

History of the Christian Church: Stories of Faith

Lesson # 22 of 27

Lesson Goal & Objectives

Goal

- The students will gain an appreciation of being part of a glorious adventure which has continued through 2000 years – the spreading of the Gospel through time. They will see themselves as part of something “bigger than themselves” which has an ongoing life. The history of the Church is not merely about events in a dead past: it moves through us into the future.

Objectives

- The students will discuss the stories of at least four people from four different eras in Church history who illustrate the circumstances and challenges of their times. They will write a brief paragraph about either themselves or someone whom they admire to show that they understand that the history of the Church is an ongoing story.

Introduction & Teacher Background

The writer of this lesson loves history, but she is keenly aware that many people find it dull and boring. If you are one of those people, please put your feelings aside and wake up to a new possibility! If you suffered from dull and boring history teachers in your life, forgive those people and move on.

Everyone loves stories! History is a fascinating collection of stories about real people and events that were (and remain) exciting, enriching and illuminating. To a great extent we are the products of these events. However, we are also a vital part of the flow of history because what we do today becomes part of the living stream of history as we take our place in it by shaping the future. We are part of a great Tradition rooted in the essential and formative Story of Jesus Christ and His Gospel of salvation: history is not just about some dead past, it is about *us* – we are part of history. Our stories become part of these great and wonderful stories of the ages that went before us. We don't know yet how all these stories will turn out, except that we know that God's Kingdom will triumph! How exciting! History is a “page-turner” and we are part of the writing of the amazing ending.

If you can try to cultivate this attitude, your students will also become interested in hearing the stories of the Living Tradition of our Church. Don't just try to teach some history – become a story teller. Imagine that you are sitting around a campfire with your students: your goal is to fascinate them with exciting, funny and even scary stories. If you find this difficult, locate someone who is a really good story teller or make use of some good videos that tell stories of Christian history.

For convenience sake, we can divide the history of the Church into major periods. There are some differences and discussions about how historians do this, but the following outline is

generally accepted: (This outline is intended to give teachers some background, it is **not** intended for use directly by the students). Please note that some periods overlap.

1) The life and mission of Jesus: approximately 4 BC to about between 30 & 35 AD
2) The age of the Apostles: the first disciples go out, make disciples and form new church communities throughout their known world. (About 33 AD to about 80 – 90 AD)

3) The Age of the Martyrs: The Church was persecuted often in most places throughout the Roman Empire from about 40 to about 300 or 312. Many men, women and even children bravely gave their lives as witnesses to the Truth of the Gospel. While the major persecution of the Church by the Roman Empire ceased in 312, there has never been a time in which Christians have not been persecuted somewhere. We are still living in an “Age of Martyrs” today in many parts of the world.

4) The “Patristic Age” The age of the “Fathers” (and Mothers!): Those who were converted by the Apostles began to hand on the authentic teachings of the Faith, teaching it to disciples and writing about it. (About 70 to around the middle of the 700s) Some of the great fathers include Clement, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Antony of Egypt, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Tertullian, and among the mothers, St. Macrina.

5) The Age of the Councils: Councils are meetings of bishops in which the Church prays and considers making decisions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The first of the great councils was held in the small city of Nicea in 325. Subsequent Councils completed the writing of the Nicene Creed which summarizes the important doctrines of the Christian Faith. The last of the great Councils in which all Christian churches were represented was held in the early 700s.

6) The Dark Ages: This era lasted from about 400, as the Roman Empire crumbled and ceased to function, until 800 with the crowning of Charlemagne as the “emperor” of a land that covered most of Germany, France and northern Italy. This was an age in which there was a great deal of strife and very little travel, trade or communication. Celtic & Benedictine monasteries spread. Islam was founded by Mohammed around 630 and grew rapidly.

7) The Middle Ages: The “Medieval Period” lasted from 800 until the middle of the 1300s, with the coming of the “Great Plague.” Contrary to the mistaken ideas of some, this was not part of the “Dark Ages,” it was an age of great development and learning. Cities were built, universities rose, travel and trade began to flourish. It was a time of great development in art and the beginnings of science. The first of several Crusades began in the 11 century to try to reclaim Palestine from the Islamic Empire. This was also an era in which prayer and contemplation became a stronger focus. During this time, a schism developed in the Church between the West, centered in Rome, and the East, centered in Constantinople. New religious orders like the Franciscans and Dominicans were founded.

[The fourteenth century saw the population of Europe drop to less than half of what it had been due to the devastation of the bubonic plague. The pandemic was accompanied by famine and wars. This period saw a breakdown of much of the social structure]

8) The Renaissance: Around the mid 1400s until the late 1600s. This word means “rebirth” and was a period of Discovery and new developments. Art, music, and scientific inquiry had new growth. North and South America were colonized, and missionary activity by various churches became a new focus. Teaching about prayer developed and deepened.

9) The Reformation: At the beginning of the 1500s figures such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer, John Knox, Ulrich Zwingli and others led a movement which not only

questioned practices and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church but also formed new churches independent of Roman Catholic authority.

10) The Age of the Enlightenment: This term is somewhat ironic from a Christian point of view. There was a new emphasis on logic and reason and the beginnings of skepticism about faith. Beginning in the second part of the 1600s, people pursued the expansion of territory and the expansion of scientific knowledge.

11) The 1700s were a time of increasing the power of nations which were then absorbed into large empires. Industrialization began and developed causing more people to move into cities. The first part of the 1700s also saw the “Great Awakening” in North America in which thousands became Christians under the preaching of George Whitefield and the Wesleys. The movement called, “Pietism,” placed more emphasis on emotion in prayer and worship as a reaction to the increasing interest in science and logic.

12) The end of the 1700s and the beginning of the 1800s were a time of increasing unrest with questioning of Christianity and of the old regimes. There began to be more and more revolutions against kings after the American and French revolutions. Marxism, Darwinism and the concepts of Freud began to replace Christian beliefs for many people. During the 19th century, technology, industrialization and skepticism about God all increased.

13) The Twentieth Century saw not only great scientific and technological developments but also two world wars and many genocides. Marxism, which began to dominate many nations beginning with Russia in 1917-18, lost its control of much of Europe in the late 1980s. By the end of the millennium, many large Protestant churches were beginning a tending to become smaller in Europe and America while missionary activity increased and flourished in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

14) The new Millennium presents many challenges and questions about the directions that the world and Church will take in the future. Are we ready to take our place in history?

Opening Prayer (5 min.)

Book of Common Prayer page 816 #7 *For the Church*.

Review (5min.)

Intro-Activity – Lesson – Reflection

The format of this lesson is different from the others. Rather than beginning with one introductory activity and ending with one reflection, take at least one half hour to 45 minutes for story telling concerning interesting figures from history.

Begin by asking the students if they like stories (no one doesn't!) Ask them to mention *briefly* some their favorite family stories – perhaps of a trip or special event. History is a great collection of the stories of the people who lived before us. Tell them that today we are going to hear some stories about some great people who illustrate the history of the Church. Please make use of at least one story *from each of the following sections*. The eras are presented in

chronological order. Take about 6 – 8 minutes for each story – or more – depending on the time frames you have available.

Do NOT have the students read these stories to the class – this will not help the stories to come alive for the students – which is the goal. It is also best if you, the teacher, do not read these stories directly off the page. Read them over before class until you understand them thoroughly. Use sources such as *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* to supplement your understanding of each person if you possibly can. Tell each story in your own words with as much energy as you can muster. At the end of each story ask the students: **What impressed you about this person?** Then give them a few minutes to answer before going on to the next story.

At the end of discussing at *least* 4 of the persons listed, briefly explain to the students that these people represent major periods of Church history. The Church has existed for 2000 years in order to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. We are part of this story, too, which continues until Jesus returns. *See the instructions for the end of the lesson below.*

Section 1 (choose one)

Apostolic Period: **Simon bar Jonah** was a man who made a living by fishing in the Sea of Galilee with his brother, Andrew. When Jesus came to their town, they both began to follow Him. Peter listened to Jesus’ teachings and saw His miracles. He was very much a “guy” who often blurted out his ideas before really thinking about them. Jesus nicknamed him, “**Peter**” which can be translated as “Rocky.” When he saw Jesus walking on water, he asked Jesus to let him step out of his boat and walk on water, too. Although he started to sink when he looked away from Jesus, Jesus reached out and saved him. Peter realized that Jesus was the Son of God, and he saw Jesus transfigured in great light. Although Peter denied Jesus at His crucifixion, he saw Jesus in His resurrection. Jesus gave him the mission to: “feed My lambs, feed My sheep.” Peter preached and taught in many places in the Roman Empire, such as Antioch, ending up in Rome itself. Sometime in the mid-60s AD, Peter was martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ. Tradition says he asked to be crucified upside down because he did not feel worthy to die in exactly the same way that Jesus did.

Patristic Period: **Athanasius** grew up in the city of Alexandria in Egypt at the very beginning of the 300s. He studied with teachers who had survived a fierce persecution by the emperor, so they had very strong faith in Jesus. When Athanasius was about 24 years old, a priest named Arius began to teach people that Jesus was not fully and truly God. Many people who were considered to be the most intelligent believed in Arius’ ideas. His teachings about Jesus were also popularized in the “pop music” songs – a kind of “rap music” – that people sang in ordinary life. Arius’ influence began to become the dominant theory in many churches. A great Council of leaders from all over the church met in the town of Nicea in 325, and it condemned Arius’ ideas as wrong. This was not done to be unfair to Arius, but because the bishops realized that only the real Jesus could change people’s lives. Wrong ideas about Jesus would prevent people from having a genuine and complete relationship with Him. Athanasius was called to be a bishop shortly after the Council of Nicea ended, before he was even 30 years old. Throughout his life, Arians fought against those who were trying to hold on to the truth that Jesus is really the Son of God. As bishop, Athanasius was attacked physically, was forced out into the desert where he had to hide more than once and was even banished by the emperor himself. He suffered a lot. However, each time this happened, as soon as he could, he would return back to his diocese where he taught and wrote books about the truths of the Christian Faith as they have been given to us by the Apostles. When he died in his late 70s, the tide had turned,

and orthodox faith was believed by the majority of Christians again. Most historians agree that Athanasius' faithfulness was a major factor in the defeat of the Arian heresy.

Section 2 (choose one)

1) Medieval Period: At the beginning of the 1200s a young man named Giovanni Bernadone lived the town of **Assisi** in Italy. Because his mother was French, his friends gave him the nickname "Little Frenchy" – Francisco in Italian, or **Francis** in English. He was wealthy, good-looking and everyone considered him to be very cool. If there was a party going on in Assisi, Francis was there. Twice he went to war in order to gain the title of "knight" and to become famous. The first time he was captured and held for ransom; the second time God stopped him by speaking to him in a dream. Francis became depressed and confused, and so he began to go off by himself to pray and ask God for direction. Two events answered his prayers. One day he saw a man with leprosy coming toward him. Although he was very much afraid of catching leprosy (and he hated the smell of the disease) he got down off his horse, giving the leper money, and even a hug. This gave him great joy. Later, he heard Jesus speak to him from a beautiful painted cross saying: "Francis, rebuild My church which you see is falling down in ruins." Francis began repairing churches and nursing lepers. When his father objected to his behavior, he gave back everything his father had ever given him – including his clothes. He joyfully taught people about the love of God, and soon many people began to be converted to deeper faith and prayer by his preaching and teaching. People who followed him came to be called, Franciscans – they included friars and nuns who lived in monasteries, and also married people who lived in their own homes but also followed Francis' way of prayer and service. The Franciscan movement evangelized many people throughout Europe and began to do missionary work in foreign lands, eventually including the Americas. Two years after his death in 1224, Francis was declared a saint – he continues to be loved and followed by people all over the world.

2) Medieval Period: **Catherine** Benincasa was a beautiful girl who lived in the town of **Siena** in the 14th century. When she was only about 4 years old, she had a powerful vision of God, the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, appearing in the sky. For the rest of her life the only thing she wanted was to focus on God's love as much as she could. In her time, girls were expected either to get married or to become nuns. Although many young men proposed marriage to her, Catherine neither married nor entered a convent. She remained single, making a personal vow to God not to marry, but she continued to live in a room at the back of her family's house. She spent her time praying, teaching other people about faith and prayer, and nursing those who were sick. At the time, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope, was living in France where his decisions were being controlled by the King. This was causing trouble in the Church. Through her prayer Catherine became convinced that God wanted the Pope to go back to Rome where he could fulfill the requirements of his office in freedom and peace. She wrote many letters to the Pope telling him this, but when he did not return to Rome, she visited him in person. Although she was a young woman with no wealth or power and no special position in the Church, she had the courage to speak to the most powerful person in the Church at the time. He did finally listen to the message God had told her to give him and returned to Rome. Catherine died at the age of only 33. People still read her book on prayer and Christian living. Her life shows that God can use people who are willing to listen to him in a powerful way, even if they are young, poor or just ordinary.

Section 3 (choose one)

Reformation: At the end of the 1400s there was a great church being built in Rome, requiring a lot of money. Some of those who were sent out to take up collections to pay for the building began telling people that they would automatically go to heaven just by putting money into the collection boxes. A priest in the town of Wittenburg in Germany, named **Martin Luther**, became very angry when he saw the people in his parish giving more money than they could afford because they were afraid they and their families would go to hell if they didn't contribute. In 1517 he put up a notice on the door of the cathedral objecting to this practice of trying to "sell salvation" and inviting other priests to come have a public discussion with him about this. He also reminded people that St. Paul had written in his letters that we are "saved by Grace through Faith" not by just doing things like giving contributions. When his ideas were reported back to Rome, the leaders became angry with him. He was accused of heresy and was told to stop preaching or teaching. He replied, "Here I stand, I can do nothing else" and kept on teaching people that God's Grace for salvation is a free gift. At the time people who were accused of heresy were often burned at the stake. Luther was ordered to report to Rome, where he probably would have suffered this fate. He remained in Germany where many people accepted his teaching on Grace. They refused to give up Luther's teachings even when threatened with being thrown out of the Roman Catholic Church. When this did happen to them, they continued to worship God in their churches independent of the Roman Catholic leadership. This formed the new "Lutheran Church." Other religious leaders such as John Calvin and John Knox also became leaders of independent churches which continue to this day.

In the 1500s there was a lot of rivalry and fighting in England. After the death of her father, King Henry VIII, his young daughter, **Elizabeth Tudor**, was imprisoned in the dreaded Tower of London; she was not sure if she would live or be executed. However, she later became queen of England after the death of her older sister, Mary. When her father Henry and her brother Edward had ruled England, the Church there was independent of the Roman Catholic leadership. However, Elizabeth's sister, Mary, had rejoined the Church of England with the Roman Catholic Church. Elizabeth had grown up believing that the English Church should be independent, but she was willing to make peace with Rome when she was about to be crowned queen. She sent an ambassador to Rome, but the Pope of the time did not want Elizabeth to become queen of England. England had had several wars in past years trying to decide who would take the throne. Elizabeth knew that she had to be strong in order to keep unity and peace in her kingdom. She was crowned queen in spite of the Pope's rejection of her, and the Church in England remained independent. In England at the time, there were people who preferred the worship style of Rome and also those who accepted the teachings of Luther and Calvin. Elizabeth "settled the question" of how the Church in England would pray together, worship and teach the Christian Faith by asking well educated religious leaders to work out what they called a "middle path between Geneva (the home of the Protestant John Calvin) and Rome." This bringing together of elements of Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Reformation is called the "Elizabethan Settlement." The Book of Common Prayer became the official source of worship, prayer and understanding of the Christian Faith for England and later for her colonies in America. Elizabeth led her country through wars and many difficulties. She sent explorers out to the "New World" and encouraged the development of learning and literature. She brought unity to England in a time when there was a great deal of strife and rivalry in Europe. Without her strong leadership, the Church of England, the parent church of our Episcopal Church, might not have grown and flourished.

Section four (choose one)

18th – 19th Century: **Samuel Seabury** lived in Connecticut before our Revolutionary War. At that time Americans were members of the Church of England, and there were no bishops in the American colonies. Those who were called to priesthood had to make the dangerous journey across the Atlantic to be ordained, or priests from England had to be willing to leave home to come to the colonies. Seabury went to England in 1753 to be ordained a priest, returning again to Connecticut. After the Revolutionary War, when the United States became independent of England, English bishops would no longer ordain American priests because they were required to make an oath of loyalty to the king, and of course Americans could no longer do that. In 1783 the priests in Connecticut decided it was necessary to have an American priest ordained to be a bishop so that he could then ordain priests for Anglicans in America. Because of the political situation in Scotland, Scottish bishops were not making an oath of loyalty to the king of England. Seabury made a lot of effort to find someone who would ordain him as a bishop, and after a year some of these Scottish bishops agreed to do this. A few years later, some English bishops realized the necessity of allowing the Anglicans in America to have bishops, and they ordained William White to be an American bishop also. With the help of several laymen and priests Bishops Seabury and White formed the Foreign and Domestic Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America in 1789 at our first “General Convention.” Seabury traveled through New York, New Jersey and New England, founding many churches. Some of the churches in our own part of New York were originally built by Seabury. By the time Seabury died in 1796 the future of “The Episcopal Church” (as it is now officially called) was firmly established in the U.S.

Sister Constance, csm was a member of the Sisters of St. Mary who live here in the Diocese of Albany. The community of St. Mary is the oldest order of Episcopal nuns founded in the United States. Since the middle of the 1800s they have been involved with schools, hospitals and centers which help the poor in addition to their life of prayer. In 1873 Sister Constance and several other Sisters of St. Mary made the long and difficult trip from Peekskill, N.Y. to Memphis Tennessee to open a school for girls. Only five years later a terrible epidemic of yellow fever broke out in Memphis. At the time, no one really understood what caused the fever, and there was no way to cure it. People suffered terribly from it, and could only hope that their own immune systems would allow them to live through it. Many people fled away from Memphis, but Sr. Constance and her nuns remained with several priests and doctors from the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Mary to help nurse the sick although they could have chosen to leave. After working hard in extremely difficult conditions, Sr. Constance and three other nuns, Sr. Ruth, Sr. Thecla and Sr. Frances came down with the fever and died. They are great examples of faith, courage and the willingness to give up their own lives to try to save others. When the epidemic was over, over 5,000 people had died. Sr. Constance and her companions are still remembered for their unselfish service.

After discussing the four stories you have chosen, briefly explain to the students that these people represent major periods of Church history. The Church has existed for 2000 years in order to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. We are part of this story, too, which continues until Jesus returns.

Ask the students: Think of someone who is now influencing the members of our Church in our own time. How do you think you yourself fit into the history of the Church?

Take-home Activity (5 min.)

After taking a few minutes to discuss the two questions immediately above, ask the students to write a short paragraph describing *either* 1) how their own life stories fit into Church history *or* 2) how a person in the church whom they admire is helping to contribute to the history of the Church.

Closing Prayer (5 min.)

Book of Common Prayer page 540, the Collect at the top of the page.

Resources

- Lesser Feasts and Fasts