

THE APOSTOLIC AGE

Part Two: Hierarchy, Heresies, Apologists, Persecutors

In Church history, the *Apostolic Age* usually refers to the time of the Apostles and the generations of Christians that followed them. In this article, we will be looking mainly at events that took place in the second and third century of Christianity, more specifically:

- **Three degrees of hierarchical ministry**
- **Three heresies**
- **The Apologists**
- **Roman Empire's persecution of Christianity**
- **Dealing with the lapsed**
- **Early Christian lifestyle**
- **Reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity**

Three degrees of hierarchical ministry

The three degrees of ordained ministry that exist in our Church today start to take on definite form by the end of the first century. We know this from the still existing seven letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, a heroic martyr of the early Church at the time of the Apostles. Tradition has it that he may have known St. John the Evangelist. His seven letters stress, among other things, the importance of the bishop's role in the Christian community and of the community's faithfulness to their bishop. Ignatius writes:

Follow your bishop, every one of you, as obediently as Jesus Christ followed the Father. Obey the presbyters (the college of presbyters) as you would the apostles; give your deacons the same reverence that you would a command from God. Make sure that no step affecting the church is ever taken by anyone without the bishop's sanction. The sole eucharist you should consider valid is one that is celebrated by the bishop himself, or by some person authorized by him. Where the bishop is to be seen, there let all his people be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is present, we have the catholic church. Nor is it permissible to conduct baptisms or agapes (a meal of support and fellowship with a religious significance but different from the eucharist) without the bishop. On the other hand, whatever does have his sanction can be sure of God's approval (Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans, 8).

It is for the rest of you to hold the deacons in as great respect as Jesus Christ; just as you should also look upon the bishop as a type of the Father and the clergy as the apostolic circle forming his council; for without these three orders no church has any right to the name. (Ignatius, To the Trallians, 3)

Ignatius is the first person to refer to the Church as the "Catholic Church."

Deaconesses. An early Church document called *Didascalia Apostolorum* states:

*Establish for yourself, bishop, administrators of justice as helpers who can join with you in the work of salvation. Choose those who please you from among all the people and appoint them deacons, a man for the execution of the many things that are necessary, and a woman to serve among women. For there are houses where you cannot send a deacon to women because of the pagans, but you can send a deaconess. And also because the office of a woman deacon is necessary in many other things. In the first place, when the women go down into the water they must be anointed with the oil of anointing by a deaconess.... But a man should pronounce the names of the invocation of the deity over them in the water. And when the woman who is baptized comes out of the water, let the deaconess welcome her, and let her take her and teach her how the seal of baptism must be kept intact in purity and sanctity (Quoted in *How to Read Church History*, Jean Comby). Jean Comby's very readable two-volume book contains many quotes from primary resources related to many issues in each era of the Church's history.*

Bishop of Rome. Before Jerusalem is burned by the Romans in 70AD, the bishop of Jerusalem is considered the most important bishop in the Church. After the fall of Jerusalem, Rome gradually becomes the capital city of Christianity, the place where Peter and Paul are martyred. It is the capital of the Empire. The bishop of Rome is seen as the successor of Peter. In the second century (130-202), St. Irenaeus of Lyons (in present-day France) says of the Roman See: "Every other (local) church must be in harmony with this church (Rome) because of its outstanding pre-eminence." In the

middle of the third century, Bishop Cyprian of Carthage writes: *“To be in communion with the bishop of Rome is to be in communion with the Catholic Church.”*

Despite these words of Irenaeus and Cyprian, it will take many centuries before all the bishops in a growing Church come to recognize the jurisdiction of the Church of Rome over all other churches, something the bishops of the Eastern Church never fully recognize. Instead, these bishops, especially the bishop of Constantinople, see themselves as equal to the bishop of Rome. Eastern bishops reject the belief that the bishop of Rome has universal *jurisdiction*. This tension between the East and West reaches a climax in 1054 when the leaders of both sides excommunicate each other.

God raises up great teachers to deal with heresies

In several of his writings and speeches, Paul warns the early Christians about the danger of false teachers. In Acts 20:30, we read: *“From your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them. So be vigilant....”* Heresy is the willful acceptance of incorrect doctrine. Three prominent heresies emerge in the first two centuries of the Church are Marcionism, Montanism and Gnosticism. A brief word about each of them....

Marcionism. Marcion affirms that Jesus rejects the God of the Jews, the God of the Old Testament; that the Jewish covenant is over and replaced by the Gospel. This heresy prompts the Church to reaffirm its connection with the Revelation of God in the Old Testament.

Montanism. Montanus and his followers are charismatic preachers who place great emphasis on the Holy Spirit and his gifts. This group sees very little need for earthly authority and Church order. They impose rigorous practices of fasting and ascetism. In 177AD, Montanus and his followers are excommunicated.

Gnosticism. The greatest internal threat to early Christianity are heresies that fall under the umbrella title of *Gnosticism*. These groups claim to profess the true Christian religion by virtue of a special saving knowledge (Greek, *gnosis* = knowledge) that they have received *secretly* from Jesus or one of his followers. The Gnostics’ “dualist” philosophy holds

that the spiritual realm and the material realm are totally opposed, and that matter is the handiwork of an evil god. Hence for Gnostics, the God of the Old Testament who created matter is an evil god, and Jesus is not human, but only *appears* to be human.

The Apologists. When Christianity is attacked, God raises up a group of writers who become known as apologists, defenders of the faith. These intellectual leaders can explain the faith through reason and philosophy. They demonstrate that Christianity is a reasonable and intellectually sound religion that can be understood and embraced by people of all cultures and lands. In their defense of the faith against heretical teachings, the apologists appeal to apostolic teaching and to apostolic succession. In his treatise *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus of Lyons writes: *“The tradition of the apostles, manifested throughout the world, can be clearly seen in every church by those who wish to behold the truth. We can enumerate those who were established by the apostles as bishops in the churches, and their successors down to our time....”*

Six Apologists. The best known apologists in the early Church are Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Origen and Tertullian. Concerning the work of the first “Apologists” in the Christian Church, Jean Comby writes: *“They had to work out a language intelligible to those for whom they were writing, that is to say, in terms of the Graeco-Latin culture. In this way, Christianity broke free from its cultural isolation”* (Reading Church History, pp 33-34).

Ignatius of Antioch (35-115AD) was born in Syria and a convert to Christianity. He becomes bishop of one of the most prominent Sees of the ancient church. In 107, Emperor Trajan visits Antioch and forces Christians to choose between death and apostasy. Because Ignatius will not deny Christ, he is condemned to be put to death in Rome. On his long journey to Rome, Ignatius stops and befriends several Christian communities. Then he writes his seven letters to these churches urging them to remain faithful to God and to obey their superiors. In his final letter, he begs the Christians in Rome not to try to stop his martyrdom. *“Let me be food for the wild beasts for they are my way to God. I am God’s wheat and shall be ground by their teeth, so that I may become Christ’s pure bread”* (Letter to the Romans, 4:1-2).

Justin Martyr (100-165AD) is a well-educated philosopher prior to becoming a Christian. He is known as the patron saint of philosophers and the most famous of the *Apologists* in the second century. He defends the faith from attacks and helps to explain it to Gentile inquirers. Justin also writes one of the earliest descriptions of the Mass which can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (para.1345). In 165AD, Justin is beheaded for his faith.

Polycarp (69-155AD), one of the most important bishops in the early Church, is a disciple of the apostle John; hence, his importance when it comes to apostolic succession and teaching. When a Roman official tries to save Polycarp's life by convincing him to deny his faith, the aged bishop says: "*For eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I now blaspheme my king and God?*"

Irenaeus (125-202AD). As a youth, Irenaeus sat at the feet of Polycarp. This makes him, with his teacher, a great witness to *Apostolic succession* and *Apostolic teaching*. Irenaeus is a defender of the Church against Gnosticism. He is also a proponent of the medicine of mercy when dealing with heretics. He convinces the Pope to lift the ban of excommunication of Christians who differ from the Church on minor matters. One of the famous and beautiful sayings attributed to Irenaeus is: "*The glory of God is man fully alive.*" The circumstances of his death are not known.

Origen (185-254AD) is recognized by most as the greatest Christian scholar before the fourth century. According to St. Jerome (342-420AD), Origen produced about two thousand books. At only 18 years old, the young brilliant scholar is appointed by his bishop to head the renowned catechetical school of Alexandria, where he serves as a lay scholar for many years. Origen is denied the title "saint" because of some of his beliefs, e.g., the 'lesser' divinity of the Son when compared to the Father; that God's universal plan of salvation would one day extend itself to even Satan and all in hell. Origen is also known for his allegorical interpretation of Scripture: —the attempt to seek the deeper, spiritual meaning of Scripture. He dies after suffering greatly during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Decius.

Tertullian (155-222 AD). Tertullian may have been the most brilliant lawyer in the Roman Empire. Inspired by Christian martyrs, he became a Christian in his late forties.

In his book *The Fathers of the Church—Expanded Edition*, Mike Aquilina writes of Tertullian: "*Once in the church, he wielded his pen like a blazing brand, to expose error by the light of truth, and to immolate falsehood with the flames of his invective. It was Tertullian who first used the Latin word Trinitas (Trinity) to describe God*" (p.92). One of Tertullian's most famous sayings is: "*The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.*" It is the blood of the martyrs that convinces him to become a Christian.

Problems arise when Tertullian shows no tolerance for lukewarmness, cowardice and immorality among Christians. Calling for a purer church, he falls under the influence of the schismatic Montanus. *Schism* is an attempt to preserve orthodoxy while breaking from union with the Church and the Pope. Sadly, this man who spent many years drawing people to the Church, dies outside the Church.

It is truly a mark of the divine origin of the Church that it not only survived centuries of bloody persecution, ostracism, and torture within the Roman Empire, but also produced throughout that same period great writers, scholars, monks, and saintly men from every walk of life.

Roman Empire's persecution of Christianity

During more than 2,000 years of its existence, Catholic Christianity has been attacked from within and from without. Above, we looked at three internal threats to the Christian faith. We could add to them the belief that Gentiles had to become Jews to convert to Christianity. We also saw in the first article how the first Christians were attacked and persecuted by the Jewish leaders. Now we turn to the attempts by the Roman Empire to destroy Christianity.

Rome is generally tolerant of different religions and initially saw Christians as just another sect within Judaism. But as Christianity grows in numbers and becomes more visible, and as Christians preach that there is only one God and that he is not the emperor, Rome begins to change its attitude towards the new

religion. Because Christians refuse to worship the emperor—which Rome has mandated in order to foster unity in the Empire—they are accused of being atheists and subversive, a threat to civil harmony.

Most persecutions of the first two centuries are brief and limited to certain areas, but they are brutal. In 64AD, Nero falsely accuses Christians of burning Rome in order to deflect blame from himself. He tortures and crucifies Christians, igniting their bodies as a spectacle for the bloodthirsty crowds.

In the middle of the third century, the Emperor Decius, fearing the growing number of Christians, calls for the first empire-wide persecution of the Church. Christians who refuse to offer sacrifice to the Roman gods are imprisoned or put to death. While many Christians bravely submit to a cruel death rather than deny Jesus, thousands of them, including clergy, renounce (“apostatize”) their faith.

The last and perhaps worst of all the Roman persecutions takes place under Diocletian (284-305AD). His aim is to uproot Christianity from the Empire. He tries 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 the death penalty.

Two early female martyrs. Two of the best known early female martyrs are *Perpetua* and *Felicity* who are martyred in 203. They are jailed while they are catechumens, showing that the catechumenate is illegal. Both Perpetua and Felicity are baptized while in prison. Perpetua’s father and the Roman governor beg her to offer sacrifice to the emperor so she could escape death but she bravely refuses.

Early Christian martyrs are buried in caves, called “catacombs,” outside the walls of the city of Rome. They remain today as a monument for many who suffered and died for Christ.

Dealing with the lapsed

During the persecution of the Church, not all Christians submit to their death bravely. Thousands of them, including clergy, try to offer sacrifice to the emperor to escape death. We should not be surprised at their failure. Had not Peter, the first Pope, denied Christ when it seemed he too might be

crucified? How to deal with the so-called *lapsed* was a controversial issue in the early Church.

A priest name *Novatian* who is himself consecrated as an antipope, says that the Church has no power to reconcile apostates or those guilty of murder, adultery, fornication or a second marriage. In 251AD Pope Cornelius holds a synod in Rome and orders the “lapsed” to be restored to the Church with the usual “medicine of repentance.”

There is another heresy associated with this period of Church history, namely, *Donatism*, from Donatus, who believes that the clergy responsible for turning over sacred books or vessels during the persecution by Diocletian should not be forgiven by the Church or reinstated to ministry.

An important principle of Catholic life emerges from the belief that the authority to confer a sacrament, to teach, or to lead in the Church does not depend on the worthiness or personal holiness of the ordained minister. Jesus continues to work through and to forgive fragile human vessels to show that the power in the sacraments and the ordained ministry comes from God, not man. Perhaps the best image of the Church in the third century is that of Saint Cyprian, who writes of it as a great ark of ship that holds sinners as well as saints and martyrs, and yet is the only place where salvation can be found in a world bound by sin.

Early Christian lifestyle

Concerning this aspect of early Christianity, Michael Pennock writes:

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. (ibid, p.58)

Reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity

We close this article by briefly looking at some of the reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. By the

end of the third century, the Christian Church is like an empire within an empire. While there is indeed a divine side to the expansion of Christianity, God usually works through human beings and events to achieve his purposes. So, on a human level, what caused the rapid spread of Christianity? Here are some reasons:

- The first Christians had a burning desire to share the awesome good news that they had experienced. Theirs was not a private religion.
- Non-believers were moved by the witnessing of the first Christian communities as they cared for the widows, orphans and the poor, and visited the condemned in prison. They said, “See how those Christians love one another.”
- The public killing of Christians helped to ‘market’ the Christian faith. Martyrdom was frequently witnessed by thousands in the Roman amphitheaters. Even the hardest of hearts must have been moved by the way Christians went to their death, especially the witness of women like Perpetua and Felicity.
- The ability of great teachers like Justin, Ignatius and Irenaeus served to defend Christian beliefs and explain them to educated non-believers.
- Two conditions within the Roman Empire facilitated the work of Christian missionaries: a) the marvelous system of roads and shipping made it easy for missionaries to travel throughout the empire; b) since most people in the empire spoke Greek, Greek-speaking missionaries proclaimed the Gospel in all the large cities and were understood.

Discussion questions

1. What spoke to you most in this article?
2. What, if anything, did you learn that you had not previously known?
3. Christians who live in countries where Christianity is persecuted pay a price for being Christian and are usually stronger Christians. How do you think American Christians would respond if they were persecuted for their beliefs in Jesus? What forms of subtle persecution or anti-Catholicism exist in our Church?

4. What factors block and facilitate the spread of Christianity today?

5. What, if any, questions do you have about this period in Christianity?