

A HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

In the time of Jesus there was no one way of following him. Peter, James and John seem to have had a distinctive role apart from the 'Twelve'. There were women who followed Jesus and looked after him; (Luke 8:1-3) seventy disciples whom he sent out ahead of him (Luke 10:1) and people who received individual calls such as the rich young man (Luke 18: 18-23) the three men (Luke 9:57-62) the blind man (Luke 18:35-43) and others.

The early church (the Greek word, "Ekklesia" means ' a gathering') stressed that there were different ways of following Jesus (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7). Jesus did not 'set up' the Church with all the features that developed later (e.g. bishops, stained-glass windows, holy days of obligation, papal conclaves etc. The blueprint model once popular, has been replaced by other approaches based on scholarship. Jesus had come to refound Judaism, and initially the Jewish Christians maintained their Jewish practices such as meeting in the Temple in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46) or in synagogues (James 2:2) as well as gathering in their homes for the breaking of bread (Acts 2:46) where they could remember and celebrate their faith in Jesus.

The developing community ('the Way') was founded on the faith of Peter ((Mt 16:18, Jn 21:18). On this rock (this foundation) the church began to develop. Jesus' concern with simplicity, for the poor and outcast seems to suggest that often the organised church has contradicted his values in its wealth, complex and elaborate worship and concern with material things. The early church was charged with the MISSION "Go and teach all nations, baptise them and make them disciples" (Matthew 28: 19-20). Its message was that "Jesus is alive".

In the beginning it was a small group but soon the need for organisation was evident. This early church is described in the Acts of the Apostles as an ideal community (Acts 2: 42-47; 4: 32-35). The members shared their possessions, worshipped together and ate together. The numbers increased and some non-Jews joined the group. Very soon the ideal harmony and brotherhood was disrupted (Chapter 6) by a disagreement, which brought the first change. Laymen were appointed deacons to assist the apostles. The letter to the Romans (Ch 16: 1) indicates that at some time there were called women deacons.

There was an internal dispute over the acceptance of pagans, and Peter convinced the group that the Gentiles were free to hear the message of Jesus. A problem arose (Acts: 15) about the laws (especially circumcision), which should be imposed on the Gentiles. There was no direct command from Jesus so that the group had to interpret the mind of Jesus. They recalled how he spoke (about the Good Samaritan, for example) and how he acted (like with the Roman centurion or the Samaritan woman in John 4: 9) and attempted to interpret his mind as it applied to the new circumstances.

Paul argued that the spirit of the law was important, not being harsh or legalistic. Paul and Peter argued (Galatians 2: 11-14) and Paul was able to convince Peter, but he needed official backing.

A special meeting 'of the whole church' was held, where Paul argued his case, that the message of Jesus was for the Gentiles, and they should not be required to keep all of the same laws that Jews kept. James as leader of the church in Jerusalem drafted a letter announcing the decision that the church in Jerusalem was in favour of 'being gentle' with the pagan converts (Acts 15: 19-20). Paul and his fellow missionaries began a new campaign to visit his communities and explain this ruling because he knew there were those who opposed it and they were visiting new communities and stirring the people against Paul's work. The church began to organise itself and in time the "twelve" were martyred.

Local churches developed their own customs and practices according to the missionary who established them. Persecution followed and it was made necessary for the believers to meet secretly. They developed a secret meeting symbol. The word "Ikhthus" in Greek is "fish". When the five letters Ikhthus are separated and applied to the first letter of each word of their faith proclamation "Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour" this became a meaningful symbol.

The history of the church over the next 2000 years reflects change, growth, hardship, persecution, infidelity, mission and adaptation. In its early days while the group was small there were difficulties. These were multiplied when the group spread and encountered totally new circumstances. Perhaps its best days were the first three centuries during which time the believers had to cope with persecution and fidelity was costly.

In 313 Constantine the Emperor issued an Edict tolerating Christianity and soon afterwards established it as the official religion throughout his Empire. Many historians argue that although at the time this must have seemed exciting, it was one of the most unfortunate events to affect the Church. Religion became institutionalised, political, elitist and complex both in government and worship. People who had been celebrating Eucharist in homes now gathered in former pagan temples for worship. In 330 Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Byzantium (now Istanbul, Turkey) and renamed it Constantinople, after himself.

During the years that followed, Popes were often more involved in temporal welfare than spiritual concerns and they bowed to the pressure of Emperors who often appointed bishops and chaplains. Many Popes lost all religious authority and often people's allegiance to their faith was determined by the practical protection they needed from an emperor or king. Various rites became widespread as they adopted different attitudes on theological points. The belief in the Trinity was one such issue. Owing to accusations that Christians had more than one God, the churches in different places formulated different theologies (Greek, Roman, Syrian, Armenian, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Coptic etc).

By the 400's, the Roman Empire had lost much of its great power, and its armies could no longer defend the long frontier. Germanic tribes known as 'Barbarians' began invading Roman territory and this divided the huge Roman Empire into many kingdoms. The strong central and local governments disappeared. Invasions by Muslims in Spain and the Middle East, and the spread of the Byzantine Empire in south east, greatly changed Europe.

The Byzantine Empire reached its peak in the 500's and included parts of southern and eastern Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. It was a continuation of the Roman Empire and it played several important roles in history. It protected much of Europe from the attacks of Barbarian, Arab and Turkish invaders. Christianity, Greek culture, and Roman customs flourished in the Byzantine empire, providing a link between ancient and modern European civilization.

Muhammad conquered Mecca in 630 and many tribes and clans in Arabia submitted to his authority. Expansion was rapid after his death in 634. Arabian tribes were taught Islam and within ten years Muslims had overrun Palestine, Egypt, Syria and most of Iraq. Muslim soldiers and their families were sent to settle in strategically located towns, which rapidly grew into major cities. Each town centered on a main mosque and was ruled by the provincial governor. Soldiers and other Muslims each received a payment from a share of the booty taken during conquests and taxes from conquered lands.

The Muslims began to spread across North Africa from Egypt. While political conflicts broke out and marked the end of political and religious unity, conquests extended into Afghanistan and central Asia and across North Africa and into Spain. By the mid-700's non-Arab Muslims outnumbered Arab Muslims in many regions. And the Islamic state was transformed into the Abbasid empire that blended many cultures and was ruled by an absolute monarch who resided in Baghdad which had more than a million inhabitants. Through the Persian Gulf products flowed from east Africa, Arabia, India, Southeast Asia, and China. Across the desert products came from Syria and down the Euphrates River goods came from North Africa, Egypt, and the Mediterranean. To Muslim scholars and historians of this period, Baghdad was the centre of the world. By the mid-700's, Muslims had built an empire that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of China.

Meanwhile Christian Missionaries traveled great distances to spread their faith. Popes, bishops, and other leaders of the church took over many functions of government after the Roman emperors lost power. The church collected taxes and maintained law courts to punish criminals. Church buildings also served as hospitals for the sick, and as inns for travelers. Most of western Europe was divided into large estates of land called manors. Each village on a manor produced nearly everything needed by its people. Most people who had lived in the towns went to the countryside and became peasants on the manors. Some towns were completely abandoned and gradually this affected trade and industry. Education and cultural activities were almost forgotten and almost all state and city schools disappeared.

Charlemagne, (742-814) conquered much of western Europe and united it under a great empire and revived the political and cultural life of Europe. In 800 he was crowned Emperor of Rome by the Pope and he became protector of the church. Under his rule refusal of Baptism carried the death penalty. He granted large estates to loyal nobles, who, in return, provided military and political services to the king, and maintained roads, bridges, and fortifications on their land.

This system became the basis for the political and military feudal system in Europe for the next four hundred years. After Charlemagne's death his empire was divided into three parts and was soon attacked by Magyars, Muslims, and Vikings. By the late 800's, Europe was again divided into many kingdoms.

The power of the church became a great force because it touched almost everyone's life in many important ways. Clergy baptized, performed wedding blessings and conducted burial services. Many feudal lords gave lands to the church in return for services performed by the clergy who often controlled the lords with threats of excommunication. These threats sometimes led to interdicts which closed all the churches on the lord's land. Then no one on the land could be married or buried with the church's blessing, and church bells were never rang. People usually became so discontented that they rebelled, and the lord finally yielded to the church.

One thousand years ago Europe was poor, underdeveloped, and thinly populated. War, disease, famine, and a low birth rate kept the population low and people lived an average of only 30 years. There was little travel and eighty per cent of people never went farther than fifteen kilometers from their birthplace. However a century later because many capable lords provided strong governments and created more peace and security, economic conditions improved; towns sprang up near castles and monasteries and trade routes re-opened.

The five major Crusades (1096–1219) were to prove disastrous. In an attempt to secure possession of Jerusalem, Christians invaded towns and slaughtered thousands of people, especially Jewish people, who were regarded as suitable "victims" to obliterate wherever they lived. These mostly rabble armies were called by Popes and they murdered "in the name of Christ". They are a stark reminder of how badly we can 'get it wrong'. The Crusades encouraged European trade with the Middle East. Northern Italians built great fleets of ships to carry goods across the Mediterranean Sea to trade centers in Spain and northern Africa, and brought back goods which had sometimes been exported from India and China.

The Mongol Empire was the biggest land empire in history. Its territory extended from the Yellow Sea in eastern Asia to the borders of eastern Europe. At various times it included China, Korea, Mongolia, Persia (now Iran), Turkestan, and Armenia. It also included parts of Burma, Vietnam, Thailand, and Russia. In 1218, under Genghis Khan much of Islamic-Arabic civilization was destroyed. The Mongol armies spread terror and destruction and ruthlessly eliminated any resistance. When territories did resist, the Mongols slaughtered the population of entire cities.

The Mongols captured Baghdad, but the vitality of the Muslims did not diminish. Socially and culturally, the Muslim world became more diverse than ever. In west Africa and what are now Malaysia and Indonesia, Muslim merchants and scholars introduced Islam and converted kings, who made Islam the state religion. In China, the Muslim population also grew from communities of merchants.

In Africa south of the Sahara, large-scale conversions began in the 1400's. Most of these conversions resulted from trade and personal contact rather than conquest. Increasing contact with Arab and Byzantine civilizations brought back much learning that had been lost to Europe since the end of the Roman Empire. Scholars translated Greek and Arabic writings from these civilizations and studied their meanings. Between 1300 and 1500, medieval Europe gradually gave way to modern Europe. During this period, the Middle Ages overlapped the period called the Renaissance.

During the First Crusade, from 1096 to 1099, crusaders regained the coastal regions of the Holy Land. Later crusades resulted in increased tension between the Byzantines and the West European Christians. In 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, religious hatred played a key role in the capture of Constantinople by Western forces. This conquest occurred partly because merchants from the Italian city of Venice wanted to gain control over trade in the Middle East. The Venetians and the crusaders established a new empire and kept the government in Constantinople.

By the late 1300's, Constantinople and part of Greece were all that remained of the Byzantine empire. Muslims established the Ottoman Empire in what is now Turkey and in 1453, Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, was conquered. It was renamed Istanbul, it became the capital of the Ottoman Empire. Wars and natural disasters played a large part in the halt of European progress. From 1337 to 1453, England and France fought the Hundred Years' War, which interrupted trade and exhausted the economies of both nations. In addition, the breakdown of feudalism caused civil war throughout most of Europe. To add to the miseries of the people, the Black Plague killed about twenty-five percent of Europe's population between 1347 and 1352.

In a time of great superstition and fear, such a tragic even fuelled a strong feeling of guilt and a fear of Hell. This was expressed in the paintings in churches and cathedrals. It also gave rise to Penance, Pilgrimages, Purgatory and Relics. People believed that holiness would pass on to the possessor of something a holy person had owned, so soon after such a person's death they were keen to obtain a part of their clothing or a part of their body. Saints were cut up and sometimes the pieces were sold in the hope that their holiness could assist others avoid hell.

In the Sante Chapelle in Paris, there were 5000 items supposedly including things such as the rod of Moses, the crown of thorns, Jesus' swaddling clothes and drops of Jesus' blood. By 1520 this collection increased to 19,000 items and a person visiting all these relics in one day could gain 2,000,000 years release from purgatory! People looked to heaven for relief from their tragic sufferings. Extremists encouraged people to "win favour" with God by mortification. The period of indulgences and their abuse soon followed. People were desperate to "buy" God's favour and their fear was fanned by preachers and artists. At one time, ten days out of purgatory was offered for lasting out the Mass! Collections for cathedrals and palaces most often funded these projects and rewards were granted in the form of indulgences.

Scholars and artists studied subjects that they believed would help them better understand the problems of humanity. These subjects included literature, history and philosophy. Art of the Renaissance was dominated by three men, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo da Vinci. Italy was repeatedly invaded by armies from France, Germany, and Spain from 1494 to the early 1500's and the invaders were dazzled by the beauty of Italian art and architecture and returned home deeply influenced by Italian culture. Visitors to Italy, such as merchants, bankers, diplomats, and young scholars sought to acquire the basic tools of humanistic study and they too began to spread their influence throughout parts of western Europe. Several great explorers of the late 1400's and early 1500's were exposed to the traditions of the Renaissance. These include Christopher Columbus who 'discovered' America in 1492.

From 1309 until 1377, seven successive popes resided in great splendor in Avignon. where they could escape avoid the civil wars disrupting Italy, and because they were increasingly influenced by the powerful French kings. Following the return of the Papacy to Rome in 1378 until 1417 a controversy called the Great Schism deeply divided the church. For many of these years there were three men claiming to be the true Pope, supported by French or Italian groups. In 1417, bishops and other high-ranking clergymen meeting at the Council of Constance finally ended the Great Schism by electing. Martin 5th. Later that century the Papacy was occupied by men totally unfit for the office.

The Reformation began in 1517 with Martin Luther. He objected to the corruption he recognised in the papacy, and the misuse of indulgences impelled him to take a stand. Within forty years, Protestantism was established in nearly half of Europe. The split deepened when the Calvinists and Church of England movements began shortly after Luther. In western Europe, kings were increasing their power over their own people. The monarchies in England, France, and Spain were growing stronger, organizing their finances, and building their armies. Some people regarded the pope as a political leader of a foreign state and opposed his control and influence in their own countries. These realities greatly assisted the spread of Protestantism. As a result of the Reformation, Europe was divided between the Catholic countries of the south and the Protestant countries of the north.

The Catholic Reformation set out to recover lost ground and stimulated reforms within the Catholic Church. The Spanish Inquisition and Index were instituted (the latter remaining until Paul 6th in this period of restoration and consolidation). The Reformation. The Council of Trent was eager to combat the encouraged use of scripture by the Protestants. Its major concern was reform. Many church teachings were re-formulated and steps were taken to prevent further divisions. The Council standardised worship.

John Knox went to Geneva and learnt from Calvin and others of reformed theology and brought this back to his native Scotland, where the Presbyterian Church had it's beginnings – based on the rule of presbyters (or elders). The Methodist Church began later as people like John and Charles Wesley reacted against the direction of the Church of England and were banned from the established churches.

One of the major emphases of the reformation church was the place of scripture, and this led to many translations of the bible into local languages. The 'Enlightenment' or Age of Reason began in the 1600's and lasted until the late 1700's. Philosophers emphasized the use of reason as the best method of learning truth and their influence on theology shaped scholasticism. They credited reason for the achievements made in science and philosophy and contrasted this with ignorance, superstition, and uncritical acceptance of authority which all of which they felt had dominated the Middle Ages. Secular academics blamed people in authority, particularly the leaders of the Catholic Church, for keeping others in ignorance to maintain their own personal power.

The philosophers explored issues in education, law, philosophy, and politics and attacked tyranny, social injustice, superstition, and ignorance. Many of their ideas were taken up as the ideals of the American and French revolutions during the late 1700's. The philosophers stressed the importance of education insisting that "knowledge is power." Toward the end of the 1700's people came to value feeling rather than reason, and to prefer passion, individuality, and spontaneity to discipline, order, and control.

In 1870 Vatican I was called and among other things this Council issued the decree on Papal Infallibility. This was the time when reform began especially under Pope Leo 13th (1878-1903) and several Popes took the steps that were to lead in time to the calling of the 2nd Vatican Council in 1962, where the need for change and adaptation was recognized so as to relate to a changing world.

For almost 2000 years despite division, schism, crusades, decay, persecution, dissension and unfaithfulness, the church has remained alive and active keeping in the forefront, its Mission. Some historians suggest that since Vatican II the church has discovered a vitality and influence which has been absent for centuries. The struggles prove that the church is human but it also proves that it has Jesus in its midst. No empire, no organisation has lasted the centuries. Christians still proclaim Jesus' promise "Remember I am with you always, until the end of time." Surely this has been proved!

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At the same time it must be remembered that some local churches have died out. Adapting to the times is critical. We could speak of three eras in the history of our church. The first age is the **Apostolic Age** when the emphasis in the church was on mission. Those who were baptized and joined the fellowship did so in the knowledge that they were called to witness (from the Greek word martyros) to their faith. Many lost their lives because of this vocation. The church structure was simple and adaptable and expansion took place in the face of opposition.

The second age is the age of **Christendom** when the church became identified with the Empire. What seemed like a wonderful gift of freedom, through Constantine's edict, became a millstone around the neck of the church as it struggled to free itself from State control, with very little success. The church gradually became institutionalized and rigid in its practice. Individual piety lost connection with its scriptural base and uniformity replaced the variation and flexibility of the earlier age. The work of mission was left to professionals (clergy, religious and lay volunteers) who went to far off lands. Laity virtually lost any sense of mission.

The third age is the **Emerging Age**. In this secular age, mission is again the vocation of every Christian. No longer do people need to go to far off lands. Mission starts in the nearby homes and streets; outside the church door. Most Catholics and Protestants are not regular 'church attenders' these days. Many of them feel alienated or they have a sense that the church is irrelevant for them. They can be the focus for outreach and mission. Ecumenism and mission take precedence over intolerance and maintenance. Passionist Family Groups can contribute to this outreach and mission.