

THE APOSTOLIC AGE

Part Two: Hierarchy, Heresies, Apologists, Persecutors

In Church history, the *Apostolic Age* usually refers to the time of the Apostles and the generations of Christians that followed them. In this article, we will be looking mainly at events that took place in the second and third century of Christianity, more specifically:

- **Three degrees of hierarchical ministry**
- **Three heresies**
- **The Apologists**
- **Roman Empire's persecution of Christianity**
- **Dealing with the lapsed**
- **Early Christian lifestyle**
- **Reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity**

Three degrees of hierarchical ministry

As we read the Acts of the Apostles and letters of the New Testament, we learn that the Apostles have taken on a leadership role in the early Christian communities. They represent Christ in these communities. In Luke 10:16, Jesus says to his representatives: "Whoever listens to you, listens to me. Whoever rejects you, rejects the one who sent me." As the Apostles start to die, they appoint successors. Bishops today are seen as successors of the Apostles. This is known as *apostolic succession*. Bishops acted as overseers of the first Christian communities.

While still alive, the Apostles appoint some men to assist them, especially in caring for the needy. These men become known as *deacons*. In 1Tim 3:1-3, Paul outlines the qualifications required of bishops and deacons, indicating that these two ministries had become established in the early decades of the Church.

The development of the **order of priest** is less clear in the New Testament. But by the end of the first century, three roles or "offices" of leadership and service came to be recognized in local Christian communities: bishops, presbyters, and deacons (Catechism 1554). Certain New Testament verses testify to the beginnings of what will become known as the *sacrament of Holy Orders*. For example, in 2Tim 1:16, Paul speaks about the laying on of hands. In 1Tim 3:1, he speaks about the of-

fice of bishop being a worthy way to serve God's people. In Titus 1:5, Paul directs his collaborator Titus to ordain priests to assist the Church in Crete.

In one of his writings, St. Ignatius of Antioch, who may have known the Apostles, talks about the importance of being in union with one's bishop.

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 ...make sure that no step affecting the church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop's sanction. (Ignatius, To the Trallians, 3)

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

In 2016, Pope Francis set up a commission to look into the possibility of having female Deacons.

The Pope, Successor of St. Peter. In the New Testament, it is quite clear that Peter holds a leadership role among the Apostles. Whenever the list of the Apostles is mentioned, Peter's name always comes first. It is to Peter that Jesus says: "*You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church*" (Mt 16:18). Peter's leadership role is shown when Jesus speaks to him about "feeding my lambs" and "tending my sheep" (John 21:15-17). It is Peter who initiates the move to appoint a successor to Judas; Peter who gives the first sermon after the Holy Spirit comes upon those gathered in the Upper Room (Acts 2:14-36); and it is to Peter that God reveals his will to have Gentiles (non-Jews) included in his new church (Acts 10). Peter also plays a leadership role in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15).

If it is Jesus' will to have a leader in those first years of Christianity, Catholics reason that it is surely God's will to have successors to St. Peter. Gradually, the Church will come to recognize the Bishop of Rome as the Universal Shepherd of the Church. By the fourth century, the Bishop of Rome will come to be called "Pope" (Papa).

Before Jerusalem was burned in 70AD, it was seen as the central city of Christianity. But after the fall

of Jerusalem, Rome gradually becomes the new capital city of Christianity, the place where, according to Tradition, Sts. Peter and Paul are martyred. From early on, the Bishop of Rome is seen as the successor of St. 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 will 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 have 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. A brief word about each of them....

Marcionism. Marcion affirms that Jesus rejects the God of the Jews, the God of the Old Testament; that the Jewish covenant is over and replaced by the Gospel. This heresy prompts the Church to reaffirm its connection with the Revelation of God in the Old Testament.

Montanism. Montanus and his followers are charismatic preachers who place great emphasis on the Holy Spirit and his gifts. This group sees very little

need for earthly authority and Church order. They impose rigorous practices of fasting and ascetism. In 177AD, Montanus and his followers are excommunicated.

Gnosticism. The greatest internal threat to early Christianity are heresies that fall under the umbrella title of *Gnosticism*. This group claims to profess the true Christian religion by virtue of a special saving knowledge (Greek, *gnosis* = knowledge) that they have received *secretly* from Jesus or one of his followers. The Gnostics’ “dualist” philosophy holds that the spiritual realm and the material realm are totally opposed, and that matter is the handiwork of an evil god. Hence for Gnostics, the God of the Old Testament who created matter is an evil god, and Jesus is not human, but only *appears* to be human.

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).

Ignatius of Antioch (35-115AD) was born in Syria and a convert to Christianity. He becomes the second bishop of Antioch around the year 70AD in one of the most prominent Sees of the ancient

Early apologists not only argued for the reasonableness of their faith; they risked their lives rather than deny their beliefs.

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”* (Letter to the 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. In Article One, it is mentioned that Justin has written one of the earliest descriptions of the Eucharist which is quoted in the Catechism (1345). In 165AD, Justin is beheaded for his faith.

Polycarp (69-155AD), one of the most important bishops in the early Church, is a disciple of the apostle John; hence, his importance when it comes to apostolic succession and teaching. When a Roman official tries to save Polycarp’s life by convincing him to deny his faith, the aged bishop replies: *“For eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I now blaspheme my King and God?”*

Irenaeus (125-202AD). As a youth, Irenaeus sat at the feet of Polycarp. This makes him, with his teacher, a great witness to *Apostolic succession* and *Apostolic teaching*. Irenaeus is a defender of the Church against Gnosticism. He is also a proponent of the medicine of mercy when dealing with heretics. He convinces the Pope to lift the ban of excommunication of Christians who differ from the Church on minor matters. One of the famous and beautiful sayings attributed to Irenaeus is: *“The glory of God is man fully alive.”* The circumstances of his death are not known.

Origen (185-254AD) is recognized by most as the greatest Christian scholar before the fourth century. According to St. Jerome (342-420AD), Origen produced about 2,000 books. At only 18 years old,

the young brilliant scholar is appointed by his bishop to head the renowned catechetical school of Alexandria, where will serve as a lay scholar for many years. Origen is denied the title “saint” because of some of his beliefs, e.g., the ‘lesser’ divinity of the Son when compared to the Father; that God’s universal plan of salvation will one day extend itself to even Satan and all in hell. Origen is also known for his allegorical interpretation of Scripture. i.e., the attempt to seek its deeper, spiritual meaning, as opposed to the literal sense. He dies after suffering greatly during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Decius.

Tertullian (155-222AD). Tertullian may have been the most brilliant lawyer in the Roman Empire. Inspired by Christian martyrs, he becomes a Christian in his late forties.

In his book *The Fathers of the Church—Expanded Edition*, Mike Aquilina writes of Tertullian: *“Once in the church, he wielded his pen like a blazing brand, to expose error by the light of truth, and to immolate falsehood with the flames of his invective. It was Tertullian who first used the Latin word Trinitas (Trinity) to describe God”* (p.92). One of Tertullian’s most famous sayings is: *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”* It is the blood of the martyrs that convinces him to become a Christian.

Problems arise when Tertullian shows no tolerance for lukewarmness, cowardice and immorality among Christians. Calling for a purer church, he falls under the influence of the schismatic Montanus. *Schism* is the attempt to preserve orthodoxy while breaking from union with the Church and the Pope. Sadly, this man who spent many years drawing people to the Church, dies outside the Church.

It is truly a mark of the divine origin of the Church that it not only survived centuries of bloody persecution, ostracism, and torture within the Roman Empire, but also produced throughout that same period great writers, scholars, monks, and saintly men from every walk of life.

Roman Empire’s persecution of Christianity

During more than 2,000 years of its existence, Catholic Christianity has been attacked from within and from without. Above, we looked at three

internal threats to the Christian faith. We could add to them the belief that Gentiles had to become Jews to convert to Christianity. We also saw in the first Article how the first Christians were attacked and persecuted by the Jewish leaders. Now we turn to the attempts by the Roman Empire to destroy 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.

Two early female martyrs. Two of the best known early female martyrs are *Perpetua* and *Felicity* who are martyred in 203. They are jailed while they are catechumens to show that the catechumenate is illegal. Both Perpetua and Felicity are baptized while in prison. Perpetua’s father and the Roman governor beg her to offer sacrifice to the emperor so she could escape death but she bravely refuses.

Modern Martyrs. Persecution and martyrdom are not things of the past. Many believe more Christians were killed in the past century than all the previous centuries combined. Tens of thousands of Christians were killed in the Nazi era, the Boxer Rebellion in China, in civil wars in Spain, Latin America and Central America. Most recently, thousands of Christians have been killed by Muslim extremists in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

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

Dealing with the lapsed

During the persecution of the Church, not all Christians submit to their death bravely. Thousands of them, including clergy and one pope, try to offer sacrifice to the emperor to escape death. We should not be surprised at their failure. Had not Peter, the first Pope, denied Christ when it seemed he too might be crucified? How to deal with the so-called *lapsed* is a controversial issue in the early Church. Some leaders believe that the lapsed should be readmitted to the Church after they repent and do penance. Others believe that they should be excommunicated for their terrible sin of betrayal.

A priest name *Novatian* who is himself consecrated as an antipope, says that the Church has no power to reconcile apostates or those guilty of murder, adultery, fornication or a second marriage. In 251AD, Pope Cornelius holds a synod in Rome and orders the “lapsed” to be restored to the Church with the usual “medicine of repentance.”

There is another heresy associated with this period of Church history, namely, *Donatism*, from Donatus, who believes that the clergy responsible for turning over sacred books or vessels during the persecution by Diocletian should not be forgiven by the Church or reinstated to ministry.

At this time, an important principle of Catholic life emerges in the Church, namely, the belief that the authority to confer a sacrament, to teach, or to lead in the Church does not depend on the worthiness or personal holiness of the ordained minister. Jesus continues to work through and to forgive fragile human vessels to show that the power in the

sacraments and the ordained ministry comes from God, not man.

Early Christian lifestyle

Concerning this aspect of early Christianity, Michael Pennock writes:

Christianity had become distinct from Judaism and other religions in the Roman Empire. Through persecutions and other challenges, the early Christians increasingly developed into a recognizable Church. This community of faith crossed ethnic and racial lines to embrace all people. Common practices and beliefs of local Christian Churches throughout the Roman Empire included preaching the Gospel, public prayer, a ministry of care for each member, initiation rites, Eucharistic fellowship, and a common view of life and human destiny. (ibid, p.58)

Reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity

We close this article by briefly looking at some of the reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. 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 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.

Discussion questions

1. What spoke to you most in this article?
2. What, if anything, did you learn that you had not previously known?
3. What, if anything, surprised you, confused you, or shocked you about this period in Church history?
4. Christians who live in countries where Christianity is persecuted pay a price for being Christian and are usually stronger Christians. How do you think American Christians would respond if they were persecuted for their beliefs in Jesus? What forms of subtle persecution or anti-Catholicism exist in our society today?
5. What factors block and facilitate the spread of Christianity today?
6. What, if any, questions do you have about this period in Christianity?