

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- The Church has a rich and varied history.
- Saints and religious orders helped shape the Church.
- The Spirit guides the Church.



thinkers explored the Church's understanding of God. This period also produced some whose thoughts wandered far from the course set by Jesus during his earthly ministry.

Heresies, beliefs or opinions that directly contradict official Church teaching, emerged. One heresy said Jesus wasn't divine, and another said Jesus wasn't human. Some emperors supported heresies and executed Christians for disagreeing with them.

Church History

Your life story reflects the events and experiences that make you who you are. Getting to know you involves learning about significant moments in your history. It's the same with the Catholic Church. Like our own personal stories, the story of the Church is a journey of faith.

- *Think of an event from your journey that affects who you are today.*



Religious Freedom

In 313, Constantine decreed that no one "should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion" (Edict of Milan). Christians could finally live and proclaim their faith openly.

Freed from concern about persecution, Christians had time to think about the truths of God's revelation through Jesus Christ. Many great

Even with these challenges, incidents of martyrdom (dying for the faith) declined as Christianity became more accepted in the Roman Empire. Christians found new ways to dedicate their lives to Jesus. Some chose to go to the desert to focus on penance and prayer. These men and women felt the solitary life kept them away from society's corruption. Religious communities formed as people began to gather around these holy men and women. Other Christians put their faith into action through social service. They provided compassionate care to the poor, sick, dying, and abandoned.

- *What might the hermits have found in the desert that's more difficult to find in ordinary life?*
- *How can you create a desert space in your spiritual life?*



Conquest, Collapse, and Confusion

In the fifth century, the Roman Empire began to collapse as barbarian tribes invaded. Bishops became the only authorities people could rely on, not only for Church teaching but also for maintaining social order. Initially, Roman Christians wanted nothing to do with the barbarian conquerors. Eventually, Christians worked to civilize and convert these invaders.

As missionaries, these men and women worked to bring the faith to unbelievers, often through social service. Monasteries and parishes were founded to bring the newly converted to a deeper knowledge of Christianity. The educated monks helped instruct the people while parishes made Christianity the center of community life. Service to the poor was almost completely up to the Church. The invaders employed the clergy (ordained Church officials) as ambassadors and public leaders.

Serious problems arose as a result of the close ties between Church and state. Nobles chose who would become bishops, often selecting men who would support their interests rather than the gospel. Priests were appointed by local landowners and often had little or no training. Many clergy and religious became more interested in material possessions and power than in spreading the good news.

- *To whom do you turn for clarity and truth in times of confusion? How might that person or organization be a vehicle of God's wisdom for you?*



Back to Basics

The eleventh and twelfth centuries saw the flowering of great universities, Gothic architecture, and extraordinary thinkers and scholars. These centuries also brought new problems to the Church. In 1054, disagreement about the pope's role and a difference in understanding of how we talk about the Holy Spirit in the Creed led to a **schism** or division of the Eastern (Orthodox) Church from Rome.

Saint Bernard (1090–1153) and others brought reform to religious communities, asking them to return to a life of prayer. Their reform spread throughout the rest of the Church. Finally, Pope Gregory VII took back the power to appoint clergy from the nobles.

In addition to the noble desire to protect Christianity's holy sites, baser motives—greed and a desire for power—fueled the Crusades (1095–1291). In a series of military expeditions, Christians of Western Europe attempted to take Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslims.

While the Crusades continued through most of the thirteenth century, the Church of this time also had people of remarkable character. Saints Francis of Assisi and Dominic changed the way Christianity was preached. Monasteries preserved the teachings of the Church but had lost contact with the common people who needed this knowledge. Francis, Dominic, and their followers took the gospel message to the streets and lived simply among the people. Saint Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican priest, was an important philosopher and theologian of this time.

- *Reform often leads to renewal. When have you experienced new life, energy, or clarity of purpose as a result of changing your ways?*



The Call for Reform

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were fraught with confusion. At times, two and three men claimed to be pope. Corruption among many Church leaders and interference in the Church by secular authorities increased. Saint Catherine of Siena and others called for renewal.

In 1517, Martin Luther, a Catholic monk, called for an end to the abuses in the Church. He wanted reform, not a new Church. Yet poor communication, stubbornness on both sides, and interference by secular authorities led him to take a “protestant” position and break away from Catholicism. Division followed division, and Christianity has since split into thousands of **denominations**.

This Protestant Reformation shocked Catholic leadership into action. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) clarified Catholic belief, corrected abuses, and set up the seminary system to educate clergy. New religious orders began to help in renewal and promotion of spiritual growth.

• How does an emphasis on social service show the Church’s roots in Jesus’ ministry?



The Call to Serve

Social service and everyday spirituality were the focus of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Saint Francis de Sales wrote books that called laypeople (those not ordained) to holiness. Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac organized ways to help the poor. They set up groups of laypeople, called “confraternities,” to manage orphanages, homes for the elderly, and parish services for the needy.

Catholicism in America

In the early 1800s, Catholics were a small and insignificant number in the United States. By the Civil War, they had become the largest single religious group in the United States, numbering three and a half million people.

This increase in numbers was the result of large numbers of immigrants coming from Ireland and Germany. Later, many Catholics from Poland, Italy, Mexico, Canada, and Eastern European countries came to America. Catholic immigrants were often subject to discrimination and misunderstanding.

Modern Catholic Social Teaching began as the result of the Industrial Revolution. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII spoke out in support of the rights of working people. He believed in the workers’ rights to fair wages and safe working conditions, forming unions and striking if needed.

The Twentieth-century Church

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) took a close look at the Church and its relationship to the modern world. The council made updates in the ways Catholics worship and practice their faith. Calling the Church the “people of God” and teaching of the “universal call to holiness,” it encouraged the laity to become more involved in the work of the Church and to renew their efforts to follow Christ.

“The laity ‘work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.’”

*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church
(Lumen Gentium), 31*

Many Catholic Christians give their lives selflessly to advance the causes of peace and justice. Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, and St. Teresa of Calcutta, founder of the Missionaries of Charity in India, worked heroically to make God’s love real to the poor.

During his time as pope (1978–2005), St. John Paul II asked forgiveness for sins committed in the name of the Catholic Church through the ages. Some of the wrongdoings he listed were the censure of Galileo, involvement in the slave trade, injustices against women, inactivity and silence during the Holocaust, and cases of clergy sex abuse.

The Church Today...and Beyond

Today's Church takes a strong stand on moral and social issues, such as abortion, assisted suicide, and religious liberty. It remains active in aiding the poor and oppressed of the world.

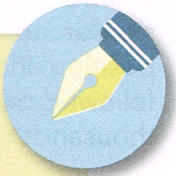
In every age, the Church experiences both opportunities and challenges and produces both saints and scoundrels. As it faces new challenges and learns from past errors, the Church remains the living sacrament of the body of Christ in our world. We trust the Holy Spirit to guide the Church as it follows Jesus' command:

"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."

Matthew 28:19–20

Choose an event in Church history that you'd like to learn more about. Do some research and consider the following questions:

- What value was the Church trying to uphold?
- What effect did human goodness and/or weakness have on this event?
- How do you see the Spirit at work guiding the Church through this event?



Spend some time in prayer, reflecting on the following question. Be sure to open your heart for God's response—within your prayer time and in the days ahead. Record your reflection in your journal.

- *The future of the Catholic Church depends on the Holy Spirit and your response to what God calls you to do. What role might God want you to play in the unfolding life of the Church?*

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