Hope in the Midst of Crises?

Looking Back at Church History Through Eight Different Eras
Overview of Eight Eras:

1. Late 1st Century, Persecutions, & An ‘Underground Church’ 50–324CE
2. Constantine: Growth but Rise of Heresies & Crumbling of Roman Empire 325–600CE
4. Rise of the Papacy, The Renaissance, & Spiritual Renewal amid the ‘seeds’ of The Reformation 1101–1492CE
Overview of the Eight Eras

5. Age of Reformation into Rise of The Enlightenment & Science 1492–1790CE

6. Fall of Monarchies & Rise of Democracy amid a ‘Defensive’ Church 1791–1950CE


8. Multiple Crises–A Multi–Cultural Church dealing with Post–Modernity & Secularism 2001–present

A brief American Catholic History & Bibliography
Paul & his followers write ‘letters’ to support early Christian communities as they ‘separate’ from Judaism.

Loose structure with women & couples leading communities. Council of Jerusalem (Acts–50CE) includes diverse members leads to Gentile acceptance.

With Christian growth in Asia Minor (Greece/Turkey), culture moves from Jewish/Near-eastern to Greco-Roman around Mediterranean Sea to Spain & North Africa.

*Four Gospels* formed & become ‘core’ of Christian teaching. Little specific doctrine established, more ‘pastoral’ development.

*Liturgy in ‘house’ churches* & homes not in ‘buildings’—the Community ‘gathered’ to hear the Word & ‘Break Bread.’
Primary leaders—Paul & his successors, John (the Mystic) & his successors, Peter & his successors (as Bishop of Rome—1st among equals). Other leaders writings—as Irenaeus, Clement, Shepherd of Hermas, Ignatius of Antioch—inspire. Later Origen & Cyprian of Carthage.

Later the role of deacon/social worker, priest/teacher, bishop/oversight develops. By 2nd century the election of ‘bishops’ as principal teacher in ‘apostolic succession’ develops. Women served as deaconesses.

Persecutions kept occurring on & off within an ‘underground’ church over the next centuries.
1st Era: Underground Church—50–324CE

Strengths:
◦ Little doctrine or structure as we know it, but developing.
◦ New ministries: deacons, presbyters, episcopes.
◦ Communities formed & shaped under persecution.
◦ Diverse ‘theologies’: Peter, Paul, & John.
◦ Bishops’ role as teacher, preacher—central leader.
◦ Spirituality—desert Fathers.

Weaknesses:
◦ No ‘ordination’ as we know it.
◦ No real centralized leader—Bishop of Rome, 1st among equals.
◦ Split between ‘Mother’ Judaism & new sect.
◦ Gradual split between clergy & laity.
◦ Apostates—how forgive?
◦ Roman Empire divides into East & West.

Lead by God’s Spirit
Underground Church
2a. Constantine: Christendom, Rise of Heresies, & Roman Empire crumbling 325–600CE

- With Constantine, as a catechumen, Church moves from ‘underground’ to ‘privileged’ place, as church buildings are created for public worship.
- Christians spread throughout Europe & British Isles.
- Divisions arise between Near East & Europe over respect for diversity within worship as old Roman Empire splits—Constantinople & Rome.
- Doctrinal development (Nicene Creed) through four early ‘councils’—combating heresies.
  - *Arianism*—denied divinity of Jesus
  - *Pelagianism*—stated we ‘earn’ grace/heaven by our ‘works.’
  - *Manichaeism*—believed ‘body’ is bad; ‘soul’ is good.
  - *Gnosticism*—believed ‘we’ve got The Knowledge’ which alone saves us.
2b. Constantine: Christendom, Rise of Heresies, & Roman Empire crumbling 325–600CE

- The Scriptural ‘Canon’ (72 books of OT & NT) set.
- Rise of ‘counter-cultural’ movements—Western Monasticism (Benedict—500ce)—’missionaries’ calling for a spiritual ‘return’ to the Gospels.
- Formal Liturgical Development of Mass & Rituals, Catecheumenate
- City of Rome declines and Bishop of Rome (Vatican) only ‘power’ left?
- Primary leaders: Constantine & mother Helena; Augustine & mother Monica, Benedict & twin sister Scholastica, Jerome (Scripture), Gregory the Great, Brigid & Patrick of Ireland
2nd Era: Christendom, Rise of Heresies & Roman Empire crumbling 325–600CE

Strengths:
- Christianity growth to known world.
- Monastic Spirituality: call back to simplicity & core beliefs.
- Core Doctrines clarified thru Synodal structure.
- Liturgical Life develops: active participation, variety of ministries, sacraments.
- Catechumenal Initiation.

Weaknesses:
- Heresies & schism arise.
- Tension between European & Near-eastern cultural mentalities.
- Political ‘pressure’ & control from secular powers.
- Corruption in parts of the Church.
- Missionary zeal but often at expense of ‘depth’ & cultural ‘respect.’
With collapse of Roman Empire, barbarians from northern & eastern Europe invade the south & west destroying churches, monasteries, schools with much history & culture lost.

In the Near East & North Africa the prophet Mohammad (650CE) creates the *Rise of Islam*—a new ‘Abrahamic’ religion which spread rapidly. The Church loses the Holy Land & No. Africa.

Monasteries like Cluny in France (900CE) try to preserve historical and cultural records.

With a lack of educational resources, the ‘Dark Ages’ begin time of ‘gloom & doom’ in worship & low self esteem in the culture.

Rise of a definite ‘caste’ economic system—*feudalism*.

After Boniface’s evangelization (700CE) by 800CE Germany becomes the *Holy Roman Empire* under Charlemagne.
By 1054CE the Eastern & Western Church splits into Orthodox Rite (E) and Roman Rite (W) not over theology but politics & culture.

Pope Nicholas II (1060CE) creates a ‘college of cardinals’ from around the world to ‘elect’ the next pope.

William the Conqueror of France takes over England from Edward the Confessor.

German Pope Gregory VII (1078CE) creates ‘canon law’ to separate Church from State & Lay control.

Primary missionaries: Boniface, Cyril & Methodius 850CE (Slavic).

Strengths:
- Italy & Rome become a ‘backwater’ in influence, only Vatican remains
- Church & Role of ‘Papacy’ rises in Rome.
- Monastic movement flourishes with core spirituality & preserving educational resources.
- Christianity spread to North & Eastern Europe.

Weaknesses:
- Past cultures & records (Egypt, Rome, Greece) lost.
- ‘Pyramid’ structure of society prospers.
- Clergy & Laity more clearly divides in dress & status.
- North Africa & Lands surrounding Israel lost.
4a. Rise of the Papacy, The Renaissance, & Spiritual Renewal amid the ‘seeds’ of The Reformation 1101–1492CE

- Four political/religious ‘Crusades’ of 11th–12th centuries pillage Holy Land & oppress Muslims.
- Europe begins economic & cultural ‘rebirth’ which leads to affluence in the Church & building of the great Cathedrals (Notre Dame in Paris, Cologne, Rome, etc.) 1100–1492CE
- Counter-cultural spiritual renewal with creation of new religious orders—Francis of Assisi & Dominic 1250CE
- The Bubonic Plague (1347–50CE) – more than 1/3 of Europe died.
4b. Rise of the Papacy, The Renaissance, & Spiritual Renewal amid the ‘seeds’ of The Reformation 1101–1492CE

- Development of a more ‘hierarchical’ Church & centralizing *papacy* (papa)—11 ecumenical councils (1st Lateran 1123CE—made clerical celibacy mandatory for all priests).
- Primary leaders: Bernard of Clairvaux (Cistercians/Trappists 1153CE), Pope Innocent III (reform of sacraments), Francis & Clare of Assisi, Dominic, Catherine of Sienna, Roger Bacon (science)—13th Century.
- Rise of the Ottoman Empire in Near East (1250CE)
- Seeds of Reformation:
  - 1st slavic reformer—Jan Hus killed in 1415CE.
  - Creation of the printing press 1440CE (Gutenberg Bible), pamphlets easy.
- Corruption of the Papacy in late 1400’s with more interest in family politics and the arts than the Church.
4th Era: Rise of Papacy, The Renaissance, & Spiritual Renewal amid the ‘seeds’ of The Reformation 1101 to 1492CE

- **Strengthens:**
  - Creation of many new & influential religious orders.
  - Education at many levels & the Arts & Historical Cultures flourish.
  - Positive reforms by canon law—separate State control of churches.
  - Church begins to focus on expansion to Far East & exploration of new ‘lands.’

- **Weaknesses:**
  - Affluence becomes distorting & distracting influence for Church & State.
  - Tension between Theology & Canon Law, leads to legalism.
  - Hierarchical Church—more clericalized in dress, titles, status, & power.

**Theological & Spiritual Giants**

**Affluence & Corruption**
5a. Age of Reformation into Rise of The Enlightenment & Science Revolution 1492–1790CE

- Beginning movement to *Global Church* with Columbus’ discovery of the Americas.
- Peasants begin to *revolt against the ‘feudal’ caste system*. Monarchies questioned.
- *Corruption* in economics, politics, & the Church—‘Indulgences’ sold, shady popes.
- Rise of ‘*Protestant’ reformers*: Martin Luther (Lutheran), Ulrich Zwingli (Congregational), Henry VIII (Anglican), John Calvin (Presbyterian), John Wesley (Anglican to Methodist).
- Catholic Response: The Council of *Trent* (1545–65CE)—positive reforms—seminary & clergy, but aggressive defensiveness; Pius V—*Tridentine Mass* ritual frozen in Latin (1570CE).
- Spanish Inquisition—paranoia—1564–1642CE—burning heretics.
- Yet, *spiritual renewal* with highly trained Jesuits under Ignatius of Loyola & spiritual renewal with Carmelites under John of the Cross & Teresa of Avila.
5b. Age of Reformation into Rise of The Enlightenment & Science Revolution 1492–1790CE

- **Knowledge Explosion** with printing press:
  - *Scientific revolution* with Copernicus & Galileo—16th century.
  - *Philosophical revolution* (The Enlightenment—John Locke)—17th century
  - Monarchies fall with *political revolution* under democratic ideals (USA & France). Rise of Napoleon (France)—18th century.
  - Rise of *secularism*—‘not see, can’t believe’ leads to anti-religious & anti-institutions.

- Heresies ascend like *French Jansenicism* (anti-body, anti-sexuality).

- Primary leaders: Charles Borromeo, Robert Bellarmine, Francis de Sales, Vincent de Paul.

- *Missionaries* like Francis Xavier (Far East), Junipero Serra (California), Rose of Lima, Martin de Porres, & Peter Claver (Latin America)—17th Century.

- *American Revolution* (1776) & *French Revolution* (1789) change the world & raise many questions about the Church & the State.
5th Era: Age of Reformation into Rise of The Enlightenment & Science Revolution  1492–1790CE

- **Strengths:**
  - RC Counter-Reformation (Trent, etc.) had positive effects on clergy & seminary training, cleaning up ecclesial messes.
  - Jesuits, Carmelites, key saints & religious women have powerful impacts.
  - Papal abuses & affluence confronted.
  - Missionary expansion to a global Church, but not without cultural disrespect.

- **Weaknesses:**
  - Defensiveness to honest challenges of reformers, philosophers, & scientists.
  - Used authority & lecture versus dialogue.
  - Fear led to the Liturgy (Mass) being ‘frozen’ legalistically for 400 yrs.
  - Negative heresies (Jansenism) persist & hurt the Church.

Catholic Reform done in many areas, but not ‘heard’ where needed

Fear, resistance to change hurts Christian unity
6a. Fall of Feudalism & Monarchies, Rise of Democracy amid a ‘Defensive’ Church 1791–1950CE

- Absolute monarchies collapse with rise of ‘democratic’ principles. Eventually colonialism of nations is questioned. Church threatened! Napoleon (1801) begins to limit the power of The Vatican.
- Church struggles to deal with Modernity & new ways of thinking—politically, economically, & theologically.
- Radical shift in most of the world from an agricultural to an industrial and then technological culture.
- Papacy for the most part has strong popes who centralizing the authority of the Church in Rome—the Vatican & the Curia.
- Giant Popes: Pio Nio (Pius IX) ruled for 32 years—Syllabus of Errors (1864), Vatican I (1869–70, Infallibility defined, but unfinished).
- In the U.S. the Catholic Church grows from a minority to influence because of democratic principles, religious orders & education, new immigrants primarily from Ireland, Germany, Italy, & Europe.
- New Historical, Theological, & Scriptural methods & study in 19th & early 20th century are beginning which raise many ‘questions’ not considered before. Fundamentalism vs metaphorical Scripture study?
6b. Fall of Feudalism & Monarchies, Rise of Democracy amid a ‘Defensive’ Church  1791–1950CE

- **Leo XIII** (On Economic Revolution 1891)—the beginning of *Catholic Social Teaching*—interrelationship of moral principles for economic & political life—locally, nationally, & globally.
- **Pius X**—reform of the Liturgy (communion for children); but *resistance to modernity*—oath against Modernism; rejection of many theologians).
- New Universal *Code of Canon Law* (1917)—1st time all Church law codified for the whole Western Church. Helpful but leads to ‘legalism’!
- Strong ‘*Catholic Identity*’ in education & schools—clear rules, absolutes.
- **World Wars** (1914–18, 1939–45)—US Catholic bishops become more influential in the world—practicing social teachings (basis for New Deal). Benedict XV speaks out against war & the use of weapons of mass death.
- By 1929 *The Vatican gives up its ‘temporal power’* in Italy. Vatican State along with the ‘Holy See’ formed, freeing the Church.
- Pius XI (1931) follows up Leo XIII with Catholic Social teaching on international economic justice among & between nations.
- Gradual movement from a *Euro-centric Church to a more Global Church* including No. & So. America, Africa, & Asia.
- Pius XII begins to open Catholic Scriptural scholarship to the ‘new methods & research’ of the last 100 years (1943). A new door opens.

Strengths:
- Democratic ideals raise questions about institutions.
- New religious orders improve education & evangelization.
- Church to become more globally & multi-cultural conscious.
- With modern scholarship—historical consciousness, Scriptural understanding, new theological concepts immerge.
- World Wars & Holocaust raise moral questions.

Weaknesses:
- Anti-religious & anti-religious attitudes frighten the Church.
- The Church ‘frightened’ by new concepts of study, democracy, & cultures & how to deal with them.
- Legalism, clericalism, & control/power rules the day.
- Euro-centric ideas dominate over 3rd & 4th world ideas.

Modernity pushes the Church into new ideas
Church opens to more gospel & global concepts
Pius XII begins an opening to *new scientific developments* in his encyclical—*Humanae Generis*. Systematic, Biblical/Scriptural, Liturgical, & Moral theological developments open!

In 1955 Pius XII opens new *Liturgy* development on Holy Week celebrations and Liturgy.


*Ecumenism & Interfaith Relations* encouraged in Decree on Ecumenism (1964) & Interfaith Relations (1965—Judaism, Islam, etc.) along with a Decree on *Religious Liberty* (1965) written by an American.
Part of Vatican II implementation: Liturgy in the vernacular, sacraments revised, permanent diaconate & catechumenate restored.

Consequential popes from Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, to John Paul II. Along with significant theologians: Rahner, Schillebeeck, Congar, Murray, Haring, Bea, Danielou, & Guardini. Women religious reform their orders & move out into engagement with the world (Sr. Mary Luke Tobin of Loretto, KY).


In 1973 US Supreme Court allows ‘abortion on demand’ (Roe v. Wade) which ignites polarized religious views, spreads throughout the world.


World migration of many peoples from oppression to free societies; Latin American exodus to USA. Multi-culturalism develops.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta draws attention to the plight of the poor & suffering in India and all over the world.

In the 1980’s a ‘Restoration’ begins to occur within the Church, questioning many of the principles & consequences of Vatican II, seemingly encouraged by John Paul II.

Yet, in the Jubilee Year 2000, John Paul publicly apologizes for all the mistakes & sinfulness of the Catholic tradition over the years.

Strengths:
- Move from ‘pyramid’ to a ‘concentric’ model of church.
- Consultation & dialogue over ‘top–down’ process.
- Theological pluralism over a monolithic mindset.
- Outreach & Social Justice accentuated.
- Virtues emphasized over Sin in moral reasoning.
- ‘People of God,’ Baptism, promotes lay ‘ministry.’
- Ecumenism & Interfaith dialogue & social activity encouraged.

Weaknesses:
- Polarization between ‘traditional’ & ‘progressive’ thinking.
- Fewer clergy & religious.
- Loss of a sense of a closed ‘Catholic Identity.’
- Some feel confusion & loss of a sense of ‘Sin.’
- A very slow adaptation to the modernity.
- Some groups longing for a ‘Restoration’–a ‘reform of the reform’? Vatican II questioned?

Pyramid to Servant model of Church

Tensions between ecclesial ‘ideologies’
8a. Multiple Crises amid Multi–Cultural Globalism & Post–Modernity 2001–present

- Rapid social change & rise of the internet, social media, & instant communication & technology—truly ‘Global Village.’
- Secularism grows, skepticism of all religion, rise of the ‘nones’ (those who practice no formal religion).
- Rise of 3rd & 4th World cultures, particularly Africa, Asia, & Latin America—global migration leaving oppressive nations.
- 9/11 (2001) Terrorist attacks & Iraq & Afghanistan wars
- John Paul II’s decline & death (2005), Benedict XVI following—tensions—clerical abuse, bishops’ responsibility, a ‘new’ controversially translated Roman Missal, Muslim conflict—within which Benedict states—’it not either/or but both/and!’
Climate change & concern for Environment & Global Warming.

In US the cost up & attendance down at Catholic schools, seemingly abandoning poorer & less affluent neighborhoods.

Surprise of Francis (2013)—non-Italian & now 3rd World Bps. of Rome? Pastoral, dialogical, less ‘trappings,’ care for creation, acknowledging clerical abuse throughout the world, & synodality (dialogue with all!), cleaning up Vatican finances, denouncing clericalism, reforming the Roman offices (as servants), & creating diversity in world’s cardinals (representing the whole Church)

But ‘resistance’ to Francis’ gospel & pastoral reforms, especially in the USA, among so-called ‘traditionalists’ & some well-to-do business persons—wanting clear identity, control, & authority.

Some of our Catholic media (online, print, & TV) seems to have increased some polarization within the Church with often ‘less than the full truth’ in resistance to Vatican II reforms & Pope Francis’ writings & speeches.
Some dioceses seeming to forsake Vatican II’s emphasize on ecumenical/interfaith work, social justice, & lay ecclesial ministry for more clerical control, pre-Council Liturgical practices, vesture, & pious practices.

A world-wide pandemic (COVID19) hits all; rise of ‘nationalism,’ political extremism, questioning of ‘truth’ (facts & science?), interracial justice & xenophobia.

Several Francis key documents—calling us back to Jesus’ Gospel demands—humility, simplicity, servant leadership, integral human development & community, & ‘accompany’/‘encounter’ the poor & vulnerable.

Joy of the Gospel (2013)—what does it mean to be ‘church today.

Laudato Si (2015)—calling the world community to care for the environment

Fratelli Tutti (2020)—called the world again to being ‘a human fraternity/sisternity’
8th Era: Multiple Crises—A Multi-Cultural Church dealing with Post-Modernity  2001–present

**Strengthens:**
- Many lay leaders ‘step up’ to their Baptismal ministry.
- Growing new lay spiritual movements within Church.
- Pope Francis ‘inspires’ many with his pastoral, humble, engagement–clear, down-to-earth writings.
- In the past God’s Spirit has inspired new ‘surprises’ that call us back to the Gospel basics.

**Weaknesses:**
- Abuse scandal severely damages Church credibility.
- Loss of full implementation of Vatican II principles.
- Polarization among Vatican II supporters & ‘radical’ traditionalists who want to return to the 1950’s Church.
- Lessening of ecumenical & interfaith cooperation.
- ‘Reform of the Reform’ Liturgical practice & renewed clericalism alienating many of the young.

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Trust in God’s Spirit to enlighten us

Lack of historical perspective/understanding
Hopeful ‘signs’ over 2000 years?

Strengths of Past:
- God’s Spirit has inspired new ‘counter-cultural’ movements in each era.
- God has sent ‘prophets’ & ‘saints’ into our midst—who reminded us of Gospel demands!
- Often it is the ‘least among us’ who become the most powerful.
- ‘Power’ corrupts & Jesus reminds us to be ‘servants’!

Hope for the future:
- Our youth are most ‘creation conscious,’ less ‘power-oriented,’ more ‘color & ethnicity blind.’
- Access to spirituality & catechetical resources are larger than ever.
- Authenticity, engagement, encountering, accompanying seem to be needed virtues.
- Drawing out of our past both the old and the new.
Very brief American Catholic History parallels Universal Church 1791– present

- 1600’s Spanish & French Missionaries.
- 1700’s English Catholic to Maryland (1789) – 1st bishop (John Carroll) & diocese, 1st seminary (St. Mary’s, Baltimore), 4 more dioceses (1808).
- 1800’s – rapid expansion; new religious orders (1812–Seton & Spalding, etc.), Trappists (1848), St. Meinrad (1854); two waves of immigrants (‘30’s & ‘80’s); US bishops at Vatican I (1870); Baltimore Catechism (1884); Notre Dame (1842) & Catholic University (1889); African American parishes (1864) & Black Catholic Congresses (1890’s).
- 1900’s—Fr. John Ryan (Bps Conf.) lead to New Deal; Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton; explosion of parishes & schools after WWII; JFK – 1st Catholic president; urban to suburban flight; US Bishops at Vatican II then implemented; ecumenism & social justice concerns grows. Then post 1990—clergy shortage, parishes & schools merged & closed, & abuse scandal, beginning of Latino/a immigration.
- 2000’s—abuse blows open, clergy shortage gets worse, but more multi-cultural experiences, polarization between evangelicals & Catholics (other places collaboration), political divisiveness.


**Comby, Jean. How to Read Church History, Vol. 1 (From the beginnings to the 15th century) & Vol. 2 (From the Reformation to the present day). New York: Crossroad, 1996.**


