

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:



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

## Church History

Kathleen found a puppy near the side of the road. He lay huddled next to his lifeless companion, likely a sibling. Kathleen could only guess that the puppies had been abandoned. The faithful brother would not leave his sibling's side, despite the fact he was terrified.

It took months for Kathleen to earn the puppy's trust after she brought him home that night. She named the pup Second Chance because she was hoping she could give him exactly that—a second chance. She called him Chance.

Kathleen wished she knew her dog's history, thinking that might help her understand him better. Without knowing the exact details of Chance's history, Kathleen could only assume his puppyhood had been one of neglect and abuse. She knew it would take years for Chance to fully trust her. But she vowed to give her dog a second chance at a happy, love-filled life.

- *How does knowing something's history help you understand it better?*



## Why Is History Important?

Your life story reflects who you are and what's happened to make you who you are. Anyone who wants to get to know you needs to learn about your history, too. It's the same with the Catholic Church. The story of the Church, like your own personal story, is the story of a journey of faith. The Church's journey began thousands of years ago with the Israelites, had its foundation in Jesus Christ, and has evolved through many periods, some of them extremely difficult.

## What Happened After Christianity Became Acceptable?

When we left the early Church in lesson C11 ("Early Church"), it was just getting through a period of great persecution. Now freed from that fear and anxiety, Christians had time to think about the truths of God's revelation made through Jesus Christ. Many great thinkers expanded the Church's understanding of God. Unfortunately, this period in Church history also produced some thinkers 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 was not divine; another said Jesus was not human. Some emperors supported heresies, and some Christians were executed for disagreeing with them.

Even with these challenges, **martyrdom** (the giving of one's life for the sake of one's faith) declined as Christianity became more acceptable in the empire. Christians were able to find new ways to dedicate their lives to Jesus. Many chose



to go to the desert. These men and women felt that the solitary life kept them away from society's corruption. Religious communities were formed as people began to gather around these holy men and women, creating intentional communities focused on living a life of prayer and service. Other Christians turned to social services, providing care and compassion to the poor, sick, dying, and abandoned.

- How would being part of a community help strengthen the desire to live like Christ?
- Would it be hard or easy to live the Christian life in isolation?



## Changes in the Roman Empire

In the fifth century, the Roman Empire began to collapse as barbarian tribes invaded. Bishops became the only authorities people could rely on. At first, Roman Christians wanted nothing to do with the barbarian conquerors, but eventually they began to feel the call to convert the invaders.

These were the first **missionaries**. Missionary men and women work to bring the faith to unbelievers, often through social service. To bring the newly converted to a deeper knowledge of Christianity, monasteries and parishes were founded. The highly educated monks helped instruct the people, while parishes made Christianity the center of community life. Clergy (ordained Church officials) were employed by the invaders as ambassadors and public leaders. Service to the poor was almost completely up to the Church.

However, there were also serious problems that arose because of the close ties between Church and state. Nobles appointed bishops, often choosing someone who would support their interests rather than the gospel. Priests were appointed by local landowners and had little or no training. Many became more interested in material possessions and power than in spreading the good news.

- How has history influenced the way the Church functions?
- Can the Church still do good even if Christians sin?



## 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, the less noble feeling of 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.

## 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, as many other Catholics did, 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 the 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.

## The Church in the Twentieth Century

*“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”*

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), 1

In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council—an important gathering in Rome of Catholic bishops worldwide, as well as laypeople and leaders from other Christian communities—took a close look at the modern Church. The council made many changes in the ways Catholics worship and practice their faith. It encouraged laypeople to become more involved in the work of the Church and to renew their efforts to follow Christ.

Ministries that were once the work of only priests are now carried out by laypeople in part because of renewed efforts to engage the laity in the Mass, but also because of a decrease in the number of priests. At Mass, laypeople proclaim the word (the priest or deacon still proclaims the Gospel), distribute holy Communion, lead the assembly in song, and serve as ministers of hospitality. Most parishes have active liturgical committees that involve laypeople in planning liturgical feasts and celebrations.

## The Church Today

Today’s Church takes a strong stand on moral and social issues, such as abortion and assisted suicide, which ignore Christ’s teachings regarding the sacredness and priceless value of human life. The Church remains very active in aiding the poor of the world and in offering support to those who suffer from other forms of poverty. You’ll discuss this part of the Church’s mission more in lesson C16, “Social Justice.”

There are many challenges facing the Church today, as there have been throughout its history. As we face these challenges and try to learn from past mistakes, it is important to remember that we are all human, as imperfect as the apostles before us. Yet the Church is still the body of Christ, and we can trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide us.

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



## The Call to Service

Social service and everyday spirituality were the focus of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Saint Francis de Sales wrote books that called laypeople 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 United States, Catholics were a small and insignificant number in the early 1800s. By the 1860s, they comprised the largest single religious group, or **denomination**, 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, and Hispanic countries also came to America.

The birth of modern Catholic social teaching came 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 a worker’s right to a fair wage, the right to form associations (unions), and the right to go on strike to defend workers’ rights.

A **denomination** in Christianity is a distinct religious body with its own ways of worship, leadership, and doctrine. Historically, many of these denominations broke away from the Catholic Church.



As a group, list the ways the Church today reaches people with the good news and the effects of that outreach. Make another list of ways you wish the Church were more active and what effects those ways might have.



Recall a time when you made a mistake.

What did this mistake teach you about yourself? How did it help you grow? Become more understanding or forgiving? How did it influence who you are today?

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