

# The History of the Catholic Church

## The Middle Ages (600-1300 A.D.)

These seven hundred years of Church history were marked by many conversions, tension between Church and state, soaring advances in art, literature, architecture, and theology. New religious orders were started and flourished while old ones were renewed and reinvigorated.

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## The Seventh Century – Growing West vs. Struggling East

- Pope Gregory (the First) helped to keep Italy and Europe together amidst the Roman Empire collapsing under the attack of the Lombards.
  - His theological and spiritual writings shaped the thoughts of the Middle Ages and are still popular today.
  - He sent a Benedictine monk, Augustine, to England to convert the Angles and Saxons.

Augustine converted and Baptized King Aethelbert of Kent, and soon all of England was Christianized.

England quickly began sending missionaries out to other countries and lands.

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- The Third Council of Constantinople began meeting in 680 A.D. to condemn “Monothelism”—the belief that Jesus did not have a human will, but only a divine one.
- In the East, Islam was quickly gaining power. Muhammad died in 632 A.D., and his followers were organizing military power and threatening to invade Europe.

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The Eighth Century – Christendom is Born while the East Splits

- A Benedictine monk, St. Boniface, was instrumental in the continued conversion of Europe.
  - He evangelized Germany from 723-739 A.D.
  - He helped the pope form an alliance with the kings of the Franks in France, beginning with King Pepin.

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- The alliance between the Church and the Emperor continued and reached a climax with the coronation of Charles the Great (son of Pepin) in 800 A.D.
  - This alliance alienated the Eastern (Byzantine) Church, because they continued to stay loyal to the Emperor in Constantinople.
  - Charles the Great made the situation even worse by demanding that the Church of the East include "*filioque*" "and the Son" in the creed.

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- The Second Council of Nicaea in the East (787 A.D.) discussed the procession of the Holy Spirit from God.
- Charles the Great objected to the Council's creed, which stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father, and made no mention of Christ.
- Because of his staunch objections, the Church of the West (Roman Catholicism) continues to this day to profess that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (*filioque*), while the Eastern Church (Eastern Orthodox) professes that the Holy Spirit comes only from the Father.

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- This is one instance among many that illustrates the problems that came about from the alliance of Church and state.
  - Charles the Great used his political power to steer theological thought.
  - At one point, he wrote a letter to the pope explaining that it was the pope's job to pray for the Church and his (Charles') job to rule it.
  - While the Church enjoyed having the security of the state, it did not like the fact that kings often interfered with Church activity—like appointing priests and bishops.

The Eastern Church also had problems with the alliance of Church and state.

The Byzantine Emperor, Leo III, published a decree forbidding Christians to venerate icons (beautifully painted images of Christ and the saints).

Although this practice had been an important part of the spiritual life of all Christians, Leo thought the Bible forbid the practice and called for the destruction of all such images (iconoclasm).

At the Second Council of Nicaea, the Church reaffirmed the practice of venerating images and distinguished this from *adoration*, which belongs to God alone.

This was particularly important during the Middle Ages, since most people were illiterate, and pictures were, as Pope Gregory the Great said, “books for lay people.”

This is the idea behind stained glass windows.

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## The Ninth Century – The Breakdown

- The beginning of the 9th Century looked promising.
  - The Church and state were getting along better and the Church was actually given the leading role in the relationship.
    - Lothar, the grandson of Charles the Great was actually crowned in Rome in 823 A.D., and after that, the pope in Rome crowned all rulers of the Holy Roman Empire.
    - But this wonderful time did not last long.

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- The Western Empire (Roman Empire) began being weakened by invasions from the Vikings, Hungarians, and Moslems. This led to feudalism—the splitting of the Empire into small divisions struggling for survival and battling one another.
  - As the Western Empire faced problems, so did the Western Church.
    - There was a brief schism between the Church of the West and the Church of the East from 858-879 A.D.
    - Problems continued for the Church throughout the 9th Century as clergy, who were ruled by secular authorities, abused celibacy, were often illiterate and uneducated, and monasteries lost their vitality and became worldly and corrupt.

While the dispute began because of some territorial ambitions, it ended with the allegation by the Patriarch Photius that the Roman Catholic Church was unorthodox for using *filioque* in the creed and other alleged errors.

Even though these disagreements were worked out in the 9th Century, they would arise again later and spark a schism (1054 A.D.) that still remains unhealed.

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- Yet, by the grace of God, a new movement of the Holy Spirit was beginning through two monks, Sts. Methodius and Cyril.
  - These two monks began a mission in Eastern Europe.
  - Not only did they bring Christianity to these people, but Cyril invented the Slavonic alphabet that provided the Slavs with a new language and a vehicle for their culture.

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## The Tenth Century – Otto to the Rescue

- Things had gotten bad in society and in the Church. The pope was controlled by the Roman aristocrats, who were unworthy of their high office. Otto the Great, however, helped the Church by choosing and appointing holy ministers.
- A key to the renewal of the Church during this time was the renewal of monasticism.
  - A fire of holiness began to renew the Catholic Church as many of the monks were called out of their monasteries to be bishops and even popes (the great popes of the next century were all monks—Gregory VII, Urban II, and Paschal II).

The worst of the popes, John XII (955-964 A.D.) was so corrupt that God delivered the Catholic Church from him through the secular ruler, Otto I (the Great).

Otto the Great was the first Holy Roman Emperor from the German nation.

He wanted to use the Catholic Church as an instrument in helping restore order to his empire. His primary way of doing this was through “Lay Investiture”—the selection of popes and bishops by the emperor.

By God’s grace, the popes who were selected during this time were of great caliber and quality. As a result, Western culture began to revive.

The renewal within the Church at this time began with the founding of a new Benedictine monastery at Cluny, France in 910 A.D.

This monastery set aside monks who would pray full-time, observing silence at all times, except for the chanting of the Divine Office (Scripture readings and prayers arranged for recitation throughout the day).

The monks selected their own Abbot, and were not controlled by laity.

This was such a powerful movement that sister houses were established for the women, and all of the monasteries totaled about fifteen hundred by 1100 A.D.

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## The Eleventh Century – Extraordinary Popes and the Great Schism

- Pope Gregory VII helped break the Church from the arm of the secular authority.
  - The King would no longer appoint popes.
  - Gregory's authority and fiery temperament helped to reform not only the Church, but Western civilization.
- The next two popes, Urban II and Paschal II, were also holy and strong.

Pope Gregory VII reasserted the spiritual and moral authority of the Church, so much so, that the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, approached him on his knees to beg forgiveness for rebelling against the Church.

He stated that Christ had given power to Peter and his successors to be the spiritual leader of society, and therefore, it was the right and duty of the pope to depose emperors who were immoral and to change civil laws that conflicted with God's laws.

Pope Urban II demonstrated the authority of the Church by calling for the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont in 1095 A.D. to free the holy places of the East from Moslem control.

Urban certainly did not envision the Crusades turning out the way they did, but saw them as an important way for Christians to reclaim the centrality and Lordship of Jesus Christ and help free the Eastern Christians from Islamic rule

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- The saddest moment in the 11th Century was the Great Schism.
  - In 1054, the Church of the West and the Church of the East split, the former recognizing the pope as the earthly head of the Church and the latter recognizing the patriarch as such.
    - The feuding escalated until the Western Church excommunicated the Eastern Church, who in turn excommunicated the Western Church.
  - In 1965, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras met, warmly embraced and proceeded to lift the excommunications from one another's Churches.
    - Reunifying the Churches has made progress and we are in the midst of important discussions and prayer for this unity today.

Most historians say that the schism was both ecclesial (the pope's authority) and theological (*filioque*) in nature.

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## The Twelfth Century – Higher Education and Churches

- The Church's desire to separate itself from political authorities reached a head in 1122 A.D., when the Concordat of Worms was signed.
  - This decreed that bishops and abbots would be selected by the laws of the Church, with the civil ruler investing them with civil authority if he wished to do so.

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- Far from solving the problem, Church leaders had to play delicate games of politics to keep any one particular European state from influencing or dominating the Church. Often, the delicate balance was thwarted.

Archbishop Thomas à Becket of Canterbury stood up for the rights and liberties of the Church and was forced to flee to France by Henry II. Because of the Becket's popularity among the people, he was allowed to return six years later. However, his continued support of the pope enraged the king, who eventually murdered Becket on the steps of the altar of his cathedral in Canterbury. The pope excommunicated Henry II, but the king later repented and rejoined the Church. Becket was canonized a saint in 1173 A.D.

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- The Crusades continued in the East.
  - The Church saw the crusades as falling under St. Augustine’s definition of a “just war.” Pope Urban II, who called for the first crusade, forbade anyone from going on a crusade who was in it for glory or temporal gain.
  - While the Church had its reasons for the crusades, many of which were very valid, the sins of particular individuals stained the whole endeavor.

The First Crusade was a military success, but the expulsion of the Greek patriarch in Antioch only deepened the schism between the Eastern Church and Rome, and the crusaders indiscriminately murdered hundreds of innocent people when they captured Jerusalem.

The Second Crusade in 1146 was a military failure.

The Third Crusade in 1189 intended to recapture Jerusalem from the Turks, but all that was accomplished was a treaty guaranteeing the safety of Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land.

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- Spiritual renewal in the Church continued throughout the 12th Century.
  - As the Church was being renewed spiritually, it was manifesting itself physically.
    - The square Romanesque churches of the past gave way to the soaring spires of Gothic cathedrals.
    - Popular images of Christ the King gave way to images of the Suffering Christ.

Bernard of Clairvaux founded a new order of monks called the “Cistercians.”

As a preacher, spiritual director, and theologian, Bernard was the leader of spiritual renewal in the 12th Century. The Cistercians quickly became the most influential religious group in the Church.

The renewal from these monks came in the form of radically living the Gospel and the call to poverty.

Eventually, more than 600 monasteries of Cistercians sprang up. Not only was this good for monastic life, but the spirituality that came forth helped renew the parish priests.

Spirituality and personal devotion among the laity also flourished.

Invoking Mary and the Saints in prayer became more popular.

There was a renewed devotion to the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, especially in the form of Eucharistic Adoration. Also, the term “transubstantiation” began being used more

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- The Twelve Century marked the beginning of Scholasticism.
  - The use of “reason” was employed in order to understand mysteries of faith and theology.
  - Theologians wanted to form systematic teachings based on the Bible, the early Fathers of the Church, and philosophy. Faith and reason, they believed, are not conflicting, but complementary.
- Through the great spiritual and intellectual people of this time, God laid the foundation and prepared the world for the greatest century of spiritual, cultural, and intellectual advancement in the history of Western civilization: the thirteenth century!

Some of the great intellectuals of the time included:

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), who is considered the Father of Scholasticism.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Peter Lombard, who wrote the Book of Sentences, which became the standard Theology text for the times.

Gratian, a monk whose organization of the teachings and laws of the Catholic Church gave birth to the new science of canon law in the twelfth century.

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## The Thirteenth Century – The Height of Christendom

### ■ Popes and Councils

- The greatest pope during this time was Innocent II (1198-1216), who succeeded in bringing every secular ruler into submission to the Church by persuasion or by the use of excommunication. His motive was to gain full control of the Church in order to continue to reform it.
- The First (1245) and Second (1274) Councils of Lyons were held in France because of political pressures on the pope in Rome. France was loyal to the pope, and saintly French kings, like King Louis IX (canonized St. Louis), provided support and protection for the Church.

In 1215, he called for the Fourth Lateran Council, which gathered more than four hundred bishops and eight hundred abbots and priors, as well as representatives of the secular rulers. It reformed decrees involving the spiritual growth of Christians and took measures to suppress heresies (the Inquisition).

Innocent III recognized the scandal that was caused by the excessive wealth of the Church and promoted the “Mendicant” orders—groups of men and women who lived radical poverty, like Saint Francis of Assisi (1209).

Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) is the perfect example of the achievements of the popes of the 13th century.

In his famous bull, *Unam Sanctam*, he continued to speak out against the interference of secular authorities in the spiritual mission of the Church.

He called a tremendously successful “Jubilee Year” (a holy year) in 1300, the first of its kind, that drew more than a million pilgrims to Rome.

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### ■ The Religious Orders

- The Franciscans: The life of St. Francis of Assisi is one of the greatest stories in Church history. Francis' little band of followers grew into the most influential religious group in the Middle Ages. Francis' witness to poverty was very needed in a Church that had become quite wealthy. Francis did not look toward the shortcomings of the Church or its clergy, but loved the Church and stayed loyal to Her. He worked to reform the Church, but never stopped loving the Bride of Christ. He was blessed with stigmata before his death and was canonized a saint just two years after he went to his eternal reward in 1226.
- The Dominicans: Saint Dominic was born in Spain in 1170 A.D. The religious order he founded was called the Order of Preachers, because of their desire and superb ability to convert people to Christianity through preaching. Like the Franciscans, the Dominicans were a great source of renewal within the Church.
- Other Orders: The newly founded Carmelites and the Augustinians joined in the spiritual renewal of the Church.

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## ■ Crusades and Inquisitions

- The darker side of the thirteenth century can be found in the crusades and inquisitions.
  - Pope Innocent III called for the Fourth Crusade in 1202, but without his permission it stopped in Constantinople to establish a new emperor—one more favorable to the West.
    - The soldiers proceeded to plunder and pillage the beautiful city in 1204.
    - This created new tensions and hatreds between the Church of the East and the Church of the West; tensions that have in many ways not yet been healed.
    - Never again has the Church attempted to capture territory, even the Holy Land, for the sake of Christ; nor has it condoned warfare among nations for this reason.

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- Certain groups, specifically the Cathars and Waldensians, were drawing people away from the Catholic Church, asking them to deny the humanity of Christ, reject the Sacraments, and deny the spiritual authority of the priests.
  - In response to these groups, the Church began the Inquisition—a formal procedure and tribunal for questioning those suspected of holding heretical (false) teachings.

While the use of torture and killing in order to lead people back to true faith or keep heretics from spreading falsehood seems barbaric in our modern mindset of religious freedom, these practices were a part of the culture in the 13th century.

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- The 13th century was the apex of culture and learning in the Middle Ages.
  - The first two great universities were founded at Paris (specializing in theology) and Bologna (specializing in law). Soon Oxford (1200) and Cambridge (1209), and Naples (1224) followed.
  - Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote His masterpiece, the Summa Theologiae (the "Summary of Theology"), which is recognized throughout the world as a pinnacle of genius and clarity, while Dante's Divine Comedy emerged as one of the greatest literary works of all time, cathedrals soared to the skies, artist produced great and lasting pieces, and culture as a whole reached an all-time high.

Medicine, law and theology were the fields of advanced study, with theology being called the "queen of the sciences."

The three great Theologians of the time came from the Mendicant orders:

Saint Bonaventure (1217-1274): continued a long tradition of a mystical approach to theology.

Albert the Great (1200-1280): approached theology by employing reason and was the first great supporter of employing the thought of Aristotle.

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274): a student of Albert the Great, he took the use of Aristotle to a new level by constructing a system of thought that combined the Bible, the Church Fathers, and Aristotelian reasoning into a great, unified system of understanding.

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*Saint  
Thomas Aquinas*

