

THE APOSTOLIC AGE

Part One: Birth of the Church

In this Article, we will look at:

- **What is Church history?**
- **Why study Church history?**
- **Birth of the Church: Pentecost Day**
- **Persecution of the first Christians**
- **Paul**
- **Council of Jerusalem**
- **Formation of the Christian scriptures**
- **Worship life of early Christians**

What is Church history?

- Catholic Church history is the story of how the community of believers responded to Jesus' Great Commission to spread his message to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19-20).
- Church history is the story of the people and events that have shaped Catholicism since its beginnings in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.
- Church history is the story of how God through the Church continues his work of salvation in all times and places.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, "The Church is in history, but at the same time she transcends it. It is only 'with the eyes of faith' that one can see her in her visible reality and at the same time in her spiritual reality as bearer of divine life" (770).

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 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 (Matt 28:20) and not to allow the gates of hell to prevail against it (Matt 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.

As we study Church history, we will encounter saints and villains, Church leaders who inspire us and Church leaders who scandalize us. Because the Church is *human* and made up of imperfect people, it will sometimes fail us, hurt us and even scandalize us. But because the Church is *divine*, it will recover from its failures and grow from strength to strength. Today, the Catholic Church has over one billion members, that is, about 17% of the world's population.

In her book *Church History – From Apostolic Times to Today*, Gloria Shahin writes:

Even though the Church has a divine origin and a divine mission, that mission is carried out in the midst of human events; therefore, to study the history of the Church, it is also necessary to study the events of the Church's life intertwined with events in the life of the world. The Church, like Jesus Christ himself, is incarnated in the world.

As you learn about the Church's history, recall that the nature of the Church transcends the actions of specific individuals who have shaped her human character, and that despite any human failings, the Church that you are a part of is willed by the Holy Trinity – planned by the Father, instituted by Christ, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (p.7).

Jesus, Founder of the Church. Catholics believe that Jesus is the founder of the Church. In Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus expresses his plan to found a church when he says to Peter: "*You are Peter and upon this rock, I will build my church.*" Notice the words "*my church.*" The Catholic Church which we belong to is *Jesus' Church*. He is its founder and sustainer.

After his Resurrection, and before he ascends into heaven, Jesus proclaims two other very important things.

- He instructs his apostles to “*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptize and teach them...and know that I will be with you always*” (Matt 28:19-20).
- He tells his disciples that they will “*receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them*” (Acts 1:8).

The Apostolic Age

The first age in the Church’s history is called the Apostolic Age which covers the time of the Apostles and the first generations of Christians who lived after the Apostles, roughly from 30AD to 312AD.

Birth of the Church: Pentecost Day. The Church began in or around the year 30 in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

In the Jewish year, Pentecost is the final day of the annual harvest festival. The Jews, speaking in different languages, assemble in Jerusalem. The disciples and Mary are gathered in prayer in the Upper Room awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. Early on Pentecost Day, Jesus fulfills his promise to send forth his Spirit to empower his followers to be his “*witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

Upon receiving the Spirit, the Apostles go out to the streets of Jerusalem and with great enthusiasm, start to evangelize all who are willing to listen. The people are amazed that these simple Galilean men are able to speak to them in several different languages about “*the mighty acts of God.*” Luke tells us that “*all were astounded and bewildered*” saying to one another: “*What does this mean?*” (Acts 2:11-12). With that, Peter gives his first homily (2:14-36). It is a very effective one as Luke tells us that “*those who accepted his message were baptized and about three thousand persons were added to their number that day*” (Acts 2:41). The Church is born.

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” or followers of the way of Jesus. 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 and 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.*”

In the meantime, tension arises between two groups of Jewish Christians: the Hebrew community (Aramaic-speaking Jews) and the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews). The Hellenists complain against the Hebrews that their widows are being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). The Apostles respond by asking the Hellenists to select some spirit-filled men to take care of the problem. This is the beginning of the diaconate ministry in the Church. Stephen is their most famous deacon. The leaders of the synagogue become jealous of Stephen’s popularity and effectiveness amongst the people. They drag him into court, bring false witnesses, and condemn him to death. Saul holds the cloaks of those who stone Stephen to death (Acts 7:58).

Paul – a towering figure in the early Church

As a result of Stephen’s martyrdom, many Christians flee to areas outside of Jerusalem and bring the Gospel with them to Jews living in the area. This event could be called “the first expansion of Christianity.” The persecuted Hellenists become the first missionaries of the Church. In the meantime, Saul becomes a leading persecutor of the new breed of

Jews outside of Jerusalem. While on his way to Damascus to persecute Jews who believe in and proclaim Jesus, Saul is knocked to the ground by a great light. Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting *him* (Jesus showing his identity with the Church). After being baptized and spending some time on retreat (Galatians 1:17-18), Saul, the *persecutor* of Christians, becomes Paul, the *proclaimer* of Jesus.

Concerning Paul, Michael Pennock in his book, *This is our Church*, he 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.*”

Scholars have estimated that St. Paul covered over 15,000 miles on his journeys—on land and by sea.

Council of Jerusalem

In Acts 10, Peter has a vision during which God communicates to him that the Gospel of Jesus and salvation are for *all* people. After the vision, he witnesses the Holy Spirit come to the centurion Cornelius who is *not* a Jew. He welcomes him and his household into the Church through baptism. In principle, Peter comes to believe that it is not necessary for Gentiles to become Jews before embracing Christianity.

In the meantime, over in Antioch, where many Hellenists have taken refuge, the disciples of Jesus are given the name Christians for the first time (Acts 11:26). It is from the city of Antioch that Paul (with Barnabas) launches his first missionary journey. Paul welcomes the Gentiles into the Christian faith without imposing Jewish practices on them.

Back in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians continue to follow Jewish practices, including circumcision. There are two groups of Christians in Antioch: Jewish Christians who follow the Mosaic Law and Gentile Christians who do not. The question is raised as to whether they can celebrate the Eucharist together, which is usually done after eating a meal together. The larger issue, rather, is whether Gentiles must become Jews before becoming Christians. This is the focus of what becomes known as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

Paul and Barnabas, who have just returned from their first missionary journey, represent the ‘liberal’ view which holds that Gentiles need not become Jews before becoming Christians. On the conservative side, James, bishop of Jerusalem, maintains that Gentiles must be circumcised and required to observe the Mosaic Law (v.5). Peter, head of the Apostles, speaking as chairman of the meeting (vv 7-11), takes the side of Paul. He affirms that all are saved by grace—Jew and Gentile alike. Hence, we should not impose Jewish practices on the Gentiles. Nevertheless, James succeeds in placing certain restrictions on Gentile Christians when they are in the company of Jewish Christians, e.g., they are to abstain from eating blood (Acts 15:29).

The Council of Jerusalem is a *major* event in early Christianity. It results in the severance of ties between the Christian faith and Judaism. Thence from, 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.

The Church expands with Paul. After the Council of Jerusalem, Paul goes on his so-called second missionary journey which takes him across Asia Minor. The Gospel spread to Europe about 50AD as well as to Greece. In his third journey, Paul revisits many of the same places that he evangelized in his second journey. A fourth journey takes Paul to Rome, the capital of the empire, but as a prisoner. Acts 28:31 tells us that two years of open arrest allowed Paul “to preach the kingdom and teach about Jesus Christ quietly, openly and unhindered.” After those last verses of Acts, we do not hear any more about Paul. It is about 63AD.

Peter and Paul in Rome. Tradition associates Peter and Paul with the Church in Rome. They are its pillars and foundation. Rome is said to have been the place of their martyrdom and where their tombs are preserved. It is possible that Peter and Paul were martyred during Nero’s persecution of the Church in 64AD.

Final break with Judaism. In 70 AD, 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. Thenceforth, Jewish Christians are no longer welcome in the synagogues.

Formation of Christian Scriptures

The last decades of the first centuries witness the gradual formation of Christian writings which in time will 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.

How did Church leadership decide on which books belonged in the New Testament canons? In general, we can say that the decision was likely based on which books best captured the vision and message of Christ, which books best nurtured the faith of the people. More specifically, a book would have been accepted into the Canon of the New Testament because of its *apostolicity* (written by an apostle or an early Church figure), *orthodoxy* (reflecting the authentic beliefs of early Christianity), and *continuity* (having a link with the beginnings of Christianity). Prior to the compilation of a *written* Tradition, the early Christians depended on *oral* Tradition and Church leaders to know what were true and false teachings. While Jesus and his Apostles spoke in Aramaic, the New Testament would have been written in Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire. The Scriptures became a very important help as Church leaders confronted heretical teachers and teachings.

Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium

As the young Church is forming, we notice three important developments coming together that will become a core part of Catholicism, namely, the interdependence of Scripture, Tradition and the Church's role in guarding what is often called the *sacred deposit of faith*.

Scripture. The Church inherits from the Israelites the 46 books of the Old Testament. But when the Apostles start to die, it is deemed very important to gather together the writings of the Apostles and other followers of Jesus, like Paul. We saw above *how* the Church decided on which early church writings belonged and did not belong in the New Testament.

Tradition refers to emerging beliefs and practices not explicitly found in the written Word of God, e.g., how the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist were

celebrated, explicit beliefs around the humanity and divinity of Christ and the Holy Trinity, the emergence of a hierarchy, or the decisions of early church councils. Oral tradition and practices help us to understand more fully Christian life in the early centuries.

The Church. Since we did not have a New Testament until the fourth century, early Christians depend on Church leaders

to know what are authentic—and what are false—Christian beliefs and practices. Once the New Testament is formed, the lay faithful also look to Church leaders for a correct interpretation of the written Word of God.

So from the earliest times, when it comes to protecting and interpreting the deposit of faith—what Jesus is all about—*Scripture, Tradition and Church leadership* work together. (For more on this aspect of Catholic belief, see Article 2 of my Catechism Topics.)

Worship life of early Christians

In the early years of Christianity, Christians with a Jewish background continue to worship in the temple and local synagogue. They meet in one another's homes for the Eucharist and to share the teaching of the Apostles. Gradually, Christians worship in enclosed places outdoors. Beginning about the end of the second century, some Christians would donate houses which are solely used for worship. Actual churches are built from the middle of the third century.

Baptism and Eucharist are the principal sacraments in the early Church. It will be the Middle Ages before the Church starts to speak about seven sacraments. To be initiated into the Church, one has to repent of sin, be instructed in the teachings of the Apostles, believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, and observe the commandments.

In response to those who accuse Christian worship of immorality, *Justin Martyr*, in the middle of the second century, writes an apology to the emperor, i.e., in defense of Christianity. In his letter, he states that on the day called Sunday, Christians gather to listen to the teachings of the Apostles which is followed by a homily or exhortation to live according to the teachings (Liturgy of the Word). Then prayers

Apostolic Succession

Uninterrupted passing on of apostolic preaching and authority from the Apostles directly to all bishops.

are said (Prayers of the Faithful), after which bread and wine are brought forward (Presentation of the Gifts), over which the presider prays (Eucharistic Prayer). Then the consecrated gifts are distributed to those present (Holy Communion). Communion is taken to those who are sick (Ministry to the Sick). Finally, there is a collection for those in need. Justin specifies the conditions for taking part in the Eucharist which is not an ordinary meal.

This food we call eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things we teach are true, and has received the washing for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth, and who lives as Christ handed down to us. For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.

Three things are worth noting from Justin Martyr's description of the Eucharist: a) the structure of the celebration is almost identical to what we have today, a liturgy of the Word followed by a liturgy of the Eucharist; b) the belief in what will later be called the 'Real Presence'—transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ through the prayer of the presider; c) only those who believe in what the Apostles teach are allowed to receive the Eucharist. Hence, when our Church states that only those who are in *full communion* with our Church should come to communion, she is only reinforcing what a very early teacher and saint of our Church taught. Finally, as ritual texts for the celebration of the sacraments have not yet been written down, the presiders more or less improvise.

Baptism has, of course, been always administered in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And as early as the third century, we find in the writings of Hippolytus the text of a Eucharistic prayer that is quite similar to our current second Eucharistic prayer. The normal presider for Baptism and Eucharist is the bishop. Priests only start to preside when the Church increased in numbers and the bishop cannot be at every Eucharist.

Discussion questions

1. What spoke to you most in this Article?
2. What, if anything, did you learn that you had previously not known?
3. Including and welcoming Gentiles into Christianity was a huge challenge for Jewish Christians. In the 1950's and 1960's, the inclusion of black Americans in the mainstream of American society was a huge challenge for most white Americans. What groups are knocking at the door of our Church and society seeking inclusion? What keeps us from welcoming them?
4. What do you think it was like to have Christianity with no New Testament, no Catechism, no Canon Law, and only a loose leadership group?
5. What, if any, questions do you have about the first decades of Christianity?

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As a Protestant, Bruce Shelley saw Church History through the eyes of a Protestant historian.

Stewart, Cynthia. *The Catholic Church – A Brief Popular History*.

While I have found all of the above books helpful in writing these articles, if I had to recommend *one* book, it would be Carl Koch's *Popular History of the Catholic Church*. Jean Comby's books are very unique in that they contain numerous quotes from primary sources on many different issues in every era of the Church's history.