Heresy is the willful acceptance of incorrect doctrine. Three prominent heresies emerge in the first two centuries of the Church: Marcionism, Montanism and Gnosticism.

The Apologists. When Christianity is attacked, God raises up a group of writers who become known as apologists—defenders of the faith. These intellectual leaders can explain the faith through reason and philosophy. They demonstrate that Christianity is a reasonable and intellectually sound religion that can be understood and embraced by people of all cultures and lands. In their defense of the faith against heretical teachings, the apologists appeal to apostolic teaching and to apostolic succession. In his treatise *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus of Lyons writes: "The tradition of the apostles, manifested throughout the world, can be clearly seen in every church by those who wish to behold the truth. We can enumerate those who were established by the apostles as bishops in the churches, and their successors down to our time...."

Six Apologists. The best known apologists in the early Church are Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Origen and Tertullian. Concerning the work of the first Apologists in the Christian Church, Jean Comby writes: "They had to work out a language intelligible to those for whom they were writing, that is to say, in terms of the Graeco-Latin culture. In this way, Christianity broke free from its cultural isolation" (Reading Church History, pp 33-34). The following is a brief note on two of the best known of the early apologists.

Ignatius of Antioch (35-115AD) was born in Syria and a convert to Christianity. He becomes bishop of one of the most prominent Sees of the ancient church. In 107, Emperor Trajan visits Antioch and forces Christians to choose between death and apostasy. Because Ignatius will not deny Christ, he is condemned to be put to death in Rome. On his long journey to Rome, Ignatius stops and befriends several Christian communities. Then he writes his seven letters to these churches urging them to remain faithful to God and to obey their superiors. In his final letter, he begs the Christians in Rome not to try to stop his martyrdom. *“Let me be food for the wild beasts for they are my way to God. I am God’s wheat and shall be ground by their teeth, so that I may become Christ’s pure bread”* (Romans, 4:1-2).

Justin Martyr (100-165AD) is a well-educated philosopher prior to becoming a Christian. He is known as the patron saint of philosophers and the most famous of the *Apologists* in the second century. He defends the faith from attacks and helps to explain it to Gentile inquirers. Justin also writes one of the earliest descriptions of the Mass which can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (para.1345). In 165AD, Justin is beheaded for his faith.

Roman Empire’s persecution of Christianity

Rome is generally tolerant of different religions and initially saw Christians as just another sect within Judaism. But as Christianity grows in numbers and becomes more visible, and as Christians preach that there is only one God and that he is not the emperor, Rome begins to change its attitude towards the new religion. Because Christians refuse to worship the emperor—which Rome has mandated in order to foster unity in the Empire—they are accused of being atheists and subversive, a threat to civil harmony.

Most persecutions of the first two centuries are brief and limited to certain areas, but they are brutal. In 64AD, Nero falsely accuses Christians of burning Rome in order to deflect blame from himself. He tortures and crucifies Christians, igniting their bodies as a spectacle for the bloodthirsty crowds.

In the middle of the third century, the Emperor Decius, fearing the growing number of Christians, calls for the first empire-wide persecution of the Church. Christians who refuse to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods are imprisoned or put to death. While many Christians bravely submit to a cruel death rather than deny Jesus, thousands of them, including clergy, renounce (“apostatize”) their faith.

The last and perhaps worst of all the Roman persecutions takes place under Diocletian (284-305AD). His aim is to uproot Christianity from the Empire. He tries to do it by confiscating the property of Christians, destroying their churches and sacred books, banishing them to hard labor, subjecting them to a host of tortures, and inflicting the death penalty.

Early Christian martyrs are buried in caves called “catacombs” outside the walls of the city of Rome. They remain today as a monument for many who suffered and died for Christ.

Reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity

By the end of the third century, the Christian Church is like an empire within an empire. While there is indeed a divine side to the expansion of Christianity, God usually works through human beings and events to achieve his purposes. So, on a human level, what caused the rapid spread of Christianity? Here are some reasons:

- The first Christians had a burning desire to share the awesome good news that they had experienced. Theirs was not a private religion.
- Non-believers were moved by the witnessing of the first Christian communities as they cared for the widows, orphans and the poor, and visited the condemned in prison. They said, “See how those Christians love one another.”
- The public killing of Christians helped to ‘market’ the Christian faith. Martyrdom was frequently witnessed by thousands in the Roman amphitheaters. Even the hardest of hearts must have been moved by the way Christians went to their death, especially the witness of women like Perpetua and Felicity.
- The ability of great teachers like Justin, Ignatius and Irenaeus served to defend Christian beliefs and explain them to educated non-believers.
- Two conditions within the Roman Empire facilitated the work of Christian missionaries: a) the marvelous system of roads and shipping made it easy for missionaries to travel throughout the empire; b) since most people in the empire spoke Greek, Greek-speaking missionaries proclaimed the Gospel in all the large cities and were understood.

Have a blessed week,

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