



CHURCH HISTORY: 33-1054 AD

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"To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."

-Cardinal John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Introduction, 5

A Historical Religion

Christianity is a thoroughly historic religion. The pivotal moments of salvation history all occur at specific times and places as God chose to reveal Himself to the Israelites through the prophets, and later to the whole world through His Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:2). In the New Testament age, God continues to manifest His presence among His people through the deeds of His saints, who proclaim His Word and with the Church prepare the world for the final consummation of history at the end of time. No religion is more historic than Catholicism.

This lesson plan is meant only to be a very brief outline of the most important people and events in Catholic history. Those interested in learning more are encouraged to go further in their studies of Catholic history.

The Fact of the Resurrection

As we saw in our lesson on the Resurrection of Christ, the basis of the Christian faith is in the affirmation of a specific historical event: the literal Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' Resurrection in or around 33 AD validates His claims and establishes the Church as a supernatural community. If we cannot affirm the historicity of Christ's Resurrection, the entire Christian faith is in vain (1 Cor. 15:14-17). Thus, the Resurrection becomes the ultimate historical fact that underlies the whole Christian faith. The first Apostles were chosen among those who had been witnesses to the Resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). The primitive Gospel message preached by these Apostles was the fact of Christ's Resurrection and the necessity of entering the Church He had established.

Dispersion of the Apostles and the Conversion of the Gentiles

The Apostles initially worked only in Judea and Galilee, but the persecution of the Church ushered in by Herod Agrippa and the Jewish authorities dispersed them to further regions, which in turn brought in more Gentile converts. The question of to what degree Gentile converts had to attend to the Law of Moses was settled at the Council of Jerusalem around the year 50. From thereon out more and more Gentiles would enter the Church. The Apostles spread as far abroad as France, Armenia, India and Egypt. The most notable Christian missionary was the Jewish convert St. Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament Epistles and founded churches all across Asia Minor, Greece, and as far away as Italy and Spain.

By the end of the first century, the Church was established throughout the Roman world. The destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD put an end to institutional Judaism as a political power; the simultaneous expansion of Christianity throughout Europe ensured that the Catholic Church would not remain a small movement within Judaism, but would truly be universal (*katholikos*) in nature. Early Christians primarily met in the cities and were centered around the authority of a bishop, one who stood in the line of apostolic succession from one of the apostles. The bishops wielded immense authority and influence in the early Church.

Catholic Apologists

As the first generation of followers died and the Church began to grow, pagans began to take notice of the Christians and their strange beliefs. Most pagans of the second century viewed Christianity as an eccentric superstition, though some emperors (Trajan, Marcus Aurelius) saw the Church as a potentially subversive political movement and supported local persecutions of Christians.

Face with this pagan hostility, the 2nd century produced some remarkable Christian authors who strove to explain the new religion to the pagans in terms they could understand. These authors, called the Apologists¹, sought both to prove that Christianity was not a subversive religion, as well as convince the pagans of the veracity of its claims. The most notable Christian apologists were St. Justin Martyr (d. 160), Tatian, Aristedes and Athenagoras. Other Christian authors sought to defend the integrity of the Faith against new heresies that were constantly cropping up and challenging the traditional teaching, such as St. Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 200).

Persecutions and Growth

Christians were persecuted by the Romans because the Roman authorities believed them to be subversive, based on the fact that the Christians refused to worship the state gods. This refusal was not just antisocial, but treasonous, since the blessings of the Roman state depended upon the gods being properly placated. Persecution was sporadic throughout the 2nd century. A particularly harsh persecution broke out in North Africa during the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211) during which two of the most famous martyrs of the Roman period (Perpetua and Felicity) met their end in a Roman amphitheater, thrown to wild beasts.

In 251, the Roman Emperor Decius inaugurated the first empire-wide persecution, ordering every single man, woman and child in the entire Empire to sacrifice to the gods on pain of death. Though the edict was not enforced everywhere, there were many martyrs; many Christians also fell away under persecution. Fortunately, the persecution was short lived and the Church would enjoy peace for another generation, although the large numbers of Christians who lapsed in their Faith during the persecution (the *lapsi*) caused bitter disputes about how much penance should be imposed, what sort, and how they should be reconciled to the Church. These disputes were instrumental in the development of the Church's doctrines of penance, sacraments and indulgences.

¹ From *apologia*, to make an answer for.

The bitterest persecution was the Great Persecution of Diocletian (303-313 AD), which was the Empire's last attempt at stamping out Christianity. The Great Persecution was empire-wide and compelled all residents of the Empire to sacrifice to the pagan gods on pain of death. Churches were destroyed, and copies of the Scriptures were confiscated and burned as well. Somewhere between 3,000 and 10,000 Christians suffered martyrdom.

Triumph of Christianity

In 312 AD the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity after a miraculous vision at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which he believed granted him victory over a pagan rival. Constantine legalized Christianity with his famous Edict of Milan (313) and continued to patronize and support the Church throughout his reign, granting the Church tax-exempt status, freedom from military conscription, and many other civil benefits. The degree to which Constantine himself personally understood the doctrines of Christianity is questionable, but he undoubtedly believed and saw the Church as an institution that could help bring unity to an empire increasingly divided by civil strife. From 313 onward, the Church would continue to grow in power at the expense of paganism and all future emperors (with the exception of one) would be Christians.

Trinitarian and Christological Controversies

As Christianity began to enjoy its new legal status, bishops and theologians entered into debates about the nature of Christ and the relation of the Three Persons of the Trinity. In response to the heresy of Arianism, which claimed Jesus was a lesser God than God the Father, the Church summoned the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 and taught that Christ was "light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father. This settled the Church's fundamental understanding of who Christ is and established the precedent of settling major doctrinal disputes by means of ecumenical councils.

The Council of Constantinople (381) was called to further clarify the Church's understanding of Christ's nature. The councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) established that Christ was fully God and fully man, possessing two natures (one divine and one human) in a single person. This doctrine of Christ possessing two natures in a single person was referred to as the Hypostatic Union. Debates continued after these councils as to whether Christ had one or two wills and one or two "energies" that made His wills operative. The Church taught that Christ has a human will and a divine will, but that the human will is always perfectly in subjection and union to the divine will. By the 6th century, the orthodox doctrines of Christ and the Trinity as we understood them were settled, although many Christians in the east, particularly Egypt and Syria, refused to acknowledge the Council of Chalcedon's decrees.

The Popes

Meanwhile the Roman Empire in the west continued to decline. The last Roman Emperor was deposed in 476, marking the end of the western empire. The Church was graced with some particularly powerful popes during this period, men who were known for their administrative capabilities, holiness, and zeal for the Faith. Of note are Pope St. Damasus I (366-384), St. Leo

the Great (440-461), Pope St. Gelasius I (492-496), and Pope St. Gregory the Great (590-602). By the time of Pope Gregory, the Church's liturgical celebrations looked much as they would a thousand years later. Gregory expanded papal authority over the Church by sending missionaries abroad and consolidating his power within Christendom by means of a flurry of correspondences with fellow bishops. He is remembered as one of the greatest popes of all time and the first pope of the medieval world. From the time of Gregory onward, the papacy would become not only the spiritual head of Christianity but an important temporal institution as well. The Eastern Catholics, however, supported by emperors at Constantinople who feared the popes' authority, frequently disputed with the papacy and went in and out of schism over the centuries.

Conversion of Europe

The first countries to convert to Christianity were Armenia, Ethiopia and Ireland, all outside the pale of the Roman Empire, and all coming to the Faith between 300 and 460. In 492, the King of the Franks, Clovis, converted to Catholicism after winning a battle against a rival tribe. France thus became the first kingdom within the territory of the old Roman Empire to embrace the Faith. Hence she is called the Church's Eldest Daughter. In 597 Pope Gregory the Great sent the missionary St. Augustine of Canterbury to England and by the 650's the Anglo-Saxons were solidly Catholic. The rest of the Empire continued to Christianize throughout the succeeding centuries, bringing in the continental Saxons in the 9th century and finally the Norse in the 11th and 12th.

These early missionary successes were the work of Benedictine monks. The Benedictines had formed in the early 6th century and were instrumental in the spread of Catholicism. Monasticism was central to the conversion of the European peoples.

Carolingian Renaissance

The conversion of Europe, the spread of Benedictine monasticism and the rise of the Carolingian kings under Charlemagne (768-814) brought about a spiritual and intellectual renewal in 9th century Europe known as the Carolingian Renaissance. Monk-scholars from all over Christendom converged on the Frankish court and graced it with their talents. The Christian faith was spread and nourished with the encouragement of the French kings, great scholars wrote manuals on history and theology, new forms of art and architecture (like Romanesque) developed, and there was a general renewal of religious life led by reformers such as St. Benedict of Aniane. The Renaissance continued through the 9th century until the disruptions caused by the Norse invasions and the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire brought it to an abrupt end by the mid-900's.

Iconoclasm

Meanwhile in the East a series of Emperors, beginning with Leo III the Isaurian in 726, attacked the Greek Catholic custom of incorporating images in Christian worship. Churches were ransacked and holy images (called *icons* in the East) were whitewashed over or destroyed. Ostensibly the objection was that Christian theology prohibited the use of images in worship, but in reality the Byzantine Emperors feared the growing influence of the monasteries and sought to neutralize them by destroying icons, which were the center of popular devotion. The monks and

Christian people fiercely resisted, however. St. John Damascene (676-749) opined that when the invisible God took human flesh, He became visible, and thus made it appropriate to depict the divine in human form. This rationale was accepted by the Second Council of Nicaea (787) which condemned the smashing of icons as the heresy of iconoclasm and affirmed the propriety of using images in Christian worship.²

The Growing Schism

Throughout the entire second half of the first millennium, the Catholics of Western Europe and those of the east under the Byzantine Empire grew more remote. The division was more cultural than theological, and much of it was political as well, as the Patriarchs of Constantinople and then the Byzantine Emperors resented the growing influence of the popes. There were some theological and disciplinary differences as well: the Eastern Catholics preferred leavened bread in the Eucharist as opposed to unleavened in the west; Eastern Catholic theologians objected to the Trinitarian formula that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father *and* the Son (called the *Filioque* clause), and there were continuing disputes over whether the See of Constantinople or the See of Rome was supreme. Most importantly, the Byzantine Christians spoke Greek exclusively while the western Catholics used Latin, which made communication and dialogue very difficult. In addition to this, the See of Constantinople often fell under the rule of heretical bishops from time to time, sometimes leading to open schisms. By the 11th century, the Christians of the east and west had little in common with each other culturally or liturgically.

Lay Domination in the West

Meanwhile in the West, the relationship of royal patronage of the Church that had begun with the Carolingians had devolved into outright lay domination by the 10th and 11th centuries, especially in Germany under Otto the Great (936-973), who claimed the right to select bishops, invest them with the signs of their office, and even have a say in who should become pope. The Church suffered under the domination of these lay lords, and the papacy of the 10th and early 11th centuries became corrupted by political ambition as the popes became tools of Roman families or imperial politics. Simony, corruption, and priestly concubinage were not uncommon.

Cluniac Reform

God, however, raised up a series of reformers who challenged the prevailing moral climate. In southern France at the monastery of Cluny a movement of genuine spiritual renewal began to take root in the 10th century and blossomed in the 11th as Cluniac monks began to call for an end to simony, lay domination of the Church, and a return to clerical celibacy. These reforms were especially offensive to the lay princes who dominated the Church at the time, and calls for an end to lay domination became the occasions of titanic struggles between the Church and the royal

2 St. John's theology was incorporated into the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "The Christian veneration of images is not contrary to the first commandment which proscribes idols. Indeed, "the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype," and "whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it." The honor paid to sacred images is a "respectful veneration," not the adoration due to God alone: "Religious worship is not directed to images in themselves, considered as mere things, but under their distinctive aspect as images leading us on to God incarnate. The movement toward the image does not terminate in it as image, but tends toward that whose image it is." (CCC 2132)

power. Nevertheless the movement spread. When one of the Cluniac reformers became Pope Gregory VII in 1073, the stage was set for a dramatic contest between the Church and the Holy Roman Emperors, who since the time of Otto, had claimed the right to select the Roman pontiff. The debate, known as the Investiture Controversy, would drag on until 1122, when lay people were definitively barred from investing bishops with the sign of their office.

Schism of 1054

Though the Church would go on to victory in its conflict with the lay princes of Germany, its dealings with the Greek Catholics would not go over so well. In 1054, after years of disputes about the way Greek Catholics were being treated by Latin Norman lords in Sicily, a papal deputation to Constantinople in 1054 ended in schism when the papal legates excommunicated Patriarch Michael Cerularius, who likewise excommunicated the legates. Though not yet in formal schism, relations between the Greek and Latin Christians had broken down to such a point that 1054 is typically taken as the beginning of the schism with the Greeks.

Continued in Class #25.

For Further Reading: Acts 1, 1 Cor. 15:14-17, Bl. John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine; The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, Robert Louis Wilken; *Triumph: The Power and Glory of the Catholic Church* by Harry Crocker III; *Readings in Medieval History*, Patrick J. Geary; *Life of Charlemagne*, Einhard; *Faith of Our Fathers*, James Gibbons; *Faith of the Early Fathers*, William A. Jurgens.