

The History of the Catholic Church

The Patristic Period

(100-600 A.D.)

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(The Patristic Period: 100-600 A.D.)

The Second Century— Continued Expansion and Defense of the Faith

– In the 2nd Century, the leadership structure of the Church developed a definitive form that we still see today:

- Bishops
- Presbyters (priests)
- Deacons

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The Second Century— Continued Expansion and Defense of the Faith

- It was important for the Early Church to formulate creeds.
 - The short summaries of Christian belief helped teach the faith to those who were preparing for Baptism.
 - They also helped eliminate false teachings.

Creeds:
Prayers or Confessionalism?

- What is a creed?
 - A creed is simply a prayer that states what a community believes.
 - The Catholic Encyclopedia defines it as, “a concise, authorized statement of essential tenets of religious belief that a believing community employs primarily in worship and initiation rites.

Creeds: Prayers or Confessionalism?

- Where did Creeds come from?
 - Creeds, since they are part of a believing community, must come from the community.
 - The earliest Christian creeds are found in the New Testament.
 - Essential statements about Jesus' divinity can be found in many New Testament verses: Acts 2:36; 10:36; Colossians 2:6; 1Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9; "Jesus is the Son of God"—Acts 9:20; 13:33; Romans 1:4; Hebrews 4:14).
 - Statements about the Trinity can be found in: Matthew 28:19-20 and 2 Corinthians 13:13.
 - As the Church grew, so did the need for a concise statement of belief. All of the earliest forms of creeds shared the same structure. They were not interested in stating "new truths," but stating the essential elements of God's plan of salvation, such as can be found in [Ephesians 1:3-14](#).

Ephesians 1:3-14

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved. In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth. In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the one who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy Spirit, which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God's possession, to the praise of his glory."

Creeds: Prayers or Confessionalism?

- What is Confessionalism?
 - “No book but the Bible—No creed but Christ.”
 - There are fundamentalist churches that are adamantly opposed to creeds, referring to them as the “sin of Confessionalism.”
 - The use of creeds suffered a tremendous blow at the end of the last century. Many of the Protestant denominations were beginning to turn back to the use of creeds as a way of summarizing what they believed. This caused a backlash from other denominations. Conservative evangelical churches reacted by condemning the “dead orthodoxy” of creeds and praising an individual’s personal experience of God.

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The Second Century— Continued Expansion and Defense of the Faith

- In addition to using creeds, the Church also began putting together the “canon” of Scripture, that is, they began determining what books from the Old and New Testament would be included in the Bible.
 - The main criterion for a Book or Letter being accepted into the canon was its use in church communities and Masses.
 - This process was extremely important because by the 2nd Century, many “false” Letters and Gospels had surfaced among Christians.
 - It was not until the Fourth Century that the Church officially decided which Books would be included.

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The Second Century— Continued Expansion and Defense of the Faith

- It was the unity of the Early Church that kept it from becoming tainted by false teachings.
 - The pre-eminence of the city of Rome in the Roman Empire lent itself to being the “center” of Christianity (It was the center of everything back then).
 - The bishop of Rome held a unique place among the other bishops, so that when false teachings (heresies) arose, the church through the Empire looked to Rome. We have written testimonies of this:
 - Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (France) wrote: “Every other local church must concur with this church, Rome, on account of its special pre-eminence” (*Against Heresies*, The Early Christian Fathers, book 3, 3:2, 372).
 - Bishop Cyprian of Carthage: “To be in communion with the bishop of Rome is to be in communion with the Catholic Church.” (3rd Century).

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The Third Century – Persecution and Theological Development

- Christianity experienced a little peace in the Roman Empire between 200-250 A.D. This gave the Church a chance to expand, evangelize, and organize.

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The Third Century – Persecution and Theological Development

- In 250 A.D. however, Emperor Decius began to fear the growing number of Christians and called for an Empire-wide persecution. Christians who refused to worship false gods were imprisoned or put to death. This brought the first widespread problem of **apostasy**, the denial of the faith.
 - When the persecution ended, the Church had to decide what to do with those who had renounced their faith. Could they be readmitted to the Church? The Catholic Church affirmed that God wanted His people to include repentant sinners.
 - This issue arose again in the early 4th Century during another serious persecution by the Romans (Emperor Diocletian).
 - Once again, the Church affirmed the need to always reach out to sinners. It also began to understand that the authority to confer a Sacrament and to teach depends not on the worthiness or personal holiness of the minister, but on God's goodness and love.

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The Fourth Century – The Christian Empire and the Arian Crisis

- In 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine passed the Edict of Milan with the Emperor of the East, Licinius, thus granting religious toleration through the Roman Empire. Christianity was no longer an illegal religion!
- As the years passed, and Constantine became the sole Emperor, he gave more and more support to Christianity. He was Baptized on his deathbed in 337 A.D.

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The Fourth Century – The Christian Empire and the Arian Crisis

- Christians rejoiced that they could worship freely and safely. The merging of Church and State presented some new problems, however.
 - A priest named Arius began teaching that Jesus, the Son of God, was not equal to God, but the highest creature that God had ever created.
 - Sensing tension building in the Church, Constantine convened the first Council of the Church. Bishops from around the world met in Nicaea (in Turkey) in 325 A.D. to concretize the teaching about the nature of Jesus Christ. Seeing that Arius was wrong, the bishops included a new word in the creed to better explain Jesus' relationship to the Father. The word was *homoousios*—"of the same substance" or "one in being." They declared that Jesus was not a "creature" of God, but "begotten, not made."

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The Fourth Century – The Christian Empire and the Arian Crisis

- Despite the Church's declaration, some of the "Arian" bishops (those who supported Arius) swayed the opinions of following Emperors, who made life very difficult for the bishops and priests who believed that Jesus was One with the Father.
 - The tireless work of many people helped to keep the Church on track. Men like, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzen wrote constantly in defense of the Council of Nicaea.
 - Eventually, in 381 A.D., the Council of Constantinople reaffirmed the earlier teaching that Jesus is indeed of the same substance as the Father. The Nicene Creed that we profess at Mass actually came from the Council of Constantinople.

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The Fourth Century – The Christian Empire and the Arian Crisis

- With the end of persecution, there emerged some new heroes of Christianity—the hermits, or monks (also known as the Desert Fathers).
 - These men and women literally gave up everything to live in the desert, following Christ by way of penance and prayer. The word, “monk” comes from the Latin word meaning “alone.”
 - Some of these men were called out of their radical poverty and isolation to lead the Church as bishops (ex.- St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Gregory of Nazianzen).
 - Some of the other notables include:
 - St. Jerome: a Biblical scholar who lived much of his life in a cave in Bethlehem.
 - St. Augustine: who became the bishop of Hippo, Africa, and is considered by many to be the Father of Psychology because of his very introspective book, Confessions.

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The Fourth Century – The Christian Empire and the Arian Crisis

- At the Council of Sardicia, in 343 A.D., the pope (the bishop of Rome) was recognized as the final authority over the Church. Saint Jerome expressed beautifully how this leadership works when he wrote to Pope Damasus, “I follow no one as leader except Christ alone, and therefore I want to remain in union in the Church with you, that is, the chair (office) of Peter. I know that on this rock the Church is founded” (St. Jerome, Letters, 15:2, quoted in Dogma 4: The Church, Michael Schmaus).

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The Fifth Century – Questions of Belief and New Political Alignments

- The 5th Century challenged Christians to not only defend the Church spiritually, but physically as well. The Vandals and Huns attacked the Western Empire, but Christian leaders such as Pope Leo I helped lessen the destruction.
 - He dissuaded Attila the Hun from attacking Rome and persuaded Genescric the Vandal to plunder Rome without destroying it.
 - The good news is that by the 6th and 7th Centuries, Catholic Christians had managed to convert many of these Arian believers to orthodox Christianity.

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The Fifth Century – Questions of Belief and New Political Alignments

- The greatest Theological battle in the Western Empire during this time was with Pelagianism.
 - Pelagius was a British monk who denied that human nature was corrupted by original sin. Thus, humanity did not need God's grace to avoid sin, but only good examples or moral living, like Jesus. His teaching ultimately stated that humanity was dependent upon human effort for salvation rather than on the grace of God in Jesus Christ.
 - Saint Augustine almost went to the opposite extreme, emphasizing an absolute dependence on God's grace to do anything good.
 - The Second Council of Orange, in 529 A.D., balanced Augustine's view by definitively stating that we have an absolute need of God's grace to do anything good but we also must cooperate with God's grace.

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The Fifth Century – Questions of Belief and New Political Alignments

- The big discussion in the Eastern Empire during this time was whether or not we could legitimately call Mary “*Theotokos*,” or “God-bearer.”
 - Some of the leaders of the Church did not want people to become confused about Mary’s humanity by essentially calling her the “Mother of God,” while others thought that the title would safeguard the unity of Jesus’ human and divine nature.
 - The discussion came to an end at the Council of Ephesus, in 431 A.D., when the Church declared that Mary could rightly be called the “Mother of God,” not because she contributed to the divine nature of Jesus, but because she is the mother of his human nature. This was essentially just a reaffirmation of a long-standing tradition in prayer of referring to Mary as the Mother of God.

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The Fifth Century – Questions of Belief and New Political Alignments

- This dispute gave rise to a new dispute in the Church concerning the two natures of Christ.
 - Some theologians tried to argue that Christ was really only divine, but with a human “shell” or “costume.” Therefore, he neither truly suffered nor underwent human difficulties and emotions. Other theologians stated that Christ was half human and half divine (“logically” speaking, two halves make a whole). Still others believed that Christ was almost all human, but with a divine “soul” or “spirit,” not a human one.
 - The Council of Chalcedon, in 451 A.D., reaffirmed the Church’s belief that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine—two natures, complete, and undivided (“...true God and true man...”).

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The Sixth Century – The End of One Era and the Beginning of a New Era

- While the Western Empire had been preoccupied with invading tribes from the north, east, and south, the Eastern Empire had enjoyed a relative peace. That changed, however. While the Western Empire was beginning to convert the invaders, the Eastern Empire was coming up against the attack of Islam, which eventually overwhelmed it.
 - The pagans who had invaded the West began to lose control and their power collapsed (Burgundian in 532 A.D.; Vandals in 533 A.D.; Ostrogoths in 553 A.D.)
 - Clovis, King of the Franks, was converted to Christianity in 496 A.D. and became a great supporter of the Church.

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The Sixth Century – The End of One Era and the Beginning of a New Era

- Saint Benedict founded a monastic community at Monte Cassino in Italy in 529 A.D., and it eventually changed the face of Europe.
 - Monasteries were based on the idea that Christians should live in community and work and pray together. Saint Benedict's great motto was, "Ora et labora," that is "pray and work."
 - Monasteries had a huge impact on academia since they were centers of study and education.
 - One historian, Edward Gibbon, wrote, "A single Benedictine monastery may have done more for the cause of knowledge than Oxford and Cambridge combined."
 - Saint Benedict's monasteries were not the only ones, however. Even before Benedict, Saint Patrick had brought the Gospel to Ireland (461 A.D.) and founded monasteries.

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Saint Benedict

“The Rule”

