

Contents

Introduction.....	7
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Section 1: The Church in the Early Christian Centuries

Part 1: The Origin of the Church9

Article 1: From the Father's Heart	10
Article 2: Sent by the Holy Spirit	14
Article 3: After Pentecost.....	17

Part 2: The Mission of the Church22

Article 4: The Conversion of Saint Paul	23
Article 5: The Significance of Saints Peter and Paul.....	26
Article 6: The Development of the New Testament.....	29

Part 3: Growth and Persecution in Apostolic Times.....35

Article 7: Persecutions and Progress.....	36
Article 8: Early Christian Worship.....	39
Article 9: The Early Apologists.....	43
Article 10: Authority in the Church.....	46

Part 4: Age of the Fathers.....51

Article 11: Constantine and the <i>Edict of Milan</i>	52
Article 12: The Fathers of the Church	55
Article 13: Church Councils and Doctrinal Development ...	59
Article 14: The Collapse of the Roman Empire of the West.....	63

Section 2: The Church in the Middle Ages

Part 1: The Early Medieval Period68

Article 15: Western Monasticism	69
Article 16: The Development of Islam	72
Article 17: Charlemagne: Holy Roman Emperor	76
Article 18: Gregorian Reform	79

Part 2: Threats from Within and Without83

Article 19: The Eastern Schism	84
Article 20: The Crusades	88
Article 21: Challenges to the Papacy	92

Part 3: The High Middle Ages.....98

Article 22: New Religious Orders	99
Article 23: Medieval Cathedrals: Works of Beauty and Inspiration	103
Article 24: Scholastics and Medieval Universities	106
Article 25: The Eucharist: Heresies, Teachings, and Devotions	110
Article 26: Understanding the Inquisitions	113

Section 3: An Age of Renewal and Growth

Part 1: Renaissance and Reform120

Article 27: The Renaissance	121
Article 28: Luther's Complaint	124
Article 29: Religious Confessions in Europe	127

Part 2: Catholic Renewal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries133

Article 30: The Council of Trent	134
Article 31: The Catholic Reformation and New Religious Orders	139

Part 3: The Church in the New World 144

Article 32: Missions to Latin America 145

Article 33: Missions in the Far East 149

Article 34: Missions to North America 153

Section 4: The Church in the Modern Era

Part 1: The Church in the Age of Reason and Revolution 160

Article 35: The Age of Reason 161

Article 36: The French Revolution 164

Article 37: The Effects of the Enlightenment
and the French Revolution 168

Part 2: Pope Pius IX and Vatican I 172

Article 38: Pope Pius IX and Religious Renewal 173

Article 39: Vatican Council I 176

Part 3: Catholics in America 181

Article 40: The Church in America 182

Article 41: An Immigrant Church 186

Article 42: American Missionaries and Saints 190

Part 4: Industrialization, Injustice, and the Church's Response 194

Article 43: The Effects of
Industrialization and Capitalism 195

Article 44: The Birth of the
Social Doctrine of the Church 198

Section 5: The Church in the Post-Modern Era (Twentieth to Twenty-First Centuries)

Part 1: The Early Twentieth Century 205

Article 45: To Restore All Things in Christ	206
Article 46: Rivulets of Renewal	210
Article 47: The Church and World War I	214
Article 48: The Church and World War II	217

Part 2: Vatican Council II: A Pastoral Approach to the World 223

Article 49: Pope John XXIII: Winds of Change	224
Article 50: Vatican Council II: A New Pentecost	227
Article 51: An Overview of Vatican Council II.	230
Article 52: Images of the Church	234

Part 3: Developments after the Second Vatican Council 240

Article 53: The Papacy of Pope Paul VI.	241
Article 54: The Pilgrim Pope	246
Article 55: The Mass, Then and Now.	249
Article 56: Vatican II: A Gift of God to the Church.	253

Part 4: The Church in the New Millennium 257

Article 57: The Life and Times of Pope John Paul II	258
Article 58: Pope John Paul II: Evangelist and Pastor, Teacher and Writer.	262
Article 59: The Papacy of Pope Benedict XVI.	267
Article 60: Pope Francis: Servant of the Servants of God ..	271
Article 61: The Church in the United States: Abounding in Hope	274
Article 62: The Church in the United States: Choices and Challenges.	278

Glossary	285
Index	293
Acknowledgments	305

Renaissance and Reform

In the 1400s the Middle Ages, a period covering nearly a thousand years, was gradually fading and giving way to a new reality in the religious, social, and political realms. For the Church the crisis of popes and antipopes—the Papal Schism—and the Avignon Papacy left the papacy tarnished and weakened. Further, the papacy had become a target of cynicism because of some popes' focus on temporal power and riches. In the social and intellectual sphere, a movement was born that shed the religiosity and piety of the Middle Ages and focused instead on glorious human achievements. Thus the Renaissance began, and with it the humanist movement. Finally, as princes and monarchs began to assert their supreme authority over their subjects ahead of the Church, national identities began to replace the authority and unity once dominated by the Church. In this context the Protestant Reformation was born and the once united Christian world fractured into various denominations, or confessions.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 27: The Renaissance (page 121)
- Article 28: Luther's Complaint (page 124)
- Article 29: Religious Confessions in Europe (page 127)

Article

27 The Renaissance

As the period known as the Middle Ages was drawing to a close, Europe was ushering in a new era known as the Renaissance. The Renaissance, a term that means “rebirth,” represents a period of cultural awakening in which the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome were rediscovered.

The Renaissance began in Florence, in Tuscany, in roughly the late fourteenth century. From there, it spread to the rest of Europe. A distinguishing characteristic of the period is **humanism**, a movement to revive classical learning, such as Latin and Greek literary and historical texts, and that focused on human achievements rather than on the divine. Humanism was expressed in scholarship, art, architecture, and music, which were often supported by wealthy patrons and by the Renaissance popes.

Humanist Scholarship

Most humanist scholars were Christian. Eminent among them is Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), who developed important new Latin and Greek translations of the New Testament. Erasmus and other Christian humanists encouraged the Church to return to the Gospel values, and were at times critical of what they saw as the excesses of the Renaissance Popes.

Scholarship in this period received a tremendous boost from the invention of the printing press, around 1440, by Johannes Gutenberg. Books could now be mechanically reproduced, thus also becoming widely available to greater numbers of people.

Art and Music

Some of history’s greatest and most enduring achievements in the arts have their roots in the Renaissance. Master artists of this period celebrated the beauty of God’s creation, especially visible in humanity. Supported by wealthy patrons, such as the Medicis of Florence, and by popes, these artists created works of immense beauty that stand to this day as a testament to human achievement, both in their subjects and



humanism

A cultural and intellectual movement that emphasized classical learning, such as Latin and Greek literary and historical texts, and that focused on human achievements rather than on the divine.

in the genius of the works themselves. The most famous of these include Michelangelo's *Pieta* and scenes from Genesis on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel; Da Vinci's *Last Supper*; and Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, as well as works by Bernini, Giotto, Raphael, Donatello, and the Dominican friar Fra Angelico, who was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1982 and was later named the patron of Catholic artists.

Music also saw new developments during the Renaissance, with the emergence of new liturgical forms and sacred music. The best known composer of the period was Palestrina, whose musical compositions had a lasting influence on the development of liturgical music. Palestrina made such a favorable impression on Pope Julius III that he appointed him musical director of his chapel. In his youth, Palestrina was a spiritual disciple of Saint Philip Neri (1515–1595),

“the Apostle of Rome,” and under his spiritual guidance gained an insight into the spirit of the liturgy that later influenced his music.

Despite the fact that Michelangelo was a sculptor and not a painter, he mastered difficult techniques of perspective, painting on curved surfaces to be viewed from 60 feet below.



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Pray It!

Praying with Art and Music

When we come before God in prayer, we come with all of our senses. Try some of these ideas to help you to use the senses of sight, sound, and touch in your praise of God: set one of your favorite Scripture quotes to a simple tune you can remember; use crayons or paints to express your prayer or your feelings to God, using various colors and abstract designs; find religious art (perhaps from books in the library) to look at and just “be” in God’s presence with it; write a prayerful poem or song and set it to music. As the psalmist says, “Sing to the LORD a new song” (Psalm 96:1).

The Renaissance Popes

The ten popes of the Renaissance period (Nicholas V [1447–1455] to Leo X [1513–1521]) did much to advance the arts through their patronage of great artists and the grand building projects they initiated. These works still enrich the Church today. Still not all of the outcomes of these popes' efforts were positive. Further, at times their motivation was personal gain rather than the glory of God. The Renaissance popes frequently used their power to enrich themselves and

their families, even appointing relatives to the **college of cardinals**. Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503), of the wealthy and powerful Borgia family and an infamous Renaissance pope, appointed at least eight relatives. Further, because these popes were in constant need of money to fund their lavish building and arts projects, they sought new sources of revenue. One of these sources was the sale of indulgences, a practice that led to the coming revolution in the Church that we now know as the Protestant Reformation. (We will learn more about this topic in article 28, "Luther's Complaint.")



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Architecture

A visit through Italy today, particularly Rome and Florence, would reveal some of the greatest architectural achievements of the Renaissance. Located in Vatican City, in Rome, is Saint Peter's Basilica. Saint Peter's has the largest interior of any church in the world. Although there has been a church at the site since the fourth century, the current basilica was constructed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, begun under the direction of Pope Julius II (1503–1513). It houses some of the Church's greatest artistic treasures, including works by Michelangelo and Bernini. The initial design for its dome was created by Bramante, but the dome was later redesigned and completed under Michelangelo. Renaissance



college of cardinals

A Church body made up of all the cardinals whose function is to advise the Pope about Church matters and to elect a successor following the death of a Pope.

churches can be found throughout Rome. Many of them also house the works of master artists.

Renaissance architecture abounds in Florence also. From the palaces of the Medicis to churches built under their patronage, a trip through Florence is like a walk back in time. The crowning glory of the city is the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore (Basilica of Saint Mary of the Flower), familiarly known as the *Duomo* (Italian for *cathedral*). This basilica was completed in 1436, with the dome engineered by Filippo Brunelleschi.

Of course, to note Saint Peter's Basilica and Florence's *Duomo* is like noting two stars in a constellation. Nevertheless these two examples point to the creative genius that flourished at this time and that still enriches the Church and the world today. 🙏

Article 28 Luther's Complaint



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In the fifteenth century, images cut into the surface of a block of fruitwood were printed on hand presses. Some woodcuts showed scenes from daily life: this one depicts the sale of indulgences on the street.

By the start of the 1500s, the Church and politics in Europe were in a volatile state, a reality brought about by practices within the Church that left it vulnerable to criticism, and by the forces of nationalism. For the Church a scandal over indulgences proved to be the fuse that exploded the situation. A then-unknown German

friar, Martin Luther, unwittingly put a match to that fuse. Before we look at Luther's actions and their consequences, let's consider the matter of indulgences as they were promoted in that time.

Indulgences

The original intent of indulgences was to offer Christians a way of doing good as penance for their sins. For instance, making a pilgrimage could merit a special indulgence, which

took away punishment that would otherwise have been suffered after death in purgatory. Unfortunately, indulgences came to be seen as a kind of magic antidote to sin rather than as an element to support true Christian living. In this atmosphere indulgences could be bought and sold rather than earned through good works and prayer. Among some churchmen the selling of indulgences became a common practice. The Dominican friar Johan Tetzel is an infamous seller of indulgences, generating profits to fund papal building projects, including Saint Peter's Basilica.

Luther's *Ninety-five Theses* is not a list of grievances against the Church. It is an argument, or disputation, organized into numbered points, which opens with a call for debate on the statements in the document.

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Martin Luther's Call for Reform

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was an Augustinian priest and monk and a scholar who had studied the Church Fathers and Scripture. Luther believed that only faith in God's love and mercy could justify sinners. This belief sharply contrasted with some of the exaggeratedly pious practices of the time, which at times were based in superstition rather than true faith in God. Luther sought to preach his views to others. On October 31, 1517, he posted his famous *Ninety-five Theses* on the door of the church in Wittenberg. Among other things, this document protested against the sale of indulgences. Luther hoped his statements would invite debate with other theologians. Instead his bold yet simple act began an upheaval that became the Protestant Reformation. Luther had not intended to begin a movement to break away from the Church of Rome, but his call for reform and the Church's response brought about just that outcome.



Catholic Wisdom

Justification by Faith Today

In 1999 the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, after serious dialogue, mutually agreed on the meaning of "justification by faith." They stated: "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works" ("Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," 15).

Luther's Doctrine

When Luther was eventually called to Rome, he refused to go. Instead he further elaborated on the following teachings:

- *Sola Scriptura* In contrast with the Church's position that Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition together contain the Deposit of Faith, Luther stated that Scripture alone transmits Revelation.
- *Sola fide* Luther stated that humankind is justified by faith alone, rather than by both faith and good works, as the Catholic Church teaches.
- *Sola gratia* Luther rejected the understanding that our cooperation with God's grace is essential for our salvation and believed that salvation comes solely by divine grace, an unearned gift of God, and is not merited by the sinner.

Luther further taught that there are only two valid Sacraments—Baptism and the Eucharist—rather than seven.

The Church's Response

The Pope at the time, Leo X (1513–1521), did not initially become involved in the matter of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*. Leo saw the situation as a quarrel among monks. However, in December 1520, Leo condemned forty-one of Luther's proposals and gave him sixty days to recant or be excommunicated. Luther gave no sign of changing his stand, and the excommunication became final in January 1521. According to the European law of the time, a secular ruler—in this case Charles V of Germany—had to arrest and punish heretics who did not recant their heretical beliefs. However, Luther was protected by his friend Duke Frederick of Saxony, who agreed to give him safe passage and to hide him. At home in Germany, support for Luther grew, fueled in part by German nationalism, the movement for a united and independent Germany. The Germans, tired of supporting a papacy now seen as corrupt, sought to promote the interests of their homeland instead.

While in hiding, Luther completed a German translation of the Bible. He also wrote catechisms explaining his ideas. With the aid of the printing press, invented a century or so earlier, his writings, as well as his translation of the Bible, had a wide reach.

By 1525 Luther had come out of exile and married. He had stressed the priesthood of all believers and rejected the position that priests should be required to be unmarried. Luther continued to attract a strong following, and his followers began to be called Lutherans. In 1530 his good friend and follower Philip Melancthon composed the basic creed for Lutherans, calling it the Augsburg Confession. The Augsburg Confession is still the statement of faith for Lutherans, and the year 1530 is considered the beginning of Protestantism. Because Luther rejected ecclesiastical power, he entrusted princes with the organization of churches and their worship. As a result the Lutheran churches became national churches, with their organization differing from one state to another. 🕯

Indulgences and Reform

Luther was right in reacting negatively to the sale of indulgences. He was not alone. Several other leading Catholic theologians, such as the humanists Erasmus and Saint Thomas More, were also critical of this Church abuse. Unlike Luther, however, they remained loyal to the Church.

Eventually Pope Leo X issued a document clarifying the meaning and purpose of indulgences. As a result the selling of indulgences declined and eventually stopped. Most of Luther's early concerns about the abuse of indulgences were incorporated into Church teaching at the Council of Trent, held later in the sixteenth century (see article 30, "The Council of Trent").

Article

29 Religious Confessions in Europe

Following Luther's break with the Catholic Church and his establishment of the Lutheran Church, Christianity in Europe further split into different branches, or confessions, as the new Protestant communities are often called. A new religious landscape was beginning to take shape across Europe.

Which confession a sixteenth-century Christian belonged to was largely a matter of geography. Secular rulers legislated religious practice, and dissenters were subject to persecution, exile, and even execution.



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Germany

In Germany, even as Lutheranism continued to expand, splinter groups formed. One example is the Anabaptists of Münster, whose goal was to establish a church founded on the Apocalypse. Neither violence nor dialogue succeeded in bringing about religious unity in Germany, and conflicts of religion took place during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). The war ended with the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, which gave princes the freedom to choose the confession for their subjects by establishing the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose realm, his religion”).

Switzerland

In France a reformer named John Calvin (1509–1564) took Luther's ideas even further, and created his own version of Protestantism, which became known as Calvinism. Like Luther, Calvin believed in the supreme authority of Scripture, and Scripture alone. Unlike Luther, however, he denied Christ's presence in the Eucharistic elements. Calvin advocated very simple church worship, with none of the elaborate rituals, ornamentations, or statues. However, under threat of

persecution, he fled France for Switzerland. There he wrote the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, which clearly outline his understanding of the Christian faith and practices.

When Calvin arrived in Switzerland in 1536, that country already had a religious revolution in progress, led by Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), with its center in Zurich. Like Calvin, Zwingli departed significantly from Luther's theology, with a significant new addition in the teaching of **predestination**. Protestants in Geneva asked Calvin to help implement reforms.

Calvin proved an able administrator. He founded a university at Geneva to train ministers. He preached almost daily and wrote extensively. Just as Zwingli had done in Zurich, Calvin established a **theocracy** in Geneva, with the Church dominating state affairs. Calvin enforced strict moral laws and established a system of complete intolerance of any religion other than his brand of Protestantism. Practicing beliefs opposed to Calvin's was punishable by death, often by public burning.



predestination

The belief that each person's fate after death is predetermined by God and that no one can do anything to change it.

theocracy

A form of government in which God is understood to be head of the state, ruling by divine guidance granted to its clergy or other ruling officials.

The British Isles

The origin of the conflict between England and the Church was the marriage of King Henry VIII. Henry, who reigned from 1509 to 1547, had been given the title Defender of

Live It!

Church Unity and You

Through the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Church advocates for unity with all Christians according to the conciliar decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) and collaborates in dialogue with other churches and world communions. These include several of the Orthodox Churches, as well as the various faith communions of Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, some Pentecostal groups, and others.

What can you do for Christian unity?

1. Pray the prayer of Jesus, "that all may be one" (John 17:21).
2. Learn about your faith so you will be able to share the truth about Catholicism with others.
3. In relationships with other Christians, seek to understand. Ask questions, and respond to questions, with thoughtfulness and gentleness.

the Faith by Pope Leo X, for his defense of the faith against Luther. Now Henry faced a personal dilemma. He wanted his marriage to Katherine of Aragon annulled, or declared invalid by the Church, because she had not given him a son to inherit the throne and ensure succession. Clement VII (1523–1534), who was Pope at the time, would not consent to the annulment.

Henry rebelled against the Pope. He declared himself head of the Church of England and required all English clergy to commit their loyalty to him. Those who remained loyal to Rome, such as Thomas More, were executed. He then ordered the archbishop of Canterbury to annul his marriage to Katherine so he could marry Anne Boleyn. (Incidentally Henry ordered Anne's beheading a few years later and went on to marry four more times.)

Henry dissolved the monasteries in England and seized their properties. In 1534 Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, declaring the English monarch the head of the Catholic Church in England, or the Anglican Church. Despite the official break with the Catholic Church, Henry VIII rejected Lutheran teaching and never considered himself a Protestant. The Church of England retained many essentials of the Catholic faith in the Act of the Six Articles of 1539, an act that standardized Church practices.

Following Henry's death, some Calvinist ideas crept into Anglicanism. When Elizabeth I, who reigned for forty-five years (1558 to 1603), took the throne, she took the title Supreme Governor of the Realm in Matters Spiritual and Temporal. She promulgated the *Thirty-nine Articles of Religion* defining the Anglican faith and solidified the dominance of the Anglican Church. As dissenters sprang up and sought to follow a Calvinist "purist" religion, these Puritans became subject to persecution.

Scotland adopted Calvinism and the Scottish Reformed Church (Presbyterian) received official status in 1560. John Knox, who was strongly influenced by Calvin, was its organizer. Although England tried to impose reforms in Ireland, Ireland steadfastly refused and remained loyal to Rome.

The Execution of Saint Thomas More

Despite pleas and pressure from his friends and family, Thomas More (1478–1535), Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, refused to recognize King Henry VIII as head of the Catholic Church in England. In 1534 he was arrested for treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London. On July 16, 1535, he was executed.

It is said that More refused to cower before his executioners and had a sense of humor to the very end. He is quoted as saying to his executioner: "I pray you, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself." And then: "Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine office, my neck is very short. Take heed therefore thou shoot not awry" (William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More*). He also proclaimed that he was God's first, but also a good servant to the king.

More was then executed by beheading. His body was given to his foster daughter for burial. As was the custom for traitors at the time, his head was fixed upon a pike over the London Bridge for a month. It was rescued by his daughter and today is believed to rest in Saint Dunstan's Church in Canterbury.

Portrait of Thomas More



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Protestantism Expands

Over the next two centuries, many Protestant communities were found across Europe. Almost all of them were derived from, or related to, the three main movements of Lutheranism, Calvinism, and the Church of England. 🙏

Part Review

1. Describe the theocracy that Calvin established in Geneva.
2. What is predestination and how is this belief contradictory to the doctrine of free will?
3. Imagine living in a world before the invention of the printing press and after it. Describe some of the likely social and religious changes this technological change might have generated.
4. Briefly explain Luther's doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* and provide a Catholic response to each.
5. Explain the Church's teaching on indulgences and describe the abuses related to indulgences that provoked disagreement from Luther and other theologians of his time.
6. Explain the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*. What might be some of the implications if this became a guiding principle for modern nations?
7. What was at the root of England's break with the Catholic Church? In what ways did the outcome differ from the break begun by Martin Luther?