

Edited by Fr. Jack Wintz, O.F.M.; designed by Robert Roose
© 1987 St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic St., Cincinnati, OH 45210

From Pentecost to Vatican II

Ten 'Peak Moments' of Church History

By Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

Before he left them, Jesus assured his followers that he was not simply tossing their future to the four winds. Rather, his community would be guided throughout history by a special wind—a Wind known as the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit of Jesus is active through the whole sweep of Church history, we can assume its guidance all the more intensely at those turning points of history we sometimes call 'peak moments.'

This *Catholic Update* may well make the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the sketchiest outline of Church history ever written. In reality, it's only one author's opinion of the top 10 dates of Catholic history—10 major events making the most explosive impact on the Church's development throughout the centuries.

How does one choose the 10 most important turning points in Catholic Church history? Not easily. I followed three guidelines in determining my 10 choices. *First*, the event selected had to advance the Church's mission of salvation in a fundamental way. *Second*, the event had to generate an enduring and dynamic faith in Christ. *Third*, its impact must still affect the Church today.

My choices, of course, are not beyond dispute. Another observer could persuasively pick alternative events. Subjective judgment is certainly involved here. In any case, our 10 turning points are simply a few landmarks showing the Church's journey of faith from Pentecost to Vatican II—an era still evolving under the Spirit's guidance.

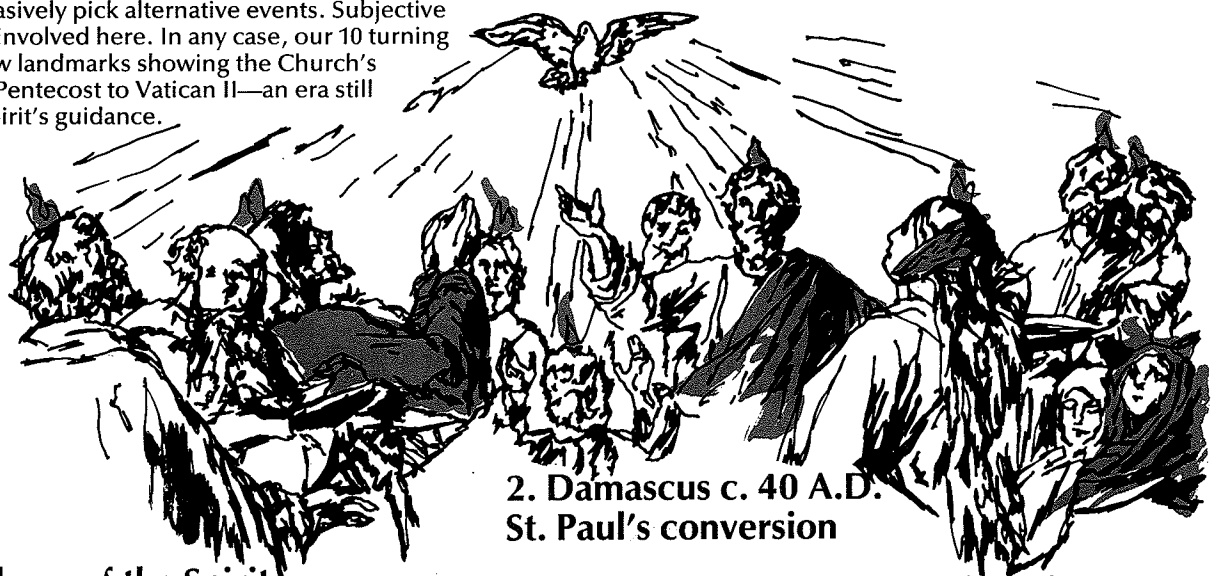
Spirit was sent to sanctify the Church forever. Now all believers will have access to the Father, through Christ in the one Spirit. Pentecost marks the birth of the Church.

What happened inside the Upper Room is manifested outside to the world. "The Holy Spirit was already at work in the world before Christ was glorified. On Pentecost, the Spirit came to be with the Church forever. On that day the Church was publicly revealed to the multitude. The Gospel began to be spread among the nations by means of preaching" (Vatican II, *Decree on Missionary Activity*, 4).

The "era of the Church" began at Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles offer the first account of the Spirit's activity in the Church. Empowered by the Spirit, the first Christians felt capable of fulfilling the mission entrusted to them. The Holy Spirit, who worked mightily in the first believers, is continually at work in the Church to the present day. The "era of the Church" marches through the centuries to our own day. It looks forward to the year 2000, the third millennium, to continue the work of salvation.

1. Pentecost The Church is born of the Spirit.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said to the apostles, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever, the Spirit who reveals the truth about God" (John 14:16-17). That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, when the



2. Damascus c. 40 A.D. St. Paul's conversion

The first Christians were converts from Judaism. Then, at Antioch, Gentiles were invited to join the Church. "Believers went to Antioch and proclaimed the message to the Gentiles, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:20-21).

The community did not oblige these converts to be circumcised or to follow Jewish Law, as was customary among Jewish Christians. The number of Gentile converts grew dramatically. The original believers feared the newcomers would swamp the Church and rob it of its Jewish character. The first believers aroused controversy when they insisted that Gentile converts be compelled to accept circumcision and Jewish Law. The dispute threatened to destroy the unity of the Church. The infant Church faced the question of acculturation and adaptation at the very dawn of Christianity.

Saul of Tarsus, known by his Roman name of Paul, did the most to solve the problem. As a zealous and brilliant rabbi, he had persecuted Christians. But on the road to Damascus he experienced a profound conversion to Christ. His experience of the risen Christ led him to see that the Gospel transcended cultural limits.

"I no longer have a righteousness of my own, the kind that is gained by obeying the Law. I now have a righteousness that is given through faith in Christ. All I want to know is Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:9-10).

The Church convened a Council in Jerusalem, probably in the year 49. The participants adopted Paul's missionary principle which stressed the universal scope of salvation and called for the adapting of the Gospel to new circumstances without losing its essential truth. It enabled a dynamic Church to evangelize the Mediterranean world. It backs the Church's present mission effort to bring all peoples the Good News of Christ.

3. Milan 313 A.D. Constantine wins freedom for the Church

In the three centuries that followed the death of the last apostle, the Church faced threats of disintegration internally and externally. The community of believers sought a way to hold the far-flung Church together and maintain its unity. To this end they created a system of authority based on bishop, canon and creed.

Externally, the Church faced an even greater threat—the awesome and hostile power of the Roman state. Normally, Rome tolerated all religions. But when it realized that Christianity wanted to triumph over all rival religions, Rome declared war on Christians. Nero initiated the first persecution in 64. Nine major pogroms (persecutions) against Christians ensued in the following centuries. But the blood of the martyrs became the seed of a growing Church.

As the Church grew, so did the ferocity of Roman opposition. The prelude to change came in a battle between Constantine and Maxentius in 312. Constantine had a vision of Christ, who told him to ornament the shields of his soldiers with Christ's

monogram, the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*. Constantine won the battle and attributed the victory to Christ. He became emperor of the West and an advocate of Christianity.

In the year 313, he met with the emperor of the eastern half of the empire at Milan. The two emperors agreed on a policy of complete religious tolerance. Under Constantine, Christianity became the favored religion. The Church came out of the catacombs and entered the palaces of power, for good and for ill, as subsequent history shows. It was not until Vatican II that the Church espoused the religious liberty for others that it accepted from Constantine.

4. Chalcedon 451 A.D. Christ's divine/human natures affirmed

The greatest doctrinal controversy in the history of the Church centered on the meaning of Christ. Was Jesus really human and really divine? How were the humanity and divinity of Jesus essentially united?

The story begins with Arius of Alexandria. His teaching about Christ began with Proverbs 8:22: "The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways." Arius argued that "before he was begotten, or ordained, or established, *he did not exist.*" Hence the Son of God had a beginning and could change and sin. Effectively this was a denial of the divinity of Christ. The Council of Nicaea in 325 condemned this teaching and asserted Christ's divinity.

A century later the issue arose again. In Antioch, Theodore of Mopsuestia so stressed the humanity of Christ that it seemed as though the divinity of Christ was not important. Meanwhile in Alexandria, a scholar named Cyril so stressed the divinity of Christ that he appeared to discard Christ's humanity.

The issue was resolved at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Council declared that "the two natures (divine and human) are united without change, and without division, and without confusion in Christ." Thus Christ is one divine person in two natures—human and divine.

That key teaching about Jesus remains relevant in the contemporary Church as new exaggerations about Christ's humanity and divinity—one seeming to exclude the other—require new correcting and balancing.

5. Monte Cassino 520 A.D. The Christianization of the barbarians

Officially, the fall of the Roman Empire occurred in 476. Waves of barbarian armies swept into Europe and dismantled the civil structures of the empire. Something was needed to restore order to the chaos they bred. Someone was needed to offer a way to stabilize and evangelize these new hordes of people.



Pope Gregory the Great, who led the Church from 590-604, brought order to the chaos. He established the popes as the de facto rulers of central Italy. He strengthened the papal primacy over the Churches of the West. He left behind a body of writings that strongly influenced medieval thought.

But, in some ways even more influential, St. Benedict had begun at an earlier date the response the Church needed to stabilize and evangelize the barbarians. He founded the Benedictine Order at Monte Cassino in 520. From that house of work and prayer, the monks went forth and created a network of monasteries all over Europe.

These farmer monks, with their vow of stability, were a godsend to the nomadic barbarians. The monks taught them the values of agricultural living as well as the Good News of Jesus Christ. The monks planted in them the seeds of medieval Christendom as well as the basis of the civilization that would become known as Europe.

The Irish monks of Columba had preceded the Benedictines in northern Europe. But their ascetic otherworldliness did not meet the practical needs of the barbarian people. Their tribal view of organization did not suit the demand of a Europe that required an administrative style more akin to the proven success of the Roman Empire's system. The Benedictines possessed a spiritual and practical view of life that made them more relevant to people's religious and secular needs. Thus they gradually replaced the Columban monasteries.

Today the Church faces the challenge of a Third World seeking order, humanity and religion in the midst of poverty. The Church's preferential option for the poor and its proclamation of the kingdom of God signals a new response to a civilization's needs in the spirit of the Church's response of the sixth century and those following.

6. Assisi c. 1200 A.D. From monks to mobile friars

The 12th-century revival of commerce caused the growth of new towns and cities. The monks had forged the Church's presence in its rural ministry. The friars would provide the



Church with a dynamic presence in urban ministry. St. Dominic (1170-1221) fashioned an Order to minister to the educated classes inside the new towns. St. Francis (1182-1229) created an Order to minister to the poor and destitute clustered in the slums outside those town walls.

The son of a rich cloth merchant, Francis was a spirited, poetic young man who dreamed of daring deeds of chivalry. After a brief, disillusioning career as a soldier, Francis experienced a conversion to Christ. He stripped himself of all his wealth. Barefoot and penniless he preached a simple trust in God and joy in the wonder of God's creation. Disciples gathered round him and the Franciscan Order was born.

The Franciscans and other orders of friars—Dominicans, Carmelites, Augustinians—developed an urban ministry for the Church just when it needed one. The stability of the monks suited the rural church. The flexibility of the friars was better for the mobile society of the cities. The friars helped found and staff new universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Paris and Padua. They fostered popular devotions like the Christmas crib, the Stations of the Cross and the rosary.

Other key events of this period were: The Great Western Schism (the split in the Roman Catholic Church, 1378-1417, involving two anti-popes at its height), the building of the Gothic Cathedrals, the Crusades and the battles with heresy that led to the Inquisition.

7. Wittenberg 1517 A.D. The Protestant revolt

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, an event that was to signal the start of the Reformation. Corruption affected the Church at all levels. Nearly two thousand marketable Church jobs were for sale. Parish priests were uneducated and ill-equipped for ministry. The Benedictine Rule was a dead letter. The friars were in disarray. Spiritual favors such as indulgences were for sale. Italian politics, not the needs of the universal Church, absorbed the attention of the Renaissance popes.

The Church ignored most of the calls for reform. Luther developed a new vision of the Church as a basis for reform. He rejected the divine establishment of the Church and taught that it was the result of a number of New Testament communities, exclusively human in origin. Those who accepted Luther's position on this found it easy to repudiate the divine origin of the papacy, the hierarchy and the distinction between ordained priesthood and the priesthood of the laity. Scripture alone became the authority.

Other reformers, such as Calvin and Zwingli, advanced the initiatives of Luther. The Church recognized the seriousness of the situation too little and too late. Political and economic factors contributed to the rise of national Churches. A cold war between Catholics and Protestants lasted until the ecumenical movement of the 20th century.

8. Trent 1545-63 A.D. The Counter-Reformation

On December 13, 1545, 30 bishops met at the first session of the Council of Trent. It took 18 years for Trent to complete its work, though the actual working time was only three years. The Council defined key doctrines of the Church: the necessity of both Scripture and tradition, the importance of good works aided by grace, the seven sacraments, the hierarchical Church, the divine institution of the priesthood, transubstantiation and

the sacrificial character of the Mass. Seminaries were reformed and papal supremacy reinforced.

Trent sparked the Counter-Reformation, led by saints like Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Ignatius founded the Jesuits, wrote the Spiritual Exercises which became a practical spiritual guide for millions and introduced a new flexibility into religious life that enabled his members to minister on a worldwide scale.

In Spain, the Carmelite reform of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and John of the Cross (1542-1591) built upon the mystical tradition of medieval mystics like Bridget of Sweden, Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Siena, and thus generated a fresh commitment to the inner life of contemplation in the Church.

St. Peter's Basilica was built, crowning an exuberant outpouring of Renaissance art, architecture and music. St. Thomas More (1478-1535) and Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) bequeathed a record of Christian humanism that continues to influence ideals of liberal arts scholarship.

9. Vatican I, 1869-70 A.D. Solidification of papal authority

On the eve of the first Vatican Council, the papal states were gone. The pope had lost his political power, but he vastly expanded his spiritual dominion. The movement called Ultramontanism, applied to papal supporters in northern Europe beyond the Alps, helped the pope exert his authority over the international Church.

Ultramontanists were pope-centered Catholics. Some were political conservatives who saw the pope as a defense against revolutionary ideas. Others were clergy who looked to the pope for protection against the arbitrariness of bishops. Catholics in Germany sought the pope's support against the injustices of their Protestant masters.

They found their man in Pius IX who ruled the Church for 32 years. Their hopes were confirmed at Vatican I which declared the doctrine of papal infallibility. While this Council described the pope's role in the Church, it was unable to speak to the role of bishops because the Franco-Prussian war interrupted the Council proceedings and it was never reconvened.

Vatican I enhanced the potential for papal ministry in the Church. It also spurred an internal spiritual renewal of the Church. Thousands entered seminaries, convents and monasteries. New hospitals and missions sprang up all over the world. Mass attendance was probably the highest in history. Devotional life flourished. Catholicism became a world force to be reckoned with.

10. Vatican II, 1962-65 A.D. Dialogue with the world

Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962. He said the purpose of the Council was "aggiornamento," an "updating" that would be a pastoral response of the Church to the contemporary needs of the modern world.

The 19th-century Church had resisted new movements for religious liberty, and the use of contemporary philosophy in doing theology, as well as the employment of scientific historical research in doing biblical studies. At Vatican II, the Council Fathers cast a more friendly eye on these movements. They approved the concept of religious liberty as articulated especially by the American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray. They accredited theologians skilled in the use of modern philosophy as *periti* (experts). They incorporated the dynamic view of Scripture based on scientific-historical studies of the Bible.

The office of bishop was explained and developed in terms of collegiality "with and under Peter." Direction was given for dialogue with Protestants, Jews and other world religions. They described the Church as a mystery, as the People of God and as an efficacious sacrament of salvation. The Fathers encouraged the laity to participate in the Church's mission and worship.

As at Trent, the most spectacular reform of Vatican II was in the area of liturgy. Vernacular languages were permitted and new rules for the Mass and other sacraments were commissioned. The Council Fathers asked the missionaries to collaborate with people in mission lands for building a better world. At the same time the missionaries were to conduct a dialogue of salvation with all people and call them to salvation in Christ.

In *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), the Fathers summoned the whole Church to dialogue with the whole world to advance the dignity of human beings. The People of God should also demonstrate how the Church's mission of salvation speaks to and assures this dignity for each human being.

Practical applications of this vision have appeared in the Church in Latin America where vigorous efforts have been made on behalf of the social development of the people. The struggle for liberation from various forms of political and economic oppression also resulted from Vatican II. In the United States the Council's vision has also been implemented in the Catholic bishops' pastorals on peace and on the economy.

Jesus' spirit lives on

The above 10 turning points show how the Holy Spirit has led the Church on a journey of faith from Pentecost to Vatican II. These events remind us that Jesus abides with the Church through his Spirit, and that the Father's love for the Church never ceases. Father, Son and Spirit will continue their covenant with the Church, thus inviting us to an active response inspired by our faith-founded hope in the future of the Church and its mission of salvation.

Alfred McBride, O.Praem., is a Norbertine priest who for many years directed the religious education department of the National Catholic Educational Association. He has also served until recently as the president of the University of Albuquerque. He is the author of many books, including St. Anthony Messenger Press's popular The Story of the Church: Peak Moments From Pentecost to the Year 2000. (This book, recommended as supplemental reading, can be ordered at the address on front for \$8.95, including shipping.)

Published with ecclesiastical approval.