

The History of the Catholic Church

The 3rd Century: the Church Expands

Events of the 3rd Century

212: Constitutio Antoniniana

230-232: Sassanid dynasty of Persia launches war with the eastern regions of Rome

235-284: Crisis in the Roman Empire

258: Valerian I persecutes the Christians before being taken captive

284-305: Emperor Diocletian begins massive persecution of the Christians

Politics

The 3rd century was a complex and bloody century for the Roman Empire. Emperor Septimius Severus began the century and continues his reign until 211. Although his reign was largely peaceful, new threats were entering the Empire or about to emerge on the scene. Severus' reign was a peaceful one for the Empire and especially for Christians. His policy of tolerance helped the Christian church to flourish, grow, and become rather large by mid-century.

Shortly after the reign of Septimius Severus, his son, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, nicknamed "Caracalla" reigned in his father's place. Although Severus would reign until his death in 211, many scholars believe that Antoninus began his reign as early as 198 while his father was still emperor. Antoninus would begin a whole new era in Roman history by granting all free men of the Empire citizenship of Rome in what is called the Constitutio Antoniniana. He would reign until his death in 217.

Over the next three decades, Rome will continually fight against warring powers like Persia and the Germanic tribes. Persia had reorganized its leadership over the course of the first part of the 3rd century and was ready for war. As it began its campaign against Rome, political pressures in Persia lead to a conflict between three Persian leaders. At war with itself, Persia withdraws its forces ending the conflict between Rome and Persia.

From 235 to 284 Rome will enter a period of crisis so severe that it almost ended the Empire. Over the course of four decades, 26 different emperors will ascend to the throne and just as many ascended will be assassinated. The constant turn over of emperors led to incredible instability for the empire nearly leading to complete collapse. In 268 the Empire will split into 3 sections fracturing the Empire and causing another civil war. The conflict and chaos finally ended when Diocletian ascended to the throne in 286.

Emperor Diocletian was not immune from the effects that the last century had on Roman politics and life. He saw the great plurality of the Roman Empire as the source of its conflict. His new vision was to unite the Empire under one type of social and political life. After a century of conflict, the senators didn't object to the nearly tyrannical rule of Diocletian neither were they in a place to fight back. Diocletian began his campaign by forcing all soldiers to obey the Roman

cult of deities and sacrifice to the gods. Anyone who did not obey this command was executed. Diocletian believed that the gods were the main reason the state of Rome survived and without them it would crumble. Therefore worship of the deities was necessary. As the edict was carried out, he realized that many people refused his order and many soldiers were willing to die in response to his order. This greatly angered Diocletian and brought great anxiety about the future of the Empire. In response, he led the last and most extensive persecution of the Church in the history of the Church. Many thousands would die as martyrs in his campaign for unity in the Empire. Diocletian's reign will end in 312 when Emperor Constantine takes the throne.

The Church

The era of peace enjoyed by most Christians had many consequences. The first consequence was instability. As we saw in the 2nd century internal conflicts over leadership and church structure led to many of the Church Fathers writing extensively on the value and importance of obedience and structure. The 3rd century will not be as strongly influenced by internal political struggles. The 3rd century sees the rise of theological schools. Each school will have its own emphases and direction that will greatly impact the Church's understanding of herself but also the beliefs of the people. The schools in Alexandria and Antioch will focus on the life of Christians whereas Ephesus and Rome will focus on politics and beliefs. As Christians continued to enter the public sphere, they were allowed to operate in more public and official capacities. Some Christians became governors or leaders in the Roman governmental system. Others became officers in the army. Basically, Christians were now accepted at all levels except the Senate and the Caesar.

The Christians of the 3rd century are no longer concerned about martyrdom. Although writers like Tertullian will emphasize that the true Christian must die for their faith, new waves of thought are entering the Church. The most prominent new wave of thought is the moral life of Christians. Instead of focusing on martyrdom as the only proper way to follow Christ, many people are now exploring the way to live one's life in the public sphere. Ideas around prayer, the moral code, and the practices of Christians now become the dominant thoughts. This new age of acting or being Christian in the world will greatly influence this century and the next several centuries.

As Christianity expands, so do its resources. Whereas the last two centuries were marked by simplicity in art and architecture due to limited capital, the expansion of the Church in the 3rd century sees an emergence of Church buildings and capital. Most Christian buildings are still house churches. Mainly that people use a section of their house as a site for Christian worship. The 3rd century sees a rise in rooms of a house being set apart for worship. By the end of the 3rd century major sites of Christians have houses with a specific room for the celebration of the Sacraments, rooms for the bishop and his presbyters, and a room for storing the items used for worship. Some buildings were large enough to have a special room set aside for the baptismal font called a baptistry. This expansion of church property shows the great increase in converts and the growth of the Church in the 3rd century. With capital for growth and expansion, Christian art develops as well as items for specific Christian use such as vestments.

The major Christian centers of learning advanced the Church in more ways than theological. As centers of learning for Greek culture, Antioch and Alexandria maintained their Hellenistic influences into the 4th century. Rome and Ephesus began a new wave in Christian thought that would become the dominant way of expressing Christianity by the 5th century. As the Latin language became more commonly used, Latin entered the Church through the theological centers in Rome and Ephesus. Whereas Hellenistic culture began to expand Christian thought into ways of being Christian in the world, Latin maintained the necessity of martyrdom as the essential way to follow Christ. The Latin language provided greater depth and clarity on matters of faith than Greek. As the Church continued to expand in the 3rd century, Latin became more dominant and the more standardized way of expressing Christian thought. These differences in language and culture led to great rift in the Christian church and many debates.

We cannot leave the 3rd century without examining the effects of Emperor Diocletian's persecution on the Christian Church. His persecution is the last major persecution the Church will experience. After the 3rd century, the relationship between the Emperor and the Church will turn peaceful. Once we arrive at the 16th century and the era of globalization, persecutions will happen throughout the world but not affect the entire Church like in the 3rd century. Diocletian's persecution knew no bounds. He wanted the Empire to follow the Roman cult of deities and nothing was going to stop him. Since the Church now had capital, the persecutions of the Christians also meant that he could seize their capital once he killed the members. Additionally, Christians became more lax than we saw in previous centuries. Without the fear of being martyred, many people converted due to the simpler form of religion, because of the teachings, or because it was the new dominant religion. No longer did people feel the sense that conversion may lead to their horrific martyrdom. When the persecutions began, many Christians defected from the faith or followed the instructions of the Emperor to sacrifice to the gods or hand over church property. Some Christian writers claimed that this choice to follow the prescripts of the emperor was morally licit and did not result in a defection from the faith. Others were horrified that Christians would defect from their faith even to the smallest degree desiring for these defectors to be excommunicated from the Church. The persecutions under Diocletian were more serious than simply killing Christians and caused great rifts in the Church regarding the treatment of defectors.

The number one greatest achievement of the Church in the 3rd century was a formalized statement of belief. With so much confusion regarding the Christian beliefs and many people claiming to follow the Christian beliefs, the Church codified their beliefs in the Apostles Creed. This Creed explained the basics of Christianity and was used in all churches throughout the Empire. Additionally, the Church codified the 27 books of the New Testament and the books of the Old Testament during this century. Therefore, the 3rd century ends with some major achievements for the solidification of Christianity as a religion.

Spirituality

Spirituality of the 3rd century comes in two main forms: the focus on martyrdom and Christian life. Many Christians of the 3rd century still emphasized the value and importance of martyrdom as the best and most assured way to follow Christ. As the persecutions under Diocletian ramped

up, the emphasis on martyrdom did as well. Although martyrdom was always, and still is, seen as the most perfect way to follow Christ, not all people agreed with its emphasis. For most of the 3rd century Christians were not being persecuted or martyred. Thus the question: how ought a Christian to live? A new wave of thought entered the Christian church on the importance of living the Christian life. Many writers of the 3rd century emphasized the value of living the values of Christ and following him in our daily life. Such actions like being kind, living moral and upright lives, and becoming examples to the people were the standard language. Emphases on prayer and the Sacramental life of the Church also became the standard way for Christians to worship.

Additionally some saw another way to live the Christian life. At the turn of the 4th century we meet St. Anthony of Alexandria or St. Anthony of the Desert. Hearing the call to leave everything and follow Jesus, he left all his property and headed out into the desert. In the desert he would live a very simple life dedicated to prayer and penance. Many people flocked to the desert inspired by his example. The life of the desert is called the eremitical life meaning “life of the desert.” The desert people were called hermit based on the word eremos or desert. Thus began the tradition of the desert mothers and fathers and the early monastic life. The 3rd century is dominated by a desire to follow Christ in our daily lives with much discussion regarding the practical nature of doing this.

Heresies:

Manichaeism

Developed in the middle of the 3rd century by the intellectual Mani. Mani was born in Southern Mesopotamia where he was raised in a Jewish Christian household. After becoming disillusioned by the practice of the Christian community, he claimed to have received several visions regarding God’s desire for him. After being expelled from the Christian community, he began to teach his new doctrines. Manichaeism is a dualistic religion like Gnosticism that teaches that there is a good god and an evil god. His religion focused on elected individuals who can help their disciples to enter the cosmic plane.

Arianism

Arius was a Alexandrian theologian of the late 3rd century. After studying the Christian doctrines, he became immensely concerned with the monarchy of the Father. He felt that claiming that Jesus is God breaks the 1st commandment, destroys the monarchy of the Father, and making Christianity polytheistic. His main slogan is “God is one.” If Jesus is God, claims Arius, then there was a time when Jesus didn’t exist and God brought him into existence. Since God cannot have a beginning or an end, then Jesus cannot be God.

Arius’ power will overwhelm Christianity of the late 3rd and early 4th century. At the height of his preaching, the Emperor, Empress and 60% of Christianity will believe his teachings. Already riled by political pressure and persecutions, Arius will become powerful enough to engage a war with Christianity. Since his teaching is condemned and clarified in the next century, I will discuss the conclusion then.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism seems to never die. As the persecutions under Diocletian increase, the Gnostic tendencies reemerge. Many people adopt their new policies as a way out of the horrors of martyrdom. The Gnostics of the 3rd century taught that our actions do not correspond to our beliefs. Even if you offer the sacrifices in the temples as ordered by the Emperor, this does not mean that you chose to defect from the faith. Therefore many people adopted these policies so that they would appease the Emperor and also maintain their Christian faith. The final conclusion to this heresy will be in the 4th century with Pelagianism.

Key Figures

St. Clement of Alexandria: St. Clement is probably the best known author of the 3rd century. After being raised in a Christian household, he studied under teachers in both Rome and Palestine and ended his studies with a master in Egypt. Clement's theological points center on the logos or the "word." Jesus, the Word, is the central revelation of the loving God. Through God's sending of the Word, we are saved.

Origin: One of the most learned and prolific writers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. His works would be read by a large number of Christians even though they were partially condemned by the Church. After studying in Alexandria, he would teach the converts and continued his writing on Christian doctrine. He wrote several commentaries on books of the Bible, spiritual works, apologetics against heresies and more. Many of his writings were well accepted and widely read. Others contain some strange ideas. Origin thought that all souls existed in Heaven. After the fall, the fallen souls were sent to earth for their punishment. Once our punishment is over, due to the Sacrifice of Jesus, we are free to go back to Heaven.

St. Cyprian of Carthage: Bishop of Carthage and one of the most prominent writers of the 3rd century. During the persecutions under Decius, he went into hiding probably in Carthage. Following tumultuous relations with the bishop in Rome and the bishop in Carthage, the clergy supported Cyprian as bishop bringing him into the political sphere of the Church. We would write extensively on order and forgiveness especially to those who defected from the faith.

St. Lawrence the Deacon: the Seventh Deacon of Rome and one of the major leading officials in the Church. When Diocletian ordered him to bring all the treasures of the Church, he sold all the church property and brought the poor of the city of Rome to the Emperor. Livid with rage over this defiance of his orders, he ordered him to be roasted alive. As he was being roasted, he told his torturers, "turn me over I'm done on this side."

St. Perpetua and Felicity: a pair of sister saints from the persecutions under Diocletian. They were both told to defect from their faith, refused, were sent to the gladiators, survived, and then were killed by beheading. The story of these saints will survive the centuries.

Art and Music

Christian art takes an explosive advent in the 3rd century. With buildings set aside for worship and the church gaining some capital, now we can decorate and express our faith in art. Early

Christian art is dominated by biblical images that center on freedom from persecution and healing. The story of the hemorrhaging woman captivates Christians as the belief in Jesus bringing healing to them. Each painting deviates strongly from the Roman art which is bold, beautiful, and dominated with athletes in the nude.



Christian art is simple and full of fully-clothed people. The first image below is the story of Daniel and his companions being burned alive. The outstretched arms represent their plea to God but also the orans position of prayer. The intertwined hands show the Christian



community at prayer emphasizing the link between the faithful at prayer and salvation through Jesus. The second image is the good shepherd. Jesus is in the middle surrounded by sheep and animals. These sheep represent the Church and Jesus is the savior who will bring healing and safety to his persecuted flock. The final image below is the hemorrhaging woman. She is kneeling before Jesus in a act of supplication. Jesus extends his hand towards her as a sign of both healing and blessing.



Eucharistic Prayer of Hippolytus

Bishop: The Lord be with you.

People: And with your spirit.

Bishop: Lift up your hearts.

People: We have them with the Lord.

Bishop: Let us give thanks to the Lord.

People: It is proper and just.

Bishop: We give thanks to you God,
through your beloved son Jesus Christ,
whom you sent to us in former times
as Savior, Redeemer, and Messenger of your Will,
who is your inseparable Word,
through whom you made all,
and in whom you were well-pleased,
whom you sent from heaven into the womb of a virgin,
who, being conceived within her, was made flesh,
and appeared as your Son,
born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin.
It is he who, fulfilling your will
and acquiring for you a holy people,
extended his hands in suffering,
in order to liberate from sufferings
those who believe in you.
Who, when he was delivered to voluntary suffering,
in order to dissolve death,
and break the chains of the devil,
and tread down hell,
and bring the just to the light,
and set the limit,
and manifest the resurrection,
taking the bread, and giving thanks to you, said,
"Take, eat, for this is my body which is broken for you."
Likewise the chalice, saying,
This is my blood which is shed for you.
Whenever you do this, do this in memory of me.

Therefore, remembering his death and resurrection,
we offer to you the bread and the chalice,
giving thanks to you, who has made us worthy
to stand before you and to serve as your priests.

And we pray that you would send your Holy Spirit
to the oblation of your Holy Church.

In their gathering together,

give to all those who partake of your holy mysteries the fullness of the Holy Spirit,
toward the strengthening of the faith in truth,

that we may praise you and glorify you,

through your son Jesus Christ,

through whom to you be glory and honor,

Father and Son,

with the Holy Spirit,

in your Holy Church,

now and throughout the ages of the ages.

Amen.

Apostles Creed

I believe in God the Father almighty;
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended into heaven,
sits at the right hand of the Father,
whence he will come to judge the living and the dead;
and in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Church,
the remission of sins,
the resurrection of the flesh,
[life everlasting].

nothing is impossible with God, except to lie. **3** Therefore let faith in him be rekindled within us, and let us understand that all things are near to him. **4** By his majestic word he established the universe, and by a word he can destroy it. **5** "Who will say to him, 'What have you done?' Or who will resist the might of his strength?" He will do all things when he wills and as he wills, and none of those things decreed by him will fail. **6** All things are in his sight, and nothing escapes his will, **7** seeing that "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day pours forth speech to day, and night proclaims knowledge to night; and there are no words or speeches whose voices are not heard."

28 Since, therefore, all things are seen and heard, let us fear him and abandon the abominable lusts that spawn evil works, in order that we may be shielded by his mercy from the coming judgments. **2** For where can any of us escape from his mighty hand? And what world will receive any of those who desert him? For the scripture says somewhere: **3** "Where shall I go, and where shall I be hidden from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I depart to the ends of the earth, there is your right hand; if I make my bed in the depths, there is your Spirit." **4** Where, then, can one go, or where can one flee from the one who embraces the universe?

Good Behavior, Faith, and God's Favor

29 Let us, therefore, approach him in holiness of soul, lifting up to him pure and undefiled hands, loving our gentle and compassionate Father who made us his own chosen portion. **2** For thus it is written: "When the Most High divided the nations, when he dispersed the sons

27.3 *faith in him* Or *his faithfulness*. **27.5** *Wis.* 12:12. **27.7** *Ps.* 19:1-3 (LXX 18:2-4). **28.2** *scripture* Or perhaps *writing*, possibly referring to the third division of the Hebrew Bible (the first two being the law and the prophets). **28.3** *Cf. Ps.* 139(LXX 138):7-10. **29.2** *Deut.* 32:8-9.

of Adam, he fixed the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the angels of God. His people, Jacob, became the Lord's portion, and Israel his inherited allotment." **3** And in another place it says: "Behold, the Lord takes for himself a nation out of the midst of the nations, as a man takes the first fruits of his threshing floor; and the Holy of Holies will come forth from that nation."

30 Seeing then that we are the portion of the Holy One, let us do all the things that pertain to holiness, forsaking slander, disgusting and impure embraces, drunkenness and rioting and detestable lusts, abominable adultery, detestable pride. **2** "For God," it says, "resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." **3** Let us therefore join with those to whom grace is given by God. Let us clothe ourselves in concord, being humble and self-controlled, keeping ourselves far from all backbiting and slander, being justified by works and not by words. **4** For it says: "The one who speaks much shall hear much in reply. Or does the talkative person think that he is righteous? **5** Blessed is the one born of woman who has a short life. Do not be overly talkative." **6** Let our praise be with God, and not from ourselves, for God hates those who praise themselves. **7** Let the testimony to our good deeds be given by others, as it was given to our fathers who were righteous. **8** Boldness and arrogance and audacity are for those who are cursed by God; but graciousness and humility and gentleness are with those who are blessed by God.

31 Let us therefore cling to his blessing, and let us investigate what are the pathways of blessing. Let us study the records of the things that have happened from the beginning. **2** Why was our father

29.3 *Cf. Deut.* 4:34; 14:2; *Num.* 18:27; *2 Chron.* 31:14; *Ezek.* 48:12. **30.1** *the portion of the Holy One* Various ancient authorities read *a holy portion* or *holy portions* or *a portion of holy ones*. **30.2** *Prov.* 3:34; *James* 4:6; *1 Pet.* 5:5. **30.4-5** *Job* 11:2-3a *LXX*. **31.2** *Cf. Gen.* 15:6; *Rom.* 4; *James* 2:23.