

History of the Catholic Church

Part 2: the 1st Century: the beginning of the Church

Major events of the 1st century:

0 AD (4BC -6AD): Birth of Jesus

31(33): Death of Jesus

44: Death of the first apostle, James

48-66: Mission of St. Paul

50: Council of Jerusalem

54-68: 1st persecution of the Christians under Nero

64: The Great Fire of Rome

68: Death of Sts. Peter and Paul

68: 1st Gospel is written: Mark

66-70: The Great Jewish War

70: Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the Diaspora begins

70-75: Matthew's Gospel is written

75-80: Luke's Gospel is written

80: Colosseum is completed

90-95: John's Gospel is written

Politics of the 1st Century:

The century begins in the era of Roman peace called the Pax Romana. People are beginning to experience the beauty of this peace through increased trade leading to increased wealth. Most of this wealth will be concentrated in the elite of Rome but the people experience the wealth through the public works projects of infrastructure and the building of temples and public places. In general Roman rule is good and the people are tolerant of their new overlords.

At the top of the Roman world is constant chaos as ruling families and elites vie for power. Thirteen emperors will control Rome in the 1st century with three of them for a year or less. Constant squabbles left the Roman elite constantly at each other's throat trying to claim the title of Caesar. For the most part the people were only affected by the constant change in emperor more than any policy change or leadership change. Most of the rulers expected the same tribute from their subject.

Although general day-to-day life was placid, many challenges were just on the horizon. Tensions between the Romans and Jews were growing and small skirmishes of Jews began to fight Rome.

Each time they were horribly slaughtered. In 54 AD Emperor Nero began the first of the great persecutions of the Christians. He, as well as many Romans, felt the Christians were atheists who were trying to destroy Rome with their new religion. In 64 AD a huge fire broke out in the mercantile district in Rome that would ignite twice and destroy 2/3rds of the city within a week, Nero claimed the fire was caused by the Christians leading the people to help encourage the persecution of the Christians. Christians were now slaughtered through executions, combat in the arena, or through being fed to wild beasts.

Nearly 10 years after the persecution of the Christians began, the Jews were finally at their breaking point. In 66 AD Jews from throughout the region of Israel banded together with the goal of finally expelling the Romans from their lands and becoming a free state again in what is called the Great Jewish Revolt. This revolt was devastating. The Romans, far superior in military might, slaughtered the Jewish rebels and killed thousands. The Romans finally ended this revolt by destroying the Temple in 70 AD. The revolt was over, the Jews were demoralized, and the ancient faith realized the end had come. Jews from the region of Israel fled the land and hid in what is called the Diaspora or the Great Dispersion. Now Jews would leave Israel and begin to inhabit the various regions of the Empire in an effort to stay hidden and preserve their faith until God finally redeemed them and restored the land.

Throughout the next 30 years minor persecutions of the Christians would continue in various regions with no concentrated efforts. Emperors would come and go and the Empire would regain some semblance of peace. In this more peaceful era the Church continued to grow and develop gaining many more members.

Church developments:

The first Christians were Jewish converts. These Jewish converts lived their faith by practicing the basic forms of Judaism like going to Synagogue and praying in the Temple. They did not perform the customary sacrifices of the Jews and instead celebrated the Eucharist, or thanksgiving, in their house churches. By the time of the end of the Acts of the Apostles, nearly 5 to 10 years after the founding of Christianity, the Jews realized that the Christians were being persecuted by the people and would cause the Jews to be persecuted in response. Therefore the Jews joined these persecutions and kicked the Christians out of their synagogues and the Temple. Frustrated by their abandonment by the Jews, the Christians made every effort to separate themselves from their parent religion. The Sabbath became Sunday, the days of fasting were moving from Tuesday and Saturday to Wednesday and Friday, men stopped covering their heads when they prayed, and all praying and worshipping happened in the house churches. Christian priests took the name episcopos and presbyter further distancing themselves from the Jewish priesthood. This new wave of thought attempted to separate themselves completely from those words and ideas that represented Judaism.

At first the early Christians were called the people of the “way” since they followed the pattern of the life of Jesus. This title soon fell away by about 15 years after the start of Christianity when, at Antioch, they were called Christians. A name that would dominate the new band of followers. The name Christian literally means the “people of the Christ.”

The first 20 years of Christianity was dominated by the belief that Jesus would return soon. Even St. Paul during his missionary efforts throughout the Empire told many of the Christians to stay calm and prepare for the end. Do not worry about taking wives or husbands or worry about the persecutions because Jesus is coming soon. As the Apostles began to die, mostly through martyrdom and with no sign that Jesus was returning soon, the Christians realized that maybe Jesus wasn't coming back as soon as they thought. Thus they began a concerted effort to preserve the faith and developed means of passing on the faith through the written word.

The first Christian texts were hymns. These hymns were designed to teach the faith and guide their Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist. Their first celebration of the Eucharist was centered on the sharing of the stories of Jesus and his teachings followed by preaching and expanding upon these stories. With the hope of Jesus' immanent return diminishing, they realized they needed a written account of the life of Jesus so that the stories could be passed down through the generations. Hence, the Gospels were written. Scholars debate the formation of the Gospels and the years of their creation. Regardless, the purpose of the Gospels was to tell the story of Jesus so that his teaching, words, and sacrifice could be shared with future generations. By the end of the 1st century, all four Gospels were written and all the letters of the New Testament. These texts were not the only texts written to proclaim the faith. Up to 20 other Gospels were also written and scores of other letters. These letters could be anything from communication between bishops to accounts of martyrdoms. We have 100's of these letters and correspondences. The other gospels, called the Gnostic Gospels, were not widely used. Each text was read in the liturgy with the people at prayer deciding the validity of the text. By the end of the first century the basic canon of the New Testament was widely used with some extra texts circling around various Christian communities. The last book of the New Testament, Revelation, would be written at the turn of the century thus completing the canon of the New Testament.

Spiritual developments:

Only two major ideas dominated the spirituality of the early church: martyrdom and the Eucharist. The early church believed that the fastest and most assured way to get to Heaven was through martyrdom. Hundreds of Christians were martyred by the turn of the 1st century. Emperor Nero was one of the main proponents of the extermination of the Christians but many other Roman communities joined in the efforts in their own way. The most common form of martyrdom was to be beheaded or killed by a volley of arrows. When they wanted more entertainment from vanquishing their foes, the Romans would set up Christians in gladiator matches without weapons or feed them to wild beasts without weapons. These public spectacles grew large crowds of Romans who liked to see the destruction of their common foe. With the completion of the Colosseum in 80 AD, many Christians would die in this battle arena. Martyrdom was considered the best way for a Christian to end his/her life and prove his/her faith to the world.

The early church celebrated these martyrs in a variety of ways. The records of their heroism were recorded in stories many of which survived the many centuries and can be read today like the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity. The most common form of celebrating the martyrs was to celebrate the Eucharist over the tomb of the martyr. This started the practice of daily Mass since

the anniversary of the death of a martyr rarely fell on a Sunday and the practice of placing a bone fragment or relic of a martyr in the stone of a consecrated altar.

The celebration of the Eucharistic had a basic form that kept evolving and expanding over the century. It began as an evening celebration that would consist of hymns, prayers, readings or telling of the life of Jesus, preaching, and then the sharing of the broken bread. This same structure will form the way we celebrate the Eucharist from this point until the present day. The only major developments of the 1st century are the changing of the time of the Eucharist and the addition of the Eucharistic Prayer. When the Eucharist was celebrated in the evening, people would congregate and get drunk since it's the end of the day. The early bishops commented on this disgrace of this holy event and changed the standard time of the celebration to the morning so that people would not come to Mass drunk. Similarly, to help emphasize the message of the celebration, prayers were added around the celebration of the Eucharist to emphasize the meaning and importance of this event. Thus the Eucharistic Prayer was formed.

Another common practice of the early church was the praying of the Our Father three times a day. In the accounts of the Acts of the Apostles, Peter was known to go to the Temple and pray three times a day. His pattern of prayer became the standard hours of the Liturgy of the Hours and the practice of praying the Our Father three times a day got codified in these hours: once at Mass and once at Evening and Morning Prayer.

By the end of the 1st century the Sacraments had their basic structure and number. Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation were the most prominent of these Sacraments. Baptism and Confirmation were the means through which a person entered the church. The process of entry could take between four and twenty years depending on the person. Each person was given a sponsor and education in the faith. Once the person had renounced certain worldly pleasure and the sponsor agreed the person was ready for entrance into the church, the person would be baptized. Anyone holding public office, performing military service, or whose life was not deemed worthy of the life of a Christian would not be admitted for Baptism. Baptism and Confirmation happened at the same time. A person would be washed with water and then anointed with oil. The early church was very clear on this process. In the Teaching of the 12 Apostles, The Didache, the author notes that cool, flowing water was the expected norm for baptism. When cool, flowing water was not available, warm, flowing water was allowed. When warm, flowing water was not available, then cool, stagnant water was allowed. When cool, stagnant water was not available, then warm, stagnant water was allowed. Baptism was performed nude in lakes and rivers since churches were not built yet.

The Sacrament of Holy Orders and Marriage were just on the fringes of early Christianity. The form of consecrating a bishop and deacon is explained in the Acts of the Apostles. For priests/presbyters, their form and function was different than modern priests and therefore the structure is similar to that of a deacon. The ordination rite consisted of the bishop laying his hands on the candidate and saying the prayers of consecration. Marriage in the early church was minimized. The earliest Christians thought that celibacy was the best way to follow Christ and marriage was the option for those too weak to live a celibate life. It would take a few more centuries before marriage is given status equal to the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

The Sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick were vastly different than in the upcoming centuries. Anointing of the Sick required a presbyter anointing the person with oil and saying some prayers. The Sacrament of Penance was always celebrated by the bishop and done publically. Any time a person committed a widely known serious sin, they were brought before the bishop for penance. These sins included adultery, apostacy, and murder. The person would be tried by the bishop. If found guilty, he/she would be given a penance and expected to fulfil the penance before being admitted back into the church. They literally could not step foot in the church building until the penance was completed. Some of these penances ranged from 5 to 30 years and could required fasting for the entire time or more severe mortifications. Once the penance was completed, the penitent would go before the bishop who would publically declare his/her sins forgiven and readmitted the person back into the community.

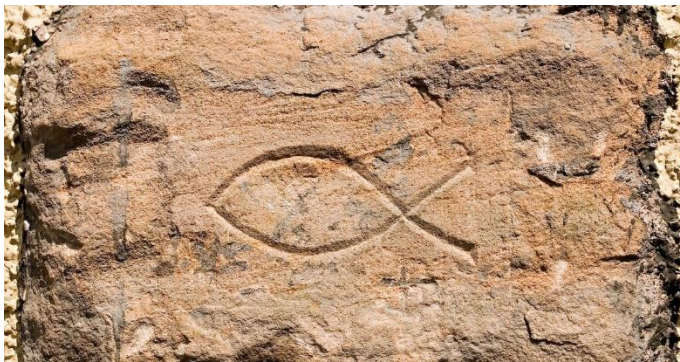
Papacy and church function:

The most important early development in the church is leadership. Now that Jesus is dead and risen and the apostles are beginning to disperse and die, who will lead the church? Although this topic is hotly debated, the Acts of the Apostles clearly indicates that Peter led the early church. Not only did he lead the Council in Jerusalem but he gave the final opinion on the matters settled during this council. In addition to the clear evidence in Acts, historically Peter and Paul were always seen as the major driving force and source of leadership in the Church. When we get to the 4th and 5th centuries, the Council of Nicaea and Chalcedon will affirm that primacy of church authority resides in the See of Peter, namely the church of Rome. During the 1st century the main issues are succession. Who will take over after the apostles die? This may seem like a simple issue to solve for our modern ears but another similar issue plagued the church and led to these debates. The earliest Christians assumed Jesus was coming back before they needed to discuss leadership. Therefore no one had a plan. The plan was later developed that those who succeeded the Apostles needed to be witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and be in good standing with the Church.

The first division of the church were those of apostles, what we call bishops today. The role of the successors is oversight of the church, hence the word episcopos which means overseer. The apostles, for our purposes bishops, ran the church. They presided over every celebration of the Eucharist, celebrated every Sacrament, and were the leadership of a local church. The bishop and his flock constituted a church. The presbyters, or elders, held advisory roles to the bishop. The presbyters would assist at the celebration of the Eucharist and help in the administration of the church. The final division, which occurred first out of these three divisions, is the role of deacon. Deacons were appointed and commissioned as early as a year after the death of Jesus. As the church grew and more needs were presented to the apostles, they realized the need for additional help, hence deacons. Deacons were men who were in good standing with the church that would assist in the celebration of the sacraments, distribution of the Eucharist to the sick, and aid orphans and widows. They were the servants of the bishops who did all the extra work the bishops didn't have time for. Thus by the end of the 1st century, these three divisions of the hierarchy of the church are established.

The final major development of the early church is the Council, or later called the Ecumenical Council. As issues arose over church governance, the beliefs of the church, or the practices of the church, the Apostles realized they need solutions and a way to deal with these problems. The solution is a council. Council are meetings where all the Apostles, or bishops, are present. When all those present agree on an issue, then the Holy Spirit inspired this solution and thus it is the faith of the church. From this point forward major developments in theology and church practice will be decided by councils.

Christian Art



for fish. One Christian, wanting to know if the other person is Christian, would draw the top half of the fish. If the other person was Christian, they would know this symbol and add the bottom half of the fish. Now you know that you are both Christians and safe to talk and share. The other prominent symbol of the early Church is the Chi Rho. The Chi Rho is the combination of the first two letters of the title “Christ” into one symbol. These two symbols represent not only the oppression of the early church but the clever ways they disguised themselves to avoid death.

Early Christian art is very sparse with imagery. The reason is simple: persecution. If you are a persecuted person who is hated by all factions of society, you don’t want images that look like calling cards for them to capture you. Therefore early Christian art is rather cryptic. The most iconic of the early Christian symbols is the ichthus, Greek



Heretical Movements:

Two major forms of heresy dominate the 1st century of Christianity. The first form is based on the Jewish practices. As we see in the letters of St. Paul, many early Christians believed that they needed to follow the Mosaic law in order to be true Christians. Since Jesus was a Jew who followed the Mosaic Law, so must we follow it as Jesus did including circumcision, dietary practices, and legal prescriptions. At the Council of Jerusalem in 50 AD, these matters were discussed and debated with the conclusion that Christians are not Jews and thus are not bound by the Mosaic Law. No longer do Christians need to be circumcised, follow the dietary customs of

the Jews, nor the precepts of the Law. Christians are, however, to avoid meat sacrificed to idols, blood, and to follow the parts of the law that deal with moral teachings.

The second movement began late in the 1st century and would continue for four more centuries: Gnosticism. A group of Christians, believing that they had received a special revelation from God, left the larger Christian community and wandered off into the desert to become the Gnostics. Gnosticism comes from the Greek word gnosis which means to know. These people felt that God gave them special revelations which their followers were expected to learn, follow, and through which they would be saved. Their core belief comes from the Gospel of Mark where Jesus speaks the fullness of the truth only to his disciples. This “special knowledge” is the core belief of the Gnostics. The Gnostics formed themselves into small communities where the person who gained the personal revelation would instruct and lead the small band of followers.

Major Saints and Persons:

The most prominent saints of the 1st century are the apostles Peter and Paul. All the Apostles except John were martyred as they preached the message of Christianity. Paul and Peter were crucified or beheaded at Rome. Bartholomew was skinned alive in India. The others were all beheaded or crucified. John was the only apostle to survive the age of persecution and was exiled where he lived his final days.

All of the popes of the 1st century were also martyrs which would start the tradition that all popes will be martyred and all popes are saints. The first five are chronicled in the 1st Eucharistic prayer called the Roman Canon: Linus, Cletus, Clement, (2nd Century: Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian, Lawrence, Chrysogonus).