

Catholics through the ages

This is where we've come from



A 'down-to-earth' mystery

As Catholics we believe that the Christian Church ultimately has its origin in God, the infinite Mystery of love who gives birth to and sustains all creation. But the Church is also embodied within human history. Eternal truths are communicated from age to age, but these truths are received in a human way. We have to discover them anew with the fresh insights that arise with each epoch of human history. While Christian revelation allows us to enter into the profound 'love life' of God, it also illuminates our human frailty. As history progresses, so too does the Church's self-understanding as a vehicle of salvation. That's why, when we look at the history of the Christian Church through the ages we see evidence of both grace and sin, great leaps forward and disastrous steps backward. Our Christian faith reassures us, however, that we will never be abandoned by God whose guiding light will remain with the Church always. At the same time, we recognise that we can never become boastful or complacent about this promise, for the story of the Christian Church is not just the story of 'truth' but of the human search for truth and, as every family knows, growing to maturity and wisdom often involves painful mistakes. Imbued with this hope-filled yet realistic view of the Church, we now turn to examine some of the highlights and landmarks of its two thousand year history.

Christianity starts and spreads

Since Jesus was a Jew and his message was directed towards the people of Israel, Christianity naturally arose within the Jewish community living under the reign of the Roman Empire. Very soon, however, it began to spread into the Gentile

'Where are you from?'

'Melbourne'

'Ah! I've got cousins in Melbourne. Do you know...'

'Well, actually I've only lived there six months. I'm originally from New Zealand.'

'That explains the way you pronounce "six".'

Approaching the Topic

'...but my dad's side of the family are all Italian. That's why I wave my arms about when I talk! And you? Where are you from?'

'Well, I grew up about two blocks away and I've lived there all my life...'

We can learn a lot about people by getting to know their background. This is certainly true of the Catholic Church. Who we are today as a faith community has been shaped by centuries of experience in changing political, cultural and economic circumstances.



(non-Jewish) populations, thanks largely to the missionary zeal of one extraordinary man: Paul of Tarsus. Paul braved shipwreck, imprisonment, ridicule and eventually martyrdom in order to proclaim the Good News throughout the Graeco-Roman world. (In the New Testament scriptures you can read the letters he wrote to the Christian communities he founded on these missionary journeys.)

The first few centuries are of special importance in the Church's history, as it was during this time that the foundations of Christian life and teaching were laid down for generations to come. We call this the 'apostolic age' because we recognize the first apostles, 'eye-witnesses' of Jesus' life, as the authentic interpreters of the intentions of Jesus. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they established the essential cornerstones of Church life. This era also saw the emergence of the New Testament scriptural writings. As Catholics we accept both the scriptures **and** the apostolic tradition as our essential guide in charting our future as a Church.

Fresh insights

As time went on, more great

teachers, thinkers and leaders were raised up, who continued to explore and consolidate the message of Christ and what it meant for Christians. We refer to these figures as the 'Church Fathers'. Often their contributions arose out of the midst of conflict, as they faced those who threatened to distort the true meaning of the Gospel. If an issue was particularly critical, the bishops would be called together in Church Councils, to discuss the implications and seek a resolution. Although such conflicts may often have been distasteful and damaging at the time, with the benefit of hindsight we can look back and see how the Holy Spirit has worked through such controversies to clarify and deepen our understanding of the Christian message.

New challenges

During the first three hundred years, Christians were often persecuted and killed by the rulers of the day who perceived the Church as a potential threat. Thus the first saints to be recognised were often martyrs. Persecution eased, however, in the fourth century when the Roman Emperor, Constantine himself became a

Christian. Ironically, this turn of events brought new difficulties. With Christianity now established religion of the state, many people sought baptism for political gain rather than out of a genuine conversion of heart. A 'secularisation' of the Church began to creep in. Many Christians began to take on the 'ways of the world', and failed to live the radical edge of a Gospel lifestyle.

It was at this time that there arose in the Church the monastic movement: groups of Christians who deliberately took on an austere and contemplative lifestyle, as a visible witness to the Gospel call to repentance and conversion of heart. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the spiritual thrust of monasticism saved the Church from becoming a mere outward show of religiosity. Many great bishops, theologians, councils and missionary endeavours of the ensuing centuries were strongly influenced by monasticism.

Survival and growth

The monasteries proved to be a vital link in the Church's survival in the 'Dark Ages'. Europe suffered debilitating foreign invasions of Germanic and Arab peoples, which threatened to destroy its civilizations, including its Christian dimension. During this time of decay, the monasteries, especially of the Benedictine rule, kept alive all that was best of classical culture and, when the time came, helped the Church to rise to the challenge of embracing the newly emerging Germanic western world.

The years 700-1300 saw the development of a western Christian community of nations in Europe. The Germanic culture, the revival of ancient Graeco-Roman learning, and Christianity were welded into one, leading the Church to find expression in new forms with a fresh array of strengths and problems. One of its best fruits of this medieval period was its intellectual advances. New schools and universities came into existence, fostering rich development in philosophy and theology.

Step forward and backwards

On a less happy note, this period saw a growing division between the western Church and the Church in the east. There had always been a certain amount of debate and rivalry between the two over political and theological points of difference, but by 1054 this had developed into a 'schism' (or breaking point) that to this day has not been completely healed. The Church's tremendous religious energy was also misdirected into some horrific displays of intolerance. The Crusades against Islam, the use of the Inquisition to combat heresies, and the insane hunt for witches are all part of a grievous chapter in Church history. Fortunately, at a time when the Church needed to hear a corrective voice, God raised up people like St Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) and St Dominic (d. 1221), who founded religious communities that showed that the witness of one's life has more far-reaching influence than violence and force. For the Franciscans that meant a lifestyle of poverty; for the Dominicans, the power of preaching God's Word.

Tension and Tragedy

The disintegration of political unity among the western European states which began in the 14th century also affected the Church. Territorial and intellectual tensions developed. From within the Church, a strong movement of criticism began to swell against its hierarchical and legalistic structures, most notably against the papacy. Many of these criticisms were well-founded, such as those which challenged certain corrupt fiscal practices. Understandably, the reformers became overwhelmingly frustrated and disillusioned with the refusal of Church authorities to recognise the need for renewal. Unfortunately, however, some protesters ('Protestants') like Martin Luther gave up hope that the Church would ever reform. Instead of choosing to stay within the Church and press for change, they broke

away and established their own churches. A tragic split in Christianity resulted. A unified Christian consciousness was shattered into denominational thinking. To this day the Church remains deeply affected by this tragic chapter in history (for which both sides must share the blame) when our differences of opinion were allowed to override an even greater reality: our unity as the body of Christ.

In the wake of such division, the Roman Catholic Church (as it was now called, having stayed in union with the Pope) sought to reaffirm its foundational beliefs and structures at the Council of Trent (1545-63). Thus began a period of



reconstruction and inner reform, enhanced by a flourishing of saintly people and new religious communities. A fresh vitality of faith sought expression through art and theology; Spanish mystics (Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross) helped deepen religious life.

New lands, new ideas

From the 16th Century, the Catholic Church began a new world missionary phase. Enabled by the ventures of European explorers and traders who traveled to far-away lands, Christian missionaries made contact with peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas,

Australia and the Pacific. As with all European expansion, these missionary journeys were a mixture of gift and burden to the native populations who received them. At times, Christian zeal failed to show respect for the indigenous cultures. At other times it protected and enhanced them.

New intellectual forces of secularisation, well and truly felt by the 18th century Enlightenment, confronted the Church with a powerful challenge. The 'supremacy of man' felt by the achievements of the industrial age, and expressed through movements such as Liberalism, Socialism, Communism and Materialism, challenged the supremacy of traditional authorities, including that of God. Western ways of thinking became more and more estranged from religion and the Church. The task of constructively responding to such vast social advances was often the source of dramatic struggles within the Church of the 19th century. Rigidity clashed with openness to innovation as old world concepts sought expression in the new. This tension continued into the twentieth century and provided a momentum that led to the calling of a great Church meeting of bishops from all over the world. You may have heard its name mentioned: the Second Vatican Council.

A watershed council

Vatican II is considered as somewhat of a watershed for the Church. It took place over 1963-65; however its effects are still in the process of filtering through to all areas of Church life. At this great Council Assembly a fresh perspective was brought to bear upon all dimensions of Church life.

For instance, its vision moved from a view of the Church that overemphasized the hierarchical dimension, and instead presented a view of the Church as the 'people of God'. A stronger communal awareness was recovered, more

akin to the primitive Church and the tradition of the Fathers. It brought about quite dramatic changes in Catholic worship. The Mass was now said in the language of the people rather than in Latin. Its documents gave greater encouragement to the participation of all members of the Church, not just those who were bishops, priests or members of religious orders.

The Word of God received greater prominence, recovering a long-lost Catholic appreciation of the scriptures. A greater appreciation of the presence of God's Spirit beyond the official, visible Church structures was fostered. Consequently, communication channels were opened with other Christian denominations and other world religions. The Council also welcomed a greater appreciation of what science and technology had to offer the Church, and with this came a renewed sense of the Church's responsibility within and to the world. Catholics were encouraged to be active and outgoing bearers of the

Gospel message, especially in situations of injustice and oppression.

Of course, these new attitudes did not spring up out of the blue. Prior to and during this period, there was much evidence of the Holy Spirit arousing the hearts of Catholics at the grass roots of the Church, through the proliferation of lay organizations and renewal movements. Such lay initiatives continue to be a prominent feature of the Church to this day.

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Vatican II, with the participation of bishops of many different nationalities from all over the world, was that it heralded a new phase of the Church's develop as a world Church, rather than as a 'European export', which for many centuries had coloured the cultural expression in which the Gospel message was proclaimed and received.

Your Story

Learning from the past, living in the present

Maturity brings wisdom and understanding. We learn from our past mistakes, even as we grapple with our new ones. We inherit our parents' strengths and weaknesses even as we sort out our own. The Church, too, undergoes this maturing process. The story below reflects the evolving nature of what it means to be human... and Catholic!

'As a teenager, I rebelled against authority. Parents, school teachers and church officials were not the go. Their rules were obsolete; their moral laws old-fashioned. Mind you, I wasn't a blind rebel; I rebelled as I became acutely aware of the hypocrisy of the adult world. "It's the person's heart that counts," I thought, "externals are irrelevant". Of course, as I grew up, I began to see the "old-fashioned" rules differently. I realised that wisdom, as well as foolishness, had been handed down through the generations.

'Later, I found myself having to work through another adolescence. In my forties I woke up to the fact that many of my attitudes displayed an undercurrent of "adolescent" faith. I was

quick to criticise traditional teachings. To me, "Rome" was an old-fashioned parent. I smirked at its pronouncements and "smoked behind its back". Mind you, some of my objections posed a healthy challenge. I highlighted questions which begged resolution – ones which some Catholics would rather ignore.

'Yes, to grow through my "adolescent" faith was healthy. But I couldn't stay there. As in my earlier youth, I had to grow up. I had to embrace what is true in the old as well as the new. Like every maturing teenager, I had to face facts: while our parents must adapt to the changing times, they are not completely stupid!' (Kath)

Your Story

Think ... Talk

How would you answer the question: 'Where do you come from?'
- What significant events and people have helped to shape you into the person you are today?
- How are you grateful for your history? What do you wish had been different?
- What valuable 'life lessons' have you learned along the way?

Pray

Christians speak of God as our 'Alpha and Omega', our beginning and end. Reflect prayerfully upon this phrase. Can you see your life's history as part of a bigger plan that rests with God?

Act

Look at some works of architecture and art which express the Christian heritage (eg your local Cathedral).

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