

The Church Faces Challenges

Should I join the team or not? Which high school should I attend? Who would make the best class president? We are constantly faced with decisions. Our choices make us what we are, and we must live with the consequences of our choices. Complete the following activity on a separate sheet of paper.

Describe a decision you made that turned out well.

Describe a decision that did not turn out well.

Describe what you learned from these decisions.

Led by the Spirit

Sometimes our decisions turn out well, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes our mistakes have long-lasting consequences. Hopefully we learn from our mistakes and move on. The history of the Church reveals many human decisions—some that turned out well and others that did not. It is important to remember, however, that the Church is both human and divine. This means that, even when there are bad decisions, weak leaders, or evil events in the Church, we can trust the Holy Spirit to lead us so that God's saving plan

can be carried out. We know this because Jesus promised the Spirit and his presence in the Church and in our lives too. We can have faith so unshakable that no matter what happens, the Holy Spirit is with us. As we try to follow Jesus, we can pray to the Spirit to guide and strengthen us and the Church every day.

Locate the following passages in the Bible and briefly summarize what Jesus promises.

Matthew 28:20

Matthew 16:18

John 14:16

John 14:26

Too Many Popes

The Church had many problems in the 14th century. A Frenchman who was elected pope moved to Avignon, France. There he and his six successors were under the rule of the French king for 70 years. This caused many problems for people and rulers of other countries. They knew that the Catholic Church was meant to be universal and not tied to one people, one country, or one time. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, leaders in Italy and the people of the Church turned to Saint Catherine of Siena for help. Catherine was a young woman whose holiness and charity were well known. She wrote many letters and visited the pope in Avignon, urging him to return to Rome. Finally she was able to persuade him to return to Rome in 1378.

The problems, however, were not over. The next pope insulted the French cardinals. They declared his election invalid and elected their own pope in France. As a result, there were two men claiming to be pope: one in Rome and one in France! Christians were confused. Nations took sides, and Church leadership was in a state of confusion. For a short time, there were even three men claiming to be pope. This internal division in the Church is called the Great Western Schism. It took 39 years before a Church council restored the authority of the true pope.

To this day, Vatican City is an independent sovereign nation, the smallest in the world. This prevents any country from claiming ownership or authority over the papacy. Rather, the pope alone enjoys full authority

The Vatican, Rome.



in the care of souls. Because of Vatican City's independence, the Church can be truly catholic, sent out to all peoples.

The Black Death

Another crisis emerged during the 14th century: an epidemic called the Black Plague, or the Black Death. The disease caused swollen glands and brought death within a few hours. At least a third of Europe's population died in this plague, which raged for 50 years. Priests, sisters, and others treated with dignity those who were sick, bringing them food and clothing and burying those who died from the disease. Many of the stricken people were comforted by the thought that Jesus had suffered too. Because of the extreme suffering that people endured during this time, their thoughts and prayers turned to the passion and Death of Jesus, the sorrows of Mary, his mother, and the concepts of death and judgment.

Anointing of the Sick

Sickness and suffering have always been a part of the human condition. In the face of serious illness, people come face to face with their own powerlessness and limitations. Some people experience great sadness, anxiety, and a loss of dignity as a result of serious illness. During these times, many people's thoughts and prayers turn to God. The Gospels provide many stories of Jesus demonstrating his compassion to those who were sick and in need of healing.

Through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, Jesus continues to reach out to those who are seriously ill. Through this sacrament, those who are suffering from serious illness receive a special grace. Using the Oil of the Sick, blessed by a bishop, a priest may anoint the sick person on the forehead and the palms of the hands. Through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, those who are sick unite their own suffering to the suffering of Jesus. They are strengthened and given courage, peace, and dignity to endure their suffering in a Christian manner. The person also experiences spiritual healing and, in some circumstances, physical healing.

A New Age

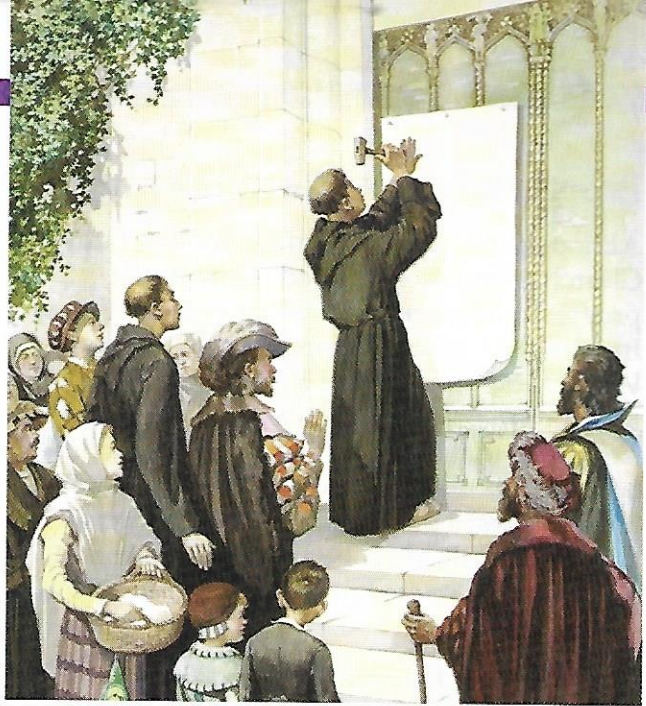
By the 16th century, a new challenge faced the Church. This challenge came from a new way of thinking and living called the Renaissance, or “rebirth.” Some people began to emphasize human achievement rather than the divine presence in the world. Although there was renewed interest in the classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome, there was less interest in religion. New ideas spread quickly because of the recently invented printing press, and people began to ask questions about their faith and about the role of the Church. At the same time, new nation-states emerged. Some of the kings of these nation-states wanted to take away the power that the Church inherited when the Roman Empire and its system of government collapsed.

Because of their positions of authority in society, many bishops lived the lifestyle of Renaissance princes. As a result, they often neglected their spiritual duties or performed them badly, taking advantage of people they were responsible for serving, namely those who were poor and vulnerable. In response, people began to challenge not only the lifestyles of the Church leaders but also the teachings of the Church.

A Call for Change

In the early 16th century, a serious public challenge to the Church came from a priest named Martin Luther. He was a professor of theology and Scripture in Wittenberg, Germany. As a young monk, Luther wondered what he needed to do to earn salvation. He concluded that salvation cannot be earned and that faith alone saves us.

While the Church teaches that faith is necessary for salvation, it also teaches that faith cannot be separated from good works. At the time Martin Luther stressed the importance of faith, the Church stressed the importance of good works. Some people even thought that their good works, especially donations to the Church, would “buy” heaven for them and their loved ones. Some Church leaders took advantage of this way of thinking and began selling **indulgences**—the remission of temporal punishment due to sins



Martin Luther posting his 95 objections on the Castle Church door.

that have been forgiven—to gain riches for themselves and the Church.

Disturbed by abuses in the Church, Luther posted a list of 95 objections on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. Unfortunately some of Luther’s ideas departed from Church teachings in significant ways. The Church teaches that God speaks through Scripture and Tradition, but Luther believed that Scripture alone should guide us. He accepted only those sacraments found directly in Scripture: Baptism and the Eucharist. He did not accept the teaching authority of the Church, the priesthood, religious life, or acts of penance.

The pope forbade Luther to preach and write about his objections. Because Luther continued his protest, the pope excommunicated him. Martin Luther gathered followers who sought to correct the abuses in the Church. Princes and other nobles backed Luther for political reasons. Eventually, although Luther still considered himself Catholic, the Lutheran Church was formed. Its creed, the Augsburg Confession, was written in 1531.

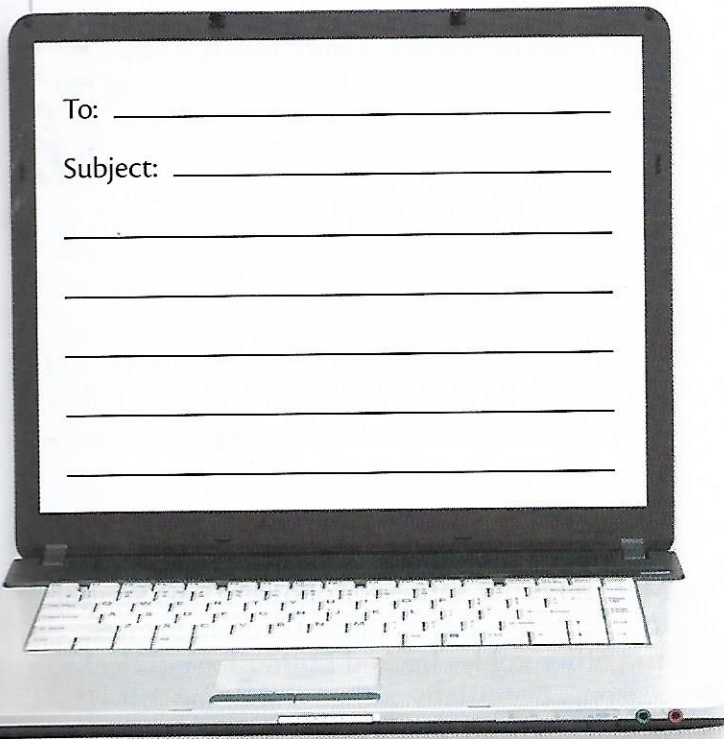
Division in the Catholic Church spread rapidly, and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church. The appearance of these separate Christian communities is called the **Protestant Reformation**.

Progress Toward Reconciliation

Although the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Churches remain separated today, much progress has taken place toward reconciliation. In 1999, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This document expressed that both Lutherans and Catholics accept the notion that we are saved—justified—by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ and, as a result, are called to do good works.

Your Advice

Write an e-mail to today’s leaders of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. Advise them on how to build unity among Christians.



A Moment with Jesus

Nothing you do can help you earn salvation. Salvation is a gift given freely to us by God through the Death and Resurrection of his Son, Jesus. Through Baptism, you have been given the gift of faith, which is necessary for salvation. Take a moment to thank Jesus for the gift of your Baptism. Ask him to strengthen your faith and to help you spread it to others. Ask him to help you do works of charity to keep your faith alive and to help all people recognize that we are brothers and sisters.

A Friend Turned Foe

At the beginning of the 16th century, England was loyal to the pope. King Henry VIII had even received the title Defender of the Faith from the pope for his writings in support of the Church against Luther. But then the king’s wife was unable to bear him a son to inherit his throne. He asked the pope to grant him an **annulment**—declare his marriage invalid—so that he could marry another woman, Anne Boleyn. When the pope refused his request, Henry declared that the Church in England was to be under him rather than the pope. Anyone who did not take an oath acknowledging him as head of the Church was put to death.



King Henry VIII’s Church of England, the Anglican Church, is now organized in over 40 countries. In some of those countries, such as the United States, it is known as the Episcopal Church.

Remember

What are some of the challenges the Church faced during the 16th century?

The Church faced the Great Western Schism, the Black Death, the Renaissance, Martin Luther's protest, the Protestant Reformation, and the challenge of England's King Henry VIII.

How does the Holy Spirit guide the Church?

The Holy Spirit makes all things work for the good of the Church so God's saving plan can be carried out.

What is Christ's promise to the Church?

Jesus said, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

Words to Know

annulment

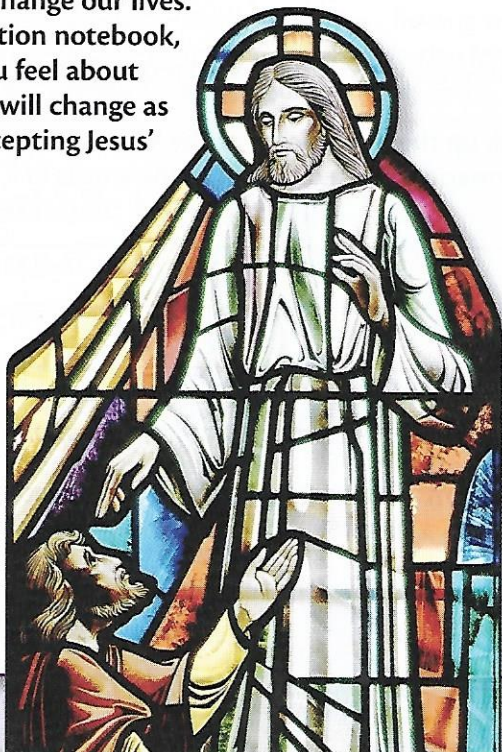
indulgence

Protestant Reformation

Respond

We sometimes think that we have to do something in order to earn salvation. Although it is wonderful to know that salvation is offered to us as a gift and that all we need is faith in Jesus, that does not mean we do not have to "do" anything. Accepting salvation through Jesus causes us to change our lives.

In your reflection notebook, write how you feel about how your life will change as a result of accepting Jesus' invitation.



Reach Out

1. Use the Internet or a library to research Vatican City. Find pictures and statistics about Vatican City that you can share with your class.
2. Talk to your parents or guardians about important decisions they have made in their lives. Ask them to tell you about decisions that have turned out well and others that have not turned out well.
3. Find statistics about different Christian denominations today. Share these with your class.
4. St. Peter's Basilica and the Vatican have been the center of Christianity for years. At the base of the dome of St. Peter's is Matthew 16:18. Find out what this text is and why it is used. Then find a Scripture text for your parish church. Write an essay explaining why it fits your parish.
5. Ask your parents or guardians about relatives or friends who are Protestant. Find out which Christian denominations they belong to and gather information about those denominations.
6. The Black Death killed nearly a third of Europe's population. Today, AIDS is killing millions of people in Africa. Visit the Web site of Catholic Relief Services (www.crs.org) and find out how you can stand in solidarity with your brothers and sisters in Africa.
7. Ask your older relatives if they have ever received the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick or were present when someone else was anointed. Ask them to describe what they saw and felt.