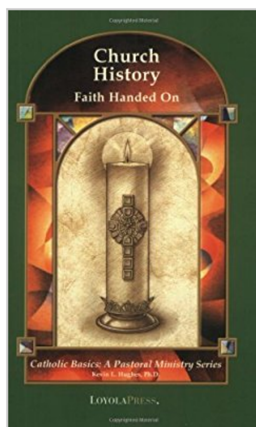

Church History: Faith Handed On (Catholic Basics: A Pastoral Ministry Series)

By Kevin L. Hughes PhD

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Each book in the series presents a Catholic understanding of its topic as found in Scripture and the teachings of the Church. Each of the authors has paid special attention to the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, so that further learning can be guided by these core resources.
Chapters conclude with study questions that may be used for small group review or for individual reflection. Additionally, suggestions for further reading offer dependable guides for extra study.
The initiative of the National Conference of Catechetical Leadership led to the development of an earlier version of this series. The indispensable contribution of the series editor, Dr. Thomas Walters, helped ensure that the concepts and ideas presented here are easily accessible to a wide audience

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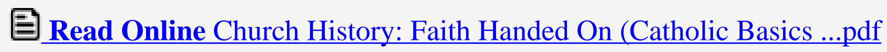
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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

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About the Series

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Introduction: Why Church History?

“Church history” is a clear conversation stopper. Whatever my answer when I’m asked what I do: “I’m a historian of Christianity” or “a Church historian” or “a historical theologian,” I get the same blank gaze, the vague affirmation of “Oh, how interesting . . .” and the awkward search for another topic of conversation. I

used to take this personally, but I don’t anymore. I’ve come to realize that, for many people, each of those identifiers contains a word that awakens memories of fear or boredom or both—history.
“History” for many evokes a picture of a frumpy-looking teacher or professor droning on in monotone about people and events long passed. For some, it recalls late nights cramming names and dates before a chapter test or final exam. It may conjure up images of the most obscure and least useful branch of knowledge in the humanities. So-called “great deeds of dead white men,” etc. Whatever the association, it is often not good.
So what could be so interesting or important to directors of religious education about Church history?
What if we were to reframe this a bit? Try to put away all your preconceptions of what “history” is and try a new way of thinking about it. When I think about who I am as a person, I cannot help but think about where I come from. I want to know about my family history, my ethnic heritage, how my parents met— all those little details help me come to understand how I got to be the way I am. And it is a thrill to learn! How many of us have been plied with questions from our children: “How did you and Mom meet?” or “Tell me about when I was born.” And how many of us have sat in awe and fascination when our parents or grandparents have told stories about “the old country” or the “good old days”? In a way, Church history is the same set of questions, the same stories, on a larger scale. It is the story of faith handed on, of how fallible human people, given by God to be members of the Body of Christ in the Church, have struggled to live out the Gospel in the very concrete circumstances of their lives for nearly two thousand years. If we stand within the Church, if we are the Church, then it is our story. And when we learn the story of our struggles, triumphs, and failures, we come to know more about who and what we are as a community of faith.
Whatever insights we receive we must in turn hand on to those who will follow us. The Good News received from the Apostles “is perpetuated in the Church by means of the Church herself. The entire Church, pastors and faithful, is responsible for its conservation and transmission” (General Dirctory for Catechesis, #43). We are responsible for the conservation and transmission of the truths of the Gospel. In large part, this can come from a prayerful study of Scripture and the teachings of the Church. But it can also come from the study of how others have conserved the Gospel and transmitted it to us. As we strive to embody the Body of Christ here, in North America, now, at the dawn of a new millennium, we can only benefit from the insight and wisdom—and even from the mistakes and missteps—of those who have striven to do the same in their own place and their own time. So what I will try to do in the few pages that follow is to give some broad sketches of how this has been done throughout the history of the Roman Catholic Church. I hope this work will serve more as an invitation than as a definitive word on the subjects treated here—an invitation to reflect and to explore the depths and riches of a tradition that flows so abundantly through two thousand years of Church history. For I am convinced that some knowledge of those depths and riches of the past will nourish your ministry in the Church of today.

Coming to Terms with the Topic: What Is Church History?

I like to think that the patron saint of Church historians is Luke, the Gospel writer. Luke begins his Gospel with the acknowledgment that “many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us,” (1:1) but he wants to do a little bit more. Rather than just putting together some story or another that he has heard, Luke promises to do his homework first: “I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account . . .” (1:3; emphasis added). Luke’s Gospel and Acts of the Apostles are modeled upon traditional Greek histories of great people. Luke’s effort represents the self-conscious work of a historian: gathering evidence, evaluating it for accuracy, and interpreting and recording it in an orderly fashion. But it is not only that, since Luke says he writes these things “for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:3–4). Church history is always a narrative or story written for the Church, for those who are called “friend of God” (theophilos in Greek) to build up their faith.
This self-conscious intention sets Church history apart from generic “history,” even if it is a “history of Christianity.” Many historians claim to take a “value-neutral” stance toward the past, but the past matters

deeply to the Church, and so it matters to the Church historian. This distinction does not mean, however, that Church history is necessarily propagandist, although that temptation certainly must be faced by anyone who tells the story of the Church. On the contrary, someone who tells that story for the Church needs to be aware both of her own "blind spots" or potential biases and of her responsibilities to the community in which she stands, to "get it right," to tell the truth of the Christian past in love and to the best of her ability. If from time to time this includes discussion of dark moments in which members of the Church failed to live up to the demands of Christian charity, then so be it. We can learn from past mistakes as well as past successes.

So what sort of story does the Church historian tell? I began by saying that it is the story of "faith handed on." In other words, Church history tells the story of the tradition of the Church (traditio is Latin for "handing over"). In his book Tradition and Traditions, the great Dominican theologian Yves Congar described tradition in three senses: First, tradition is the "transmission of the whole Gospel" in the Scriptures and the preached word, in the creeds and confessions of faith, in the sacraments and liturgical life, and in the moral life of the Church. This is the sense of tradition that we receive from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). It is in this sense that the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) says, "The Gospel is conserved whole and entire in the Church: the disciples of Jesus Christ contemplate it and meditate upon it unceasingly; they live it out in their everyday lives; they proclaim it in their missionary activity" (#43). It is the message of redemption as it is proclaimed, believed, and lived.

Second, tradition is the self-conscious interpretation of the Gospel—above all, interpretation of the Scriptures—in the formation and teaching of the faithful. From the Apostles on, the Church receives the divine revelation of the Gospel not only as a lived reality, but also as the "deposit of faith," as a body of knowledge concerning the reality of God, humanity, and all creation to be received and interpreted by the intellect. In the Roman Catholic Church, faith in the Holy Spirit's presence entails faith in the Church's teaching office, the magisterium, to guide and protect this interpretation. Tradition in this sense is what Aidan Nichols, O.P., calls "the educative milieu [or context] for faith." It is the context in which we learn the truths of our faith.

Finally, says Congar, the term "tradition" can refer to particular moments, or what he calls "monuments of faith." These are elements within the history of the Church that seem to bear witness to and declare the Gospel itself in a distinctive and enduring way. Congar counts among these "monuments" the fathers and doctors of the Church, the papal encyclicals and pastoral letters of the Church, the witness of theologians, and even Christian art. Congar also includes as his last category of "monuments" what he calls "ordinary expressions of the Christian life." In this last category are included the lives of the saints, who have been called to "live [the Gospel] in a special manner."

A so-called "thick description" of Church history, then, would include all of these things, from Scripture and the dogmas of the faith, to the lives of the saints, to the way you and I and those who have gone before us bring the Gospel to life in our daily decisions. It would take a lifetime of scholarship to even begin to understand all these dimensions of our past as a Church. But we can benefit from even a taste of that rich past, and we can hand on what we have learned to others. That is the only goal and purpose of this little book: to offer a taste, and to invite us all to share it.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What stories about your family, your community, or your roots have been important to you in your life? What makes these stories influential?
2. Are there particular "monuments" in the tradition—whether they are particular books or saints—that have influenced your life of faith? How have they influenced you?
3. Is there any relationship between a church's history and its ministry?

CHAPTER 1

Faith in Formation

If the Christian Church can be traced back to the community that gathered around Jesus of Nazareth, then the Church faced its first crisis when their leader was arrested and executed. Faith in the Resurrection enabled the Apostles to overcome this challenge—indeed to see that death and the Resurrection that followed as the key to understanding who Jesus really was. In fact, as I mentioned in the Introduction, the Gospel of Luke and Acts, taken together, can be seen as a story showing that very sense of continuity through the crisis of the Crucifixion. Acts picks up the story where Luke leaves off, to show the Apostles, empowered by the Spirit, about the business of spreading the Gospel. Acts of the Apostles (along with the letters of Paul) bears witness to the earliest Church's attempt to answer the question, What does it take to be a disciple of Jesus? In a sense, all of Church history can be seen as an attempt to answer this question in particular times and places. But at this particular time, in the first century A.D., throughout the Roman Empire, the first and fundamental answers to the question were offered by that first apostolic generation of believers. In these earliest years, these answers came to Christians only through their struggles with both outsiders and insiders to stay faithful to the Gospel.

Paul's Dilemma: Christians and Jews in the First Century

Everyone knows the story of Saul, the Pharisee, the persecutor of the Christians, who was knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus and encountered the risen Christ. Saul, the zealous persecutor, became Paul, the zealous preacher. The Pharisee became an Apostle. His conversion gave him insight into the radical newness of the Gospel as a message open to Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul was convinced that Gentiles did not need to become Jews to accept the Gospel of Christ, but some of his fellow Apostles disagreed. His Letter to the Galatians bears witness to the conflict over this very thorny issue, and in it, Paul gives his famous proclamation: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). To some of the more conservative Apostles, especially James in Jerusalem, this radical statement seemed to cut away all that was good and right in the Jewish tradition. Paul seemed to want to abandon Judaism altogether.

But, even for Paul, it was not so easy to cut the ties to the Jewish faith. His Letter to the Romans represents his struggle to make sense of the relationship between the radical newness of the Gospel of Christ and the old covenant that God had made with Israel. If the Christ is the fulfillment of the old covenant, why did most Jews not convert? Could God have abandoned Israel in favor of the Gentiles? Paul's answer is clear: "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!" (Romans 11:1). But despite the clarity of his answer, the exact relationship between Jew and Gentile, between old covenant and new, remained unclear. Paul's dilemma remained unresolved even after his death (and, some would argue, it remains unresolved today).

What I have called "Paul's dilemma" is one of the first—and most bitter—struggles that the Christian Church faced in the earliest years of its life. In the year 62 A.D., James, the "brother of the Lord," was executed in Jerusalem by the Jewish high priest, with the support of a public mob. James had been the greatest advocate of retaining Jewish traditions among the Christians, and yet the high priest apparently considered him an enemy. With his death, those in favor of retaining ties to their Jewish past lost their center of influence, and they disappear from the historical record after about the year 66. Almost by default, it seems, the Gentile communities emerged as the successors to the Apostles. Any hope of reconciliation between Judaism and the new Christian communities was rapidly slipping away. The divisions between Christian and Jew became more and more pronounced, so that by the end of the first century, the final break was evident.

In the year 70, Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans to quell a Jewish rebellion. With their temple and capital destroyed, Jewish leaders quickly reorganized around the school at Jamnia, another city in Palestine, which then became the center of Jewish teaching. The assembled leaders at Jamnia declared that the canon of the Scriptures was closed and Jews should not look for any further revelation (including, it seems to be implied, a revelation from Jesus of Nazareth). In addition, by about the year 90, a sentence was added to the traditional Eighteen Benedictions that cursed "Nazarenes and heretics." The feeling was mutual: From the

Christian side of the conflict, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch and martyr (d. 107–108) declared that "to profess Jesus Christ while following Jewish customs" was "an absurdity." The customs of Judaism were to Ignatius the "old, good-for-nothing leaven, now grown stale and sour" (Ignatius, Letter to the Magnesians, #10). The knot that bound Christians and Jews had been severed.

Insiders and Outsiders: Was the Early Church "Catholic"?

With all ties to the Jewish community cut, the earliest Christian communities were a bit at a loss to figure out what was a legitimate expression of Christian faith and what was out of bounds. The many communities spread throughout the Mediterranean world had been established by various missionary efforts, of which Paul's was only one. This meant that, at this earliest stage, there was no centralized authority or empire-wide structure, so the expressions of the Christian faith were potentially as many as there were individual churches. Some scholars have concluded that it is therefore best to speak of earliest "Christianities" rather than suggesting prematurely some unified notion of the Christian faith. It is certainly true that the Catholic Church as we know it today, with its well-structured universal hierarchy and authority centralized in Rome, did not take shape in the first few centuries. In the middle of the second century, we can begin to see evidence of bishops and priests (or presbyters, as some scholars prefer), and communication between these bishops established some common ground. But this earliest structure is a far cry from the hierarchical order that we now see in the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Rather, the story of early Christianity is the story of an emerging catholicity (with a small c), an emerging broad consensus on matters of faith and order, out of a wide variety of churches.

This is not to say that the Catholic and Orthodox churches' claims to be the "churches of the Apostles" are false, nor is it to claim that what emerged as the "orthodox faith" was an artificial invention. Rather, what I am suggesting is that the faith of the Apostles, the faith of Paul that he handed on as he had first received it, became more and more clarified as Christians confronted the challenges—both internal and external—that arose in those early years. Thus, when I speak in this chapter of an emerging "catholic Church" with a small c, I am not questioning or undermining the claims of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church to have descended from the Apostles; rather, I am suggesting that we can see the lines of apostolic succession only in retrospect. This is akin to saying that each of us can rarely know whether what we are now doing is God's will or not, but we can often see the hand of Providence if we look back. So, too, the early Christians simply struggled to be faithful to Christ and, looking back, we can see the unbroken thread of faith woven through all their struggles.

MARCION: THE STRUGGLE OVER THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

In about 140 A.D., a young man raised on the coast of the Black Sea arrived in Rome. He was the son of a bishop and a successful businessman in his own right. He was well-received by the church in Rome, due in part, perhaps, to the substantial donation he offered. But within a few years, the man, named Marcion, began to proclaim a message that made the Roman church uneasy, to say the least. According to Marcion, Jesus had rejected the God of the Jews and proclaimed faith in a different God altogether that no one had known before. To prove his point, Marcion composed a work called the Antitheses that listed apparent contradictions between the Old Testament and Christian beliefs. He made another list, or canon, of the Christian writings that, in his opinion, taught this truth. On this list were only the letters of Paul and an edited version of the Gospel of Luke from which all the references to "Israel" had been omitted. Marcion represented the radical extreme of the reaction we have already seen in Ignatius of Antioch: the Jewish covenant is over, and it has been replaced by the Gospel. But this view was considered too extreme for the Roman community, and they excommunicated Marcion and returned his donation in 144.

Undeterred, Marcion traveled the Mediterranean until his death (ca. 160), setting up churches that survived for as much as two hundred years. But Marcion's message was determined to be out of bounds by the great majority of Christians: Christ had come to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it, and so faith in Christ meant faith in the God proclaimed in the Old Testament, the Creator, the God of Israel. In response to Marcion, Christians began to devise their own list of authoritative books, their own canon of Scripture, which included

the books of the Jewish Scriptures as well as the newer Christian writings. Though the ties between Christians and Jews were severed, the earliest Christians affirmed that both parties believed in the one true God.
This consensus emerged only under the pressure that Marcion's teaching placed on the communities throughout the Mediterranean world. It is one of the cruel facts of history that firm conviction in the truth of a teaching emerges only from conflict. Under pressure from Marcion and others who seemed to go too far, a tentative unity began to emerge from the broad diversity of the first century and a half of Christianity. This tentative unity is what some scholars have called the Great Church or what we might begin to call the (small c) catholic Church.

MONTANISM: THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

The emerging catholic consensus faced another challenge from the followers of a trio of charismatic figures named Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla. The movement called itself the New Prophecy, but its opponents named it Montanism, after the male leader. Montanism began in Asia Minor in the mid-second century, when "the Three"—Montanus, Priscilla, and Maximilla— began preaching with enthusiasm about the Spirit's ongoing presence in the Church. The movement soon spread to North Africa and Rome. The Three proclaimed their message ecstatically (as if possessed by the Holy Spirit) and claimed to speak in the person of the Paraclete promised in John's Gospel. They exhorted their followers to observe rigorous practices of fasting and asceticism. They believed that the apocalyptic end was imminent and that the Heavenly Jerusalem would descend upon the city of Pepuza in Asia Minor. Despite some claims to the contrary, Montanists did not seem to differ with the emerging catholic Church's consensus on matters of doctrine and theology. Nonetheless, they were excommunicated in Rome in 177, probably for their undisciplined enthusiasm and perceived lack of respect for Church order and authority. In spite of this, in the early third century, Montanism gained its most famous member in Tertullian, an early apologist and theologian in North Africa, who, it seems, was persuaded by their passionate rigor.
Montanism presented the catholic Church with an interesting test case. Though the Montanists' doctrine was apparently sound, their loose, charismatic notion of authority was troubling. Could one rely upon the authority of one "caught up in the Spirit" to lead one faithfully in Christian life? Did the Spirit continue to speak to believers with special revelations, or was revelation now mediated through the ministry of word and sacrament by the successors to the Apostles, the bishops? If the conflict with Marcion had called the catholic Church to reaffirm its connection with the revelation of the Old Testament, the conflict with the Montanists "reinforced its conviction that revelation had come to an end with the apostolic age," as Henry Chadwick has said.

GNOSTICISM: THE QUESTION OF TRUE DOCTRINE

A final major factor in the emergence of the catholic consensus was the question of assimilation. No one could deny that Christians were immersed in the Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire—the cultural context of the Greek paganism of the time. The task, then, was to articulate their faith in Christ in that language and context. Indeed, Hellenistic philosophy and culture offered tremendous resources for Christians to express and explore their faith in their particular lives of faith. But to what extent could Hellenistic culture be integrated with Christian faith? What in Hellenistic philosophy and religion was compatible with discipleship in Christ, and what should be rejected? Like so many other questions we have raised in this chapter, these are perennial questions for Christians in every culture. But as the catholic Church was in its infancy, these questions were brought especially to the fore by the phenomenon of Christian Gnosticism.
The terms gnosticism or gnostic come from the Greek word gnosis, which means "knowledge." Gnosticism thus refers to a set of beliefs in a saving knowledge.
This knowledge was not academic or rational knowledge. Rather, it referred to knowledge of divine secrets about the nature and destiny of human beings. It offered answers to the questions, Where do we come from?

and Where are we ultimately going? Gnostics believed that this knowledge alone was enough to set them free from the illusions and darkness of the present world.

Gnosticism was never necessarily a coherent sect or church; rather, the term refers to similarities found across a number of different thinkers and texts in the second century, similar in many ways to the “New Age” phenomenon of the late twentieth century. Like New Age mythologies, Gnosticism seems to synthesize elements of many religious and philosophical traditions in the Hellenistic world: sectarian Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Platonic strands show up here and there. Scholars have disputed whether Gnostic mythologies pre-date Christianity or not, and it is difficult to say who is right. But the classic teachers of Gnosticism that we know of—Valentinus, Basilides, Ptolemy—believed that they had arrived at a true interpretation and a deeper understanding of the mission of Jesus through the lens of this “saving knowledge” of the cosmos and human destiny.

Gnostic myths share a general worldview, although the details of the picture may differ from teacher to teacher. For the Gnostic, the world as we know it is a dark place of evil, dominated by an evil god. This dark domain came to be when part of the brilliant fullness of the heavens (the pleroma, Greek for “fullness”) fell from grace and was cast out. Human beings, or, more accurately, some “elect” human beings, have a soul that is a “spark of light” captured from the heavenly pleroma and trapped in the body. This spark is the true self of the elect, mired and imprisoned though it be in the physical body. Escape from this enslavement in the world of darkness can occur only if a heavenly revealer should come from the pleroma to grant the secret knowledge to a select few. With this knowledge, the divine spark can be released and return to the heavenly fullness that is its rightful home.

One can see that these myths share the rough outlines of traditional Jewish and Christian models of the angelic Fall and the Redemption offered by a divine figure, and one can readily imagine how easily the message of Jesus could be fit into this schema. Like Marcion, many Gnostics rejected the God of the Old Testament as the fallen creator of the world of darkness. Jesus then offers liberation from this fallen god with a path to return to “the Father” in the pleroma. (See Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], #285 for some further explanation of Gnosticism.) But unlike Marcion, Gnostics believed that it was absurd to claim that Jesus, the heavenly revealer, actually died on the cross. Instead, Jesus only appeared to take on the form of a human being to deliver his message. (This denial that the Son took on flesh is called docetism, from the Greek dokein, “to appear.” See CCC, #465.) Some Gnostic writings even tell of Jesus laughing from a distance as the dark powers look upon the cross at the dead body that he had used as a vessel and think they have killed him. Salvation comes not from the Incarnation, the life, the death, and the Resurrection of Jesus, but from the secret teachings he imparted to his followers.

Gnostic Christians possessed their own scriptures (the Gospel of Thomas is perhaps the most famous) and offered spiritual interpretations of the letters of Paul to demonstrate the truth of their claims. Indeed, in the twentieth century, some prominent scholars have suggested that Gnostic Christians have been unfairly judged and perhaps offered a more palatable alternative to what became the orthodox faith. However, in the judgment of non-Gnostic Christians, Gnostic teaching stepped beyond the limits of right faith in Jesus. Non-Gnostic Christians responded to Gnostic claims by emphasizing precisely those points that Gnostics called into question: Jesus’ “Father” was none other than the Creator of the world. As they did against Marcion, Christians insisted upon the validity of the Old Testament as prophetic of the coming of Christ. They insisted upon the true Incarnation of Jesus and asserted that his suffering, death, and Resurrection in the flesh, far from being an illusion, was essential to Christian faith. For non-Gnostic Christians, it was clear that we are saved by the “Blood of the Lamb,” not by some cosmic secret.

But to support these claims, non-Gnostic Christians had to arrive at criteria for evaluation; proof-texting from Paul or other Christian writings was a method that could be used by the Gnostics as well as the non-Gnostics. So how could one evaluate the authority and validity of what a Gnostic claimed was Christian? Irenaeus of Lyons, whom some have called the “first systematic theologian,” arrived at a solution: the apostolic faith. This apostolic faith was composed of two interrelated principles: Holy Scripture and the “rule of faith.” According to Irenaeus, the Apostles had deposited the contents of Scripture and the rule of faith in

the Church. Scripture for him included the Greek translation of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint) and a list of writings that he (for the first time) called the New Testament or new covenant. These writings were those that Irenaeus and other catholic thinkers could say with confidence were apostolic, meaning that they had some sort of close connection to the Apostles. For example, the Gospels of Matthew and John were believed to have been authored directly by the Apostles for which they are named, while Luke and Mark were considered to have been written under the direct authority of Paul and Peter, respectively. Irenaeus's New Testament looked much like our own, including the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), a collection of Paul's letters, Acts, Revelation, First Peter, and First and Second John. Apparently, the only difference between Irenaeus's canon and the Roman Catholic canon was his omission of James, Jude, Second Peter, and Hebrews. (CCC, #120 gives the Roman Catholic canon.)

This canon of Scriptures, both Old and New Testament, always has to be understood along with the other component of the apostolic faith, the "rule of faith." For Irenaeus, the rule of faith was a brief summary of the Christian belief in God's action in the world from creation to redemption in Christ and sanctification in the Spirit. Irenaeus never gave a set formula for the rule, but it functioned almost like a creed. The Church, he said, believes "in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all the things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit" (Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses 1.10.1). This basic statement of faith was drawn from Scripture, but it was also a necessary key to interpreting Scripture. In a famous image, Irenaeus compares Scripture to a mosaic, where each passage or book is one piece of the many that make the larger picture. The rule of faith is the plan or the blueprint that enables one to put the passages in the right order.

The dialectic, or back-and-forth, relationship between these two elements of the apostolic faith provided the emergent catholic Church with a sort of "checks and balances" set of criteria by which to evaluate an individual Christian's teaching and practices. For Irenaeus, these criteria were entrusted by the Apostles to their successors, the bishops, or "overseers." With the guidance of this double deposit, the bishops were free to do more than react negatively to the teaching of people like Marcion or the Gnostics. They could lead the faithful into the process of providing positive norms for the life of Christian discipleship.

Rome Against Christians: The Story of Perpetua

Along with these internal struggles for definition of canon, authority, and doctrine, the early Christians also had to establish the Church's proper relationship to the external powers that be of those early centuries, the Roman Empire. Jesus of Nazareth had announced the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God, and he had been executed by Roman imperial authorities for treason. And yet, already within the New Testament writings we find a certain ambivalence toward Rome. The Gospels all seem to take pains to exonerate Romans like Pilate in the death of Jesus, laying all the blame upon the Jewish authorities. Paul apparently was imprisoned and executed by Roman authorities, and yet he tells the Romans to "be subordinate to the higher authorities." He continues to say that "whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed," and he thus commands them to pay their taxes and tolls, and pay "honor to whom honor is due" (Romans 13:2, 7).

To be sure, the missionary efforts of the early Christians benefited from the trade networks and roads that Rome had built and the relative tranquility of the Pax Romana, or "Peace of Rome." The Book of Acts would even go so far as to suggest that the empire was a tool of God's providence to benefit the spreading of the Gospel. And yet, the Book of Revelation identifies Rome with the "Whore of Babylon," the pawn of Satan's power in the world. So the question was set from early on: Should Christians, who are citizens of the kingdom of God as it begins to grow on earth, stand opposed to the empire or work within it? Similarly, from the outside, Roman citizens and authorities were not quite sure what to make of these so-called Christians. Were they a subversive "secret society," or were they yet another of the many new and exotic, but more or less harmless, religious movements that seemed to crop up throughout the empire?

One of the secrets of the success of the Roman Empire was the way in which it was willing to appropriate, or

at least tolerate, the culture and religion of those people the Romans conquered or ruled. The official pagan religion of Rome gave obeisance to the traditional pantheon of Olympian gods, with Jupiter at the head. Beginning with Augustus on, the Roman emperor was included in the pagan cult, either as the representative of the gods or as himself divine. But at no time did the Roman cult exclude indigenous religions. Rather, it either tolerated these traditions or incorporated them.

More often than not, the Romans would simply incorporate the gods of conquered peoples into their own pantheon, either claiming that they in fact worshiped the same god under a different name (any god of the sun must be Apollo, for example), or naming the local gods as provincial delegates or bureaucrats for the central government of the Roman pantheon. Strict monotheists like the Jews, however, were not so easy to assimilate, and yet Rome seemed more often than not to respect and tolerate Judaism, until some Jewish leaders encouraged sedition in the revolt of 66–70 A.D. For much of the first three centuries A.D., this sort of benign neglect seems to have extended to Christians too. However, even those inclined to leave Christians alone considered them to be antisocial and superstitious.

Christians were accused of atheism, cannibalism, and libertinism. The charge of atheism arose not simply from the theological differences between the Roman and Christian faiths, but from the practical consequences of those differences. Roman religion was intertwined with Roman politics, as the cult of the emperor makes clear. In addition, to the Romans, empirical evidence seemed to indicate that the Roman cult had given unprecedented prosperity, stability, and peace to the world. The honor paid to the emperor and the gods was simply part of Romanitas, “Romanity” or “Roman-ness,” the set of habits and practices that made a good, loyal, civilized citizen of the empire. (This is similar to the way respect for “the flag, Mom, and apple pie” used to symbolize the qualities of a good American.) Christians, by rejecting the cult of the emperor in the name of their faith in another god, seemed disloyal to the entire world order that supported them. (The other charges of cannibalism and libertinism probably arose from misunderstandings associated with the Christian practices of Eucharist [eating the Body of Christ] at the agape feast [áh-gá-pay, love feast].) Christianity seemed to many Romans distasteful and unpatriotic. The seeds of conflict were sown, and occasionally they would sprout up.

Traditional, legendary accounts of the tales of the Christian martyrs usually ascribe ten “great persecutions” to the Roman Empire. But modern historical scholarship has found little evidence for these. Some historians, in fact, have suggested that, despite Christianity’s valorization of its martyrs, Roman authorities usually acted with tact and discretion in their dealings with Christian dissidents. By this account, Roman actions would be better characterized as “prosecution” of a select few zealots who threatened the peace of the empire. The ancient sources bring no more clarity to the situation. If one reads Christian treatments of martyrdom in the first three centuries, Christian martyrs in the hands of the Romans were engaged in an apocalyptic struggle between the saints and the devil. These “athletes of Christ” wrestled in the arena with Satan himself. Theirs was the choice between confession and denial, between faith and apostasy, between God and “the Adversary.” In the Christian martyr’s ideal, Rome was simply an instrument of Satan’s power. But many Romans viewed the Christian problem not as a choice between good and evil, but rather between peace and discord. The “atheist” adherents of the Christian sect disrupted the Pax Romana, the “Peace of Rome,” in their stubbornness. The Roman response to these troublesome dissidents usually took one of three forms. As I have suggested, it seems that for most of the first two hundred years of Christianity, Roman authorities maintained a policy of limited prosecution by due process. If there was persecution, it was more often than not carried out on a local level, either by imperial successors purging the court of rivals or by local mob activity in isolated provinces, sometimes, but not always, with the support of the local governor. This mob violence grew out of what Robin Lane Fox has called “frustrated Romanity,” and is somewhat like the sporadic flare-ups of Christian persecution of Jews throughout the Middle Ages and into the twentieth century. Finally, these first two strategies of response converged in a third, a reactionary imperial reform that systematically persecuted Christians in the late third and early fourth centuries.

Rather than give the details of the many and various persecutions, perhaps it would be better to look at one of the most striking accounts of martyrdom we possess, the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity. This account

comes from one of the first official actions taken by the Roman government against Christianity around the turn of the third century.
Vibia Perpetua was a “newly married woman of good family and upbringing” (Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, #2) in Roman North Africa, in her early twenties and with an infant son. She was a catechumen, and she was arrested with several other catechumens in about 200 A.D. as part of a Roman effort to discourage conversion to Christianity. Among her fellow prisoners was her servant Felicitas. She kept a diary while she was in prison, and it is from this diary that we can see a firsthand account of the nobility and tragic beauty of Christian martyrdom.
Perpetua’s tale begins as she is arrested in her home. Her father, who was apparently not a Christian, stands before her and pleads with her to renounce Christianity. She is moved by his plea, but she cannot do what he asks:

“Father,” said I, “do you see this vase here, for example, or water-pot, or whatever?” “Yes I do,” said he. And I told him, “Could it be called by any other name than what it is?” And he said, “No.” “Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.”
(Martyrdom, #3)
For Perpetua, even before she is baptized, Christianity is essential to who and what she is, and she is willing to face the consequences of that fact.
While in prison, Perpetua receives visions that bring her comfort, foretell her death, and give her confidence that even her death will be a victory for Christ. When after several days her father returns to her, he renews his plea:

“Daughter,” he said, “have pity on my grey head— have pity on me your father . . . Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us!” This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself down before me . . . I tried to comfort him, saying, “It will all happen in the prisoner’s dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power.”
(Martyrdom, #5)

When she finally comes before the Roman governor, even he seems to take pity on her situation. Before passing judgment, he, too, asks her to reconsider:

Hilarianus the governor . . . said to me, “Have pity on your father’s grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors.” “I will not,” I retorted. “Are you a Christian?” said Hilarianus. And I said, “Yes, I am.”
(Martyrdom, #6)

What is so striking here is the intensity and honesty of the emotions portrayed. The father is heartbroken and dumbfounded at her resolve. Perpetua is moved to sadness and pity, but is undeterred. The governor seems reasonable, and even reluctant. And yet the punishment—she was condemned to be mauled to death by wild beasts in the public arena—is brutal, and the delight with which the crowd observes the victims’ torture and death is barbaric.
What emerges from this text is both the nobility of the martyrs and the profound confusion that their conviction evokes. One has the sense that both the father and the governor simply do not understand how Perpetua could give up her life over tossing a few grains of incense on the altar of the emperors. The governor enforces his policy, but it seems to be without the gleeful delight of evil that is often portrayed in the movies. Nevertheless, the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity is still a public spectacle, and the crowd enjoys their death. So there is a very real face of evil in this account, but it is framed within the elements of “frustrated Romanity” we mentioned before.

This tide of official hostility toward Christianity reached its height in the conservative reforms of the emperors Diocletian and Galerius in 302–310. Feeling threatened on the borders, Diocletian initiated a broad cultural reform to re-invigorate the sense of a common Romanity. But the Diocletian persecution served to demonstrate that the growing Christian movement could not easily be extricated from the structure and routine of Roman life, and Galerius reversed his policy in 311 and issued an edict of religious toleration. The long history of antagonism was drawing to an end.
As we have seen, the opposition between Rome and Christianity was rarely clear-cut, nor was Roman policy often aggressive in the pursuit of Christians. Nevertheless, this painful era of suspicion, isolation, and distrust produced a powerful and persuasive "ethic" of martyrdom. While the survival and continuing growth of Christianity suggest that the great majority of Christians escaped persecution one way or another, the few "athletes of Christ" established a heroic Christian ideal that echoes still in the spirituality of Christians today (see CCC, #2473). Ignatius of Antioch's cry that "At last I am made a disciple" as martyrdom approached offered a powerful image of the imitation of Christ, even in death. For Origen of Alexandria, martyrdom was a special kind of death, "Christian, religious, holy." It was an opportunity to share in the work of redemption, and it was undertaken with the conviction that death was already overcome in Christ. Thus, though the persecutions of the Roman Empire were perhaps less aggressive and bloody than previously believed, they nevertheless produced a theology of martyrdom, an ethic of resistance that subordinated the authority of the state to the power of the Reign of God (see CCC, #2473).

Drawing the Threads Together: The Birth of the Catholic Church

The first three centuries of Christianity are marked by conflict, both internal and external. This era of the Church was indeed a "baptism of fire." In response to pressures and challenges from those who claimed to be Christians—such as Marcion, Montanus, and the Gnostics—and those who vehemently rejected the Christian faith, such as Jews and Romans, the many and diverse communities of Christians began to draw together into a catholic consensus. By the early 300s, there was an identifiable federation of churches throughout the empire who were united in the essentials of faith, worship, and authority. The churches continued to grow and expand, sinking roots deep into the life and politics of the empire and becoming more and more influential as a political force. While Christians were probably not yet anywhere near the numerical majority in the empire, they could be found in its every corner. They had proven their resilience to Galerius. The opportunity was ripe for a clever politician to make good use of this new broad constituency. That clever politician was Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome.

FOR REFLECTION

1. What connections do you see between the Jewish faith and Catholic Christianity?
2. How would you compare the preaching of the Gospel in the era of "the ethic of martyrdom" and in our present-day Catholic parishes?

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