

The 3rd century

Introduction:

After several decades of persecution, the 3rd century begins with a few years of persecution followed by decades of peace. From a band of about 40 followers following Jesus' death, the church has grown to almost 200,000 by the beginning of the 3rd century and will continue to grow to about 1 million by the end of the century. The persecutions and challenges of the 2nd century don't hinder the growth of the church but, in contrast, accelerate it.

As the church enters an era of peace, the church begins to solidify. Hope seems bright as the church emerges from her hiding place amidst the fears of death and enters into the world of Roman society. Although the Church Fathers of the 2nd century openly debated the philosophers of their times allowing the church to take on a visible presence, the level of visibility in the 3rd century is much greater. Bishops around the Empire begin to build churches. These early churches were modeled after the Roman basilica as large open buildings useful for large gatherings. By having a raised platform on one end, the basilicas were great spaces for sermons, teachings, and Mass. Bishops, priests, and deacons took on a visible presence in their towns through preaching, debates, and ministry. To these Christians, it felt like a new era had dawned.

With this new visibility came new opportunities for the Church. The 2nd century experienced the dawn of many controversies which would come to dominate the next two centuries. Many Christians began to ponder, wonder, and become confused by the Christian message. Did we believe in one God or two gods? How can Jesus be both God and man? What should the life of a Christian be like? Are we like the pagan philosophers who focus on virtue? One of the greatest struggles in the midst of this plurality of thought was unity. The Church needed unity. She needed a way to emphasize the truth of the Gospel, teach it effectively, and circulate it throughout the church. All of these needs were possible and met throughout the century. The Roman road system allowed for effective and timely communication amongst churches and especially amongst bishops. The lack of persecution meant that the couriers of these messages no longer feared death, imprisonment, or being tortured for information. The exchange of ideas amongst both bishops and the leading thinkers of the church meant that they could debate and decide on crucial matters in the church.

As the debates continued, schools of thought began to develop. The first schools were located in Alexandria and Carthage. Other schools existed in Constantinople and Antioch but they lacked the prestige, sophistication, and influence of Alexandria and Carthage. Some may wonder why Rome wasn't considered one of the major leading schools of thought given that it is the center of the Roman Empire and the seat of the Roman pontiff. Rome was largely controlled by the elite and the government. The church leaders in Rome assumed their authority and power as well as held the prestige of resolving disputes over Christian doctrine. No one felt that a school of religious thought was necessary or important in Rome. Alexandria, on the other hand, was considered a center of learning since the time of Alexander the Great around 340 BC. Alexander established the city and built a massive library in the city to encourage learning throughout the Greek Empire. Since his time, Alexandria was considered one of the most important centers of

learning in the Roman Empire. Carthage rose to power after it was conquered by the Romans in about the year 44 BC. Carthage, in north Africa, became a major capital of the Roman Empire due its location as the center point of the African continent. As a capital in the Roman Empire, it gained the privilege of training governors and other officials in matters of law, governance, and rhetoric. This school of learning, although sometimes overshadowed by major schools like Constantinople and Alexandria, was to become one of the most dominant schools of thought in the Christian world. Alexandria's power consisted largely in the Greek speaking world. Since the majority of Christians spoke Greek until the mid-3rd century, all theological thought and many of the pronouncements on heresies came from either Alexandria or the bishops of the east. This Greek-speaking majority lost its power by the mid-3rd century due to a shift in the Roman Empire. Much of the focus of both thought and attention shifted to Rome and north Africa. This shift led to a shift in the predominant language of the people from Greek to Latin. Hence, the school in Carthage became one of the most prominent schools of Christian thought. Great thinkers like Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine were all trained in the school in Carthage.

Peace seemed to reign over the Christian church and unity was in their grasp. Bishops were able to clarify the teachings of the Christian church using many of the writings and preachings of the great thinkers of their time. The Mass and major Sacraments like Baptism developed into a uniform structure and ritual shared by all Christians. The Scriptures were codified and accepted by the Christian world into the 73 books as we know them today. All Christian thinkers shared the same set of 73 books: 46 from the Septuagint (The Greek translation of the Old Testament) and the 27 books of the New Testament. Although some controversies raged, they didn't disrupt the unity of the Church.

This era of peace came to a rocky end throughout the rest of the century. Various emperors began the persecution of the Christians and their successors would end them. The process continued several times throughout the century. The first major persecution began under Emperor Maximian the Thracian, who came to power by military might. His predecessor Septimius Severus was assassinated leaving a power vacuum in the Empire. Maximian, who controlled the military and deeply angered by Severus kind treatment of the Christians, rose to power by military might. He then marched on Rome and took captive many of the Christians in high rank. The most notable taken prisoner during his reign is the bishop Pontian and his priest Hippolytus who both eventually died in exile. During his persecution, he would line up dozens of Christians, execute them all, and then bury them in a mass grave with sometimes up to 60 in a grave.

The death of Maximian the Thracian led to one of the worst years in Roman history called the "Year of the Six Emperors." With a massive power struggle for dominance of power over the Roman Empire, the rest of the century is marked by constant political problems, vying for power, assassinations, and a constant transition of power. Some of the emperors were tolerant on Christians whereas others heavily persecuted them. It was a rather tumultuous time for the Church. Some of the most notable emperors who persecuted the Christians include Valerian and Decius. To quickly summarize the second half of the century: 10 years of persecution followed by 10 years of peace and repeat. It was a challenging century leading to the greatest persecution of the early Church under Emperor Diocletian in the 4th century.

Heresies and the development of Christian thought:

With the rise of schools of learning and the ability and necessity to discuss, defend, and clarify the teachings of Christian thought, the 3rd through 6th centuries are marked by incredible theological development. One of the most central issues of the 3rd and 4th centuries is the nature of Jesus. Who is he? How can he be both God and man? To us today, these issues seem resolved and inconsequential. For the people of the 3rd century, these issues were as important as national security, social stability, and the price of food to us today. We have records of people getting into fights in the street over the nature of the Trinity. In the 4th century some Christian groups will launch a war against others over the nature of Jesus. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of these controversies and issues for the people of the 3rd and 4th centuries.

Why so much controversy? The answer is simple: because their faith matters. These theological issues were not simply matters of difference of belief or a tolerance of other ideas. These issues were critical for the proper worship of God, for their image against the pagan theologies and philosophers. These issues touted the line between heresy and orthodoxy, blasphemy and worship of God, right religion and false worship. The proper understanding of the Christian beliefs were central to the life of all Christian believers. The number one most central issue in all the debates of the 3rd century is Jesus. Can God be two? Can Jesus have two natures God and human? How does this philosophically and theologically make sense? Although we want a resolution for these questions, we will not get one until the 7th century. Until then, we need to understand these issues as the core reason for the Church Fathers writing the bulk of their works. Throughout the next part of this section, I am going to list and describe the heresies that were dominant in the 3rd century so that you can understand the core ideas of the Church Fathers who wrote in this century and be able to appreciate the challenges of the 4th century.

Heresies

Monarchianism: this heresy began very early in church history but didn't become a dominant force until the late 2nd century and into the 3rd century. Since the teaching of the Apostles, many wondered how Jesus could be God when there is only one. The Jews greatly harassed the Christians over the doctrine that Jesus is God claiming that they have deviated from the one true God. The Monarchians of the 3rd century held strongly to the belief that Jesus was not really God. Two versions of Monarchianism became the most popular. The first is called Adoptionism. This idea holds that Jesus was not really God from the beginning but instead did the Father's will so perfectly that God adopted him into his life. The second form is called modalism. This idea claims that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are merely modes or expressions of the Father but neither separate entities nor fully God themselves. The Monarchianists struggled to accept anything in the nature of God that would cause him to be more than one. God had to be entirely and completely one: no additions, no alterations, completely one.

Docetism: Jesus' humanity and divinity were a huge struggle for many early Christians. Honestly, I think many people struggle with it today. How can God become human? How could a human be God? The Docetists believed that they found a solution. Jesus only *appeared* to be human but in reality was only God, not human. They would claim that the Spirit of Jesus routinely entered the body of Jesus to perform the godly responsibilities. Jesus' semblance of humanity died on the Cross but God did not. Similarly, upon his death, Jesus stripped himself of his humanity like taking off a coat and returned to his true nature as God.

Arianism: Arianism is the complete opposite of Docetism claiming that Jesus was only human and not divine. Arius, the main protagonist of this heresy, created the slogan that "God is one." His proclamation contained with it the condemnation for anyone who believed the Jesus could be God. His main point is that if Jesus is the Son of God, then there had to be a time in which Jesus was "born" and therefore is not eternal and not God. Therefore, the Jesus of Scripture is purely human and not God. He performed all his tasks as a person completely graced by God, fulfilled the will of the Father like all of us should, and opened a way for us to enter Heaven by his adherence to God's will. I cannot underestimate the power of this heresy. By the middle of the 4th century, this heresy will convert 60% of the Christian world and will almost lead to a war within Christianity.

Marcionism: Not every Christian agreed with the standard set of texts which came to be called the Bible. Marcion was one of the most restrictive readers of the Scriptures. Marcion argued, first, that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are two different gods. The Old Testament God is cruel and angry whereas the God of the New Testament is kind and loving. Therefore they cannot be the same gods. Marcion, therefore, completely rejected the Old Testament and everything it contained as contrary to the Christian message. Then, he turned to the New Testament. Marcion argued that the Apostles were Judaizers who perverted the Christian message by requiring followers to maintain Jewish laws and customs. Therefore, he rejected all of the Gospels. Lastly, he accepted the writings of St. Paul as the most authentic interpretations of the Christian message and the nature of Jesus. Marcion's following was quite small although his influence was much greater. His reduction of the Scriptures to the writings of St. Paul impelled the earliest Christians to take an interest in the Old Testament. Great writers like Origin and St. Augustine spent considerable time blending the Old and New Testaments together and showing the interrelations between them,

Novatianism: Although Novatian's writings don't seem problematic, his conclusion are. Novatian wrote a book on the Trinity in which he describes the nature of the Father and the Son as living eternally with each other. No problem yet until you realize he ignored the Holy Spirit. Yet, this was not what drew attention to his preaching. Novatian held a strong moral stance especially against those who defected from the faith or apostatized. He believed that the Christian message and salvation were not for the weak. Anyone who defected from the Church during persecution was cut off completely from the Church and could not be reconciled. His views on forgiveness and the serious sin of apostacy would become a much more major heresy in the 5th century called Pelagianism.

St. Hippolytus of Rome

The story of St. Hippolytus is as dynamic as it is fascinating. We know very little about his early life although we can speculate a few things. Most likely he was raised a Christian and was probably educated. Our first references to him come from the Church in Rome in the 3rd century. He became one of the priests in Rome and was considered one of the most brilliant theologians of his time. Some argue that St. Irenaeus of Lyons was his teacher. Others state that Origin could have heard this prominent priest preach. Just a little hint at the interwovenness of the early Church. He came into conflict with Pope Zephyrinus over the nature of Jesus. Already in the Church at this time many were struggling with the nature of Jesus. Hippolytus combatted the idea that the Father and the Son are the same and swung too far to the other side by claiming that the Son is merely an extension of the Father. The Pope decided not to make a decision on this issue which greatly angered Hippolytus. He then declared the Pope unfit for service in the Church, censured him, and denounced him as being controlled by the deacon Callistus. When Callistus was elected as the successor of Pope Zephyrinus, Hippolytus separated himself from the Church and had his band of followers elect him as the antipope. Then he set himself up as the voice of opposition to the papacy calling it weak and unwilling to exercise the necessary harshness for serious capital crimes like defecting to Rome and apostasy. During the reign of Emperor Maximinus Thracian, Hippolytus and Pope Pontian were exiled to the island of Sardinia. While in exile, Hippolytus reconciled with the Church and accepted the authority of the Pope. They both died on the island of Sardinia and were declared martyrs. Hippolytus is remembered for many things. First, the importance and value of reconciliation with the Church. Second, for his incredible theological insights which are still read today.

The Apostolic Tradition by Hippolytus:

Introduction: Scholars debate the authenticity of this work more than they debate its value. Some claim that the work was written by another person named Hippolytus who compiled the work from two centuries of sources. Since the work was found in the 19th century and few copies exist, it is hard to prove authenticity of this text. The first scholars to review this text believed it came from Egypt whereas most scholars now argue that it came from Rome heightening the theory that St. Hippolytus wrote it.

The text is one of the best sources for early Christian thought. Throughout the 2nd through 5th centuries challenges to Church authority were common and, in some situations, violent. Many early Church writers emphasized the importance of legitimate authority in the Church and this document is no exception. In addition to its focus on authority, it also strongly emphasized liturgy and prayer. This text contains some of the most complete examples of the early Mass and the celebration of the Sacraments.

The Text: *The Apostolic Tradition* is written in four parts. The first part focuses on the ordination rite for bishops, priests, and deacons. Then continues to explain the difference between exorcists, lectors, and widows who are enrolled in an order. The second part focuses on converts to the faith and the process of preparing someone for baptism. The third part lays a foundation for various challenges that can occur with the order of widows and continues with the general code

of conduct for a Christian. The fourth and final part explains the proper times and types of prayer.

This text is valuable for many reasons and I want to take a moment and emphasize some of the important parts of this text that can often be overlooked. The ordination rites explained in part 1 are almost identical to our modern day ordination for bishops, priests, and deacons. The only major difference is that Rome chooses the bishop and not the people. If you were to compare our modern day ordination prayer for a bishop to the one in this text, you would notice that they are almost identical. The same applies to the basics of the rite. The bishops lay their hands on bishops, bishops lay their hands on priests, and bishops lay their hands on deacons. No other order in the church has a rite for laying on of hands to confer someone into an order except for Holy Orders. The use of oil in the ordination of priests and bishops is still the practice today. For widows, exorcists, and lectors, *The Apostolic Tradition* clarifies that these groups of people are not ordained members and therefore do not have the laying on of hands nor use of oil like we do today.

The Catechumenal stage for a person desiring baptism into the Catholic Church is quite long during this period in church history. Notice that the length of preparation can be three years long. Also, the process of entrance into the Catholic Church is quite involved including prayers, teachings, separation from the community, witnesses, and more. All of the elements listed in this text are still used today including the separation of the Catechumens from the worshipping community during this stage, the anointing with oil for exorcisms, the process of teaching, and sponsors. Also in this section is the Eucharistic Prayer of Hippolytus. This prayer is one of the earliest complete texts of the Eucharistic Prayers of the early church. Notice that our modern Eucharistic Prayers draw elements from this prayer.

This text is valuable for us since it holds the foundations for many of the rites we celebrate today. We get to journey back in time and recognize the continuity of faith that leads to our modern celebrations of the Sacraments. Tradition is maintained even amongst the changes throughout the centuries.