

THE
Living
CHURCH

Old Treasures, New Discoveries

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CHRISTOPHER M. BELLITTO, PhD



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*In fond and grateful memory of
Lawrence Boadt, CSP (1942–2010):
Teacher, scholar, editor, publisher,
but above all a kind man and a gentle priest*

Preface

THIS BOOK ISN'T meant to be a complete history of the Church. Rather, it's intended to explore seven key aspects of the Church's life. Its goal is simple: to demonstrate briefly how the Church, over the course of two thousand years, has developed these seven aspects in the face of changing circumstances and diverse contexts. These are not the only seven aspects of the Church's life that are important, of course, but they are essential and allow us to see the process of development at work. They also permit the student of Church history to see the Church working at the top of her hierarchy, in the pews, and in the several layers of men and women in between. Church history, after all, not only trickles down but bubbles up, too.

We'll begin with three essentials: how she's organized as a structured institution, how her sacred writings came to be set into an authoritative canon (and who says so), and how beliefs were codified into doctrine. Then we'll pursue how the Church lives by looking at how the Mass developed, followed by the path to seven sacraments—a

pair of chapters that are linked since Catholics celebrate sacraments in the context of liturgy. We'll consider how the Church has related with other faiths, which we should say up front is a troubling and difficult part of Church history. But it's also a chapter with some surprises, advances, and opportunities as we live in a world of truly global interaction at the start of the Church's third millennium. Finally, we'll explore how being a layperson has evolved over the centuries, sometimes dramatically and with profound implications for today and tomorrow.

Change is not new in Church history; it didn't start with Martin Luther in 1517 or Vatican II in the 1960s. It's important to remember that there was no catechism, code of canon law, complete Bible, or list of seven sacraments that came flying down from heaven after Jesus returned to his Father on ascension Thursday. Statements of what the Church teaches and how she will celebrate her faith and beliefs took time to come into being. While doctrine doesn't change, the way the Church explains doctrine and lives the faith does. To put it another way: divine law doesn't change, but human law changes frequently. The challenge is to know the difference and to make sure that change and development begin from real roots and grow organically, authentically, and within the appropriate authority system. Studying Church history helps us figure out what can and can't develop, what should and shouldn't change, whether developments happened too quickly or slowly, and whether change was explained well or not.

Change and development can be two very different things, of course, but they aren't unrelated. Often, a change looks like just that: something new. But as you study Church history, what we often find is that what's billed as change is in fact development—sometimes

very slowly and over time—but in other cases, the Church has indeed switched gears. We can call this organic development, and we find that Church traditions, beliefs, and practices often evolve naturally, if sometimes fluidly, and at other times in fits and starts. Some very good recent studies have demonstrated, for example, how the Church first opposed freedom of conscience and usury, but then permitted these practices. On the other hand, the Church at one time permitted slavery in certain circumstances, but has now long been opposed to it and is a world leader in human rights discussions. Even something like the creation of a papal monarchy in the Middle Ages, which most historians call a papal revolution, had its seeds in ideas and practices from centuries before. And, of course, there is still a vibrant discussion about whether Vatican II's renewal (*aggiornamento*) represented a break with the past, continuity with prior traditions, or some creative combination. The Church's best scholars are still working on this recent history by using intriguing and nuanced phrases that really make you think: development or discontinuity in continuity, continuity in development, novelty in continuity, innovation within tradition, revolutionary evolution, and evolutionary revolution. You'll find examples of many of these combinations in this book.

A note about this book

THIS BOOK REWORKS a prior book of mine, *Ten Ways the Church has Changed* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), but it covers some new material, is structured differently, and has been rewritten and edited in a number of ways. I edited and added to four chapters, combined four other chapters into two, added a new chapter on Scripture, reconceived other material into an epilogue, and left out two other chapters, though I drew on them here and there. I've also added discussion questions in the hope that this book might be used in parish religious education programs or reading circles.

I'm grateful to Father Mathew Kessler, CSsR, and Luis Medina of Liguori Publications and to the Liguori production and marketing teams for making this book happen. Finally, and as always, I thank Karen Bellitto, my wife and my best friend, for being her and for helping me be me.



CHAPTER 1

An Organized Church

HOW SHE OPERATES

In the beginning, local but linked

The subject of how the Church is organized and operates is related to the branch of theology known as ecclesiology: the nature, structure, and function of the Church. Not surprisingly, we soon come to the question of who is in charge of the Church and just as quickly to conflicting answers. To begin, when we think about the early Church, today's model has to be the furthest thing from our minds. There was

no centralized papacy in the first centuries after Jesus, but rather a series of local Churches, each of which gradually came to be led by one bishop. Perhaps the best image is that of a chain of islands—an archipelago of Christian communities spread across the Mediterranean shores—each of which was generally independent, but often in contact with others. The communities sent letters of encouragement and questions to each other. When Christians traveled, they surely sought out other Christians in the towns they visited, for safety if nothing else, because Christianity was still an underground and illegal religion before the early fourth century.

In this context, several developments occurred slowly. The first concerned the organization of the new Christians. Since the first Christians were Jews, it was natural to adapt the synagogue's model of elders, readers, and those who cared for the material needs of the congregation. For a time, the word synagogue (gathering) was used alongside *ekklesia* (Church or assembly). As Christianity moved away from Judaism, particular Christian offices emerged: bishops, priests, and deacons—who were sometimes grouped together as elders—and then lectors, catechists, and others. Elders were sometimes called by the Latin word *saniores* (the older or wiser ones) and appear to have originally been lay leaders who oversaw the community. After the third century, as ordination developed more formally, this category of elders dropped away.

The second development was moniscopacy: each community gathered under the leadership and direction of one man, the local bishop, who personified the community. During the sporadic persecutions by the Roman Empire's authorities, it was often the bishop who was killed in the hope that the community would be decapitated—but Christianity continued to grow, to the Romans'

disappointment and amazement. The bishop (*episkopos*, borrowing the word for a supervisor or inspector) traced his heritage and authority to the original apostles. He played several roles: administrative leader, chief preacher, judge, and central liturgical celebrant. We hear of the bishop's importance in a letter written by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, who was martyred in Rome around 110–117. Writing to the Christian community in Smyrna, he advised: "Apart from the bishop let no one do anything pertaining to the Church," adding a moment later, "Let the people be present wherever the bishop appears, just as the Catholic Church is wherever Jesus Christ is." In each community, one liturgy was celebrated each Sunday, further linking the bishop with the Eucharist as the unifying center of the Church's body.

Did this mean bishops were all on an equal footing and did not come under other bishops? The answer depended on who you asked. For Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage in north Africa who died as a martyr in 258, the episcopacy "is one; the individual members have each a part, and the parts make up the whole." Cyprian considered the bishop of Rome the source of the episcopacy because of Peter's designation by Christ as the origin of unity. But for Cyprian, "certainly the other apostles were what Peter was, endowed with an equal fellowship both of honor and power; but the beginning is made from unity, that the Church of Christ may be shown to be one." Cyprian was not always so diplomatic in striking this delicate balance. In 256, he led a council in north Africa that challenged Stephen I, the bishop of Rome (254–257). Cyprian stressed that Peter had not claimed supremacy over Paul nor required obedience. He complained that the bishop of Rome had set himself up as a kind of autocratic and intimidating bishop of bishops. This council asserted that the

Roman bishop could confirm their decisions on appeal, but Rome could not reverse them. Intervention was certainly not welcome, and we see this in the language of the bishops' letters. Many bishops addressed each other—including the bishops of Rome—as brother, but Damasus I (366–384) of Rome called bishops his sons.

A third development occurred in Rome that both complemented and challenged monepiscopacy in the Christian archipelago. There was a sense that Peter's mandate from Christ and his presence in the empire's capital gave that city a special role. It was not uncommon for Christian bishops outside Rome to disagree with the bishop of Rome in this period, as Cyprian did, but the bishop of Rome was steadily developing toward a more central and dominating role. Supporters of Roman authority stated that a bishop's power of the keys passed through Rome, just as Peter passed the authority that Christ had given to him along to the other apostles. This argument said that, while local bishops have pastoral responsibility for their part of the Church, it is the bishop of Rome who has the ultimate and full pastoral responsibility for the entire Church.

Callistus I (217–222) was the first bishop of Rome to invoke Petrine authority explicitly, for example, and Stephen I used the phrase *cathedra Petri* (seat or chair of Peter) to describe his own place in Rome. Julius I (337–352) was angry when bishops who had gathered at Antioch in 341 did not inform him of their deliberations and actions. Julius wrote to them: "Do you not realize that it has been the custom for word to be sent to us first, that in this way just decisions may be arrived at from this place [Rome]?" Two years later, in 343, a local council at Sardica recognized Julius' authority and right of appeal. By the time of Innocent I (401–417), the bishop of Rome was declaring that nothing done by the clergy, no matter how

far away they were from the imperial capital, could be considered settled definitively until the pope gave his approval.

A fourth development linked these others. As the Church grew larger and more extensive geographically, a system of organization modeled on that of the Roman Empire's dioceses (administrative regions) naturally had to develop. Gradually, an urban bishop was in charge of a local city as well as its surrounding rural district. Bishops of larger cities oversaw them; the most famous of these are the five patriarchates of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. Four hundred years after Jesus' resurrection, then, Christianity had clearly come far from a small group of unorganized followers on the edge of the Roman Empire.

Medieval centralization

With the disintegration of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, the cities of Europe declined and the population moved into the countryside. Christianity's leaders, the bishops, took over civil leadership positions left by the Roman city officials while parishes also grew in rural areas. It was a time of growth and expansion for Christianity, but because of the empire's fall, communication slowed down and coordination among dioceses was not always efficient or extensive. In a sense, the archipelago had expanded, but also grew further apart. The advantage was that the old Roman administrative system was already in place. Into its power vacuum walked the Church and in particular her bishops, who adopted Roman law systems for their own use, the Roman *lingua franca* of Latin as the official language of the Church, and the Romans' organizational structure to administer a faith that was becoming the dominant belief system throughout Europe.

As these organizational developments occurred on the local level, the Church took steps to organize herself on a larger scale. Metropolitan bishops in charge of other bishops now came to be called archbishops. The bishops below them were suffragan bishops who came under their archbishop's authority, supervision, and jurisdiction. This system ensured that conflicts, questions, and appeals could be pursued in an orderly and fair manner up the hierarchical chain of authority. Once more, the Roman Empire's structure was filled in by Christianity. Just as Roman dioceses became Christian dioceses (first as neighborhoods and then as larger regions), the boundaries of the Roman provinces were roughly followed as the archbishops' provinces or spheres of authority. Provinces, in turn, were grouped into even larger regions. At the highest layers, even as popes were centralizing their authority, general councils were arguing—in the most extreme case—that a council and not a pope was the ultimate authority in the Church. What was at stake was the very organizing and unifying principle of the Church's structural life.

The papacy in the Middle Ages took a series of steps to consolidate its authority and power not only versus secular governments but also within the Church herself. Medieval popes wanted to be the ultimate executive, legislative, and judicial authorities within the body of the Church. One of the most important operational developments in this period was the college of cardinals, which popes used to spread the power of the papacy. Although cardinals had existed in some form for more than five hundred years, the medieval popes made the college more of an institution with certain rights and privileges—something like the ancient Roman Senate, a medieval royal curia, or today's presidential cabinet. Only the pope could name cardinals, and he increasingly appointed them from a broader geographic area

throughout Europe. In the twelfth century alone, three hundred new cardinals were named, although there were usually only a few dozen at any one time. They became his inner circle in Rome and his voice as legates across Europe. As the papacy developed financial, legal, liturgical, and secretarial departments, the popes put cardinals in charge as their most trusted advisers, which made the college and curia training grounds for future popes.

The cardinals' most important role was to elect the pope. In 1059, Pope Nicholas II gave the cardinals the lead role in papal elections, although the major Roman families and even the sitting pope could make their preferences known and exercise some influence, as they'd done for several centuries. A general council, Lateran III in 1179, said that elections no longer had to be unanimous to be valid: a two-thirds majority would suffice for a candidate's election. Another council, Lyons II in 1274, gave the Church the conclave, which locked the cardinals away until they chose a pope. Not only was this measure intended as an attempt to cut off outside interference; it was also meant to speed the election along, as the Church had recently gone through nearly three years without a pope because the cardinals could not settle on one man.

Meanwhile, proponents of general councils were promoting the idea that the pope is a kind of delegated authority figure or chief executive officer, with the people of God as the ultimate authority in the Church. This, in turn, was based on an ecclesiology that said the Church was the mystical body of Christ (to use Paul's image in Corinthians). Practically speaking—to put it in less theological and more modern political terms—the people of God did not abdicate their sovereignty to the pope but looked to him and their bishops to exercise leadership in their name without ever becoming unac-

countable. On another level, since everyone could not participate in Church matters, some type of representative institution must voice the people's concerns in an orderly and efficient manner. This is what led to the upsurge in conciliarism, whose several versions assigned varying exercises of authority to the pope. The fundamental questions ran on a handful of interlocking levels: how to balance the bishop of Rome as the successor to Peter with the bishops of other places as successors to the apostles with the power of the college of cardinals with the history of councils that helped run the Church since her first centuries. The goal was somehow to balance the singular authority of the pope with the corporate nature of the Church as the mystical body of Christ with many members gathered around and unified by the Eucharist.

There is a clear crossover here with some emerging secular developments, such as Magna Carta (1215), which talked about trials by jury, due process, and a king bound by the consent of those he governed. Parliaments in England were developing as challenges to royal authority, and the same was true of representative institutions throughout Europe, with different degrees of success. Especially in Italy, city-states modeled on the ancient Greek *polis* as well as communes experimented with representative governments. However, there is a long Church history of representation and participation, as well. Monks and nuns had, for centuries, made decisions together in their monasteries and convents, even up to the point of electing their own abbots and abbesses. Religious orders like the Dominicans had done the same since the early thirteenth century. In some cities, priests elected their own bishops, as cardinals elected the popes.

Conciliar activity and authority was not a medieval innovation or heresy. Throughout the first thousand years of the Church, councils

on the local, regional, and universal levels had met to consider the great theological and disciplinary questions of the day. The earliest—Nicaea in 325—was called not by a pope but by the emperor Constantine, yet its creed set the standard for what Christians say they believe about Jesus. Other general councils had little or no papal participation, although popes gradually played a larger role in the eight ecumenical councils that met in the first millennium. What changed in the Middle Ages was that popes tried to control the general councils: indeed, four Lateran councils met in the pope's own palace in Rome in 1123, 1139, 1179, and 1215. These were very papal events, but when the papacy began to lose its moral authority and become bogged down in pomp and politics, general councils stepped in to claim increased authority. The bottom fell out during the Great Western Schism (1378–1417) when two and then three papacies (and subsequently two and then three colleges of cardinals) competed for power.

Into this debate stepped the General Council of Constance (1414–1418), which continued to meet even after the pope who called it ran away in the middle of the night when it was clear he was going to be deposed and not reelected by the general council's representatives. In April 1415, Constance declared that the highest authority in the Church is a general council:

“This holy council of Constance...declares, first that it is lawfully assembled in the Holy Spirit, that it constitutes a general council, representing the Catholic Church, and that therefore it has its authority immediately from Christ; and that all men, of every rank and condition, including the pope himself, [are] bound to obey it in matters concerning the faith, the abolition of the schism, and the reformation of the church of God in its head and its members.”

After deposing two of the three popes and forcing the third to resign, Constance oversaw the selection of a unifying pope, Martin V (1417–1431), who was elected by a one-time-only extension of voting beyond the usual colleges of cardinals to include conciliar representatives. Before adjourning, Constance tried to make general councils a regular and not extraordinary feature of the Church's life. A decree named *Frequens* stated that a general council must meet frequently: once every ten years. For the next three decades, popes fought with general councils and these assertions. A series of strong popes eventually fought back the conciliar challenge. Pope Pius II (ironically, a former conciliarist) in 1460 slammed conciliarists as “imbued with the spirit of rebellion” and condemned conciliarism as “this pestilent poison” and as “erroneous and detestable.”

By the end of the Middle Ages, then, the papacy was once more reasserting its ultimate authority, although it was yet again damaging itself with political patronage and secular matters. Conciliarism struggled to reassert itself, but by the time the next general council met, at Trent (1545–1563), it was clearly a council of bishops under the pope's leadership, whose decisions had to be approved and promulgated by the pope, otherwise they would have had no authority whatsoever. These bishops threw their efforts into revitalizing the Church at its basic level—in parishes—and that is where they made their stand in helping the Church recover from the conciliar and Protestant challenges.

Any discussion of how the Church during the Reformations considered the question of ecclesiology and of how the Church should be organized and governed must take into account the competing Protestant ecclesiologies. Protestants sought to return the Church to its earliest models of decentralization, to greater participation by

the laity, and (for those Protestant churches with bishops) to a role for the bishop that was fairly independent and certainly not under the authority of a pope. Catholics responded to the Protestant challenges by reasserting very strongly the very necessity and legitimacy of the episcopacy and especially the papacy. After the Council of Trent, a great deal of effort was spent on centralization in Rome. During these centuries, the Church was organized and governed under the leadership of Rome. The year after Trent adjourned in 1563, Rome issued a new index of forbidden books as well as a profession of faith that embodied the careful doctrinal language Trent had worked out to restate the faith in light of the Protestant challenges. A few years later, an official catechism was published to teach this faith.

To oversee this continuing centralization, popes in this period were selected for their administrative skills: most had canon law backgrounds, few had advanced training in theology. They emphasized their roles as absolute monarchs of the papal states, that is, as temporal rulers. When they turned their attention to spiritual matters, they took a more administrative and less pastoral approach, too. They were not, however, the scandalous Renaissance popes of the prior generation, and indeed they were largely successful in their attempts at reorganizing the Church. They demonstrate the fact that the papacy had to compete with other monarchies and bureaucracies of the age. As the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine put it early in the seventeenth century, the Church is a community just like the kingdom of France or the republic of Venice.

But we should quickly add that the Church's organization did not operate exclusively at the top during these centuries. Trent empowered bishops to implement its reform decrees and bring the Church back to life. The council had mandated that bishops live in

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