

# CHURCH HISTORY: FROM PENTECOST TO THE GREAT SCHISM

## WEEK 2: THE CHURCH PERSECUTED AND DEFENDED

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Challenge of Christianity in the second and third centuries – **unity** – a common faith and a common way of ordering life and worship

### THE CHURCH PERSECUTED

#### Persecutions

Sporadic during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries – persecutions were common under Trajan (98-117), Decius (249-251), and Valerian (253-260)

Hostility toward the Church increased following the celebrations of Rome's millennium in 247, in which many Christians refused to take part; Decius required all people living in the empire to produce a *libellus* certifying that he/she had sacrificed to the pagan gods in the presence of imperial witnesses

Valerian forbade public meetings for worship and ordered bishops to be killed (after the death of Pope St. Sixtus II in 258, the Church in Rome decided not to elect a new bishop until after Valerian's death)

The Great Persecution – 303-313 – begun by Diocletian (emperor from 284-305) when the Oracle of Apollo declared that Christians were causing false oracles and disloyalty in the army; an edict issued by Diocletian declared that all churches be destroyed, Bibles and other Christian books surrendered, and all public meetings of Christians forbidden; later edicts ordered the arrest of all clergy and sacrifice to the pagan gods on pain of death; enforcement of edicts was more widespread in the East than in the West

#### Martyrs

With the exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John the Apostle, all recognized Saints from the first 250 years of Christianity were martyrs; St. Martin of Tours (d. 397) was first non-martyr to be venerated as a Saint.

St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 115) – first to use the phrase *Catholic Church* and earliest writing referring to the Bishop of Rome as the supreme head of the Church; martyred in Rome under Trajan

Ss. Perpetua and Felicity (d. 203) – martyred laywomen in northern Africa; most extensive surviving account of martyrdom

Pope St. Sixtus II (d. 258) – martyred Bishop of Rome under Valerian; one of the most revered early Christian martyrs

## **THE CHURCH DEFENDED**

Heresy - believing a doctrine contradictory to faith as defined by the Church, while maintaining faith in Christ - e.g., denying the divinity of Jesus Christ

Apostasy - completely abandoning the Christian faith - e.g., a professed, baptized Christian sacrificing to pagan gods

Schism - separating oneself from the unity of the Church - e.g., denying the leadership of the Pope

## **Defenders of the Faith in the Second and Third Centuries**

St. Irenaeus (130-202) – born in Smyrna (student of St. Polycarp), studied philosophy in Rome, bishop of Lyon; two extant works, including *Against Heresies*, defending the Church against gnosticism

“For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.”

Tertullian (160-220) – born in Carthage, “father of Latin theology,” studied rhetoric and law, concerned with the purity of the Church’s teaching, wrote on moral and doctrinal problems, including: baptism, penance, Trinity, and Incarnation; first to use the phrase *three persons in one God* and the term *Trinity*; first theologian to write in Latin; ended his life as a Montanist

Origen (185-253) – head of catechetical school in Alexandria, wrote over 6,000 brochures, letters, or books; student of Scripture and philosophy, seeking to reconcile the two; ended his life outside the communion of the Church because of differences with his bishop and the bishop of Rome

## **Christian Heresies in the Second and Third Centuries**

### **Gnosticism**

Definition: general term for a variety of beliefs, both Christian and non-Christian. Encountered by St. Paul in Corinth and Colossae. Responsible for most of the non-canonical gospels and other writings during the first 300 years of Christianity. Gnostics generally believed that: 1) they had a secret knowledge (*gnosis*) that was not available to people outside their chosen, limited group; this knowledge often included ideas on the origin of the world and human destiny; 2) salvation was available only to those who had been given this *gnosis*; 3) all material things, including the human body, are evil (dualism); led to either strict asceticism or moral license; 4) God would not take on bodily form, which is evil; therefore, Jesus is divine but not human, rather he is an apparition

Response: St. Irenaeus – it is necessary to have an authoritative, public list of accepted Christian writings (canon of Scripture); appealed to apostolic authority and succession; Christian doctrine does not change over time and among different teachers; within this apostolic teaching is the

consistent belief in Incarnation and the Trinity; Origen – Christ is the key to understanding all Scripture, which can have both a literal and a spiritual sense; Christ alone gives us knowledge

### Docetism

Definition: Gnostic sect centered on Jesus as divine but not human; he was a pure spirit whose appearance was an optical illusion; God would not take on human flesh because it is evil

Response: Tertullian – flesh is an object of God’s love, as well as spirit, so it is possible for God to take on flesh; because God created the world and all that is in it, the world can be redeemed; because God created human beings in their entirety, they are able to be brought to salvation, in their entirety

### Montanism

Definition: Montanus, a Phrygian, and two women in the 170s delivered a “New Prophecy” that they claimed was the Holy Spirit speaking through them and called all Christians to recognize them as the chosen prophets of the Spirit; caused great divisions among Christians based on who believed the prophecy; later, became strict in its morality (pre-dating Novatianism and Donatism)

Response: St. Hippolytus (d. 235) recognized that the divisiveness of Montanism was proof of it being heretical and schismatic; prophecy meant for the whole Church is not given to individuals, and such prophecy does not cause division; rather, all believers have the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

### Novatianism

Definition: What to do with lapsed Christians, especially in times of persecution? View of Novatian (anti-pope elected in 251) that the Church did not have power to declare forgiveness of the sins of murder, adultery, and apostasy; St. Cyprian (d. 258) supported this view initially, but eventually sided with Rome.

Response: Pope St. Cornelius (d. 253) and Pope St. Stephen (d. 256): reconciliation is possible

### Donatism

Definition: Are the sacraments celebrated by apostates valid? Begun when Caecilian was consecrated a bishop in 311 by a “traditor”, another bishop who had surrendered church documents and vessels during the persecutions of Diocletian. Donatus (Bishop of Carthage) and his followers held the view that such sacraments are not valid – they worked to keep the Church pure of apostates, separating themselves from communion with the universal Church and leading to deep and long-lasting schism.

Response: Condemned by the Council of Arles (314) and St. Augustine – the validity of sacraments does not depend on the moral state of the minister but on the proper administration of the sacrament with the proper intention. Donatism survived in some form in northern Africa until the 7<sup>th</sup> Century.

## **Primary Concerns for the Church by the time of Constantine**

Scripture: authority and canon

Doctrine: the nature of the Trinity and the nature of Christ

Morality: reconciliation of lapsed Christians

Unity: role of the Bishop of Rome and the Rule of Faith