

A WEEKLY HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

VERITAS

Twenty centuries of the Church, one hundred years at a time. The saints, the councils, the martyrs, and the faith handed down to us.

ISSUE NO. 1 MONDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2026 FAITH, FAMILY & FREEDOM READER

THE FIRST CENTURY · AD 1 TO 100



Pentecost, by El Greco, c. 1600. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Upon This Rock

In seventy years, a frightened band of Galilean fishermen became a Church that reached Rome itself. It survived Nero, the fall of Jerusalem, and the death of every apostle, and it handed on the faith we still profess.



Fifty Days After Easter

The Church did not begin with a building, a law, or an army. It began in an upper room in Jerusalem, around the year 30 or 33, with about a hundred and twenty disciples and the Mother of Jesus praying behind locked doors. Their Master had been crucified under Pontius Pilate. They said He had risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, and He had told them to wait.

On the Jewish feast of Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection, the waiting ended. The Acts of the Apostles describes a sound like a rushing wind and tongues of fire resting on each of them. Peter, the fisherman who had denied Jesus three times, walked out and preached to the pilgrim crowds. That day, Luke reports, "about three thousand souls" were baptized.

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42)

That one verse already holds the shape of the Church: the teaching of the apostles, a common life, the Eucharist, and prayer. Twenty centuries later, every Catholic parish still rests on those four.

♥ THE CENTURY AT A GLANCE ♥

- ♥ C. 30–33 Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Pentecost
- ♥ C. 34 St. Stephen, the first martyr, is stoned
- ♥ C. 34–36 Saul of Tarsus is converted near Damascus
- ♥ C. 49 The Council of Jerusalem welcomes the Gentiles
- ♥ 64 Great Fire of Rome; Nero blames the Christians
- ♥ C. 64–67 Sts. Peter and Paul are martyred in Rome
- ♥ 70 Roman legions destroy Jerusalem and the Temple
- ♥ C. 96 Pope St. Clement writes to the Corinthians
- ♥ C. 100 St. John, the last apostle, dies at Ephesus

The Persecutor Becomes the Apostle

The first opposition came quickly. Around the year 34 a deacon named Stephen was dragged outside Jerusalem and stoned, praying for his killers as he died. Standing by, holding the cloaks of the men who threw the stones, was a young Pharisee from Tarsus named Saul.

A short time later, on the road to Damascus to arrest more Christians, Saul was thrown to the ground by a blinding light and heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The man who hunted the Church became its greatest missionary. As St. Paul, he crossed the eastern Mediterranean again and again, founding communities in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece.



The Conversion on the Way to Damascus, by Caravaggio, 1601. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

His letters to those young churches, beginning with First Thessalonians around the year 50, are the oldest writings in the New Testament. Meanwhile, in the great Syrian city of Antioch, something new happened: "the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (Acts 11:26).

The First Council

As more and more Gentiles asked for baptism, the young Church faced its first great crisis. Did a Greek convert have to be circumcised and keep the whole Law of Moses to become a follower of Christ? Some said yes. Paul and Barnabas said no.

Around the year 49, the apostles and elders met in Jerusalem to decide. Peter rose and reminded them that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles just as to the Jews. James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, agreed. Their letter to the churches began with a phrase that would echo through every later council: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

It is a picture the Church has followed ever since. When a hard question divides the faithful, the successors of the apostles gather, pray, and decide together, with Peter speaking first.

♥ KEY FIGURE ♥



St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles

- ♥ **BORN:** Bethsaida in Galilee; a fisherman named Simon
- ♥ **RENAMED:** "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18)
- ♥ **OFFICE:** First Bishop of Rome
- ♥ **DIED:** Crucified in Rome under Nero, c. 64–67
- ♥ **FEASTS:** June 29 (with St. Paul); Chair of Peter, Feb. 22

St. Peter, by Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1610 to 1612. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Fire in Rome

On the night of July 18, in the year 64, fire broke out near the Circus Maximus. It burned for days and gutted much of the capital. Rumors spread that the emperor Nero had wanted it. To end the talk, he found someone else to blame. The Roman historian Tacitus, no friend of the faith, recorded what happened next:

"Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace... Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired."

Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, written c. AD 116

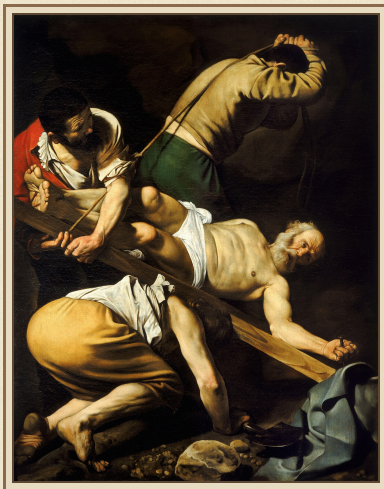


Nero's Torches, by Henryk Siemiradzki, 1882. National Museum, Kraków.

The Church still remembers these nameless victims as the First Martyrs of the Holy Roman Church, on June 30, the day after the feast of Peter and Paul.

The Two Pillars Fall

In the same persecution, ancient tradition tells us, Rome claimed the Church's two greatest leaders. Peter was crucified, and at his own request, according to the writer Origen, he was crucified upside down, unworthy to die as his Lord had. He was buried on the Vatican Hill. Paul, a Roman citizen, was beheaded outside the city on the road to Ostia. "I have fought the good fight," he had written, "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).



The Crucifixion of Saint Peter, by Caravaggio, 1601. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

Rome meant to stamp out the sect. Instead, the blood of its martyrs made Rome the Church's center. St. Peter's Basilica rises over his grave today, and Pope Leo XIV, whom we have been praying for this week, is counted as his 267th successor.

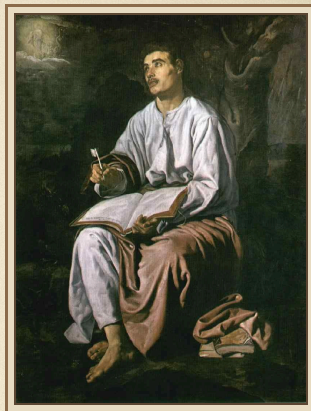
The Temple Falls

In 66 Judea rose in revolt against Rome. Four years later, in the summer of 70, the legions of Titus broke into Jerusalem and burned the Temple, as Jesus had foretold. The historian Eusebius writes that the Christians of Jerusalem, warned beforehand, had fled across the Jordan to Pella.

The fall of the Temple ended the age of sacrifice in Jerusalem. From then on, no one could mistake Christianity for a sect inside Judaism. It was a Church for every nation.

The Last Apostle

Under the emperor Domitian, persecution came again. St. John, the beloved disciple, was exiled to the island of Patmos "on account of the word of God" (Revelation 1:9). There, tradition says, he received the visions of the Book of Revelation. He later returned to Ephesus.



St. John on Patmos, by Velázquez, c. 1618. National Gallery, London.

By the time he died there around the year 100, the last of the Twelve, the four Gospels had been written, including the one by St. Luke, whose feast we kept yesterday. A short guide called the *Didache* was teaching new believers how to baptize, fast, and celebrate the Eucharist. And the Church had already learned how to carry on after the apostles were gone.

♥ PRIMARY SOURCE OF THE WEEK ♥

“Our apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the office of the episcopate... they appointed those ministers already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions, that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry.”

Pope St. Clement of Rome, *Letter to the Corinthians*, ch. 44, c. AD 96. Read the full letter at [New Advent](#).

WHY THIS LINE MATTERS: Clement, the fourth Bishop of Rome, was settling a quarrel in Corinth, a church St. Paul himself had founded. Within living memory of the apostles, he explains that they chose successors on purpose. This is apostolic succession, in writing before the first century ended.

Why It Matters Today

The first Christians had no cathedrals, no legal protection, and no finished New Testament. What they had was the apostles' teaching, the Eucharist, one another, and a willingness to die rather than deny Christ. That was enough to outlast Nero.

Every time we pray the Creed and say "one, holy, catholic and apostolic," we claim that same inheritance, unbroken from the upper room to our own parish.

NEXT WEEK · ISSUE NO. 2

The Age of the Martyrs: AD 101 to 200

On his way to die in the Roman arena, St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote seven letters, and in one of them the words "the Catholic Church" appear in writing for the first time. We will meet Ignatius, the aged bishop Polycarp, the philosopher-martyr Justin, and St. Irenaeus, who traced the faith of every church back to the apostles.

🕯 IMAGE CREDITS 🕯

1. Pentecost, El Greco, c. 1600, Museo del Prado.
2. The Conversion on the Way to Damascus, Caravaggio, 1601, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.
3. St. Peter, Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1610 to 1612, Museo del Prado.
4. Nero's Torches, Henryk Siemiradzki, 1882, National Museum in Kraków.
5. The Crucifixion of Saint Peter, Caravaggio, 1601, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.
6. St. John the Evangelist on Patmos, Diego Velázquez, c. 1618, National Gallery, London.

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