

The background of the cover features a large, semi-circular clock face on the left side, with numbers 1, 2, and 3 visible. The clock is set against a light, hazy background that includes a faint, ghostly image of a church interior with people, suggesting a historical or religious context. The overall color palette is light and monochromatic.

# THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

A Brief Popular History

Cynthia Stewart, PhD

Saint Mary's Press®

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# 1

## History and the Church

### Chapter Overview

#### In this chapter, we will explore:

- ▶ How learning about the past gives tools for understanding the present
- ▶ What we mean when we talk about “history” and the sources we use in writing it
- ▶ Some questions to ask when reading history in general and Church history in particular



## History: The Art of Remembering Who We Are

This book is about trying to understand the Roman Catholic Church through its history. That means it has two goals: to better understand the Church's past and to look at how that past has formed the Church as it exists today. Politics, oppression, freedom, debate, wars, prejudice—the history of the Church is also the history of the world. History never just stays in the background, nor is it simply about memorizing names, dates, and events. It is about learning who we are, how we got here, and where we are going. It is about us, the Church, and our world.

## Church History: The Art of Learning Who the Church Is

Why is it important to study the history of the Catholic Church? For a Catholic, the answer may seem self-evident. However, if you belong to another faith tradition or to none at all, you may have a harder time seeing the relevance to your own life.

First, Church history is more than just the history of the Church. It goes beyond the record of popes and bishops, councils and cardinals into the story of political intrigue; the rise and fall of empires; and the development of law, science, art, architecture, and literature. It is about saints and sinners, kings and peasants, monks, nuns, poets, and scholars. It is about people who felt they were answering God's call and people who felt they were breaking God's law. It is about people going about the messy business of living and creating a living institution at the same time. Ultimately, Catholic Church history is an essential part of the history of the Western world. Over the last two thousand years, nations and empires have risen and fallen and new ideas have come and gone, but the Church has continued to exist. Its history has been woven into the fabric of the Western world for so long that you cannot separate the two.

In addition, the Catholic Church shares much of its history with that of other Christian churches. Almost all non-Catholic Christian groups trace their history either through a split that occurred between the Eastern and Western Churches in the thirteenth century or through the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Thus, learning Catholic Church history is also a means of learning the wider history of Christianity.

## Ekklesia

The English word *church* comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means an assembly of those who are called forth or summoned. To the ancient Greeks, it meant a gathering of people who held the rights of citizenship. When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek during the first through third centuries BCE, they used *ekklesia* to talk about the gathering of the people of Israel. If we read the Greek version of Exodus 19:6, we find that when the people meet on Mount Sinai to receive the Law, they are called an *ekklesia*, “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” With

these images in mind, it made sense to early Christians that those who gathered in response to the call of Jesus were an *ekklesia*; in this way, they claimed a heritage that went back to that assembly on Mount Sinai.

So what the term *church* really means is people. However much we may talk about the Catholic Church or any other church as an institution, in reality it cannot be separated from the people who are a part of it. The Church’s greatest theologian, Thomas Aquinas, made exactly this point when he wrote that “the church is nothing other than the congregation of the faithful.”<sup>1</sup>

All this means that the Catholic Church has played a significant role in creating the world in which we live. Understanding Church history helps us understand our world, which ultimately helps us understand ourselves.

The Church believes its history is of central importance to all of humanity. In the Church’s vision, all of human history has value because it is part of the history of salvation, and the Church’s history in particular is meaningful because it is a profound part of God’s revelation to humanity. The Church claims that the whole arc of its history is simply a way of bringing people into closer unity with God. The following chapters are not an attempt to verify or deny those claims but rather an attempt to look at the claims as they have been lived and see how they have affected and sometimes shaped our world.

## Unraveling the Mystery of History

Imagine this scene: You have a fight with a friend. Later, when the two of you have cooled off, you sit down to talk. As you remember it, the fight started because your friend said it was dumb to study art because art could not feed or clothe people; your friend said that art does not help people as directly as science, and you started yelling about art feeding people’s souls. So how did the fight really start? The answer may well depend on who is telling the

story. History may be about remembering, but people often remember things differently.

If I decided to write about this fight, I would need to know what happened, but after I talked to both you and your friend, I would have two different accounts. Problem? Not really. As a historian, I have the tricky job of sifting through different people's memories of the same event. When you sort through all the sources that talk about a particular incident, they will all usually agree on some facts (like when and where the fight took place and who was involved), but for the "whys" and "hows," mostly what you get is interpretation; even the best interpretations will highlight some things and leave others out. Likewise with writing about events and people—each writer reconstructs a story in a different way. The writer does not create what happened but she does create "history," a particular observation and interpretation of what happened.

There is more. The reader is just as vital to the process of interpreting history as the writer because the reader is constantly sifting through a wealth of information in order to figure out what is most important. When I use a highlighter to help me remember things in a book, I do not highlight everything, just the things I most want to remember. Does that mean the other things are not important? The writer thought they mattered, or he would not have included them. So the writer has one idea about what is important, and the reader has another. The writer may have been creating history by putting things together in a certain way, but the reader is also creating history by pulling things out in a certain way.

## Finding the Starting Place

Let's think for a minute about the sources we use to learn history. We have many sources for learning about our nation and our world: books, professors, movies, TV, websites—the list goes on. We also can learn about the history and practices of a religion from books like this one, as well as from people who hold those beliefs.

If I want to know something about Islam, for instance, I could read a book describing that religion's beliefs and practices, talk to a Muslim friend, or read web pages devoted to the topic. My job as a historian would be to figure out which of these sources was most valid and useful. I would be wary of a web

page attempting to refute Islam, because as a hostile source, the web page would likely present things in a negative light. Talking with a Muslim might be a good source for understanding how Muslims live their lives, but if I want to know about the origins and development of the religion, the book on Islam might be a better source than my friend. Depending on what it is I want to know, I will decide that some sources are more valuable than others.

## It Is All about Asking Questions

Knowing that not all sources are created equal means we have to determine which ones will be most helpful in a given situation. It also means that when we read what is written about historical events and people, we need to ask ourselves some questions:

- What sources did the author use?
- What events and people are included and what is left out?
- Does the author's interpretation fit the facts as you understand them?
- Do you agree with the author's choices and interpretation? Why or why not?

Questions like these help us evaluate a work of history to see if we think it is valid and useful; otherwise we are simply accepting the author's interpretation as fact.

When we look at the Roman Catholic Church, we ought to keep in mind some questions that can help us get a fuller picture of what exactly was going on in the Church at any given moment in its history. I find the following pairs of themes helpful in understanding where the Church was at, what it looked like, what it thought was important, and what it was able to do at various points over the last two thousand years. Think of these themes as windows for looking at the Church. Different windows give different views, but when we are talking about something as rich and varied as the history of the Catholic Church, the more windows we can look through, the better our understanding of that "building" will be.

**Knowledge and wisdom.** Knowledge is about learning things and wisdom is about understanding them, and both are important in the history of

the Church. The Church has always seen itself as the keeper of wisdom, and at times this belief has conflicted with the way secular knowledge was developing. In the early Church, for example, writers debated whether studying philosophy was a true path to wisdom, and the Church had very public conflicts over scientific knowledge and whether it was leading people to devalue the Scriptures. In the modern era, the Church continues to warn against approaches to knowledge geared toward simply determining facts rather than helping people. Looking at where the Church has drawn the line between knowledge and wisdom, and where others have drawn it in relation to the Church, can help us see what the Church has valued at different points in its history.

**Political power and social influence.** At times, the Church has held extraordinary political power. Kings and emperors gained and lost their thrones based on the actions of the Church's leaders; for centuries, popes ruled the Papal States (part of what is now Italy); there have even been armies controlled by the Pope. Those times eventually ended, but the Church's ability to influence society continues today. From the beginning, the Church has played a role in helping those marginalized by society, and this tradition lives on in the Church's social teachings. Looking at how the Church has used its political power and social influence can point us toward what the Church has most wanted to achieve at different times.

**Inside view and outside view.** Catholics do not always agree on exactly how they view the Church, but they tend to share a belief in its value as a sign of God's presence in the world. Those outside the Church often view it quite differently. For example, many groups over the centuries have found their beliefs declared heretical because they differed from Church teaching; sometimes people were even put to death over those beliefs. From the Church's "inside" perspective at the time, it had a sacred duty to protect people from teachings that could lead them away from God; from the "outside" perspective of the so-called heretic, the Church was just trying to keep people from speaking a truth it did not like. Understanding the nature and context of differing views about the Church can help us get a fuller view of what role it has played throughout history.

The Catholic Church is a living, breathing, growing and thriving institution. It has been both witness and participant through two thousand years of majesty and beauty, terror and shame, tragedy and even comedy. When we

look beyond the names and dates, we see that the history of the Church is a wild ride and a great story.

## Questions and Ideas for Understanding

1. Telling the truth does not always involve telling “the whole truth”; you choose what it is important to say. Think about how you might describe a member of your family. How would you decide what things to include and what to leave out? Would you answer differently depending on who was asking the question?
2. It has been said that the news media write the first draft of history. Find two or more media accounts of the same event—a crime, a sports event, a political happening, a war, or whatever else you can find. Briefly describe the stories. Then describe how the accounts agree and how they differ.
3. Imagine you are a historian, and you want to write about a particular period of the Church’s history. You have in front of you a number of documents from that time: the personal writings of a priest, a typical Christian, and an atheist; a history text from the court of a Christian king; and a Muslim account of a war against a Christian kingdom. How could each of these sources help you better understand the Church of that time?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Aquinas, I Decret. ed Parma 16:305. Quoted in Francis A. Sullivan, SJ, *Salvation outside the Church?* New York: Paulist Press, 1992, p. 47.