

The Roman Catholic Church and the Catholic Communion

Summary: The Church of Rome traces its roots to the apostles Peter and Paul, whose lineage continues through the papacy. Despite the Church of Rome's separation from the Orthodox churches in 1054, and then with Protestant reformers in 1521, Catholics account for half of the world's Christians today.

The early church spoke of its fellowship of believers as “catholic,” a word which means “universal.” Today, the whole Christian church still affirms “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church” in the Nicene Creed. However, the term Catholic with a capital “C” also applies in common parlance to the churches within the Catholic Communion, centered in Rome. The Church of Rome is one of the oldest Christian communities, tracing its history to the apostles Peter and Paul in the 1st century. As it developed, it emphasized the central authority and primacy of the bishop of Rome, who became known as the Pope. By the 11th century, the Catholic Church broke with the Byzantine Church of the East over issues of both authority and doctrine. Over the centuries, several attempts have been made to restore union and to heal the wounds of division between the Churches.

During the early 15th century, many in the Roman Church regarded the impending Turkish invasion of the Byzantine Empire as a “work of Providence” to bind divided Christianity together. In response, the Council of Florence envisioned union on a grandiose scale not only with the Greek Byzantine churches, but also with the Copts, Ethiopians, Armenians and Nestorians, as well as a reconfirmation of the 12th century union with the Maronite Church. Despite both the presence of nearly 700 Eastern representatives and 360 Latin representatives and the ecumenical fervor undergirding the exhaustive debates, three reasons are often cited for the failure of this attempted reunion. First, the Western military aid sent to protect Byzantium was destroyed by the Ottoman forces. Second, it has been argued that the ill-will toward the West was so deeply rooted in the centuries since schism that the residents of Constantinople could not support the decisions of the Council. Finally, Mark Eugenicus of Ephesus, the only bishop to refuse his signature to the conciliar decrees, proved to be a formidable opponent to union. Upon his return, he successfully convinced many influential people within his jurisdiction to resist the decisions of the Council.

Despite the disillusionment of the Council of Florence, the Roman Church began to pursue an attractive alternative inspired by the unexpected union with the Maronites in the 12th century. This alternative consisted in the “creation of Uniate churches – Eastern in rite and canon but Roman in ecclesial allegiance.” In fact, many of the decrees agreed upon at the Council of Florence became the basis for these unions. Seeking refuge from increasing Muslim control in Syria, the Maronites migrated to Mount Lebanon in the 9th century. Existing in isolation for centuries, they were discovered by Roman Crusaders in the 12th century and both immediately “made common cause” with each other. Attending the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Patriarch Jeremiah II and his entire church was received into union with Rome. They are the only Eastern Catholic Church to have been received as a whole, without leaving an Orthodox counterpart behind. Despite the tension with their Orthodox equivalents and the peripheral existence to the largely Roman-dominated Catholic Church, these Eastern Catholic churches continued to develop over the next five hundred years. It was only after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) that the voices of these Catholic communities have been given their due credit.

Meanwhile, the predominantly Roman church also developed particularly characteristic features since the schism in 1054. Strong traditions of monasticism emerged, beginning with Benedict (480-550) who described the principles of prayer, work, and study essential to the monastic life. Even in the late 20th century, this “Rule of St. Benedict” continues to be foundational for the life of Benedictine communities all over the world. Many of the missionaries of the church were monks, such as the Venerable Bede (673-735) who brought spiritual leadership to the early church in England and Boniface (680-754) who was the “apostle of Germany.” In the early Middle Ages, Benedictine monasteries became large landholders and powerful forces in the local economy. Through the chaos of the Middle Ages, after the fall of the Roman Empire, they played an essential role in preserving the spiritual, artistic, and intellectual life of the church.

In the 12th century, other orders developed that rejected the cloistered and sometimes wealthy life of the monastery, set apart from society, for more engaged models of Christian community. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and the Franciscan order emphasized both individual and communal poverty, simplicity, and service—not apart from the people but among them. Dominic (1170-1221) and the Dominican order emphasized education, preaching, and teaching. Members of these orders were often reformers as well, calling for monasticism as well as the church as a whole to renewal.

In the 16th century, one of those reformers, the Augustinian friar Martin Luther, broke with the church entirely and launched the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) followed with its own reform of corrupt practices from within the Catholic church. Part of a movement known as the “Catholic Reformation” or the “Counter-Reformation,” the Council of Trent reasserted the visible, hierarchical, and structured authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This period of Catholic renewal reinvigorated the educational and missionary zeal of the church with the establishment of the Society of Jesus, also called the Jesuits, founded by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Especially with the colonization and conversion of Latin America and with its missions to Asia and Africa, the Roman Catholic Church became a worldwide church. Unfortunately, the strong reaction to the Protestant movement would have a negative impact upon the Eastern Catholic churches, as conformity to the Roman standard became the norm. Only the Second Vatican Council would begin the process of correcting this mentality.

Today, the Catholic Communion is centered at the Vatican in Rome, but its synods, councils of bishops, and local parishes carry on the life and work of the church on every continent. More than half of the world’s Christians are Catholic. The Second Vatican Council (also called Vatican II) considered seriously the new role of the church in the modern world. Among the many decisions of the Council was to abandon the predominantly Latin mass in favor of worship in the language and in the cultural forms of the local community. The Council declared clearly that the Catholic Church is not just the visible hierarchy centered in Rome, but “the whole people of God.” The church would emphasize not only preaching and sacraments, but a vigorous mission to the poor and those in need. The many documents of the Second Vatican Council include *Nostra Aetate (In Our Time)*, which addresses with a new openness the relation of the Catholic Church to other religious traditions.