

Fostering Faith Insert for Catechist Formation

Introduction to Church History

THEME

Church history is a record of significant events in the 2,000-year old story of the Catholic Church, “the family of God,” guided by the Spirit. “It is only ‘with the eyes of faith’ that one can see her in her visible reality and at the same time in her spiritual reality as bearer of divine life.” (CCC, # 770)

Completing this study lesson will give the catechist one hour of credit toward catechist certification in the curriculum area of Church.

CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to

1. Define the term “Church history.”
2. Articulate why a catechist should have a basic knowledge of our Church history.
3. Identify five basic themes of our Church history.
4. Provide examples of the Church at its best and at its worse.
5. Reflect on recent Church history in the light of their experience.

CATECHISM REFERENCES

759, 767-768, 770-771, 401, 409

FOCUSING THE STUDY

A reflection on five “themes” of Church history provides us with a basic background that can enrich our future study of the specifics and several ages of Church history.

Introduction

To understand ourselves as individuals and members of families it is not unusual to ask specific questions about our family history, ethnic and religious inheritance. Church history asks questions about “the family of God.” Church history is the worldwide story of not only individuals but also of communities – families, parishes, dioceses, and the universal Church. It is the story of how real people have attempted to live out the life and message of Jesus Christ. Through the study of our history we can come to know who we are as Church.

As an introduction to our study of Church history we’ll explore five themes of Church history. These areas will help give you a realistic backdrop to your study of the Church.

1. The People

A recent Filipino newspaper story tells of a young man who defended his not attending Church to his father by arguing that he did not want to sit side by side with those who were adulterers, gamblers, liars, corrupt business persons and politicians. “There is no room for me in a place filled with those who are upsetting to my spirit,” the son said.

The father replied to his son, “I understand your problem being with the sinners. But son, never forget, in Church there is always room for one more hypocrite.”

While many think of religious people as “good,” Rev. Alfred McBride, O.Praem. writes, “For nearly 2,000 years the Catholic Church has housed an unruly family of saints, sinners, and ordinary folks.” Upon our own personal reflections on life in the Church we know this to be true. Indeed, Catholic Mount Carmel Cemetery in Hillside, Illinois is the resting place of many Chicago bishops including Cardinal Joseph Bernardin (1928-1996), beloved by many for his courageous acceptance of illness and death. However, also buried in the Catholic cemetery are local gangster criminals Al Capone and Dion O’Bannion.

Millions have attempted to live the message of Jesus Christ. The Church holds up for us the real lives of thousands of canonized saints, deceased faithful who have led lives of virtue and serve as models and intercessors for us. Some Catholic educators have been inspired by the life of Elizabeth Bayley Seton (1774-1821), the first American born saint who was a convert, wife, mother, widow and founder of a religious community, the Sisters of Charity of Emmitsburg, Maryland. Seton’s establishment of Catholic schools served as a model for Catholic education in the United States.

Many of us have experienced the concern of a person who has acted as a “saint” in our life – a parent, spouse, friend, priest, religious or teacher. The “good” continue to be part of our Church.

However, sin from our earliest days has raised “...its head in countless ways among Christians.” (CCC, # 401) Events such as the Crusades (1095-1270), the Inquisition (1231 and following), and the recent sexual abuse crisis in the American Catholic Church (2002 and following) certainly bring to mind the existence of our communal sins. Individually and collectively we must ask for forgiveness for our sins. Are we becoming more aware of our past failings? Pope John Paul II has asked for forgiveness for the Church’s at times harsh treatment of Jews. In 1992 the Pope exonerated the scientist Galileo (1564-1642) for the Church’s silencing and

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imprisonment of him in 1633 for his views.

Summary: Good and evil have characterized our lives as a Christian community. The Church has been and is today comprised of “saints, sinners, and ordinary folks.”

2. Conversion



In a journey to Rome in the 1930s an adventuresome young man by the name of Thomas Merton (1915-1968) found himself encountering the art of the churches of Rome: “...for the first time in my life, I began to find out something of Who this Person was, that was called Christ...I read more and more of the Gospels and my love for the old churches and their mosaics grew from day to day. Soon I was no longer visiting them for the art. There was something else that attracted me, a kind of interior peace. I loved to be in these holy places.” Merton’s journey brought him to baptism in the Church and his entrance into the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky where his autobiography *The Seven Story Mountain* began a life-long exploration of the relationship of the contemplative life with the world.

Conversion to life in Jesus has been a hallmark of the Church throughout history. The Church has developed due to the lives of untold converts. The first Christians were converts from Judaism. Paul experienced a conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus and became the “Apostle to the Gentiles.”

During the first few centuries of the Church, thousands of Christian men and women were martyred for their belief in Jesus as the Messiah and for their Christian lifestyles. Many were attracted to Christianity because of the commitment of its martyrs. Tertullian in the second century wrote, “The seed of the Church is the blood of Christians.”

Constantine, converted to Christianity in 312, issued the Edict of Toleration in 313, which legalized and changed the face of the Church. St. Augustine (354-430) led a hedonistic life prior to his conversion to Christ and his advancement of the Church through his intellect and writings. An often-quoted phrase from Augustine is “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” You may wish to explore two “modern” converts. St. Elizabeth Stein (1891-1942), a Jewish convert, writer and philosopher, died at the hands of the Nazis at Auschwitz. American Dorothy Day’s (1897-1980) young life moved from love affairs, a brief marriage, an abortion, and birth to a child out of wedlock. Her conversion to Christ and the Church led her to form the Catholic Worker Movement and a life committed to the poor. Proceedings have begun that may lead to her canonization.

Catechists are aware of their ongoing need for conversion and transformation. The question is, “How do we place Christ at the center of our lives?” The stories of “converts” who have gone before us provide us with life experiences for our reflection. Catechists often find themselves in the position of inviting their students to conversion. What an essential ministry!

Summary: Conversion to Christ Jesus has been a continuing experience of our history.

3. Struggle

A young woman volunteered to serve as a 3rd grade catechist in her parish. She “loved children” and wanted to make a contribution. She dreamed of a close community of students gathered around her every week eagerly awaiting her teachings. She started teaching and reality set in – catechizing took more preparation than she had expected and a conflict had arisen with one of her students and his family. With the continuing assistance of her DRE she was able to come to a realistic view of the challenges in proclaiming the Gospel.

We yearn for unity in our lives. St. Paul writes, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

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And yet the existence of struggle, conflict and division is part of our lives and has been part of the life of the Church since its beginnings. Stresses came from inside and outside the Church. A few examples will have to suffice at this point. The early centuries of the Church saw conflict over the exact relationship between Jew and Gentile; the Trinity; the divinity and humanity of Jesus and the role of Mary as mother of God. Tensions between the East and West led to the schism of 1054. Various differences led to the birth of Protestant Churches in the 16th century. Perceived conflicts between reason, science and religion sometimes characterized the modern world. The 21st century sees the Church challenged within by conflicts between “conservative” and “liberal” Catholics while secularism and materialism outside the Church hold sway over many and challenge the life of the Church.

Struggle and conflict can eventually lead to growth, truth and peace in the Lord. But as scripture scholar Diane Bergant points out, “Paul would challenge us, who often take sides against one another, ‘Is Christ divided?’ It is Christ who calls, and it is Christ to whom we all owe our allegiance.”

Summary: While striving toward unity in Christ we realize that struggle has always been part of the life of the Church.

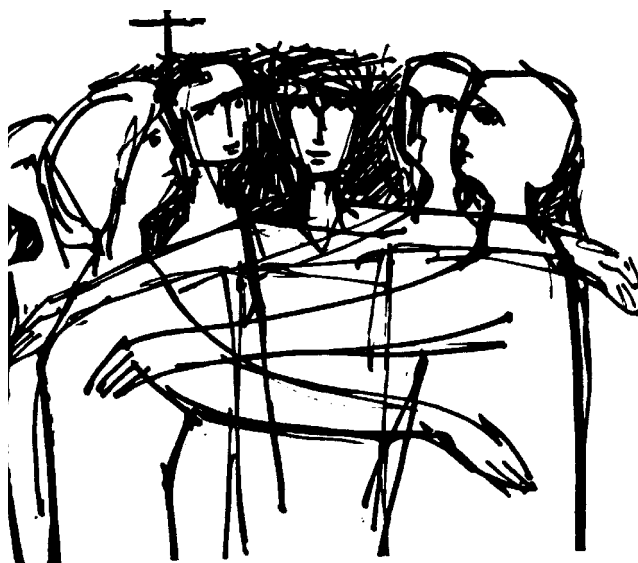
4. Renewal

Over a period of time a parish had become stagnant in most aspects of its life. With the arrival of a new pastor and the support of the community, the parish gradually began to be revitalized as they again responded to Christ’s message.

Reform and renewal has been a constant in the history of the Church. A few examples among many: St. Anthony of Egypt (250), St. Patrick (389-460), and St. Benedict of Nursia (480-547) sought to find new ways to follow Christ’s message. This led to a variety of monastic life styles which impacted the Church and the world. The 12th century saw the founding of religious communities such as the Franciscans (St. Francis of Assisi, 1182-1229; St. Clare of Assisi, 1194-1253) and the Dominicans (St. Dominic Guzman, 1170-1210). The Council of Trent (1545-1563), following the Protestant Reformation, renewed Church life by correcting abuses, clarifying doctrine, and renewing the Church from within. The late 18th and 19th centuries saw a revival of faith and the growth of the Church in North America. The Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965, the twenty-first ecumenical council, focused on “...how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the Gospel of Christ.” Liturgical

renewal, the role of the laity, ecumenism, the Church and the world, collegiality, and religious freedom were some of the Council’s main concerns. The sexual abuse crisis of the 1990s saw the American Church renew itself by forming stringent policies, instituting educational programs and reviewing seminary formation.

Summary: Renewal and reform are a necessary part of the Church’s life.



5. Inculturation

A parish catechetical program finds itself facing many new students as recently arrived immigrants settle in the neighborhood. The DRE with the pastor and parish create new ways to reach out to the newcomers and also open themselves to the immigrants’ spirituality, culture and life.

Inculturation may be seen as a process of “mutual enrichment between the Gospel and culture.” While the Gospel transforms culture, the living tradition of each culture gives rise to unique expressions of Christian life that become gifts for our whole Church. (*Our Hearts Were Burning*, # 85) Such has been the case since the Gospel has been preached to all nations. Locally, the Church in Chicago has been enriched by the spiritual, ethnic and cultural diversity of its members.

Summary: Inculturation has been a continuing experience of the Church’s life.

Through good and challenging times the Church for 2000 years has remained resilient and strong in its belief that the Lord continues to be with us. It is, in the words of historian Kevin Hughes, “...a record of a people called to faith, and

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aided by grace, a people who have sinned shamelessly and loved God with abandon.”

CONCLUSION

This session has introduced the topic of Church history by summarizing five themes found throughout the history of the Catholic Church – *the people; conversion; struggle; reform and inculturation*. There are, no doubt, other themes that thoughtful students could identify from their study of history, e.g. *learning, commitment to charity and social justice*. Our reflection on the “themes” of Church history can provide us with a background that can enrich our future study of historic specifics and the several ages of Church history. Through it all, we realize God’s continuing love and presence with his people and realize our own role in the history of the Church.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the reflection/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your responses (20-40 words each) and submit them to your catechetical leader.
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader; e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, catechist pairings, etc.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would you define Church history?
2. How does one’s own particular family, ethnic and religious history relate to Church history?
3. List and describe the five themes of Church history described in this insert.
4. From the insert or your own knowledge, list two faith producing events and two destructive events of Church history.
5. How has the Church been the “bearer of divine life?”

PRACTICAL APPLICATION/CRITICAL THINKING

1. What questions have you raised about your own family history, ethnic and religious inheritance?
2. Which of the five themes speak to you about your experience of Church?

3. How would you present one of these themes to an adult group or a youth group?
4. What has been your experience of “saints, sinners and ordinary folks” within the Church?
5. Have any of the following historical themes played a part in the history of your own life: conversion, struggle, renewal, or inculturation?
6. Besides the themes discussed can you ascertain any other themes in the history of the Church?
7. How do you see God’s presence in the history of the Church?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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