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CONNECT! 

BRINGING FAITH TO LIFE

**Church
History**

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Church History



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INTRODUCTION

Why Study Church History?

An old saying defends the study of history this way: “Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it.” This means that the study of history teaches us lessons we can apply to our lives today. It is sometimes hard to believe, but the people who lived before us were not very different from us. They were human like we are. They had their virtues, and they made mistakes. When we study their lives and how they responded to situations, we see something of ourselves. We can rejoice in their accomplishments and learn from their failures. From our vantage point today, we can see what they did right and where they went wrong.

The same is true when we study the history of the Church. Yet the Church is not totally a human institution. It is not like the government of a country or an association of like-minded people. The Church has two aspects: a visible reality, which we can see, and a spiritual reality, which we cannot see. The Church was God’s idea. She was founded by Jesus Christ and is guided by the Holy Spirit.

So when we study the history of the Church, we do not study what human beings alone have done. We study what God has done through—and sometimes despite—the actions of human beings.

Does that mean the history of the Church is perfect, with no mistakes and members who never sinned? No, that is not the case. The Church has had shining hours, when its members responded fully to God’s grace. But it has also had dark hours, when members of the Church chose to turn away from God’s path and set out on their own. Those who have followed their own path have caused great

harm. They have caused others to turn away from the Church and sometimes even from God. But why, we ask? Why does God allow wrongdoing, especially in his Church?

God has given each of us the gift of freedom, and he never takes back that gift, no matter how we misuse it. We are the Church: we, the people, under the leadership of the Pope, bishops, and priests, with Christ as our head. Because we are the Church, we can “conquer evil with good” (Romans 12:21). We, like the little candles we light every Easter, can face the darkness and make it bright with God’s love.

In the history of the Church, you will read about days of light and days of darkness. You will see that the days of light greatly outnumber the days of darkness. You will also see what various people, both saints and sinners, did with their gift of freedom. It should raise these questions in your mind: What will I do with my little candle? Will I hold it high so it shines with God’s love? Let the history of the Church help you find the courage and inspiration to be a light to the world as you read about people like you who were a light of Christ in their time.



Chapter 1

The Early Church

KEY WORDS

deacon

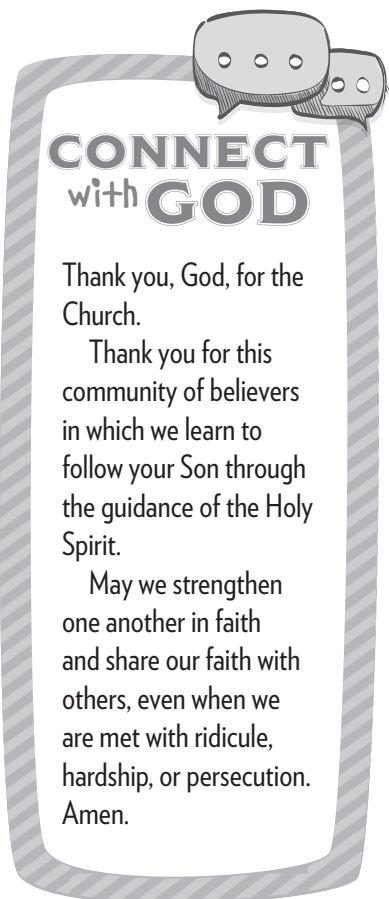
ecumenical council

Gentiles

martyr

If you listen for news about the Church in the world today, it can seem like there are two groups of Christians: One group of Christians, like those who live in the United States, are allowed to practice their religion peacefully, bringing God's love into their families, workplaces, and civic institutions. But another group of Christians, like those living in the Middle East and in some African and Asian countries, are persecuted and even killed for believing in Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church estimates that more than one hundred thousand Christians are killed violently every year.

This is not something new. It was like this for the first Christians in the years after Christ ascended into Heaven. At some times and places, Christians lived peacefully with their neighbors and witnessed to their faith in Christ and God's love. At other times and places, Christians were persecuted and sometimes killed because of their faith. Their lives remind us that following Jesus Christ and living as he taught us to live will sometimes cause conflict with people who do not believe. Yet the witness of the early Christians, even amid persecution, was also responsible for the amazing growth of the Church during that time.



The Jewish Beginnings of the Church

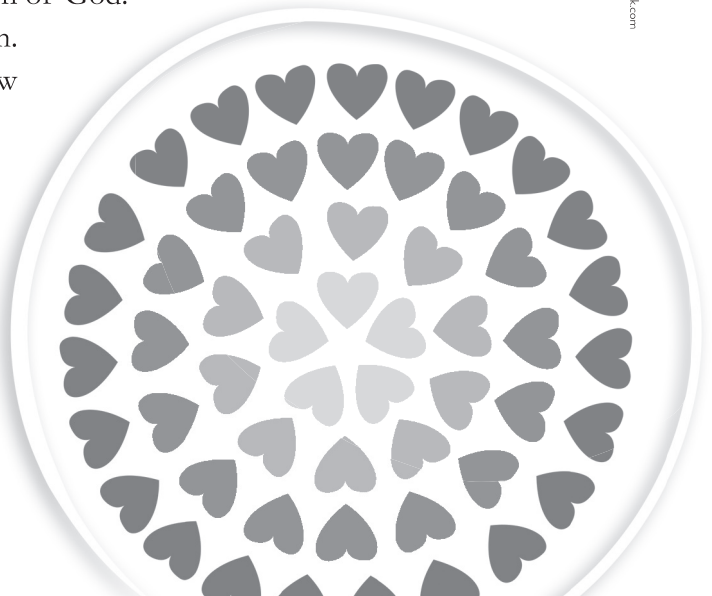
The Acts of the Apostles draws a picture of ordinary Christian life in Jerusalem after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In Acts, chapter 2, we get a glimpse of what the early Christians did each day:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. . . . All who believed were together and had all things in common. . . . Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (2:42–47)

You may be surprised to learn that the first Christians still worshipped at the Temple every day. However, they were Jewish by birth, and they saw no conflict between their Jewish faith and their belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Jesus himself was Jewish. The first Christians knew Jesus had not come to do away with God's Law but to fulfill it. So they kept their Jewish customs of prayer and met in their homes for the Eucharist.

As more **Gentiles** (non-Jews) became followers of Christ, some early Christian leaders questioned whether



How does this graphic remind you of Acts of the Apostles 2:42–47?

LIVING GOSPEL

Twenty-First Century Christians

When we read Acts of the Apostles, we might envy the early first-century Christians' devotion and way of life. They held all things in common. They ate their meals together. They were a true community, sharing their joys and sorrows. This early Christian way of life was the inspiration for the founding of religious communities of sisters or brothers, who live together and share their property in common.

We, as followers of Christ, are called to do the same thing today. We may need to do it differently because we live in a different kind of society. Yet it is helpful to look back at the early Christians and ask ourselves, How do we live the Gospel in our times? How do we share with others? How do we stay "together" and share "all things in common" (see Acts 2:44) with other believers? Do we praise God every day with glad and humble hearts?

the non-Jewish Christians needed to keep all the Jewish practices. The question was settled at a gathering of early Church leaders called the Council of Jerusalem. It was the first **ecumenical council** of the Church. At the Council of Jerusalem (see Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15), Peter, Paul, James, and other leaders decided that new believers in Christ did not have to follow Jewish customs. This was the beginning of the Church's break with the Jewish religion and Christianity being identified as a new and eventually worldwide, universal religion.



Gentiles ➡ Non-Jewish people. In the Scriptures, the Gentiles were the uncircumcised, those who did not honor the God of the Torah. In the New Testament, Saint Paul and other evangelists reached out to the Gentiles, baptizing them into the family of God.

ecumenical council ➡ A gathering of all Catholic bishops from around the world, convened by the Pope and under his authority and guidance. The last ecumenical council was Vatican Council II, called by Pope Saint John XXIII in 1962.

The Risk of Following Jesus

The first Christians were not accepted by everyone, but Jesus had dealt with rejection as well. The Gospels reveal that some Jewish leaders disagreed with Jesus' teachings. They saw him as a threat because he challenged their beliefs and their authority. Eventually, they decided he must die. This was not the decision of the whole Jewish people but a decision made by a few leaders. They denounced Jesus to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate agreed to their request. He had Jesus executed as a traitor on the charge of claiming to be king of the Jews. Of course, Jesus was and is a king—but not in a political sense. Jesus made that clear. He had no desire to take over territory by force. Jesus' Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, a bond of love and care among his followers and toward all people.

Jesus was a **martyr**, that is, someone willing to die for his beliefs. Jesus witnessed to God's love in the face of cruelty, to God's care in the face of the most terrible loss—the loss of one's own life. Those who followed in the footsteps of Jesus also risked martyrdom.



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martyr → A person who suffers death because of their beliefs. The Church has canonized many Christian martyrs as saints.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

You may never be asked to die for your faith in Jesus. But you are asked to live your faith in Jesus. This is not always easy in today's world. We can be encouraged by Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew: "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:11) and "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). If you are teased, insulted, or even ignored because of your faith, how will you respond?

Saint Stephen

After the Resurrection of Jesus and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Apostles began preaching in Jerusalem. A man named Saul heard of this. He was educated in the Jewish Law and could not tolerate what he believed was a serious misinterpretation of the Law. Saul saw Jesus as a blasphemer. He believed Jesus' followers were spreading a false and dangerous version of the Jewish faith.

Saul began actively seeking out the "followers of the Way" (as Christians were called) to bring them before the authorities. From there, they might be jailed or even killed. One of these disciples of Jesus was Stephen (ca. AD 5–34), a **deacon** of the church in Jerusalem. Deacons committed their lives to serving the needs of the Church. In fact, Stephen was the very first deacon, who had been appointed by the Apostles to serve the poor among the Christian community.

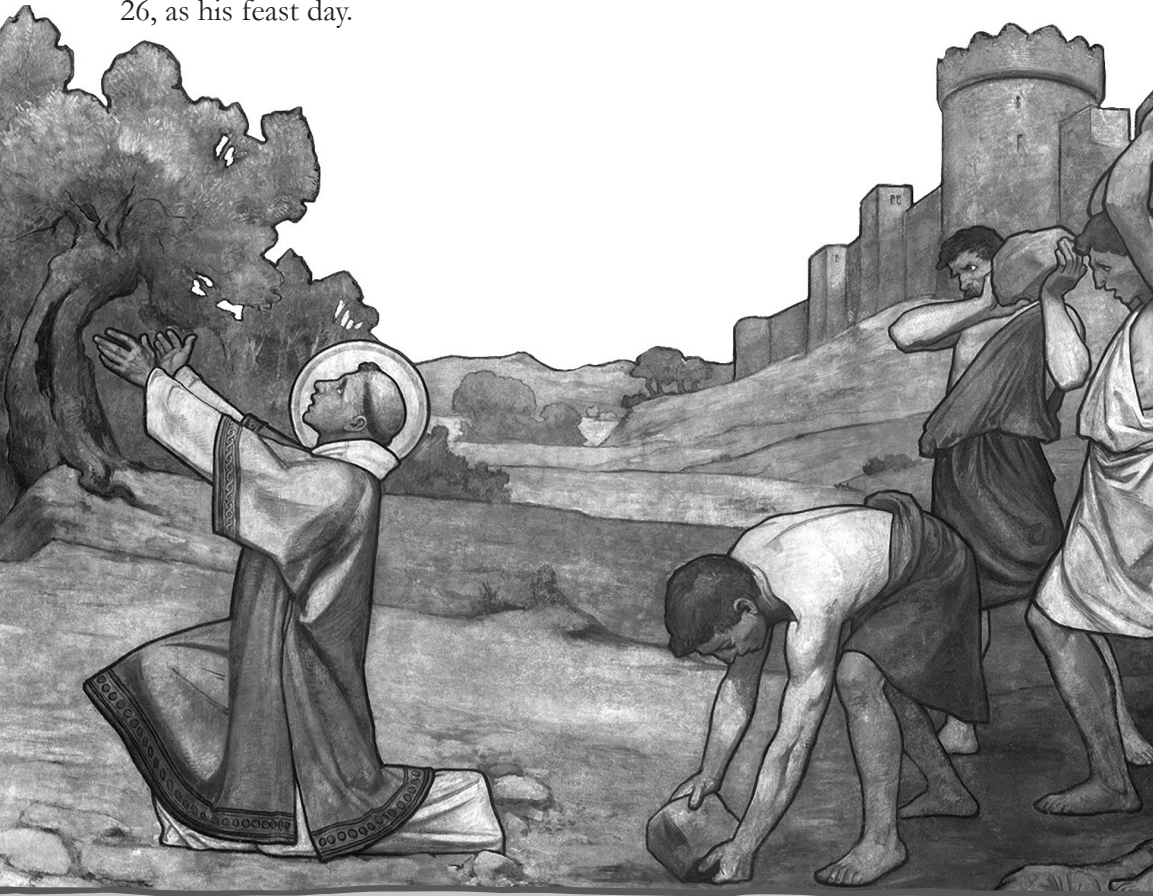


deacon ➔ The third degree or level of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, after that of bishop and priest. A permanent deacon commits his life to serving the needs of the Church. A transitional deacon is a deacon who is preparing to become a priest.

Stephen was brought before the Jewish Council of Elders (the Sanhedrin), and lies were told against him. When the high priest asked Stephen if the lies were true, Stephen retold the history of salvation, recounting all God had done for his people. He accused the council of betraying and murdering God’s appointed servant, Jesus. The council and other members of the crowd rushed at Stephen, threw him out of the city, and hurled stones at him until he died. The witnesses left their cloaks at the feet of Saul, who approved of the murder. (See Acts of the Apostles 7:54– 8:1.)

Today, the Church honors Saint Stephen as “the proto-deacon” (the first deacon) and also “the proto-martyr” (the first martyr). Because he was the first to shed his blood for his faith in Jesus, the Church gave Saint Stephen the first day after Christmas, December 26, as his feast day.

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CHECK *this* OUT

Deacons and Deaconesses

The word *deacon* comes from a Greek word meaning “service.” Deacons originated in the early Church.

In Jerusalem, it seemed that some of the people who were poor were being neglected. The Apostles were called to preach and teach, so they appointed a helper, Stephen, to organize service to the poor. Gradually, the role of deacon expanded to include other service to the Christian community and service in the liturgy. Today, there are two kinds of deacons: a *transitional* deacon intends to continue his studies for the priesthood. A *permanent* deacon is ordained a deacon for life. Modern-day deacons help bishops and priests in their ministries.

Deaconesses were the female equivalent of deacons in the early Church. They were appointed to care for women, the poor, and the sick. For example, deaconesses helped the women catechumens, especially during the Sacrament of Baptism. Deaconesses often visited the homes of women who were housebound or had recently given birth. They also visited prisoners and helped Christians who were being persecuted.

Saint Paul

Saints Peter and Paul are often mentioned together when we talk about the early Church. Both were dynamic leaders. Both were specially chosen by Jesus. Both were Apostles, and both were martyrs.

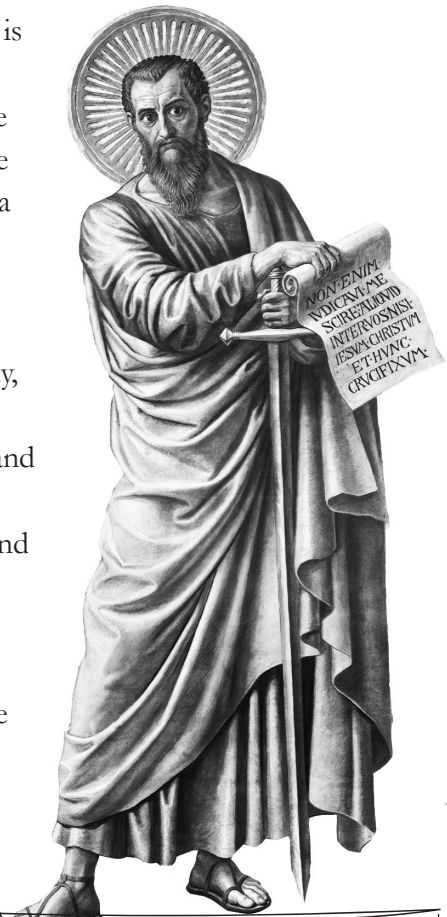
Saint Paul (ca. AD 5–64) is also known as Saul in the New Testament. (Among the Jews, he was called Saul; among the Gentiles, he was known as Paul.) His presence at the death of Stephen was not the end of Saul’s involvement in the persecution of the early Christians. He was on his way to Damascus, breathing violent threats of murder against the followers of Jesus he might find there, when he was knocked to the ground by a light from the sky.

Then he heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” (Acts of the Apostles 9:4). Saul answered, “Who are you, sir?” (9:5). The voice replied, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (9:5).

At that moment, Saul’s conversion to faith in Jesus began. He was baptized in Damascus and for the next three years studied and reflected on his new faith. He then spent the rest of his life preaching and teaching, explaining the Christian way of life to all who would listen.

Paul made three separate journeys to cities and towns in Greece and in what is now known as the Near East and Asia Minor, each journey taking two to three years. His strategy was simple. When he arrived in a city, he began preaching in a synagogue if a Jewish community lived there, or in a central meeting space. As people became interested in his message, he gathered them into an assembly, or church. He met with them regularly, teaching them about Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection. As they grew stronger in faith, he appointed a leader for them, and he moved on to another town.

The letters of Saint Paul, which we still read today at Mass, were often responses to questions Christians wrote to him after he had left a particular place. The first Christians treasured Paul’s letters, copied them, and distributed them to other Christians. That is why we still have copies of the letters today.



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In this icon, Saint Paul holds a sword to symbolize his martyrdom. Because he was a Roman citizen, he was beheaded (considered a more merciful death) and not crucified.

Paul suffered during his missionary journeys, experiencing persecution, shipwreck, beatings, and imprisonment. But once he had found the Truth, he could not deny his faith in Jesus. It is thought he was beheaded in Rome about AD 67, during the second persecution by Emperor Nero. Today Saint Paul is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles, and we celebrate the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29.

Saint Peter

Immediately after Pentecost, Peter (ca. AD 1–64) emerged as a spokesperson for the Apostles. He also led the followers of Jesus in preaching and teaching, as shown by his first sermon in the Acts of the Apostles (see 2:14–42). As the new faith slowly spread from Jerusalem and more people accepted the Good News, it was Peter to whom the Apostles and other missionaries reported.

As mentioned earlier, though the first converts to Christianity were Jews, it was not long before Gentiles asked to join the Christian community. For Peter and other early Christians, the decision to admit Gentiles was not an easy one. Because the Gentiles were known to have many gods and were suspected of living immoral lives, the Jews considered them “least likely to succeed” as far as religion was concerned. In fact, the Jews considered the Gentiles to be unclean. Observant Jews like Peter would not even eat with Gentiles.



Many churches throughout the world are named for Saint Peter. This one is in Melaka, Malaysia. It is the oldest Roman Catholic Church in Malaysia. It was built in 1710.

Yet Peter eventually welcomed the Gentiles into the Church by baptizing them and sharing the Eucharist with them. What changed his mind? Peter had a vision in which a voice from Heaven told him to eat some animals that had been lowered from Heaven in a sheet. He refused because the animals were, according to Jewish Law, unclean. The voice replied, “What God has made clean you are not to call profane” (Acts of the Apostles 10:15). Then the sheet was taken back into Heaven.

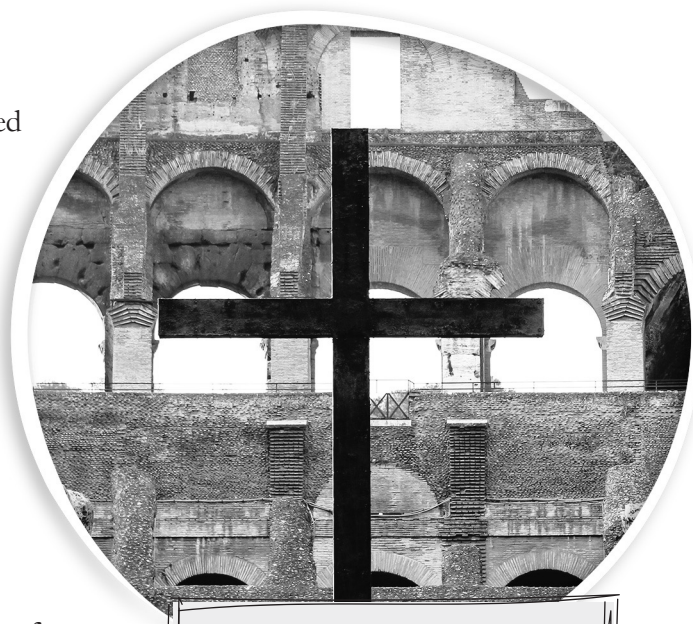
Almost immediately after this, Peter was called to the house of Cornelius, who was a Roman and a Gentile. There Peter realized the meaning of his vision: God does not favor one people over another but offers the Good News of Jesus to all. Peter baptized Cornelius and his family. During the Council of Jerusalem, both Peter and Paul spoke in favor of welcoming Gentiles into the Church and not requiring them to follow Jewish customs.

Though we have no historical proof, an old and believable tradition claims that Peter eventually made his way from Jerusalem to Rome and settled there. Rome was the center of the known world at that time, so it was natural that he would visit Rome and decide to make it his headquarters. Peter’s position as leader of the Church meant he was targeted for persecution, and he endured imprisonment and finally martyrdom for his beliefs.

The Roman Persecutions

When the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles, they were emboldened to preach the Good News to all who would listen. Yet not all who heard the Good News reacted favorably to it. You will recall that Saint Paul was one of the first persecutors of the early Church. After his conversion, he himself was the subject of persecution. The Good News upset the existing state of affairs, both in the Jewish community and especially in the Roman Empire.

Why was this so? The Romans worshipped many gods, and when they conquered a new territory, they usually demanded that the conquered people worship their gods. This, they believed, kept everyone in good order. At the time of Christ, the Roman emperor came to be revered as the son of a god—a divine being—and those who challenged the idea were considered traitors of the state.



A cross stands in the ruins of the Roman Coliseum to honor the memory of all the martyrs who were killed here, making the Coliseum sacred ground.

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You can see how this would be a problem for the early Christians. They believed there was only one true Son of God, Jesus Christ. They believed that the way to true peace and justice was through love and forgiveness, not through the war and violence of the Roman Empire. Many of the Christians, like Peter and Paul, were not shy in proclaiming their beliefs. This made them targets for religious persecution. Sometimes when problems arose in parts of the empire, Christians were blamed, persecutions followed, and martyrdom resulted. Yet at other times, Christians lived peacefully in the Roman Empire without persecution.

Under the Roman emperors Nero, Diocletian, Decius, and Domitian—whose names struck terror into the hearts of Christians—thousands paid the ultimate price for their faith. We have evidence from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus that Christians were thought to be atheists (because they did not believe in Roman gods), subversive (because they refused state orders to worship the Roman gods or the

emperor), and practitioners of cannibalism (a misunderstanding of the Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ). The Romans blamed Christians for natural disasters, such as plagues and earthquakes, because these were seen as punishments from the gods for failing to worship the gods and support the Roman way of life.

For example, in AD 64, Emperor Nero was blamed for starting a fire that burned Rome. He in turn blamed the Christians and began a persecution that may have included the martyrdom of Saint Peter. Saint Paul was likely beheaded in the second persecution led by Nero. In his cruelty, Nero displayed the sufferings and deaths of Christians as public recreation.

Other emperors also persecuted Christians. Perhaps the worst was under Emperor Diocletian (AD 284–305), who decided to uproot Christianity from the Roman Empire. He confiscated the Christians' property (including churches and sacred books), sentenced them to hard labor, and put them to death.

The theologian and writer Tertullian wrote, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians”¹ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 852). The martyrs were true witnesses, showing by their faith and courage that their belief in Jesus Christ and his message of true life, here and eternally, was the rock on which they stood.

The martyrs were witnesses to the words of Jesus in the Gospel: “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live. . . . Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26). Amid their sufferings, the martyrs answered yes. And their deaths changed hearts; many people joined the Church because of their love, forgiveness, and courageous faith.

Martyr-Saints to Know

Did you know that some of the early Church martyrs are sometimes mentioned by name at Mass? In today's Mass, the priest may choose one of four Eucharistic Prayers. In Eucharist Prayer I, just before the consecration of the bread and wine, the priest prays that we may be in communion with "those whose

memory we venerate." Then he mentions the following early Church martyrs: Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian, Lawrence, Chrysogonus, John and Paul, Cosmas, and Damian. A little later he mentions these early Church martyrs: Ignatius, Alexander, Marcellinus, Peter, Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia, and Anastasia.

Who were these people? Why are they mentioned in a prayer we might still pray at Mass today? All these saints were martyrs who were killed during the Roman persecutions. Martyrs, as well as ordinary Christians, were buried in underground cemeteries, called catacombs, with passages leading from one area to another. The Christians would gather at a burial place to celebrate the Eucharist and to remember that particular martyr. They sometimes inscribed a martyr's name on the wall of the catacomb or drew pictures of Jesus. Some of the earliest images we have of Jesus have been found scratched into the walls of the Roman catacombs.



This image of a man at prayer is an early Christian symbol found in the catacombs of Rome.

It is only natural that the Church remembers these special witnesses. Just as we remember the wonderful characteristics of our relatives and friends who have died, so the Church remembers the faith and courage of those who gave up their lives rather than deny Christ. The saints mentioned in Eucharistic Prayer I bring us back to the beginnings of the Church. Let us briefly recall a few of these important martyr-saints.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch

Saint Ignatius of Antioch (ca. AD 35–107) was a disciple of Saint John the Apostle and was the third bishop of Antioch in Syria. In AD 107, Emperor Trajan visited Antioch and forced the Christians there to renounce their faith or die. Ignatius refused to deny his faith in Christ. He was arrested and taken to Rome in chains so his death sentence (to be torn apart by wild beasts in the Colosseum) could be carried out. During the journey by sea to Rome, Ignatius wrote letters to the Christian groups in the cities where his ship docked. The Church has cherished these letters ever since.

In his letters, Ignatius urged the Christians of his day to be faithful to Christ and to their bishops as the successors of the Apostles. Saint Ignatius was the first Christian writer to use the word *catholic* to describe the worldwide Church. The letters also reveal Ignatius's great love for the Eucharist and his longing to be with God. His remains now rest in the Basilica of Saint Clement in Rome. His feast day is October 17.



This engraving is of the martyrdom of Saint Ignatius of Antioch. He is wearing the vestments of his office of bishop.

Saints Perpetua and Felicity

Saints Perpetua and Felicity (d. 202) were martyred together in the North African city of Carthage. At the time, North Africa was a province of the Roman Empire. Perpetua was a married woman of noble birth and the mother of an infant son. Felicity was her servant and was pregnant. They were catechumens; that is, they had not yet been baptized but were being instructed in the Christian faith.


After Perpetua was arrested, her father visited her. He urged her to deny her faith to save her life, but she refused. She was baptized and then put in prison. For a time, she was able to keep her child with her, but later she gave the child to her mother and brother to be cared for. Felicity, also in prison, gave birth to a daughter, who was adopted by a Christian woman.

It was decided that Perpetua and Felicity should be presented to wild beasts as part of the festivities for the birthday of Emperor Geta, who shared the emperor role with his brother and his father, Septimus Severus. First, the two women were scourged by gladiators. Then a wild cow (perhaps in mockery of their motherhood) was set upon them. Once they were wounded, they gave each other the kiss of peace and were then executed by beheading. Later, a basilica was erected over their tomb. The feast day of Saints Perpetua and Felicity is March 7.

good to KNOW



In Antioch, in Syria, Jesus' disciples were first called Christians—those who believe in Jesus Christ. Before that, they were known as the followers of the Way. Saint Ignatius of Antioch was the first to identify the Church as universal, or “catholic.” What do you like about each of these names? Do they describe you today? How?



PEOPLE of FAITH

Saint PETER THE APOSTLE

We know a little bit about Saint Peter from the Gospels. He was a fisherman, and Jesus chose him to be the leader of the Apostles. Peter sometimes said things he regretted. On the night Jesus was led before the high priest, Peter denied Jesus three times. Then Peter left the courtyard and wept bitter tears.

Yet Peter trusted Jesus to forgive him. After Jesus' Resurrection, as written in the Gospel of John, Peter declared his love for Jesus, saying three times, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" (John 21:15–17). In this way, Peter made up for his triple betrayal. He became the leader of the Church and the first Pope.

Good evidence indicates that during the first persecution by Emperor Nero, Peter was crucified in Rome.

He asked to be crucified upside down, considering himself unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as the Lord. Peter's tomb became a place of pilgrimage, and eventually the church we now know as the Basilica of Saint Peter was built over it. In 1950, archaeologists discovered a tomb in the crypt, or burial place, under the basilica. They found bones there wrapped in purple and gold cloth. Pope Pius XII announced to the world the discovery of the tomb of Saint Peter. Saint Peter shares the feast day of June 29 with his fellow Apostle, Saint Paul.

