

History of the Catholic Church

Chapter 2: The Empire and the Church

Roman Empire & Nero

- **Republic:** Centuries before Christ, Rome was a republic (*Res publica* – for the people). It was governed by elected magistrates and advised by the Senate.
- **Octavian:** Nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar (44 BC), was acknowledged as emperor by the army and given the title “Augustus” (great) by the Senate (39).
- Reached its peak in the 117 AD – English Scottish border in West, Egypt to the South, and Syria and Turkey to the East – the entirety of the Mediterranean Sea organized into 40 provinces and home to 60 million people; Roman army was foundation of the Empire
- **Empire:** Common mode of life with shared language, culture, and commerce (39).
- **Nero:** Psychopath; practiced all forms of vice and was a cruel neurotic hedonist (40)
- **Fire:** Broke out in AD 64 – began 250 years of government sanctioned persecution of the Catholic Church. Rumors Nero started it; deflected blame on Christians (human torches)
- **Note:** Before Nero (AD 54), Roman state largely unaware of Christians; sect of the Jews
- **Key:** Saints Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome under Nero; Linus next pope (67-76)

Great Jewish Revolt

- Jewish rebellion in AD 66; three years of fighting, Jews fell back to Jerusalem
- **Josephus** (AD 37 – 100) provides the main source of information for Jewish Revolt
- **Titus:** Embarked on the biggest siege to date in Roman history; led to starvation
- **Note:** People ate leather and hay, sifted through cow dung looking for scraps of food; Temple was destroyed in AD 70; About 1 million died – step over corpses
- **Note:** No Christians died as they knew the city would be destroyed as Jesus foretold
- **Key:** Destruction of the Temple changes Judaism from animal sacrifice to synagogue

Faith Spreads

- **Spreads:** 1). Empire was at peace; 2). Cultural unity – Greek common language; Latin official and in politics; 3). Imperial people were religious (polytheistic)
- **Evangelize:** Pagans were attracted to the Faith by the witness of early Christians, especially the martyrs. Romans astounded how Christians cared for the poor (47).
- **Catholic:** Roman society very class-oriented; Church brought in lots of backgrounds

Domitian: AD 81 – 96 (Assassinated)

- **Domitian:** Younger brother of Titus; he struggled with his mental health as emperor
- **Deify:** First Roman Emperor to deify himself with “Lord and God” during reign (48)
- **Persecution:** Limited persecution of the Church; St. John was exiled to Patmos
- **Clement:** Fourth bishop of Rome; wrote to Corinthians to stop their rebellion
 - Clergy derive their authority from God, and not from the people
 - Church is Apostolic, i.e., spiritual authority passed from apostles via ordination
 - First exercise of the Roman primacy after Peter’s death (papal primacy)

Church in the Roman Empire

- **First Century:** Fewer than 10,000 Christians (0.0017%) of 60 million (unaware)
- **Second Century:** 200,000 Christians (less than 1%); dislike and disdain for Christians
- **Around 250:** More than 1 million Christians (2%); First empire wide-persecution
- **Fourth Century:** 6 million Christians (10%); Church came into conflict with society
- **Society:** Believed man to be sufficient to himself and all belief to be mere opinions (51)

Pagan Attacks on the Church

- **Note:** Politics and religion can't easily be divided in the ancient world. Human society was seen to be upheld by the divine order. Religious unity was the foundation of political unity. Religious unrest (trigger) led to political upheaval.
- **Catholics:** Extraterrestrial group was an odd, seditious, and potentially threatening (52)
- **Roman Writers:** Attacked Christians for the following reasons:
 - **All those who were Christians were ignorant and poor:** Roman society was highly structured – nobility and everyone else (slaves and commoners)
 - **Christians were bad citizens:** Refused to worship state gods (or emperor)
 - **Christians believed in unreasonable doctrine:** They attacked the Incarnation
 - **Christians were cannibals:** Romans practiced many immoral things, but never cannibalism; they ate and drank the flesh and blood of the Lord
- **Key:** Apologists will defend the Faith; holiness of Christians attracted converts

Time of Major Persecutions

- **Twelve:** From AD 64 – 305, there were 12 major persecutions under the Roman Empire
- **Key:** Sometimes they were widespread, regional, a city, or in a major province
- **Pliny:** Imperial legate for Emperor Trajan asking how should he handle Christians. Emperor responds leave them alone if private. If public, then can try and execute.
- **Earthquake in Antioch:** Trajan injured; believes gods offended; persecuted Christians
- **St. Ignatius:** Arrested and taken to Rome; wrote 7 letters to six Christian churches
 - **Letter to Smyrneans:** “Where the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church” (59). Martyred in 107.
- **Gnosticism:** Greek *gnosis*, which means knowledge; material world evil and spiritual things are good; denied the Incarnation, no baptism, renounce marriage, suicide good
- **St. Polycarp:** Bishop of Smyrna (Turkey); disciple of St. John; martyred at age 85 in 155
- **St. Irenaeus:** Disciple of Polycarp; bishop of Lyons, wrote *Against Heresies*; died in 202
 - **Note:** Provides the four marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic
- **Heresies:** Marcionism rejected the OT; Montanism – private revelation equal to public
- **Key:** Church suffering from persecution from outside (Rome) and inside from heresies
- **Apologists:** Justin Martyr (100 – 165), Tertullian (163 – 230), Origen (185 – 254)
- **Persecutions:** Decius (249 – 251) – public sacrifice before the idols of pagan gods and received a certificate (*libellus*); Valerian (253 – 260) – martyred Pope Sixtus II and his Deacon Lawrence; Diocletian (284 – 305) initiated Great Persecution in 303.