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# Christianity TAKES ROOT

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They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the Apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

—ACTS 2:42-47

## The “SEED OF THE CHURCH”

**O**ne of the important Church leaders of the second century was Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (69–155). Smyrna was located in present-day Izmir, Turkey. Polycarp, along with his friend St. Ignatius of Antioch, became a staunch defender of orthodox faith, opposing various heresies that had surfaced in Asia Minor. One of his writings survives—a letter written to the Philippians. In it he quotes from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and cites various other New Testament texts, thus demonstrating the wide dispersal of New Testament writings at a relatively early age.

In 155, the aged Bishop Polycarp was arrested by a Roman official and told to renounce his “atheistic” beliefs of refusing to worship the emperor and other Roman gods. Polycarp knew the consequences if he did not do as they said: a painful death either by being torn to death by wild animals or being burned alive on a pyre. Three times he was asked to renounce his belief in Jesus Christ. But the aged man replied, “Eighty-six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong: How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

An account of Polycarp's martyrdom, probably written by an eyewitness, recounted how the flames that burned around Polycarp did not kill him. This

prompted one of his executioners to plunge his sword into his heart, out of which the martyr's blood flowed, extinguishing the fire. His persecutors then ignited the fire once again to burn the saint's corpse. His followers gathered their beloved bishop's bones and buried them in a site which they visited annually to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. (This is the earliest evidence of honoring saints on their feast days.)

Early Church theologian Tertullian wrote, "The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church." The blood of the martyr Polycarp, and that of a host of other faithful early followers of Jesus, helps to explain the early growth of Christianity. Their dramatic witness and willingness to face suffering and death led others to wonder about their reasons for doing so and eventually to Jesus Christ himself. This chapter will look at martyrdom and some other "seeds" that produced the fruit of the expanding Church in the earliest centuries.

## The Person OF CHRIST

We begin with a study of Jesus Christ in a book about the Catholic Church because the Church is the institution he founded. St. Joan of Arc would later say, "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're one thing and we shouldn't complicate the matter." Jesus Christ is the Son of God made flesh, the Savior and Redeemer of humanity, and the Lord of history. People become members of the Church through faith in Christ and Baptism in his name. As members of the Church, they try to live in accord with Christ's teachings and make him known to the entire world.

Known as Jesus of Nazareth, Scripture records that Jesus was born sometime before the death of King Herod the Great (4 BC), perhaps in the year 6 BC. He was born in Bethlehem in Judea, on the outskirts of the powerful Roman Empire then ruled by Caesar Augustus. He was born during the relatively stable time known as *Pax Romana* ("Roman Peace"). His birth went unnoticed by the Romans. It took many decades before a Jewish historian (Josephus) or Roman writer (for example, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, or Suetonius) mentioned him, and then typically only to complain about his followers—the Christians. The record of Jesus by these unbelievers is further evidence that he was a real person of history.

However it is the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John (written between AD 65–100) that are the primary sources of information about the Jesus of history. Their main concern is not biographical detail but to testify to faith



**4–6 BC**

Birth of Jesus of Nazareth

in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, to sustain and inspire Christian believers, and to convert nonbelievers.

The Gospels reveal that Jesus led a hidden life as a wood worker in the Galilean town of Nazareth until around AD 28, when he was baptized in the Jordan River by the prophet John the Baptist, a distant relative of his. After the arrest of John, Jesus began his own ministry by preaching “This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:14-15).

## Jesus the Teacher

The Gospels time and again present Jesus as a wandering preacher who often used vivid and memorable stories known as parables to teach a powerful message. The principal theme of his preaching was the advent of God’s kingdom, that is, that God’s universal will for peace, justice, love, and salvation were being realized in the present. Key points of Jesus’ teaching included:

- Although the kingdom appears small, its growth is inevitable, by God’s own design. Jesus’ initial gathering of followers and his foundation of the Church is the seed and beginning of the kingdom.
- God’s kingdom is a gift, open to all people. God’s love knows no bounds. God is like the merciful father in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32) who joyfully and unconditionally welcomes back his wayward children. God wants all people to accept his freely given love and to forgive others as we have been forgiven.
- This good news of God’s love demands a whole-hearted response. To persist in a life of sin is no longer acceptable. We must repent, ask for God’s forgiveness, and develop an intimate relationship with *Abba*, the endearing name Jesus used to call on God the Father.
- Following Jesus and living in his Father’s kingdom requires that we love everyone, even our enemies. Jesus taught his followers to follow the law of love of God that requires loving our neighbor as our self.



Love especially manifests itself in concrete action to the least in our midst: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and the imprisoned (Mt 25:35–36).

- Jesus predicts on more than one occasion that he will go to Jerusalem, “suffer many things . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Mt 16:21).
- Being a Christian requires service and commitment, picking up a cross in imitation of him. Following Jesus brings fulfillment in this life and incredible happiness in the next.

## Jesus the Wonder Worker

Jesus’ message was manifested in concrete deeds. All the Gospels tell us that Jesus performed miracles to demonstrate that God’s power had broken into human history. These mighty deeds also authenticated Jesus’ claim that he could teach in God’s name and that the Father was present in him, his unique Son, accomplishing his will of salvation. The disciples of Jesus, as well as the crowds, witnessed these powerful signs, proclaiming boldly that “the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them” (Lk 7:22–23).

## Jesus the Prayer

The Gospels also point out that Jesus prayed at significant and decisive moments in his life: for example, before God the Father addresses him at his Baptism and Transfiguration, and in the garden prior to the fulfillment of his Father’s plan of love that culminated in Jesus’ Passion, Death, and Resurrection.

Jesus’ own model of prayer also inspired his disciples to learn to pray. One of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1) and he taught them the quintessential Christian prayer, the Our Father. The example of Jesus at prayer encouraged his followers to be people of prayer. Jesus’ prayer on the Cross—“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Lk 23:46)—is his prayer that teaches that he and his followers are to always entrust every trial into the loving hands of God. Our prayer only has access to the Father if we pray “in the name” of Jesus.



## Reaction to Jesus

Although Jesus attracted followers who believed in him, he was rejected by some of the leading and influential Jewish groups of his day, including the Sadducees, the aristocratic Jewish leaders who controlled Temple worship. As collaborators with the Roman authorities, the Sadducees perceived Jesus as a threat to their power over the Jewish people. They also feared that they would be blamed by the Romans for any political disturbances attributed to Jesus. Some of the Sadducee leaders, including the high priest Joseph Caiaphas, cooperated in handing Jesus over to the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. The Gospel of John reports Caiaphas declaring, “It is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish” (Jn 11:50).

Another Jewish sect that was opposed to Jesus was the Pharisees with whom he had much in common, including belief in Resurrection, the need for virtuous living, and the importance of the Law. However, some Pharisees disapproved of Jesus’ interpretations of the Law, for example, concerning healing on the Sabbath, the necessity of ritual washings, and association with public sinners. Jesus was accused of blasphemy for claiming to forgive sin, something only God could do. In addition, Jesus courted no favor when he challenged religious leaders to practice what they preached. Jesus despised religious hypocrisy, especially when it masqueraded as religious superiority.

Eventually, Jesus was arrested. At his trial before the religious authorities, he admitted to being the Christ, the Messiah, “the Son of the Blessed One” (Mk 14:61–62). His contemporaries thought of the Messiah in political and military terms, as one who would throw off the yoke of the Romans, perhaps through military means, and reestablish the Jewish nation. Jesus saw the role of the Messiah differently, as a Suffering Servant who would sacrifice his life for the salvation of all people.

John’s Gospel reveals that Jesus’ public ministry was short, lasting from one year to perhaps two or three years. The final week of Jesus’ life was the perfect summation of a life lived for others. The details of that week include a celebration of the Last Supper set around a Passover meal with his Apostles, his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, trials before both the Jewish and Roman authorities, sentencing by Pontius Pilate, a brutal scourging, crucifixion, Death, and burial.

The sharing of the Last Supper was especially meaningful for Jesus and his Apostles. During his ministry, Jesus often ate meals with sinners to demonstrate God’s acceptance and forgiveness of everyone. Jesus also described

Heaven as a banquet where people would enjoy fellowship in the presence of his loving Father. The Jewish feast of Passover celebrated the passing over of the angel of death on the Hebrew children and Yahweh's deliverance of the Chosen People from the Pharaoh. It also commemorated the birth of the Jewish nation. Jesus, however, transformed the meaning of the meal. He became the New Passover, the Paschal Lamb slaughtered for the salvation of all. This special meal was to be the sign of a new covenant God was making with everyone, a covenant sealed in Jesus' blood. At the Last Supper Jesus gave thanks, broke bread, and said to his disciples, "This is my body that is for you." He then offered a cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:23–26). Under the consecrated species of bread and wine, Jesus is present in a "true, real, and substantial manner" (CCC, 1413).



Jesus ultimately was put to death on the charge of sedition, a crime under Roman law punishable by death. Jesus admitted to being a king, but he said to Pilate: "My kingdom does not belong to this world" (Jn 18:36). Pilate may have believed that Jesus was innocent of a crime, but he was afraid of being reported to the emperor for allowing a possible revolutionary to go free. So he ordered Jesus crucified.

Jesus' death most likely took place in the middle of the afternoon (3 p.m.) on the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan (April 7 on the solar calendar) in the year AD 30. This should have ended the story even before it began had Jesus of Nazareth been an ordinary victim of a miscarriage of justice. However, on the Sunday after his crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead. The Apostles were startled by discovering him alive, risen to a new life. The Resurrection of Jesus became for them the definitive proof of his divine origin. It validated his teaching. It became the central fact of the preaching the Apostles were compelled to announce to their fellow Jews and to the rest of the world. Thus begins the story of Christianity and the story of the Church—the new People of God—to whom all are invited to join through faith and Baptism.



## WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES ABOUT . . .

**Our Communion in the Mysteries of Jesus**

Jesus' whole life is a mystery of Redemption, especially through the blood of his cross, but also at work throughout his entire life: in his Incarnation, in his hidden life, in his word, in his healings and exorcisms, and in his Resurrection. The mysteries of Jesus are for everyone. Their purpose is for us to share in all the mysteries of his Redemption.

See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 514–518.

## The Church's BEGINNING

The Acts of the Apostles, written by the author of the Gospel of Luke, serves as a historical record for the early days of the Catholic Church. The first chapter of Acts recounts Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit, his Ascension into Heaven, and the selection of Matthias as a replacement for the Apostle Judas. Some of the important events of the Acts of the Apostles are summarized in the sections that follow.

### Pentecost

Acts 2 details the coming of the Holy Spirit. In an upper room in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of fiery tongues on the Apostles; Mary, Jesus' Mother; and some other disciples gathered there in prayer and waiting. This divine event took place on the Jewish harvest feast of thanksgiving known as Pentecost ("fiftieth day" from the Passover). The coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is sometimes known as the "birthday of the Church." The descent of the Holy Spirit empowered the Apostles and especially Peter to preach a sermon to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. In a powerful address, Peter recounted what happened to Jesus and how his life related to the prophecies of the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit also formed the Church in the life of prayer.

With great enthusiasm Peter witnessed to the life and teaching of Jesus. He boldly proclaimed that the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, and the signs they were witnessing before their very eyes did, in fact, fulfill the prophecies about the Messiah. One of the signs occurring at that very moment was that Peter was speaking in tongues, that is, all the people gathered could understand him in spite of speaking different native languages. He called for faith

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#### CA. 40

The word *Christian* first used to describe believers in Antioch

in Jesus Christ: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). As a result of Peter’s powerful sermon, three thousand people were baptized that day.

## Early Growth of the Church

In the early years, the Church grew because of the example of new Christians who shared possessions in common, prayed and worshiped together, and engaged in charitable works. It also grew because of vigorous preaching and the wonders and signs performed by the Apostles. A good example of the latter was Peter’s curing a crippled beggar and preaching that this marvelous event was due to the power of the living Lord Jesus. Those who witnessed the cripple jumping and praising God were astonished. Five thousand of them converted on that day (Acts 4:4).

The earliest converts to Jesus Christ were Jerusalem Jews or those in Jerusalem for Pentecost. They considered themselves to be pious Jews who still worshiped in the Temple and recited their Jewish prayers. Early on, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body, and the high priest heard about the miracles and preaching of the Apostles and tried to silence any talk about Jesus. But Peter and John said they could not be quiet about what God had accomplished in Jesus. When the authorities threatened death, a Pharisee and respected member of the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel, wisely cautioned his fellow leaders:

So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God. (Acts 5:38–39)

## The Gentile Issue and Other Growing Pains

Growth in any organization brings problems. The first crisis in the Christian community involved Greek-speaking converts who came from cities around the Roman Empire. They complained that their widows were not getting their fair share when food was distributed to the poor. To solve this problem, the Apostles laid hands (a sign of ordination) on seven men of good reputation to take care of this and other tasks for the ordering of communal life. These men, known as *deacons*, enabled the Apostles more freedom to preach and lead others in prayer.



Stephen was a well-known deacon whose forceful and courageous preaching showed that the Gospel went beyond mere observance of the Law and Temple worship. Jesus' salvation is meant for everyone; faith in Jesus is enough to gain salvation. This message infuriated the Jewish leaders who saw it as a threat to the very foundations of Jewish belief. Along with a young man named Saul, they drove Stephen from the city and stoned him to death. Thus, St. Stephen became the first *martyr* or "witness" for the Church.

Soon after, another persecution broke out against Christians, causing many of them to flee Jerusalem to other cities where they continued to preach the Gospel. Some reached Antioch in Syria, one of the leading cities of the ancient world. There the Gospel was preached to God-fearing Gentiles besides to the Jews in the synagogues. It was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were called "Christian" for the first time. Antioch also became a missionary center for Gentile Christianity and the home base for the journeys of St. Paul, the converted Saul, the prime missionary to the Gentiles.

After Stephen's death, the deacon Philip began a successful preaching ministry to the Samaritans. Peter also had a central role in the welcoming of Gentiles. At the town of Jaffa, Peter had a vision that convinced him that the Gospel was meant not just for Jews but for all people. He baptized Cornelius, a Gentile centurion, and his entire household, as was the custom. Peter concluded, "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–35).

The strict Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were upset that Peter mingled with "unclean" Gentiles because they did not observe Jewish dietary laws or were not circumcised, thus not members of the Chosen People. Peter quelled their negativity by reminding them that Jesus himself associated with outcasts and that he ordered the Apostles to preach the Gospel to the ends of the world. His argument calmed dissension for a time, but the issue of what to do with Gentile converts would fester for years to come among Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

In the city of Jerusalem itself, persecution of the Christians was stepped up under the reign of Herod Agrippa (AD 42–44). Herod harassed and arrested Peter. He put to death James, the brother of John and leader of the Church in Jerusalem. Another James, "the brother of the Lord," assumed leadership of the Jerusalem Church until he, too, was martyred in AD 62.

## WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES ABOUT . . .

**Infant Baptism**

From apostolic times when whole “households” received Baptism, infants may also have been baptized. Infants are baptized under the belief that Baptism removes the stain of Original Sin. Children, too, have the need of new birth in Baptism to escape the power of darkness and brought into a life of freedom as children of God. The Church and parents offer children the priceless gift of becoming a child of God soon after their birth by allowing infant Baptism.

See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1250–1252.

## MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH

**Paul of Tarsus: APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES**

**S**t. Paul is a towering figure in early Christian history. Approximately 60 percent of the Acts of the Apostles recounts his life’s work, and roughly half of the New Testament books overall were written by or attributed to him. He was a vigorous missionary, courageous defender of the faith, brilliant theologian, builder and sustainer of Christian communities, and a brave martyr.

Saul (Paul’s Jewish name) was born between AD 5 and 15 into a strict Jewish family in Tarsus in modern-day Turkey. As a citizen of Tarsus, he enjoyed the benefits of Roman citizenship and the advantage of an excellent education. Fluent in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew, he traveled to Jerusalem to study the Torah under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel (see above).

He may have been in the city at the same time as Jesus; however, there is no evidence that they ever met.

As a strict Pharisee, Paul rigidly applied the letter of the Law, for example, in helping to lead persecutions against Christians. Present at the stoning of Stephen, Paul thought it was blasphemous to call Jesus, a mere carpenter, the Messiah, Son of the Living God. Because of his zeal, the Sanhedrin sent him to Damascus to root out Christians who were evangelizing in the synagogues there.

**CA. 49**

Council of Jerusalem determines Gentiles need not be circumcised

## Paul's Conversion

On his way to Damascus, Paul had a blinding vision in which the Lord asked him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:9). This revelation convinced Paul that Jesus was alive and that he was indeed the Christ who lived spiritually in his followers.

Paul proceeded to Damascus and was baptized there by Ananias. He began to preach the Gospel, but his sudden shift in loyalties enraged his Jewish brethren who tried to kill him. After a stay in Arabia, Paul eventually made his way to Jerusalem. There he befriended Barnabas who introduced him to Peter and the other Apostles. Peter accepted Paul and saw his potential to proclaim the Gospel. Unfortunately, Paul was forced to flee the Jewish leaders once again, this time back to his hometown.

For ten years, Paul remained in Tarsus. He may have worked at his chosen trade of tent making, an occupation he used to support himself even when he became a full-time missionary. He also probably spent a good deal of time in prayer, developing a fervent relationship with the Lord that served him well for his later missionary activity. Eventually, Barnabas called Paul to Antioch to minister with him to the local Church there. Antioch supported the strongest Christian community outside of Jerusalem and served as headquarters for Paul's three remarkable missionary journeys around the Mediterranean basin.

## First Missionary Journey: 45–49

Paul's first journey took him to Perga, Antioch of Pisidia, and the cities in Lycaonia. This journey established his practice of first proclaiming the Gospel to his fellow Jews in the synagogues. When the Jews did not listen to Paul, he turned to the Gentiles. He stressed the universal message of Christianity, that Jesus had come to save not only the Chosen People, but all people.

Paul saw the Holy Spirit as the source of unity for believers, not adherence to the precepts of the Jewish Law. Salvation is a gift from God. Therefore, Paul did not require his Gentile converts to follow Jewish customs such as circumcision or the dietary laws. Baptism into the Christian faith did not require a convert to become a Jew.



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Nero blames burning of Rome on Christians;  
persecution of Christians and death of Peter

## WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES ABOUT . . .

**Catholicity**

The Church is catholic in two ways. First, the Church is catholic because Jesus is present in the Church, the fullness of his body, with the fullness of the means of salvation, the fullness of faith, and ordained ministry by apostolic succession. The Church is also catholic, or universal, because of her mission to the whole human race.

See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 830–835.

**The Council of Jerusalem**

When Paul returned to Antioch, he met resistance from some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem. They opposed Paul's practice of freeing Gentile converts from the Mosaic Law. Even Peter, who had baptized Gentiles without requiring them to become Jews first, had caved into his Jerusalem friends and stopped eating with Gentile Christians who did not follow Jewish dietary customs. On this point, Paul firmly corrected Peter for compromising his beliefs.

The Council of Jerusalem (ca. 49) resolved the conflict, which had grown to threaten Church unity. Paul and Barnabas argued for freedom for the Gentiles while James supported imposing Jewish Law on all converts. Peter upheld Paul and admitted that it is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that saves a person, not imposing Jewish Law on all converts. Thus, the Council of Jerusalem decided that Gentile converts were not subject to Jewish regulations, except to avoid illicit marriages and to abstain from food offered to idols. The Apostles sent a letter to churches at Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia with the following requirements:

It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed from idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. (Acts 15:28–29)

This decision was critical for the future of the Church. Belief in Jesus Christ, not following Jewish Law, was the means for becoming a Christian. Christianity was no longer tied to Judaism. This solution to this crisis highlighted one of the marks of the Church—its *catholicity*, a universal religion





## Paul's Third Journey: 53–58

After a short rest in Antioch, Paul spent almost three years in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor. Paul's preaching on monotheism raised the ire of the town's silversmiths who made idols for the worship of Artemis (Diana), the goddess of fertility. Paul was bad for business. His preaching turned people away from buying the little shrines made by the silversmiths. The silversmiths, along with some of Paul's Jewish opponents, eventually drove him out of the city.

After leaving Ephesus, Paul again went through Macedonia and Greece, eventually making his way to Jerusalem with a collection for the Church there. On this lengthy journey, Paul kept in contact with many of the churches he had founded by writing letters. For example, he wrote letters to the Ephesians and the Romans. While he was in Ephesus, he also wrote two letters to the Corinthians and one to the Galatians.

These epistles form an important part of the New Testament and typically instructed the new Christians on points of doctrine, answered their questions, and gave much practical advice on Christian living. For example, the Corinthians had developed many bad habits while he was gone—some of them were not sharing food with the poor who were assembled for the supper that accompanied the celebration of the Eucharist; others got drunk at those times. Paul had to reprimand them that they were committing sacrilege by their behavior at the Eucharist (see 1 Cor 11:17–34).

## Paul's Death

When Paul was in Jerusalem, his enemies tried to execute him, but Roman troops placed him under house arrest in Caesarea for a two-year period. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to have a trial before the emperor in Rome. After a long, harrowing trip that included a shipwreck on Malta, Paul eventually made it to Rome. There he lived in rented, but guarded quarters where he continued his work of meeting fellow Christians and spreading the Gospel.

Acts ends without telling us anything more about Paul. Clement I, Bishop of Rome (ca. 92–101), reports in a letter that Paul was acquitted and freed. Tradition says that Paul may have left Rome on still another missionary journey, perhaps to Spain, but that he came back to Rome during



**CA. 110**

Martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch in Rome under Trajan's persecution

the reign of terror of the emperor Nero. According to that view, he was decapitated in AD 67.

At the time of Paul's death, Christianity had been established throughout the Roman Empire. Roman efforts to eradicate Christianity had begun, but the fruits of Paul's labors could not be undone.

### ☼ THEMES IN PAULINE THEOLOGY

Besides being the early Church's greatest missionary, St. Paul was also her greatest theologian. He has influenced Christian thinking about Jesus Christ more than any other theologian in history. In the Pauline letters, we find these central theological themes:

- There is only one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Salvation takes place through Jesus Christ.
- The Death and Resurrection of Jesus are the heart of the Gospel.
- We will all share in Christ's Resurrection.
- Salvation is a gift from God. We cannot earn it. It requires faith.
- Christians are one body, the Church, of which Jesus is the head.
- We become sons and daughters of God in union with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church who enables us to call God Abba, Father.
- We are brothers and sisters of Jesus and each other. We have dignity and thus should love one another.
- To be a disciple of Jesus means we must suffer for him gladly.

## Growth Amidst PERSECUTIONS

Tertullian once remarked that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church." Recall that the word martyr means "witness." It was costly to believe in and witness to Jesus in the first centuries of the Church. A believer might have to pay with his or her life. Some of these early persecutions are detailed below.



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Justin Martyr writes his *Apology*

## Split from Judaism

Many Jews did not accept Christianity, but they tolerated Jewish Christians as long as they kept the precepts of the Torah. Most of the early Christians were Jewish. Those who lived in Jerusalem continued to practice the Jewish religion. As Acts reports, however, Christian preaching was unevenly accepted by Jews outside the Holy Land. At times, the missionaries were forcefully ejected from synagogues and civil disturbances took place. Thus, the Gospel was preached to the Gentiles, who were not required to submit to the Jewish Law as a requirement for Baptism.

As noted previous, in Jerusalem Jewish authorities did not quite know what to do with the Christians. Men like Gamaliel cautioned prudence, but this did not stop the execution of Stephen, the beheading of James the Apostle, and the periodic arrest of leaders like Peter and Paul. The decade of the 60s brought an especially fierce outbreak of persecution. In 62, the Sanhedrin accused James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, of blasphemy. He was thrown from the roof of the Temple and then stoned to death. Thus began a period of persecution against the Christians.

In 66, the Zealots, a radical Jewish sect that hated Roman rule, were successful in starting a revolution against Rome. This Jewish Revolt of 66–70 was a stunning act of defiance against Rome but ultimately failed miserably and led to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70. The Jews who survived the revolt felt betrayed by the Jewish Christians, who did not help fight due to their belief in Jesus, the Prince of Peace. As a result, Jewish Christians were not welcome in synagogues.

When some rabbis met to reorganize their faith and settle the Jewish canon of Sacred Scriptures, Christians were definitively excluded from worshipping with Jews. The Church shifted to major cities like Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria. By the end of the first century, Gentile Christians had assumed a major role in Church affairs. The Church's catholicity, present from the day of Pentecost, was of focus again as the Church expanded beyond her Jewish roots.

## Roman Reaction to Christians

Rome, in general, was tolerant of new religions. Initially the Roman government did not distinguish between Christians and Jews, tolerating the new faith as another Jewish sect. Thus, Christians were afforded the same privileges granted Jews throughout the Empire, for example, exemption from serving in the armed forces.



**CA. 185**

St. Irenaeus writes *Against Heresies*

But as Christians grew more numerous and visible, and Christian preaching became more prominent, Rome began to change its view. The Jewish historian Josephus, and Roman writers like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger accused Christians of being subversive, superstitious, atheistic, and immoral. For example, because Christians refused to worship the emperor—something Rome required to foster unity in the Empire—Christians were branded as both atheistic and subversive, a threat to civic harmony and, as atheists, responsible for the gods punishing citizens with plagues, invasions, and earthquakes. Christians were ridiculed for their beliefs in the Incarnation and Resurrection. They were also accused of cannibalism for their practice of the Eucharist. Non-believers often misinterpreted the fraternal love practiced by Christians, accusing them of engaging in unspeakable sexual perversions.

Most persecutions of the first two centuries were brief and limited to a certain area. For example, the historian Tacitus tells us about the emperor Nero's persecution of the Christians in 64. Although Tacitus held the common prejudices toward Christians, he did report that Nero falsely accused Christians of the burning of Rome in order to deflect blame from himself for starting the fire. Nero tortured and crucified Christians, igniting their bodies as a spectacle for the bloodthirsty crowds. According to Christian tradition, Peter died by crucifixion in the first wave of Nero's persecution in 64; Paul in the second wave of terror in 67.

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open the gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but [to] glut one man's cruelty, that they were being punished. (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44)<sup>1</sup>

The most severe persecution of the first century took place under the emperor Domitian (81–96) who required his subjects to worship him as a god. The Christians who refused to do so were executed. The book of Revelation reports how authorities hunted Christians in the seven churches in Asia

Minor. Pope Clement I, Bishop of Rome, wrote of persecutions in Rome in the 90s.

Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan (98–117). In a famous letter that he wrote to the emperor, he revealed Christianity was a crime punishable by death, although his personal policy was not to ferret out Christians for special punishment. If he discovered that someone was a Christian, he gave the person the opportunity to renounce the faith. If the person refused, execution followed. Trajan replied this way:

My Pliny,

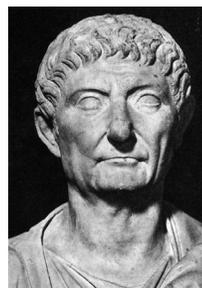
You have taken the method which you ought in examining the causes of those that had been accused as Christians, for indeed no certain and general form of judging can be ordained in this case. These people are not to be sought for; but if they be accused and convicted, they are to be punished; but with this caution, that he who denies himself to be a Christian, and makes it plain that he is not so by supplicating to our gods, although he had been so formerly, may be allowed pardon, upon his repentance. As for libels sent without an author, they ought to have no place in any accusation whatsoever, for that would be a thing of very ill example, and not agreeable to my reign.<sup>2</sup>

Under the emperor Hadrian (117–138) the persecutions ceased for the most part. But they became fierce again under emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180).

Septimius Severus (193–211) decreed capital punishment for anyone who would convert to a religion like Judaism or Christianity. Sts. Perpetua and Felicity were martyred during his reign.

Decius (249–251) required all citizens to have a certificate proving that they offered sacrifice to the pagan gods of the Empire. Decius put to death anyone found without this proof. At this time, many Christians committed apostasy, the sin of denying one's faith, to avoid being killed. When the general persecution subsided, Christian leaders had to determine how to welcome back, if at all, "lapsed" Christians who abandoned Jesus to save their lives.

The last and perhaps worst of all the Roman persecutions took place under Diocletian (284–305). His aim was to uproot Christianity from the Empire. He tried to do it by confiscating the property of Christians, destroying their churches and sacred books, banishing them to hard labor, subjecting them to a host of tortures, and inflicting



► *Emperor Diocletian*

the death penalty. As was true of every persecution throughout the Empire, though, the degree of enforcement of the decrees against the Christians varied from province to province.

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## ⊗ APOLOGISTS

**A**polo*gists* wrote primarily to convince Gentiles—especially the emperors, Roman officials, and Roman citizens in general—of the truth and high morals of Christians. *The First Apology* was written by the most famous Christian apologist of the second century, St. Justin Martyr (ca. 110–165). Justin was a convert from paganism, a philosopher, and a prolific writer. Only a few of his writings were preserved. Justin addressed his *First Apology* to the emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161), generally regarded as a highly principled ruler whose reign was mostly peaceful.

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From Justin Martyr's *First Apology*, 113, 118:

So we are called atheists. Well, we do indeed proclaim ourselves atheists in respect to those whom you call gods, but not in regard to the Most True God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is without admixture of evil. On the contrary, we reverence and worship Him and the Son who came forth from Him and taught us these things. . . .

We who formerly delighted in fornication now cleave only to chastity. We who exercised the magic arts now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God. We who valued above all else the acquisition of wealth and property now direct all that we have to a common fund, which is shared with every needy person. We who hated and killed one another, and who, because of differing customs, would not share a fireside with those of another race, now, after the appearance of Christ, live together with them. We pray for our enemies, and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us that, if they live according to the excellent precepts of Christ, they will have a good hope of receiving the same reward as ourselves, from the God who governs all.<sup>3</sup>



**250**

**Persecution under Decius;**

question of what to do with lapsed Christians

## To the Ends of the Empire

The Acts of the Apostles concludes with Paul in Rome. This was Luke's way of saying that the new religion had moved way beyond Jewish roots in Jerusalem. It had made its way to the political, social, and cultural heart of the Roman Empire. Along the way, Christian churches had sprung up throughout the Empire. In spite of persecutions, the Church's enemies could not stamp out this new faith. Christianity continued to grow steadily in numbers and influence. Retracing the reasons for this astounding growth focuses on the following:

- *Jewish communities were established in the Diaspora.* The Diaspora is the name for the dispersion of Jews outside of Jerusalem. When Jewish Christians like Paul set out to preach the Gospel, they were able to use the synagogues as a home base. When the Jews rejected the Gospel, the missionaries turned to local Gentiles who were more receptive.
- *Ease of communication and travel.* People in the empire spoke a common language—Greek at first, then Latin. There was a good system of roads and shipping. There was a common culture. These systems helped the missionaries preach everywhere and eased their travels around the Empire.
- *Pax Romana.* Peace of Rome was a propitious time in human history that had experienced relative peace for twenty-five years at the time of Jesus' birth. This stability lasted for another two centuries during the time of the first Christian missionaries.
- *Words supported by action.* People of the day were searching for spiritual meaning. The new mystery religions and the philosophy of Stoicism helped some. But they could not rival the appeal of Christianity with its call to repentance and its inspiring moral code. Searching people experienced the truth in the doctrines of a loving God, forgiveness, and Christian care and concern for one another. Christians backed up their words with action. Christian love proved to be an irresistible magnet to pagans who were seeking more to life than Roman games, orgies, and meaningless idol worship. The care for the poor, widows, and orphans, plus the willingness to die for faith in Jesus, greatly appealed to pagans. "See how they love one another" gave hope to slaves, women, and the poor. The good news also appealed to the educated who sensed that life had to mean something more than worshipping corrupt and immoral emperors as god.



**303–305**

Great persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian

## Early Church WRITINGS

Written records of Church history, doctrine, and faith began to take form shortly after Jesus founded the Church. Following a period of oral history, the Scriptures and other writings emerged and served as catechetical manuals, witness statements, and liturgical guides.

### Holy Scripture

Pre-eminent among the early Church writings are the books of the New Testament, composed from around AD 50 (1 Thessalonians) to perhaps as late as AD 130 (2 Peter). The four Gospels recount the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the early Church, focusing on the ministries of Peter and Paul. The thirteen epistles either written by or ascribed to St. Paul, the letter to the Hebrews, and the seven “catholic” epistles of 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, James, and Jude are filled with theological reflection on Christ and instructions on how to live a Christian life. The book of Revelation is a prophetic book with profound symbolism meant to bolster Christians to remain steadfast during persecution. These twenty-seven books are inspired, foundational, and normative writings for the Church.

The books of the New Testament helped combat heresy, that is, false belief or teaching about a major doctrine. One important reason the biblical books were gathered together into an official list of approved works (canon) was to combat the heretic Marcion (excommunicated in 144), who denied that a good God could have created the material world. Marcion held that the God of the Old Testament could not be the Father of Jesus, but was inferior to Jesus because he was vengeful and cruel. Therefore, he rejected the Old Testament. He claimed that it was not worthy of Christian belief and held that it belonged to a lesser demigod. He drew up his own list of Christian books that he claimed were inspired by the true God.

To meet Marcion’s and other heretical challenges, the early Church relied on the ordained bishops who traced their power and leadership directly to the Apostles. By the early decades of the second century, with a few exceptions, Church leaders agreed on the official canon of the New Testament, recognizing that all the approved books taught correct doctrine (that is, were *orthodox*) and were somehow associated with an Apostle.

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## WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES ABOUT . . .

### **The Canon of Scripture**

The complete list of books in the Bible is called the canon of Scripture. It includes forty-six books for the Old Testament (forty-five if Jeremiah and Lamentations are counted as one) and twenty-seven books for the New Testament. The Old Testament remains an indispensable part of the Bible. Its books too are divinely inspired and retain value.

See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 120–130.

## Writings of the Apostolic Fathers

The apostolic fathers of the Church were those men who personally knew the Apostles or their disciples. Prominent among these was St. Clement, the fourth Pope (92–101), who might have known both Peter and Paul. His *Letter to the Corinthians* helped settle a dispute there and made a strong case for apostolic succession. Clement's letter became very popular in the early Church and was later used to help support Catholic belief in the primacy of the Pope. Another apostolic father, St. Ignatius of Antioch, sent letters to seven churches that stressed the role of the bishop.

## The Didache

The *Didache* (the "Teaching") is a catechetical document that may have been written as early as AD 60 but most probably around AD 100. Its author is unknown. The *Didache* mentions Christian doctrines like the Trinity, moral teachings, and explains the rites of Baptism and Eucharist. On Baptism, the *Didache* provides these instructions:

The procedure for baptizing is as follows: After rehearsing all the preliminaries, immerse in running water "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." If no running water is available, immerse in ordinary water. This should be cold if possible; otherwise warm. If neither is practicable, then sprinkle water three times on the head "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Both baptizer and baptized ought to fast before baptism, as well as any others who can do so; but the candidate himself should be told to keep a fast of a day or two beforehand.<sup>4</sup>

## Apologetic Writing

The apologists were second-century writers who defended and explained Christianity to nonbelievers. Some apologetic works, like St. Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, tried to explain to Jews that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, that the Church was the New Israel, and that Christian teaching fulfilled the Torah. But most apologists defended Christianity against pagan charges that Christians were disloyal Roman citizens or morally corrupt. St. Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) was a notable apologist who tried to convince pagan intellectuals that Christianity is the truest and most intellectually satisfying philosophy.

Tertullian (ca. 160–220) was the first major apologist to write in Latin. His *Apology* defended Christianity against charges of immorality, subversion, and economic bankruptcy. As a theologian, he constructed doctrinal formulas like “one substance, three Persons” for the Blessed Trinity and “one Person, two substances” for Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, in his later years, Tertullian embraced a heresy known as Montanism that preached the imminent coming of Christ and taught a rigorous form of asceticism—including the renunciation of marriage.

## Writings of the Church Fathers

The Church Fathers is a traditional title given to theologians of the first eight centuries. The Church Fathers helped to write and form Church doctrine which has remained in great authority through the ages. The Church Fathers were found in both the East and the West and are esteemed for their correctness of doctrine (*orthodoxy*—right teaching), their holiness (*orthopraxis*—right living), their universal acceptance throughout the Church, and for the essential contributions they made to Christian doctrine in these formative centuries of the Catholic Church story. A list of the Church Fathers is found on pages 82–86.

Among the prominent writings of the Church Fathers, St. Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–202) effectively argued against Gnosticism in his *Against Heresies*. He also highlighted the importance of Church Tradition for arriving at religious truth. He wrote that the source of right teaching and belief resides with the Roman Church (with the bishop of Rome, the Pope, as the head) because the Church was founded by Jesus and entrusted to St. Peter. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215) stressed the divine nature of Christ, especially against the fifth-century heresy of Nestorianism, which argued that there are two persons in Christ. Clement's theology applied Platonic philosophy to explain Christian teaching, and he adeptly used the allegorical method to study the meaning of

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the Bible. Among the more than eight hundred works of Origen (ca. 185–254) was *Hexapla*, which provided the then critical edition of the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. Origen taught three ways of interpreting Scripture: the literal, the moral, and the allegorical. Controversial in his lifetime, though many of his works were influential up to the Middle Ages and are esteemed even today, Origen also held some controversial theological positions that were later condemned. For example, influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, he wrote that the Logos (Son) is subordinate to the Father in dignity and power. He also denied the existence of hell, preaching in its place the universal salvation of all.

## WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES ABOUT . . .

### **Interpreting Sacred Scripture**

The Second Vatican Council taught that there were three basic norms for reading and interpreting the Scriptures in light of their being inspired by God. First, the reader must pay attention to the total content and unity of the Bible, not isolated passages. Second, the Bible must be read in light of the Church's entire Tradition. Third, attention must be made to the "analogy of faith." This means the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves within God's entire plan for Revelation.

See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 112–114.

## Early CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE

Christianity had become distinct from Judaism and other religions in the Roman Empire. Through persecutions and other challenges, the early Christians increasingly developed into a recognizable Church. This community of faith crossed ethnic and racial lines to embrace all people. Common practices and beliefs of local Christian Churches throughout the Roman Empire included preaching the Gospel, public prayer, a ministry of care for each member, initiation rites, Eucharistic fellowship, and a common view of life and human destiny. Some specific Christian practices and beliefs of the early Church are discussed below.

### Sacraments

The Sacraments of the Church are rooted in the words and actions of Christ. The practice of the sacraments developed from the beginning of the Church. In the early Church, Christian initiation, like today, included the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. The period of preparation known



as the catechumenate could take three years. During this time, the candidate for Baptism, usually an adult, would learn Christian teaching and the requirements for moral living. Becoming a Christian was serious business, so the candidate often had a sponsor who testified to the candidate's good behavior and renunciation of pagan ways. Ini-

tiation typically took place on Holy Saturday. The bishop would lay hands on the candidates, absolve their sins, breathe on them, and sign the cross on their foreheads, ears, and nostrils. Later followed another anointing, the Baptism itself, and reception of first Holy Communion.

For the celebration of the Eucharist, Christians gathered in each other's homes on Sunday. Later, Christians met in donated houses or in enclosed places in a garden or cemetery. However, by the middle of the third century, Christians began to build their own churches to worship in. An *agape* (literally "love-feast") often accompanied the Eucharist to celebrate Christian fellowship and unity. This practice was eventually abandoned, probably because of abuses that crept in. Celebrants delivered homilies that showed the continuity between Jesus' teachings and the Old Testament.

The bishop was the chief celebrant of the Eucharist. Christians received the Body of Christ and often took the Blessed Sacrament home to consume during the week. Early Christians strongly believed in the healing effect of the Lord's presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

The history of the Sacrament of Penance is complex. As Baptism wiped away all sin, including mortal sin, early Christians believed that the baptized would never reject God's love. Human nature proved otherwise and Christians did commit mortal sin. The belief and practice developed that only the bishop could offer absolution from grave sins like murder, adultery, divorce, and apostasy. This could be done only once and only after the penitent performed long, arduous penances. Being separated from God's people was a serious matter.

A major question that arose in the third century concerned what to do with the *lapsi*, lapsed Christians, especially those who renounced the faith during times of persecution. In the third century, Novatian taught that no bishop could absolve a person who rejected Jesus Christ (apostasy), murdered, or committed adultery. His desire for a Church of perfect Christians led him to **schism**.

In contrast to Novatian's rigorist approach, Pope St. Cornelius (251–253) declared that mortal sins could be forgiven if sinners repented and performed the proper penances. (Pope St. Callistus had earlier decreed that mortal sin could be forgiven if a person was truly sorry.) Later, the Council of Nicaea (325) taught that dying people could and should be reconciled to the Church.

## Ordained Leadership

Jesus established the basic organizational structure of the Church when he singled out Peter as the rock of the Church. Though it took several centuries for Church ministries to develop into the forms we recognize today, even from ancient times Church ministers have been called bishops, priests, and deacons. The ministerial priesthood is different from the common priesthood of the baptized in that it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful.

Peter, along with the Apostles, including Matthias who replaced Judas, were the eyewitnesses to Jesus' public life. Early missionaries like Paul and Barnabas also took on the name *apostle* (meaning "one sent forth"). Their chief tasks—carried on today by their successors—the bishops and Pope—were to evangelize (preach the Gospel) and to witness to its truth. Their privileged role gave the Apostles the supreme authority in the many churches they founded both within and outside Palestine.

From the earliest days, *deacons* or assistants helped the Apostles in their work, for example, by taking up collections for the poor, visiting the sick, and distributing Communion. Widows—women of prayer and service—often helped, including assisting women into and out of the baptismal pools of water.

The first century also had prophets who explained God's word and encouraged their fellow Christians and teachers who instructed converts (1 Cor 12:28–30). The office of *episkopoi* (bishops) or overseers became more and more important. The bishops' main responsibilities were to preside at the Eucharist, preach, baptize, and forgive sin. Because the Eucharist was the central act of Christian worship and a vital sign of Christian unity, it was natural for Christians to look to their bishops for inspiration, leadership, and direction on questions that might cause a rift in Christian unity.

At first there was little difference between bishops and elders known as presbyters (priests). Some New Testament writings refer to them interchangeably. In the Jerusalem Church, for example, a council of elders served as a kind of senate. This council would meet with the Apostles to settle disputes. As the

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Church grew, though, the office of overseer (the bishop) dominated that of the priest (elder).

By the mid-second century, the present-day order of the hierarchy (sacred leadership) took shape. First was the bishop who served as the focus of unity in the local church. He also represented his church at regional meetings and wrote letters to other communities. Next were the priests who presided over the Eucharist in place of the bishop who could not attend all the liturgies around his growing diocese. Last were the deacons who served the various needs of the local church. Both priests and deacons were subordinate to the bishop.

The Bishop of Rome, the man we call Pope today, also held an increasingly important position among the bishops. He was the successor to Peter, the first Bishop of Rome, and resided in the imperial city, the place of Peter and Paul's martyrdom. Christians presumed that the Bishop of Rome's teaching would be in line with apostolic teaching. Rome, as the center of the Empire, was the ideal place for Christian leaders to defend the Church when she was under attack. Other bishops increasingly looked to the Bishop of Rome for leadership when disputes arose. And many of them made sure that their own teaching was in line with his.

#### WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES ABOUT . . .

##### **Bishops as Successors of the Apostles**

Bishops trace their lineage, by divine institution, to the twelve Apostles whom Christ ordained at the Last Supper and also commissioned to ordain successors until the end of time. Like the original Twelve who were united under the leadership of Peter, the bishops since have been united under the Pope.

See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 861–862.

## Summary

- Christianity is founded on Jesus Christ who lived from 6 BC to AD 30.
- The Acts of the Apostles details the early history of the Church, especially the preaching ministries of the Apostle Peter and the convert Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles.
- The Council of Jerusalem (ca. 49) was significant because it decreed that Gentiles were not subject to the Jewish Law. This decision helped the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.
- Christianity definitively split from Judaism after the Jewish Revolt of 66–70. At first Rome tolerated Christianity as another Jewish sect. However, eventually Rome saw Christianity as a threat because faithful Christians refused to worship the emperor, a practice required by authorities to promote unity.
- *Pax Romana*, the prevalence of Jewish communities throughout the Empire, a spiritual hunger for the Christian message, the witness of martyrs, and loving, committed Christians helped Christianity grow in numbers in the first few centuries.
- The formation of the canon of the Bible helped combat early heresies as did the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, apologists like Tertullian who defended Christianity against the charges of non-believers, and early theologians like Origen and St. Irenaeus of Lyons.
  - The Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist were celebrated from the first days of the Church.
  - Jesus established the basic organizational structure of the Church when he commissioned the Apostles to shepherd, sanctify, and teach and singled out Peter as the rock of the Church. Bishops exercised their ministry in communion with bishop of Rome, the successor of St. Peter. Bishops were assisted by deacons and priests.
  - The Bishop of Rome (Pope) had an important position of leadership among the bishops because he was the successor of Peter upon whom Jesus founded his Church.

## Prayer REFLECTION

St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, if authored by Paul, was written while he was in prison, perhaps between 61–63 in Rome. Some scholars, however, hold that

because of the letter's style, word use, theology of Church, and other points of doctrine, a disciple of Paul may have composed it, perhaps between 80–100.

The letter to the Ephesians teaches how the Church is rooted in God's saving love, revealed in Jesus Christ. It contains many beautiful passages that praise and bless God in both hymns and prayers. Pray this prayer from Ephesians 3:14–21:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

## Scripture CONNECTIONS

St. Peter was a towering personality in Christianity's growth from its humble beginnings. These passages help construct a chronological profile of Peter's life, on whom Christ founded his Church. Make a chart noting the events described.

Luke 5:1–11	Matthew 14:22–33	Matthew 16:13–20
Mark 9:2–8	Luke 22:54–62	Luke 24:1–12
John 21:15–19	Acts 2:1–42	Acts 3:1–4:31
Acts 9:32–10:48	Acts 11:1–18	Acts 15:7–11

## Review and DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Summarize the essential Gospel message preached by Jesus Christ.
2. Describe the opposition that led to Jesus' Death.
3. Why is Pentecost sometimes known as the "birthday of the Church"?
4. How did Judaism react to Christianity? What brought about the definitive break between Judaism and Christianity?

5. Explain the significance of the following to the spread of Christianity:
  - the baptism of Cornelius by Peter;
  - the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles,
  - and the Council of Jerusalem for the spread of Christianity.
6. Discuss at least two themes in Pauline theology.
7. Describe the details of at least two Roman persecutions of Christians.
8. Discuss the major factors for the growth of Christianity from AD 30–305.
9. Discuss some ways the early Church confronted heresy.
10. How did the Apostolic Fathers and apologists contribute to the growth of the Church?
11. Describe how the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, and Penance were celebrated in the early Church.
12. How did the leadership structure in the early Church develop?
13. Identify the following:

### Events

Council of Jerusalem

Jewish Revolt (66–70)

### People

Diocletian

Domitian

Gamaliel

Josephus

Marcion

Nero

Novatian

Origen

Pope St. Cornelius

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

St. Justin Martyr

St. Paul

St. Peter

St. Polycarp of Smyrna

St. Stephen

Tacitus

Tertullian

Trajan

### Terms

Apologist

Apostle

Apostolic Father	canon (of the Bible)
<i>Didache</i>	<i>episkopoi</i>
Gnosticism	heresy
hierarchy	martyr
orthodoxy	<i>Pax Romana</i>
Pharisee	Sadducee
schism	Zealot

## Learn BY DOING

- Learn about St. Paul's life and missionary journeys by reading and reporting on the following chapters of Acts of Apostles:
  - Acts 9:1–31 (Saul's conversion; see also Gal 1:11–17 and Acts 22:6–8)
  - Acts 13:4–14:28 (First Missionary Journey)
  - Acts 15 (Council of Jerusalem)
  - Acts 16:1–18:22 (Second Missionary Journey)
  - Acts 18:23–21:14 (Third Missionary Journey)
  - Acts 21:15–28:31 (Paul's arrest, trials, and arrival in Rome)
- Report on some aspect of "The Christian Catacombs of Rome" at this website: [www.catacombe.roma.it](http://www.catacombe.roma.it).
- Visit "Into His Own," an excellent website that gives perspective on Jesus and early Christianity: <http://virtualreligion.net/iho>. Report on some primary texts you read.
- Read and report on a section from a writing of one of the Apostolic Fathers or apologists mentioned in this chapter. Check the following:
  - New Advent: [www.newadvent.org/fathers](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers)
- Report on the martyrdom of Sisters Perpetua and Felicity. You can find their biographies at one of these websites:
  - Catholic Online Saints: [www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=48](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=48)
  - Catholic Information Network: [www.cin.org/saints/petandfel.html](http://www.cin.org/saints/petandfel.html)