

# Church History 101

A Concise Overview

CHRISTOPHER M. BELLITTO



Liguori  
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest:  
Thomas D. Picton, C.Ss.R.  
Provincial, Denver Province  
The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori  
Liguori, Missouri  
www.liguori.org

Copyright 2008 by Christopher M. Bellitto

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bellitto, Christopher M.

Church history 101 : a concise overview / Christopher M. Bellitto.—  
1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7648-1603-1

1. Church history. I. Title. II. Title: Church history one hundred  
one. III. Title: Church history one hundred and one.

BR145.3.B45 2008

270—dc22

2008001886

Scripture quotations are from *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit [Redemptorists.com](http://Redemptorists.com).

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 4 3 2 1

First edition

# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

9

## CHAPTER 1

### THE EARLY CHURCH (CA. 30–500)

12

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH (CA. 500–1500)

44

## CHAPTER 3

### THE REFORMATION CHURCH (CA. 1500–1700)

76

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MODERN CHURCH (CA. 1700–TODAY)

108

## EPILOGUE

139

## INTRODUCTION

Why read church history? There are many reasons, and one of the best—a classic defense of studying history, in fact—comes not from a Christian but from a pagan Roman statesman with the heart of an historian and the soul of a philosopher. Cicero (106–43 BC) wrote in his *De oratore*: “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?”

Applying Cicero’s advice, this review of church history has a modest goal. Catholics need an adult understanding of their faith and history for its own sake as well as to be able to link the Church’s “today” with her past. This overview seeks to help Catholics get started and situated in church history. It is a primer intended to introduce the skeleton of church history to an audience of general readers, parish study groups, RCIA candidates, catechists, and students.

Often, you might read about the “early church” or the “Renaissance popes” without a clear idea of the who-where-when-what-why-and-how of those periods. This slim volume tries to answer a fundamental question—“What did the church look like in this period?”—and to answer that same question four times, following the

## *Introduction*

traditional categorizing of church history into the major headings of the early, medieval, Reformation, and modern Church. You will find that the chunks of centuries among these four headings are uneven chronologically and occasionally overlap a bit. You may also have seen church history divided into other numbers of headings, such as six or seven eras, by ancient, medieval, and modern historians. But to get started, our four headings will suffice because, although deeper study reveals many subtleties (the “high medieval” period, for instance, or “early modern” history), these four eras helpfully illustrate the Church’s story at particular points in her life.

Each chapter has a consistent structure or order of elements. Each chapter also includes a straightforward map and timeline to orient the reader in place and period. The timeline will sometimes identify famous events or people not covered in the text to indicate what else was going on in the world—subject matter you might want to pursue after reading this introductory book. Then each chapter addresses the same quartet of topics:

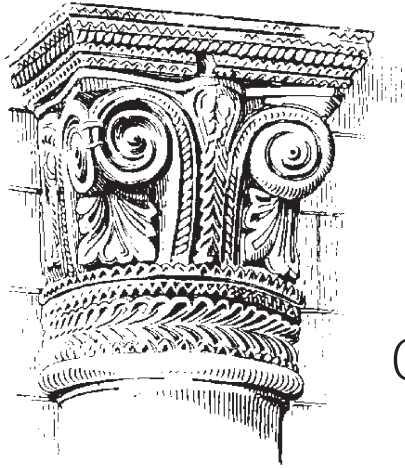
- ❧ First, “The Big Picture” steps back to view the period broadly so we will not fail to understand the most important “macro” issues and events at work.
- ❧ Second, we examine what “The Church’s Hierarchy” (pope, cardinals, bishops, and so on) was doing during this time period.

## Introduction

- ✎ Third, we look at “The Church in the Pews” to ask what Christianity was like for the average person—not unlike the average reader. These two parts taken together avoid an either/or approach; church history entails neither just the “great men (or women)” approach nor the opinion that the only thing that mattered was what occurred in parishes. By looking at the Church’s head *and* her members, to use a theological formula, we will try to see the whole picture and realize that a “both/and” perspective is better than “either/or.”
- ✎ Fourth, having considered many of the same things in each period, we finish by taking a more comparative approach to ask, “What Makes This Period Unique?”

Each chapter concludes with discussion questions and a few accessible works in English for further reading. I have not included footnotes because this is a brief work of synthesis, but my unacknowledged sources include at least those listed.

So now, to follow Cicero’s advice, let us enter the records of history.



## CHAPTER 1

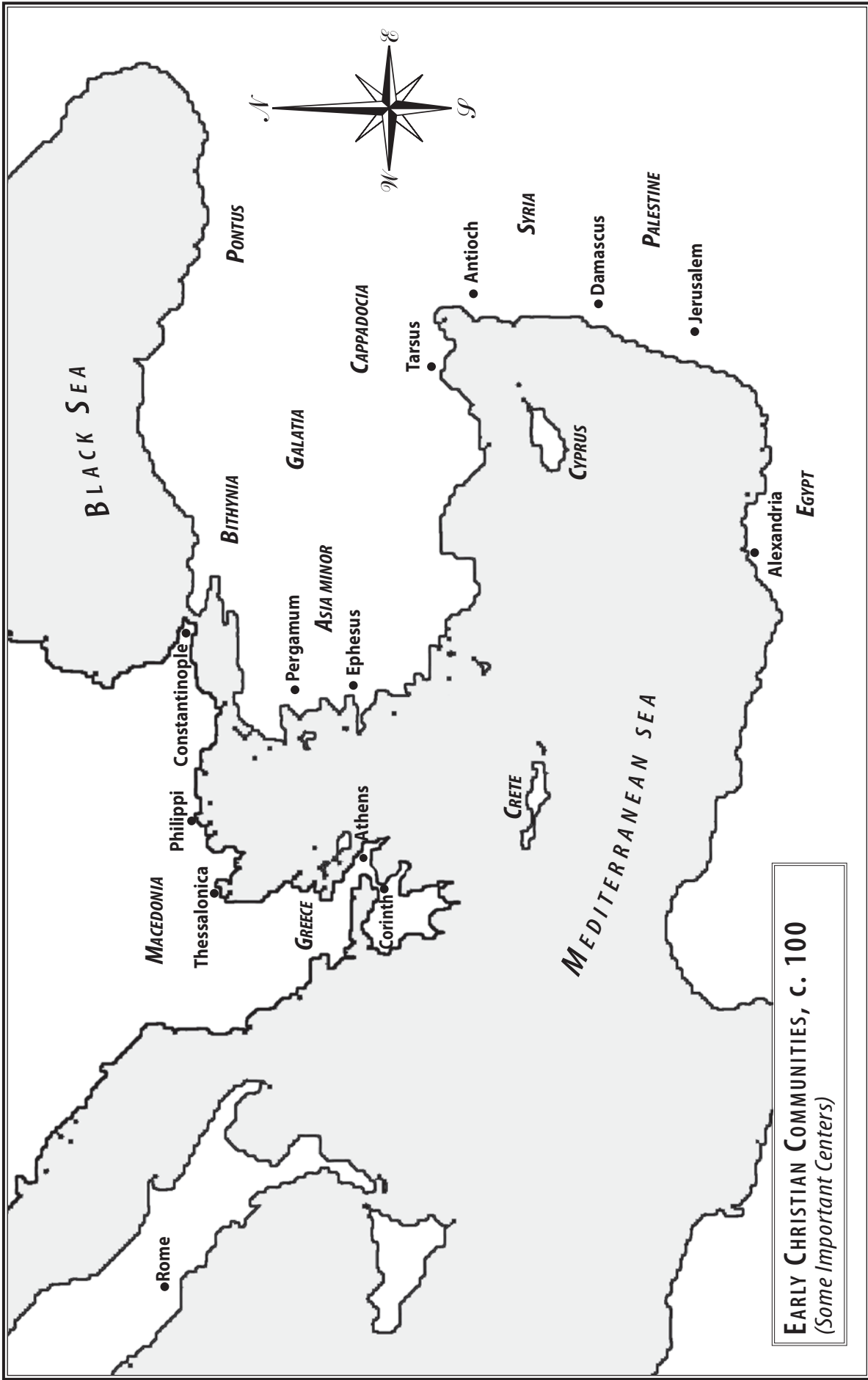
# The Early Church

(ca. 30–500)



## Timeline

ca. 30	Jesus' Passion
ca. 49	"Council of Jerusalem" decides how to spread faith to Jews and Gentiles
ca. 64	Peter and Paul martyred in Rome during the persecution of Christians that resulted from Roman Emperor Nero's burning down of the city
70	Jerusalem destroyed by Romans; Jewish diaspora begins
ca. 70–100	New Testament written
79	Mt. Vesuvius buries Pompeii
ca. 100–300	Apologists explain and defend Christianity to pagans
ca. 193–305	Episodic, systematic persecution of Christians, during which time, as it is said, "The blood of the martyrs watered the seeds of the church"
201	Roman Empire makes conversion to Judaism and Christianity a capital crime
250	Roman Emperor Decius declares that every Roman citizen must sacrifice to Roman gods on pain of death
ca. 251–356	Antony of Egypt, influential ascetic, father of Christian monasticism
ca. 260–339	Eusebius of Caesarea, "father of church history"
303–305	Last widespread persecution of Christians, begun under Emperor Diocletian
313	Constantine's Edict of Milan tolerates and favors Christianity
325	First Council of Nicaea
380–381	Christianity made official and only religion in the Roman Empire
381	First Council of Constantinople
ca. 382	Books of the Old and New Testament settled into a "canon." Jerome begins translating them from Hebrew and Greek into Latin (the Vulgate Bible) in Bethlehem
354–430	Augustine of Hippo, bishop and theologian
410	City of Rome sacked
431	Council of Ephesus
ca. 435	Patrick brings Christianity to Ireland
451	Council of Chalcedon
476	Traditional year for end of Roman Empire; bishop of Rome steps into power vacuum



**EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES, c. 100**  
*(Some Important Centers)*



## THE BIG PICTURE

---

Although rooted in Judaism, Greek philosophy, and the Roman Empire, Christianity essentially had to start from scratch.

Christians offered the world innovative theological concepts but had few structures to spread the word. Many early Christians were Jews like the apostles and Paul, so they began to preach in synagogues, while gentiles who were not Jews could not at first turn to established churches, bishops, or catechetical programs to learn about the faith. Before any of these situations could develop, Christianity had to establish its identity.

Looking closely at the earliest Roman sources, it appears that they thought the Christians were Jews, which in fact many were in the first years after Jesus. Indeed, we can talk about a “Jesus community” within Judaism in the period following Pentecost, around AD 30. Quickly, however, non-Jewish people became Christians and by the end of the first century we can clearly see a distinct Christianity alongside Judaism and Roman paganism. We hear of *Christianoi*—“men of Christ”—in Antioch as early as AD 40. By 112, a bishop named Ignatius could refer for the first time in history to the “catholicity” of Christian-

ity. He meant the new faith had spread via missionaries throughout the “universal world” of the Mediterranean basin controlled by Rome. Each local church was somehow connected to a larger “worldwide” religion.

The four gospels represent this expanding audience and date to the first century of church history, which is sometimes called the *apostolic period* as distinguished from what followed: the *subapostolic period* (“after” the first apostles). Mark was the first Gospel written, probably in the late 60s or maybe very early 70s, for an audience perhaps once grounded in Judaism but moving rapidly away to include more non-Jews. Matthew’s Gospel was written in AD 80–90, more for Jewish Christians and for gentiles who needed to have some Jewish customs explained. At roughly the same time, the author of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles—as a gentile writing for gentiles—emphasized Jesus’ role as a *universal* savior. John’s Gospel from late in the first century addressed a later generation with different concerns, especially those Christians who were being persecuted as outsiders. Parts of the rest of the New Testament, particularly letters attributed to Paul, predate these gospels, while other writings appeared about the same time or just afterward. Lists of just what books made up the Christian Scriptures circulated from the middle of the second century. By the late 300s, there was a general consensus about which books (twenty-seven in total) constituted the New Testament and it was translated from Greek into the Latin Vulgate—the standard version of the Bible for Christians for a millennium—by Jerome around AD 400.

## *The Early Church*

Romans had a place for Jews within their empire: Judaism was called a *religio licita*, something like a permitted religion, which allowed Jews to practice their faith as long as they didn't make trouble and paid their taxes. Christianity, on the other hand, seemed to be a threat. One of the first things Christians had to do, after explaining their unique belief that Jesus was the Son of God, was to convince Roman officials that they were neither criminals nor a threat to the peace and security of the empire. Enter a group of writers we call *apologists*, referring not to a modern statement of being sorry but to a Greek word for a person who explains or defends a particular position.

Apologists (often also called *Church Fathers*, but including others, among them women) followed several strategies to help establish Christian identity because, like the gospel writers, they were addressing a variety of audiences. Some apologists emphasized Christianity's ties with Greco-Roman philosophy and beliefs while others highlighted the uniqueness of Christianity, paying particular attention to its monotheistic (one-God) faith. And apologists were especially active during the first few centuries after Jesus when the Roman Empire was spreading and then falling (up to the sixth century). Some apologists were zealous, rigid, and self-righteous, but others were open-minded, engaging, and amiable. Most were well schooled in Greco-Roman learning and spoke the language of the educated pagan elite as these apologists tried to convince the Romans that Christians were friends and not enemies of Rome.

Apologists had a range of voices: there were pastoral