

Topic 14: History of the Church

The Church continues to make Christ present in human history. In the history of the Church, we find the divine and the human closely intertwined.

01/28/2014

1. The Church in history

The Church continues to make Christ present in human history. It obeys the apostolic mandate given by Jesus before ascending into heaven: *Go therefore and make disciples of all*

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age (Mt 28:19-20). In the history of the Church, we find the divine and the human closely intertwined.

Certain aspects of the Church's history are quite striking, even for a non-believer:

a) unity in time and space (catholicity). The Catholic Church has continued throughout the centuries to be the same reality, with the same doctrine and same fundamental elements: unity of faith, of sacraments, and of hierarchy (through the apostolic succession). Furthermore, throughout the centuries it has gathered together men and women of the most varied races and cultures all over the world;

b) the missionary activity of the Church in all times and places has taken advantage of even the most adverse events in history to preach the Gospel;

c) the power, in every generation, to produce fruits of sanctity in people of all races and conditions;

d) a surprising ability to recuperate after suffering crises, sometimes very grave ones.

2. Early Christianity (to 476, year of the fall of the Roman Empire in the West)

In the first century Christianity began to spread under the guidance of St. Peter and the Apostles, and afterwards of their successors. The number of Christ's followers steadily increased, above all within the confines of the Roman Empire. At the beginning of the fourth century, Christians made up approximately

15% of the population of the Empire, concentrated in the cities and in the Eastern portion of the Roman state. The new religion also spread to Armenia, Arabia, Ethiopia, Persia, and India, outside the Empire's boundaries.

The Roman political power saw in Christianity a threat to its authority, since this new religion claimed a sphere of freedom of conscience vis-à-vis the state. Christ's followers, consequently, had to endure repeated persecutions that brought many of them to martyrdom. The last and cruelest of these took place at the beginning of the fourth century, under the Emperors Diocletian and Galerius.

In the year 313, the Emperor Constantine I, who was favorable to the new religion, granted Christians freedom to profess their faith and initiated a very benevolent policy

towards them. Under the Emperor Theodosius I (379-395), Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and by the end of the fourth century, Christians were now a majority of the population.

In the fourth century, the Church also had to face a serious crisis: Arianism. Arius, a priest from Alexandria, Egypt, held heterodox opinions that denied the divinity of the Son (as well as of the Holy Spirit). He viewed the Second Person as the first among all creatures, although superior to them. This doctrinal crisis, aggravated by frequent interventions by the emperors, shook the Church for over 60 years. It was finally overcome thanks to the first two Ecumenical Councils: the First Council of Nicaea (325) and the First Council of Constantinople (381). In them, Arianism was condemned, and the divinity of the Son (*consubstantialis Patri*, *homoousios* in

Greek) was solemnly proclaimed, as well as that of the Holy Spirit. The true faith was set forth in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol or Creed. Arianism survived until the seventh century because Arian missionaries succeeded in converting to their beliefs many Germans, who only gradually accepted the Catholic teaching.

In the fifth century, two Christological heresies had the positive effect of obliging the Church to consider more thoroughly the dogma of the Incarnation and to formulate it with greater precision. The first of these was Nestorianism, which, in practice, claimed the existence of two persons in Christ, along with the two natures. It was condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431), which reaffirmed the oneness of the person of Christ. From Nestorianism stem the Eastern Syrian and Malabar Churches, which

are still separated from Rome. The other heresy was Monophysitism, which held, in practice, that only one nature existed in Christ, the divine one. The Council of Chalcedon (451) condemned Monophysitism and stated that there are two natures in Christ, one divine and the other human, united in the Person of the Word without confusion or change, and without division or separation. The four adverbs used by Chalcedon were *inconfuse* , *immutabiliter* , *indivise* , *inseparabiliter* . From the Monophysites came the Coptic, Western Syrian, Armenian and Ethiopian Churches that are separated from the Catholic Church.

The first centuries of the history of Christianity witnessed a great flowering of Christian literature—homiletic and theological, as well as spiritual—found in the works of the Fathers of the Church. These works were very important in establishing

Sacred Tradition. The most important figures were, in the West, Irenaeus of Lyon, St. Hilary de Poitiers, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Jerome and St. Augustine; and in the East, St. Athanasius, St. Basil, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria and St. Cyril of Jerusalem.

3. The Middle Ages (to 1492, the year of Columbus' arrival in America)

In 476 the Roman Empire in the West fell, invaded by a series of Germanic people, some of whom were Arians and others pagans. The Church worked in the following centuries to evangelize and help civilize these people, and later on, the Slavs, Scandinavians and Magyars. The High Middle Ages (up to the year 1000) was undoubtedly a difficult period for Europe, marked by

political and social upheaval, cultural impoverishment and economic regression, due to the continuous barbarian invasions, which lasted until the tenth century. The Church's activity gradually helped lead these young peoples towards a new civilization that would reach its height between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

Benedictine monasticism, born in the sixth century, provided oases of peace, tranquility and culture in areas surrounding the monasteries. In the seventh century, Irish and Scottish monks carried out important missionary activity throughout all of Europe, as did the English Benedictines in the eighth century. In this century, the Patristic Age came to an end with the last of the Fathers of the Church, St. John Damascene in the East, and St. Bede the Venerable in the West.

At the end of the sixth century, the Islamic religion came to birth in Arabia. After Mohammed's death, the Arabs set out on a wave of warfare and conquest that led to a vast empire. Among those subjugated were the Christian peoples of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. This helped bring about the separation of the Byzantine world from the Latin-Germanic world. For approximately 300 years, this state of affairs was a real scourge for the Mediterranean people of Europe, victims of the incursions, raids, plundering and deportations that went on systematically and unabatedly.

At the end of the eighth century, the temporal power of the papacy was formally established (the Papal States), which had already existed, in fact, since the end of the sixth century to fill the power vacuum in central Italy caused by the

weakening of the Imperial Byzantine authority. The latter, nominally sovereign in the region, was incapable of providing the administration and defense the population required. Over time, the popes realized that a limited temporal power was an effective guarantee of independence with respect to the various political powers of the time (emperors, kings, feudal lords, etc.).

On Christmas Eve in the year 800, the empire was reestablished in the west (the Holy Roman Empire) with Charlemagne's coronation by the pope in St. Peter's Basilica. A Catholic state thereby came into being, with universal aspirations, characterized by a strong sacralization of political power, intertwining politics and religion, which would last until 1806.

In the tenth century, the papacy suffered a grave crisis resulting from

the noble families of central Italy interfering in the election of the Pope; and, on a more widespread scale, kings and feudal lords claimed the authority to name the occupants of many ecclesiastical offices.

Effective papal reaction to this situation awaited the 11th century Gregorian reform and the so-called “investiture controversy,” when the ecclesiastical hierarchy managed to recover a wide measure of freedom from the political powers.

In the year 1054, the patriarch de Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, brought about the final separation of the Greeks from the Catholic Church (the Eastern schism). This was the last episode in the history of disputes and ruptures that dated back to the fifth century, due in large part to the grave interferences by the Roman emperors of the East in the life of the Church (caesaro-papism). This schism affected all the people

dependent on the Patriarchy, and even to this day it affects the Bulgars, Romanians, Ukrainians, Russians and Serbs.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, the Italian maritime republics had wrested control of the Mediterranean from the Moslems and restrained Islamic aggression. Towards the end of the century, the growth of military power in Christian countries took the form of crusades to the Holy Land (1096-1291). These were military expeditions of a religious nature whose aim was the recovery and defense of Jerusalem.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries marked the zenith of medieval civilization, with the great theological and philosophical works of St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and Bl. Duns Scotus, along with other

literary and artistic accomplishments. Of great importance for religious life was the appearance of the “mendicant” orders at the beginning of the thirteenth century, especially the Franciscans and Dominicans.

Confrontation between the papacy and the empire, already seen in the “investiture controversy,” continued unabated during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and only ended with the weakening of both institutions. The empire dwindled to a single Germanic state, while the papacy suffered a severe crisis. From the 1305 to 1377, the papal residence was transferred from Rome to Avignon in southern France. And soon after the pope’s return to Rome in the year 1378, the great Schism of the West began. This was a very difficult situation in which two popes appeared on the scene, and some years later, three (due to the

different parties of cardinals gathered in conclave at Avignon, Rome, and Pisa). During all this upheaval, the Catholic people remained perplexed as to who was the legitimate pope. The Church only overcame this harsh trial when unity was finally restored with the election of a new pope at the Council of Constance (1415-1418).

In the year 1453, the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople, bringing to an end the thousand-year history of the Roman Empire of the East (395-1453); and they went on to conquer the Balkan people, who remained for four centuries under Muslim dominion.

4. The Modern Age (to 1789, year of the beginning of the French Revolution)

The Modern Age opens with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in America, an event which, along with

the explorations in Africa and Asia, began the European colonization of other regions in the world. The Church took advantage of this historical event to spread the Gospel in continents outside Europe. Missions arose in the French colonies of Canada and Louisiana in North America, in Spanish America, in Portuguese Brazil, in the Congo, India, Indochina, China, Japan and the Philippines. To coordinate these endeavors for spreading the faith, the Holy See in 1622 instituted the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* .

Meanwhile, the Church was entering the grave crisis of the “Reformation” initiated by Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin (all founders of different denominations of Protestantism), along with the schism provoked by Henry VIII, king of

England (Anglicanism). This resulted in the separation from the Church of a large part of the world: Scandinavia, Estonia and Lithuania, part of Germany, Holland, half of Switzerland, Scotland, England, besides their respective colonial territories already possessed or subsequently conquered (Canada, North America, the Antilles, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand). The Protestant Reformation had the damaging effect of breaking up the long-standing religious unity in the western Christian world, and caused the various states to become confessional. It thereby brought about the social, political and cultural division of Europe and some of its dependent regions into two camps, Catholic and Protestant. This situation crystallized in the formula, *cuius regio, eius et religio*, according to which the subjects of each region were obliged to follow the religion of their respective rulers. Confrontation

between these two worlds led to the wars of religion, which especially affected France, the German territories, England, Scotland, and Ireland. Hostilities in this conflict ended only with the Peace of Westphalia (1648) on the continent, and with the capitulation of Limerick (1692) in the British Isles.

Although deeply wounded by the defection of so many people in so few decades, the Catholic Church was able to draw upon unsuspected interior reserves to react and begin carrying out an authentic reform. This historical process came to be known as the Counter-Reformation., whose high point was the Council of Trent (1545-1563). There some dogmatic truths were clearly proclaimed that had been placed in doubt by the Protestants, such as the canon of Scripture, the sacraments, justification, and original sin. Disciplinary measures were also

taken that strengthened and consolidated the Church, for example, the establishment of seminaries, and the obligation of residency in the diocese for bishops. The efforts of the Counter-Reformation were assisted by many religious orders in the sixteenth century. These were initiatives of reform by the mendicant Capuchins and Discalced Carmelites, and institutes of regular clerics, Jesuits, Theatines, Barnabites, etc. The Church thus emerged from the crisis deeply renewed and strengthened, and was able to make up for the loss of some European regions with a truly universal growth, thanks to the work in the missions.

In the eighteenth century, the Church had to fight two enemies: “royalism” and the enlightenment. The first was closely tied to the development of absolute monarchy. Supported by the organization of a modern

bureaucracy, the European sovereigns established a system of total, autocratic power, eliminating the barriers that had formerly been present, namely, the institutions of medieval origin such as the feudal system, ecclesiastical privileges, the rights of cities, etc. In this effort to centralize power, the Catholic monarchs often infringed on ecclesiastical jurisdiction in striving to create a Church submissive to the power of the king. This process took on different names, depending on the particular country concerned: “royalism” in Portugal and Spain, Galicanism in France, Josephism in the Hapsburg territories of Austria, Bohemia, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Lombardy, Tuscany, Belgium, and “jurisdictionalism” in Naples and Parma. It reached its zenith with the expulsion of the Jesuits by many governments, and the hostile pressure exerted on the papacy to

suppress the order, as in fact happened in 1773

The other enemy the Church had to contend with in the eighteenth century was the enlightenment, a movement that was above all philosophical, and that was very popular among the ruling class. Underlying it was a cultural current that exalted reason and nature, while fostering an indiscriminant criticism of tradition. It combined many complex strands, with a strong materialistic tendency, a naive exaltation of science, rejection of revealed religion in the name of “deism” or incredulity, an unrealistic optimism regarding man’s natural goodness, an excessive anthropocentrism, a utopian confidence in human progress, a widespread hostility against the Catholic Church, a self-sufficient attitude and scorn of the past, and finally, a deeply rooted tendency to

hold simplistic and “reductionist” views. It spawned many modern ideologies that restrict the vision of reality by eliminating supernatural revelation, the spirituality of man, and ultimately, any aspiration to seek the truth about the human person and God.

In the eighteenth century, the first Masonic Lodges were founded, with a tone and agenda that were often clearly anti-Catholic.

5. The Contemporary Era (from 1789)

The French Revolution, which started with deportation of the lower clergy, subsequently took on a clearly anti-Christian agenda: the establishment of worship of the Supreme Being, the abolition of the Christian calendar, etc., and in the end a cruel persecution of the Church (1791-1801). Pope Pius VI died in 1799 while a prisoner of the

French revolutionaries. The rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was always very pragmatic, brought religious peace with the signing of the 1801 Concordat. But later, with Pius VII, disagreements arose due to the constant intrusions by the French government in the Church's life. As a result, the Pope was taken prisoner by Bonaparte for nearly five years.

With the restoration of the pre-revolutionary monarchies in 1815, a period of peace and tranquility returned for the Church. But soon a new ideology arose that was deeply opposed to Catholicism—liberalism. Heir to the ideas of the French Revolution, it gradually succeeded in establishing itself as a political force promoting legislation that discriminated against and even persecuted the Church. Liberalism allied itself with nationalism in many countries, and later, in the second half of the century, with imperialism

and positivism. All of these forces eventually contributed to de-Christianizing society. As a reaction to the social injustices caused by the liberal legislation policies, new ideologies sprang up, seeking to give voice to the aspirations of the classes oppressed by the new economic system: utopian socialism, “scientific” socialism, communism, and anarchism, all with the goal of social revolution and with an underlying materialistic bent.

In almost every country, Catholicism in the nineteenth century lost the protection of the state, which often became an adversary. In 1870 the popes’ temporal power came to an end with the Italian conquest of the Papal States and the unification of Italy. But at the same time, the Church was able to take advantage of this crisis to strengthen the union of all Catholics around the Holy See and to free itself from the intrusions by

state authorities in the internal government of the Church. This culminated in the solemn declaration of the dogma of papal infallibility in 1870 by Vatican Council I, which took place during the pontificate of Pius IX (1846-1878). During this century, moreover, the Church was blessed with a great missionary expansion in Africa and Asia, the foundation of many women's congregations of active life; and the organization of a widespread lay apostolate.

In the twentieth century, the Church was confronted by many challenges. Pius X was forced to counteract modernist theological tendencies within the Church. These currents, in their most radical manifestations, were characterized by a religious inmanentism; even when they kept the traditional formulations of the faith, in reality they emptied these of their traditional content. Benedict XV faced the calamity of the First World

War; he maintained a policy of impartiality towards the contending parties and organized a humanitarian effort on behalf of war prisoners and the population suffering from the conflict. Pius XI opposed the various forms of totalitarianism that persecuted the Church more or less openly during his pontificate: communism in the Soviet Union and in Spain, national-socialism in Germany, fascism in Italy, and masonry in Mexico. This Pope also fostered the vocation of native priests and bishops in the missionary territories of Africa and Asia. This effort, continued by his successor Pius XII, enabled the Church to show its solidarity with peoples undergoing decolonization, rather than appearing as a foreigner.

Pius XII had to face the terrible trial of the Second World War, during which he acted in a variety of ways to save as many Jews as he could

from Nazi persecution. (According to some people's calculations, the Church saved approximately 800,000 lives). With a sense of realism, he did not consider it opportune to issue a public condemnation since this would only have worsened the grave situation of Catholics who were also being persecuted in various territories occupied by the Germans; such a denunciation by the pope, moreover, would have made it all but impossible for him to intervene successfully on behalf of the Jews. Many prominent Jews after the War publicly acknowledged the great merit of this pope's help for their people.

John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was closed by Paul VI. This Council opened up a new pastoral era in the Church, by stressing the universal call to holiness, the importance of ecumenical effort, the positive

aspects of modernity, and the broadening of dialogue with other religions. During the years following the Council, the Church suffered a profound internal crisis, both doctrinal and disciplinary. The long pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005) helped to counteract this crisis; he was a pope with an extraordinary personality who raised the Holy See to a level of popularity and prestige unknown before, both inside and outside of the Catholic Church.

Carlo Pioppi

Basic bibliography

J. Orlandis, A Short History of the Catholic Church, Four Courts Press, County Dublin, 1993.

.....

pdf | document generated
automatically from [https://opusdei.org/
en-au/article/topic-14-history-of-the-
church/](https://opusdei.org/en-au/article/topic-14-history-of-the-church/) (08/08/2025)