



ABOUT CHURCH
HISTORY

FR. DAVID VINCENT MECONI, S.J.

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Cover image: statue of Saint Denis beheaded, patron and first bishop of Paris, in the Crypte of the Sacre Coeur. Photo © Jose Ignacio Soto / Shutterstock. Back cover image: The Colosseum, built 70-80 AD (photo), Roman, (1st century) / Rome, Italy / Bridgeman Images.

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FOR TULLIO MECONI
POLYMATH, POLYGLOT,
PURVEYOR OF HISTORY,
AND LOVER OF ALL
THINGS BEAUTIFUL



Preface

Within his collection of one hundred short stories, Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375) tells the tale of a shrewd Jewish businessman and lifelong Parisian named Abraham. Desirous of entering the Catholic Church, Abraham's business savvy finds it reasonable to visit Rome first to see for himself exactly what kind of people Catholics really are. A devout and dear friend of Abraham's, Giannotto di Civignì, begs him not to go to Rome but to simply present himself to the archbishop of Paris for immediate baptism. Giannotto admits his fear that Abraham will make it to Rome and see the graft and corruption of the pope and the Curia, and would then be too scandalized ever to become Catholic. Disregarding this advice, Abraham travels to the Eternal City and soaks in as much Italian Catholicism as he can stand. He comments not only on the beautiful churches and works of art but also on the prelates who were drunks and gluttons, lax in their prayers and even worse in their morals.

Upon returning to Paris and to the home of Giannotto, Abraham rushes in and declares that he is more eager than ever to be baptized.

Incredulous, Giannotto asks how this can be.

"I see that what these scoundrel clerics so zealously want never takes root. But the exact opposite happens: despite them, your Church grows continually and shines more and more brightly." Therefore, Abraham concludes, "it is quite clear to me that your Church must have the Holy Spirit for its foundation and support," arguing that it would have collapsed centuries ago were it not for this divine foundation (*Decameron*, First Day, Novel Two).

This is a good piece of theology to keep in mind when surveying Church history: it is ultimately God who inaugurates, sustains, guides, and brings His Church to completion. As such, the history of the Church is just as much about the fidelity of God as the antics of God's people. The following collection of facts attest to how the Catholic Church has survived horrible popes and violent dictators, and has been home to billions of sinners in need of a community where they could finally know love.

From the invention of hospitals to hypertexts, from ancient Gospels to the founding of modern genetics, the Catholic Church has made



The Seven Joys of the Virgin, 1480, by Hans Memling (1435/1440-1494), Memling, Hans (c.1433-94) / Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany / Photo © Tarker / Bridgeman Images

all our lives more beautiful, meaningful, and efficient. Each of us is surrounded by Catholic events and images, often unaware of how the Faith has formed our culture.

For example, *Christmas* literally means Christ's Mass, Halloween is really All Hallow's Eve, and, where there is a time for feasting, there is also a time for fasting. *Mardi Gras* is of course French for "Fat Tuesday" because we fast the next day—Ash Wednesday—and the term *Carnival* is derived from two Latin words (*caro*, meat, and *vale*, goodbye) because it is the time of year we say goodbye to the tastier things of life until Easter morning. The Spanish *adios* and the French *adieu* both send you off with the blessing of God (*Deus* in Latin), as does even our own "goodbye." Ancient Christianity permeates who we are today, informing how we keep time, celebrate occasions, speak, see the world, and more.

Church history is full of both important achievements as well as many unfortunate atrocities. *101 Surprising Facts About Church History* is meant to show how much the Church of Jesus Christ has done for all of God's children. From basic human rights to the judgment of cultures

by how they treat the most vulnerable of people entrusted to them, traditional Christian beliefs have given voice to the inherent dignity of every human person more than any other creed or set of principles. The Church helped end modern forms of slavery, condemned as abhorrent all forms of child sacrifice, and elevated the status of women by condemning polygamy, artificial birth control, and abortion.

Jesus Christ wills the eternal joy and salvation of every human person. He founded a Church for no other reason than to save souls. The Church is the means by which Christ reduplicates His own life in others. It is here in this visible community of saints and sinners that the world comes to witness Christ tirelessly pasturing His people back to Him. As such, enjoy this trapeze through two thousand years of Church history, coming to see the beauty and the richness of this eternally important drama.

Fr. David Vincent Meconi, S.J.

St. Ignatius of Loyola
July 31, 2016

1

The first name for Christians was “People of the Way”

Before they were known as Christians, Jesus’s followers were called “People of the Way” (cf. Acts 9:2). They first became known as Christians in Antioch (see Acts 11:26) and were later called Catholics. The Greek word *katholikos* means “according to the whole” or “universal,” while the word “church” is an anglicized version of the Greek *ekklesia*, which means “to be called out from this world.”



(above) St. Paul preaching in the synagogue at Antioch, illustration from ‘Harold Copping Pictures: The Crown Series’, c.1920’s (colour litho), Copping, Harold (1863-1932) / Private Collection / Bridgeman Images



(above) Saint Pierre Church in Antakya (Hatay) Turkey. This cave, which was used by the very first disciples to be called Christians, is one of Christianity’s oldest churches. De Agostini Picture Library / Bridgeman Images

THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC:
SHE PROCLAIMS THE
FULLNESS OF THE FAITH.
SHE BEARS IN HERSELF
AND ADMINISTERS THE
TOTALITY OF THE MEANS
OF SALVATION. SHE IS SENT
OUT TO ALL PEOPLES. SHE
SPEAKS TO ALL MEN. SHE
ENCOMPASSES ALL TIMES.

—CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 868

The Catholic Church is the oldest institution in the Western world

2

The Catholic Church is the only *ekklesia* that teaches she is the one, visible, and uninterrupted Church founded by Jesus Christ. The Church is thus the oldest institution in the Western world, tracing her roots back to Christ's founding recorded in Matthew: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" (16:18). As the English writer and Catholic convert G.K. Chesterton

came to realize, the Catholic Church is the only institution capable of freeing us from the "degrading slavery" of being children of our age, and the only one on earth who talks "as if it were the truth; as if it were a real messenger refusing to tamper with a real message."

(below) Giving of the Keys to St. Peter, from the Sistine Chapel, 1481 (fresco), Perugino, Pietro (c.1445-1523) / Vatican Museums and Galleries, Vatican City / Bridgeman Images



3

The Catholic Church has many major rites

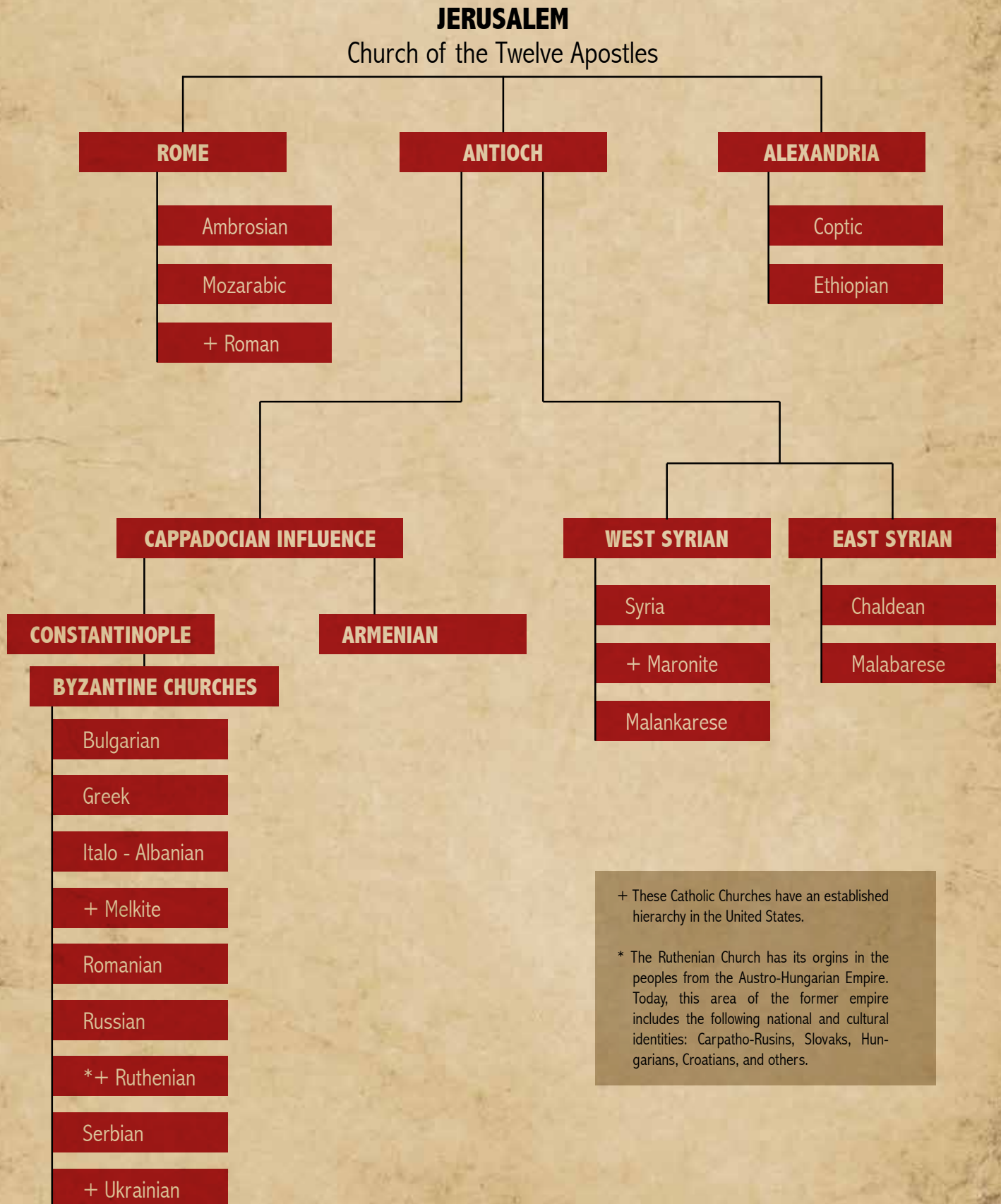
Christ's Church is much wider than the Latin or Roman rite with which most westerners are familiar. There are two other ancient Eastern rites originating from the earliest sees of Christianity: the Antiochene and Alexandrian rites. Under the guidance of St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom, an influential bishop of Constantinople, the Byzantine rite

arose a bit later, as did the Armenian and Syrian rites further east. The term “rite” refers to the prayers, ceremonies, and practices of a religious body. Such rites (see table, opposite page) are not different Churches but ancient and diverse ways the one Church has always worshiped, so as to respect the traditional customs of a local people.

(below) The Fathers of the Church: Saint Basil of Caesarea, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Gregorius of Nazianzus—an icon of 17th cent. from Lipie, Historic Museum in Sanok, Poland. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.



Genealogy of the Christian Churches





(above) Landscape with Saint John on Patmos, 1640 (oil on canvas), Poussin, Nicolas (1594-1665) / The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, USA / A. A. Munger Collection / Bridgeman Images

4 St. John was the only Apostle who did not die a martyr

Peter and Paul made their way to Rome after A.D. 60 to evangelize at the heart of the empire. In the year 64, a devastating fire broke out in Rome and the emperor Nero, blaming the Christians, used it as an occasion to squelch this new religion. During this persecution, Paul was beheaded since he was a Roman citizen

and therefore not liable to crucifixion, and Peter was crucified on Vatican Hill. Feeling unworthy of imitating Jesus in those final moments, Pope Peter asked to be crucified upside down. Legends of the other Apostles tell of their bloody martyrdom, except for St. John, who died in exile on the island of Patmos around the year 100.

St. Peter's is not the pope's cathedral

Every bishop in the Catholic Church has one cathedral. Surprisingly, the pope's cathedral is not St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City but rather the Archbasilica of St. John in the Lateran, which was donated to the Church in the fourth

century by the emperor Constantine. St. Peter's is viewed more as the cathedral of all Christians worldwide.

(below) View at the San Giovanni in Laterano Basilica in Rome, Italy. Photo © grafalex / Shutterstock.



6

The Greek word for fish spells out a title for Jesus

The five letters of the Greek word for fish—ΙΧΘΥΣ—spell out a beautiful title for Jesus. In Greek, each letter can be acrostically taken as:

- Ι Jesus
- Χ Christ
- Θ *Th* for *Theos*, the Greek word for God
- Υ A capital *U* for *uios*, the Greek word for son
- Σ The Greek letter *S* here stands for *soter*, or savior

This, then, spells out “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, (our) Savior.” Other ancient symbols found on the walls of Christian places, sarcophagi, and religious objects were

dolphins, whose elegance symbolized the elects’ movement from earth to heaven; the mother pelican, whose large beak pricks her chest while feeding her young, symbolizing Christ’s feeding His people with His own body and blood; bees, whose honey symbolized the sweetness of the Christian message; and the peacock, who grows more beautiful feathers as the old ones die—a symbol of the Resurrection.

(below) Funerary stele bearing one of the earliest Christian inscriptions. Upper tier: dedication to the Dis Manibus and Christian motto in Greek letters $\text{C} \Omega \Omega$ / *Ikhthus zōntōn* (“fish of the living”); middle tier: depiction of fish and an anchor. Licinia Amias, from the area of the Vatican necropolis, Rome (marble), 3rd century AD / Baths of Diocletian, National Roman Museum, Rome, Italy / Photo © Zev Radovan / Bridgeman Images





(above) Triumph of Faith - Christian Martyrs in the Time of Nero, 65 AD (oil on canvas), Thirion, Eugene Romain (1839-1910) / Private Collection / Photo © Bonhams, London, UK / Bridgeman Images

The Romans accused the early Christians of cannibalism

7

Christians were persecuted because they refused to worship the gods and goddesses of the Roman pantheon. Seeing that they were faithful citizens, however, their Roman persecutors needed to increase the severity of their claims. Since the persecutors knew that the Eucharist was at the heart of Christian

discipleship, they accused the followers of Jesus of cannibalism because they ate the flesh of Christ (see Jn 6:22–71) and of incest because of the “kiss of peace” given to one’s brothers and sisters at Mass, as well as their preference for marrying other Christians (see 2 Cor 6:14–15).

“They then falsely accused us, when the soldiers so urged them of cannibalistic feasts and of incestuous intercourse, and of things of which it is not lawful either to speak or to think.”

—EUSEBIUS’ HISTORY OF THE CHURCH, BOOK 5.1

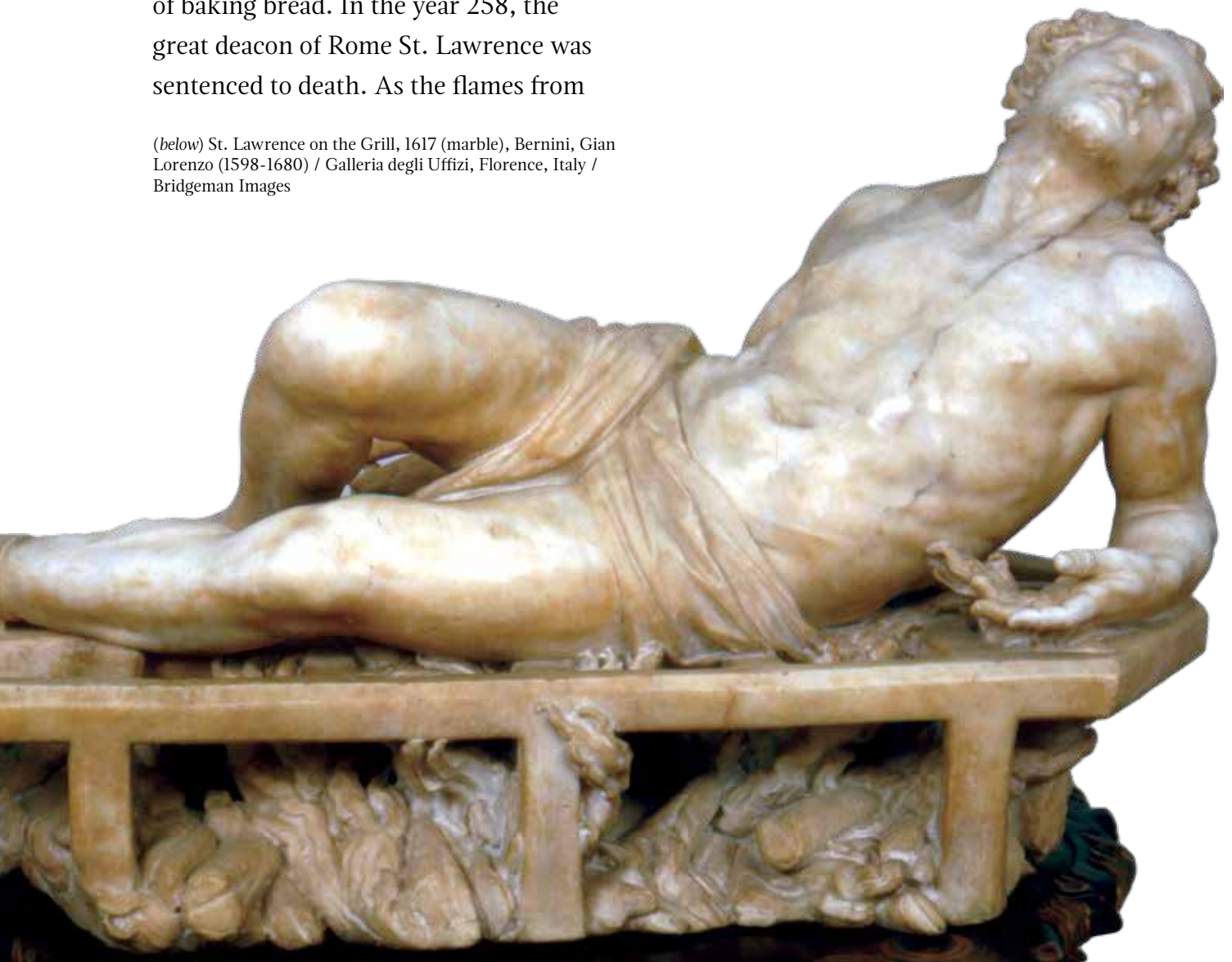
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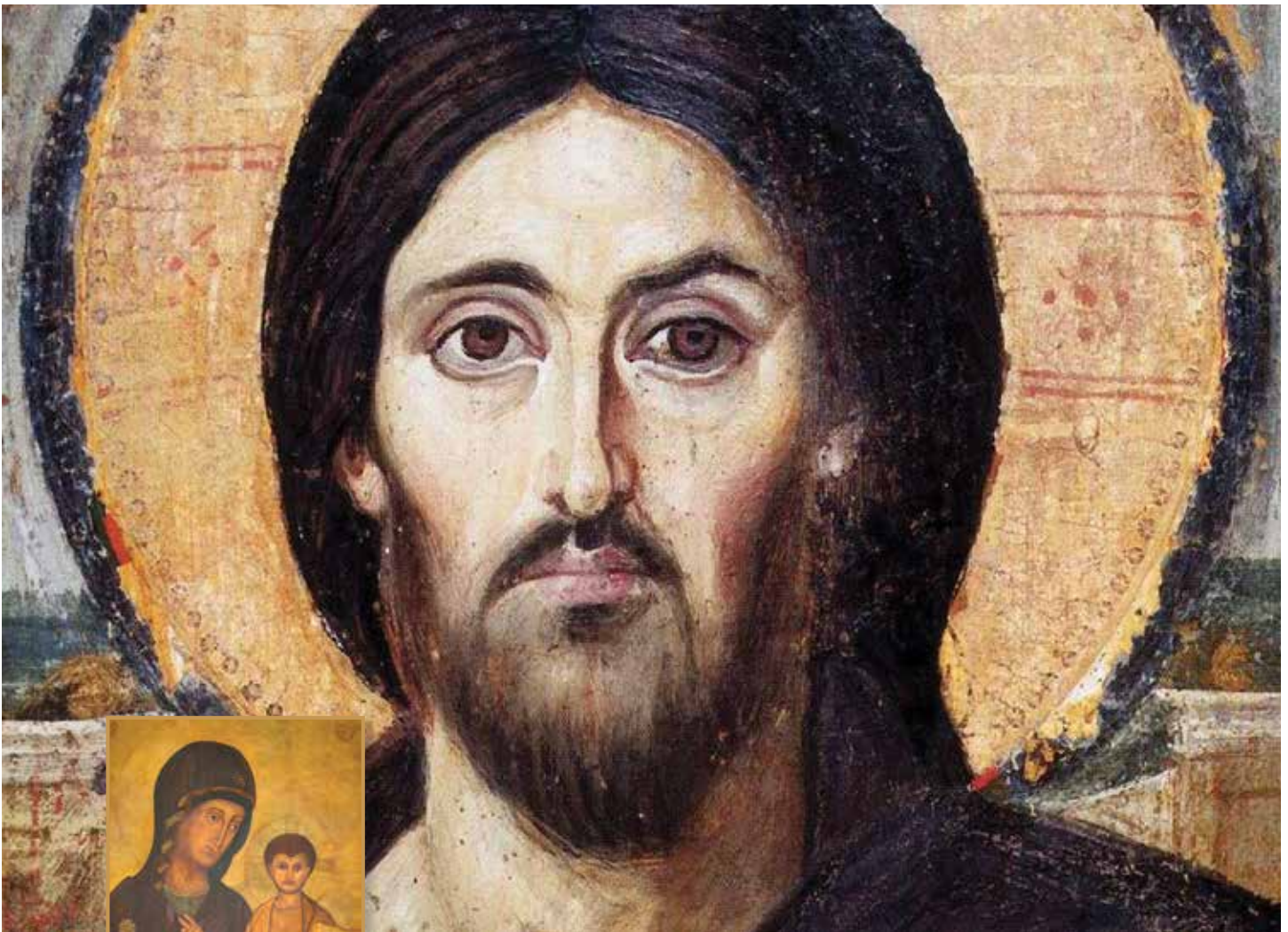
Christian martyrdom helped spread the Church rather than suppress it

The Greek word for one who witnesses to another is *martyr*. Martyrdom is considered one of the crucial influences in the growth and development of the early Church and Christian beliefs. St. Polycarp of Smyrna was bound and tied to the Romans' funeral pyre, but the flames only encircled his body like the massive sails of a ship, and his flesh took on the aroma of baking bread. In the year 258, the great deacon of Rome St. Lawrence was sentenced to death. As the flames from

the gridiron began to engulf Lawrence, he taunted his persecutors by telling them, "Turn me over, I think I am done on this side!" While these persecutions and executions were aimed at suppressing the Faith, sacrificial acts like these spurred mass conversions and gave other persecuted Christians the courage they needed to spread the Church.

(below) St. Lawrence on the Grill, 1617 (marble), Bernini, Gian Lorenzo (1598-1680) / Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy / Bridgeman Images





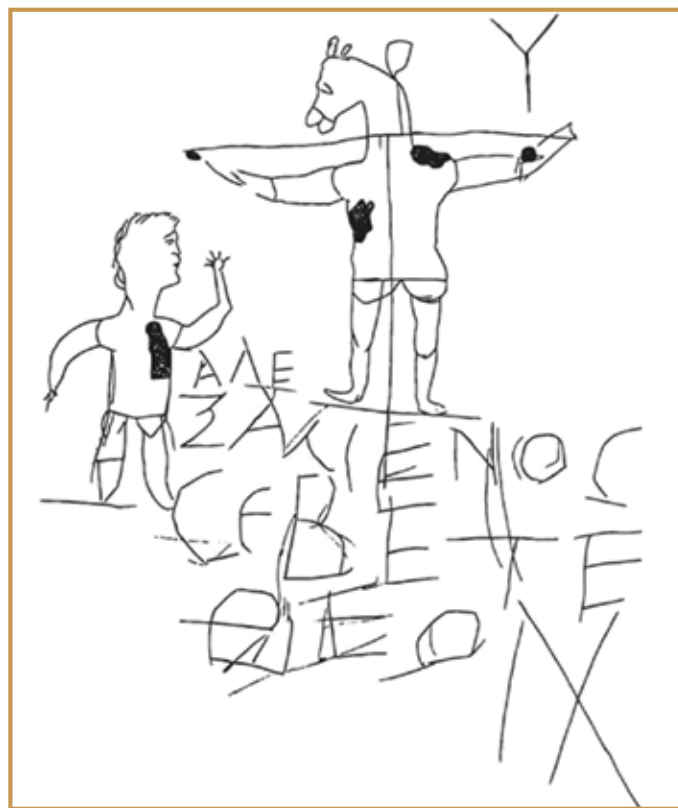
(above) Christ Pantocrator (encaustic on panel), Byzantine School, (6th century) / Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt / Photo © Zev Radovan / Bridgeman Images. (left) Madonna and child icon, Sisters of Nazareth Convent (photo) / Godong/UiG / Bridgeman Images

Icons and other forms of art helped spread the gospel

The earliest legend about an image of the face of Christ tells us that the king of Edessa asked Jesus to heal him from a disfiguring disease (probably leprosy). Christ sent an image of His own face imprinted on a piece of cloth, known today as the Mandylion. Since most ancients were illiterate, Christians came to know Scripture through paint-

ings and icons. They didn't pray to images and icons, as some people protested, but merely used it as a tangible device to make otherwise unseen realities visibly present to those on earth. In 787, the Second Council of Nicaea helped clarify the use of icons, frescos, and other forms of art in spreading the gospel.





(above) The Alexamenos graffito is an inscription carved in plaster on a wall of an ancient Roman school, Palatine Antiquarium. It dates from c. 1st to 2nd C. A.D. The drawing showing a person worshipping a crucified ass is accepted by many scholars as a mocking depiction of Christianity. The translation of the Greek inscription reads, "Alexamenos worships his God." Alexamenos graffiti, Palatine Antiquarium, Rome (litho) / Private Collection / Photo © Zev Radovan / Bridgeman Images.

10

Anti-Christian graffiti is as old as Christianity

The earliest anti-Christian piece of graffiti was found on the Capitoline Hill and dates back to the late first century. In this crude etching, a Christian by the name of Alexamenos is depicted praying pitifully to a crucified donkey with the

caption reading, "Alexamenos worships his god." This insult from the Roman mind shows us that Christianity endured mockery of the sacred not long after the time of Christ, just as we do today as well.