43. The Catholic record: atrocities, corruption and abuse

Critics of the Catholic Church, Protestant, Orthodox and secular, often raise its moral record: corrupt popes, crusades, inquisitions, persecution of dissenters, colonial conquest, and the modern abuse crisis. This chapter sets out what happened, using figures accepted by historians rather than popular exaggerations in either direction; the criticism; the Catholic response; and whether and how each was corrected. Every tradition compared on this site has a record chapter in the same format.

The criticism

- **"By their fruits you will know them"** (Matt 7:15–20). A church claiming to be the one true Church should not have produced such fruit at its head.
- **Coercion is foreign to Christ.** Faith cannot be forced (John 18:36; 2 Cor 10:3–5). Jews, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Cathars, Waldensians, Protestants and Anabaptists all suffered under rulers acting in the Church's name.
- **Structural causes.** Union with state power, an unaccountable hierarchy, secrecy and mandatory clerical celibacy made abuses likely and hard to correct.
- **Official, not just individual.** Some wrongs were authorized by papal acts (torture in *Ad extirpanda*, the conquest bulls, the 1572 medal), which strains the line between "sinful members" and the Church's teaching.
- **Late and partial apologies.** Many apologies came centuries later and speak of the sins of the Church's "sons and daughters" rather than of the Church herself; some figures involved were canonized or beatified.
- Key texts: Matt 7:15–20; Matt 26:52; John 18:36; Rev 17:6; 1 Pet 5:2–3; 2 Cor 10:3–5.

How Catholics answer

- **Holy, yet in need of purification.** The Church is "at once holy and always in need of purification" (CCC 827, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 8). Christ promised that she would not fail in faith (indefectibility), not that her members and leaders would be sinless.
- **Weeds among the wheat.** Jesus foresaw sinners in His Church (Matt 13:24–30, 47–50), chose Judas, and upheld the authority of Moses' seat though corrupt men sat in it (Matt 23:2–3). The Donatist controversy settled that clergy's sins do not destroy the Church.
- **Doctrine vs conduct.** No corrupt pope defined a doctrine of faith; the reforms that followed came from within the Church.
- **Accurate history.** Many popular figures are vastly inflated; some acts were carried out by Catholic states rather than the Church; and other churches committed parallel wrongs once

they held power.

- **Repentance.** On the Day of Pardon (March 12, 2000) John Paul II publicly confessed seven categories of sin, including "sins committed in the service of truth," sins against the unity of the Body of Christ, against the people of Israel, against the rights of peoples and respect for cultures and religions, against the dignity of women and the unity of the human race, and against the fundamental rights of the person, following the theological study *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (1999).
- Key texts: Matt 13:24–30; Matt 23:2–3; Luke 22:31–32; 1 Cor 5:1–2; Rev 2–3.

Summary

1. The "dark age" of the papacy

Period: c. 880–1050

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Election by cardinals (1059); conclave (1274)

2. Simony, sale of offices and clerical concubinage

Period: 11th–16th c.

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Trent's residence and seminary decrees (1563)

3. Avignon and the Great Western Schism

Period: 1309–1417

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Council of Constance elects Martin V (1417)

4. Renaissance popes and nepotism

Period: c. 1470–1534

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Trent; ban on papal nepotism (1692)

5. The sale of indulgences

Period: 13th–16th c.

Status: PARTLY CORRECTED

Key correction: Quaestors abolished (1562); money ban (1567)

6. Forged documents: the Donation of Constantine and the False Decretals

Period: 8th–17th c.

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Forgeries exposed (1440, 1628)

7. Vatican financial scandals

Period: 1970s–present

Status: ONGOING

Key correction: Financial reforms since 2010; Becciu retrial

8. The Crusades: massacres of Muslims and Jews

Period: 1095–1291

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Day of Pardon (2000)

9. The sack of Constantinople (Fourth Crusade)

Period: 1204

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Apology in Athens (2001); relics returned (2004)

10. The Albigensian Crusade

Period: 1209–1229

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Day of Pardon (2000)

11. The medieval Inquisition and judicial torture

Period: 1230s–15th c.

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965); CCC 2297–2298

12. The Spanish Inquisition

Period: 1478–1834

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Abolished 1834

13. The Roman Inquisition, the Index, Bruno and Galileo

Period: 1542–1966

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Index abolished (1966); Galileo acknowledged (1992)

14. Executing reformers and Anabaptists

Period: 1415–1558

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Hus regret (1999); Mennonite dialogue (2003)

15. Wars of religion and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre

Period: 1562–1648

Status: ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: John Paul II in Paris (1997)

16. Witch hunts

Period: 1450–1750

Status: ENDED; SHARED GUILT

Key correction: Ended 18th c.; both confessions

17. Treatment of Jews

Period: 4th–20th c.

Status: LARGELY CORRECTED

Key correction: *Nostra Aetate* (1965); *We Remember* (1998)

18. The conquest of the Americas and the "Doctrine of Discovery"

Period: 1452–1800s

Status: PARTLY CORRECTED

Key correction: Apology (2015); Doctrine of Discovery repudiated (2023)

19. The Church and slavery

Period: 15th–19th c.

Status: CORRECTED

Key correction: Gregory XVI (1839); *Gaudium et Spes* 27 (1965)

20. Canadian residential schools

Period: 1870s–1996

Status: PARTLY CORRECTED

Key correction: Papal apology at Maskwacis (2022)

21. Clergy sexual abuse and cover-up

Period: 1950s–present

Status: ONGOING

Key correction: Dallas Charter (2002); *Vos estis lux mundi* (2019)

22. Irish Magdalene laundries and mother-and-baby homes

Period: 1922–1998

Status: PARTLY CORRECTED

Key correction: State apologies (2013, 2021)

23. The Nazi era, Croatia and Rwanda

Period: 1933–1994

Status: DISPUTED / ACKNOWLEDGED

Key correction: Rwanda apology (2017)

Status key: CORRECTED the practice ended and the Church formally rejected it; PARTLY CORRECTED acknowledged with significant steps, but disputes remain over reparation or formal repeal; ACKNOWLEDGED admitted and apologized for, with nothing left to stop; ONGOING reforms in progress; DISPUTED historians disagree on the facts or responsibility.

Close all

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2. Simony, sale of offices and clerical concubinage 11th–16th c. CORRECTED
3. Avignon and the Great Western Schism 1309–1417 CORRECTED
4. Renaissance popes and nepotism c. 1470–1534 CORRECTED
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12. The Spanish Inquisition 1478–1834 CORRECTED
13. The Roman Inquisition, the Index, Bruno and Galileo 1542–1966 CORRECTED
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18. The conquest of the Americas and the "Doctrine of Discovery" 1452–1800s PARTLY CORRECTED

19. The Church and slavery 15th–19th c. CORRECTED

20. Canadian residential schools 1870s–1996 PARTLY CORRECTED

D. Modern institutional abuse 3

21. Clergy sexual abuse and cover-up 1950s–present ONGOING

22. Irish Magdalene laundries and mother-and-baby homes 1922–1998 PARTLY CORRECTED

23. The Nazi era, Croatia and Rwanda 1933–1994 DISPUTED / ACKNOWLEDGED

Across the traditions

Coercion and religious liberty: what each major tradition now teaches, and what it has acknowledged about its own past, from its own documents.

Catholic

The Church long accepted force against heresy, a past the International Theological Commission examines as "The Use of Force in the Service of Truth" (*Memory and Reconciliation*, 1999, 5.3). Vatican II declared a right to religious freedom so that none may be forced to act against conscience (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965, 2–3), admitting past conduct "hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel" (12). On the Day of Pardon, 12 March 2000, John Paul II led a

Orthodox

The Moscow councils of 1656 and 1667 placed oaths on the old Russian rites, and Old Believers later suffered state persecution. The Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (1971) declared those oaths void "as if they had never been," calling the 1667 anathema fateful for the Church. Russian Orthodox social teaching says that the Church may not resist sin by force (III.3), and the Council of Crete (2016) deplores

confession of sins committed in the service of truth.

Sources: Vatican II, Dignitatis Humanae (7 December 1965) 2, 3, 12; International Theological Commission, Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past (December 1999) 5.3; Universal Prayer: Confession of Sins and Asking for Forgiveness, Day of Pardon (12 March 2000), section II (vatican.va).

restrictions on religious freedom and condemns wars provoked by religious fanaticism.

Sources: Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, decision on abolishing the oaths on the old rites (30 May–2 June 1971), point 3 and introduction (azbyka.ru); Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church III.3, III.6 (mospat.ru); Holy and Great Council of Crete, The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World (2016) B.2 and "Peace and the Aversion of War" 3 (holycouncil.org).

Lutheran

The Augsburg Confession (1530) condemns the Anabaptists who forbid Christians to hold civil office (XVI), while teaching that bishops act "without human force, simply by the Word" (XXVIII). Anabaptists were nonetheless violently persecuted in Lutheran lands. On 22 July 2010 the Lutheran World Federation's Assembly at Stuttgart unanimously expressed deep regret and sorrow for that persecution and for the theological arguments Lutheran reformers gave for it, asked forgiveness from God and from Mennonites, and undertook to read its confessional condemnations in the light of that action.

Sources: Augsburg Confession (1530) XVI, XXVIII.21–22 (bookofconcord.org); Lutheran World Federation, Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of "Anabaptists" (LWF Council, October 2009; Eleventh Assembly, Stuttgart, 22 July 2010), as reported by ELCIC (1 November 2009) and Worldwide Faith News (July 2010).

Reformed

Calvin's Geneva burned Michael Servetus for heresy in 1553, and the Westminster Confession (1646) charged the magistrate to see "that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed" (23.3). The American Presbyterian church revised 23.3 in 1788: magistrates may not interfere in matters of faith and must protect all persons from injury on account of religion. On 27 October 1903 Geneva Protestants raised an expiatory monument near the site of the pyre, calling Calvin's act an error of his age and affirming liberty of conscience.

Sources: Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) 23.3, original and American revision (transcription at semperreformanda.com; OPC text at opc.org/wcf.html); Orthodox Presbyterian Church, The Confession of Faith and Catechisms (2005), Preface (1788 revision of 20.4, 23.3, 31.2); Expiatory monument to Michael Servetus, Champel, Geneva (1903), inscription (lexilogos.com); Republic and Canton of Geneva, news release of 29 September 2025 (geneve.ch).

Anglican

Article XXXVII of the Thirty-nine Articles gives the Crown chief government in all causes, ecclesiastical and civil, and the Restoration of 1660 brought the reinstatement of episcopacy

Methodist

John Wesley wrote that he persecuted no one for religious principles, yet argued in a letter of 12 January 1780 that no Protestant government ought to tolerate Roman Catholics on grounds

and the suppression of Puritan dissent. The Lambeth Conference of 1948 declared that every person has the right to freedom of religion, conscience and belief, including the right to change belief (Resolution 8). On 8 May 2022 the Church of England held a service of repentance in Oxford for the anti-Jewish laws of the Synod of Oxford (1222).

Sources: Articles of Religion XXXVII (churchofengland.org, Book of Common Prayer); Orthodox Presbyterian Church, The Confession of Faith and Catechisms (2005), Preface (1660 and the suppression of Puritanism); Lambeth Conference 1948, Resolutions 7–8 (Anglican Communion resolutions archive, 1948.pdf); ecumenism.net, 9 May 2022, on the service at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.

of political allegiance. The United Methodist Social Principles (2024) affirm the right to choose one's faith and reject attempts to impose beliefs or to coerce anyone into joining or remaining in a religion. In 2012 the General Conference held an Act of Repentance toward Indigenous Peoples, recalling the Sand Creek massacre (1864) led by a Methodist minister.

Sources: John Wesley, letter to the Printer of the Public Advertiser, 12 January 1780 (Wesley Center Online, Letters 1780); United Methodist Church, Revised Social Principles (General Conference 2024), The Political Community, Basic Rights and Freedoms, J. Religious Minorities; UM News, "GC2012: Starting along the path of repentance" (Act of Repentance, 27 April 2012).

Baptist

Thomas Helwys's *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) told James I that earthly power may not punish anyone for religion, "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews"; he likely died in prison. The Baptist Faith and Message (2000) XVII holds that God alone is Lord of the conscience and that the state may impose no penalties for religious opinions. Yet the Southern Baptist Convention's 1914 resolution on religious liberty also warned against Roman Catholic efforts "to gain control of our government."

Sources: Thomas Helwys, A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity (1612), ed. R. Groves (1998) p. 53, as cited in the First Amendment Encyclopedia (MTSU), "Thomas Helwys"; Baptist Faith and Message (2000) art. XVII (bfm.sbc.net); Southern Baptist Convention, Resolution on Religious Liberty (1914) (sbc.net).

The other records. The same format is used for every tradition: Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist and Baptist. Pointing to another church's record excuses nothing in this one; the

question every record chapter leaves open is whether a church's sins disprove its claims.

1. The "dark age" of the papacy c. 880–1050 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

In 897 Pope Stephen VI had the corpse of his predecessor Formosus exhumed, propped on a throne and put on trial (the "Cadaver Synod"). For much of c. 904–964, the period historians call the *saeculum obscurum*, papal elections were controlled by Roman noble families (Theophylact, his wife Theodora and daughter Marozia); John XII, elected about age 18 in 955, was notorious for immorality. In 1045 Benedict IX resigned the papacy in exchange for payment to his successor Gregory VI, and for a time three men claimed to be pope until Emperor Henry III deposed them at Sutri (1046).

The criticism

The papacy behaved as a political prize captured by aristocratic families. An office supposedly guarded by the Holy Spirit and holding the keys of the kingdom was bought, sold and fought over; this is hard to reconcile with a divinely guaranteed succession from Peter.

Catholic response

The Church freely admits these were scandalous men. But papal infallibility never meant impeccability (personal sinlessness), and no pope of this period defined any doctrine; the faith of the Church was unaffected. Jesus chose Judas among the Twelve. Reform came from within the Church itself: the monastery of Cluny (910) and the Gregorian Reform.

Was it corrected? Corrected. Nicholas II's decree (1059) gave papal elections to the cardinals, removing them from Roman families and emperors; Gregory X's *Ubi periculum* (1274) created the conclave. Nothing comparable has recurred.

2. Simony, sale of offices and clerical concubinage 11th–16th c.

CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Buying and selling church offices ("simony," after Simon Magus in Acts 8), appointment of bishops by lay rulers, married or concubinary priests, and bishops holding several dioceses at once (pluralism) while never living in them were widespread across medieval Christendom. Gregory VII (1073–1085) attacked them in the Investiture Controversy; the First Lateran Council (1123) forbade simony and clerical

marriage. The abuses persisted, and absentee bishops and benefice-hunting were among the Reformers' chief complaints.

The criticism

The Church sold spiritual offices for money, and its rule of clerical celibacy produced centuries of hypocrisy and concubinage. Reformers like Luther were responding to real, entrenched corruption that the hierarchy failed to fix for 400 years.

Catholic response

The Church itself condemned these practices as grave sins from the beginning (Acts 8:18–24) and repeatedly legislated against them. Their persistence shows how hard it was to free the Church from feudal lords, not approval. Celibacy is a discipline voluntarily accepted; its violation is a sin of individuals.

Was it corrected? Corrected. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) required bishops to reside in their dioceses, outlawed pluralism, and ordered every diocese to found a seminary to train priests (Session 23, 1563). Saint-bishops such as Charles Borromeo modeled the reform.

3. Avignon and the Great Western Schism 1309–1417 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

From 1309 to 1377 the popes lived in Avignon under strong French influence; Petrarch called it the "Babylonian captivity" of the Church. Catherine of Siena urged Gregory XI to return to Rome, which he did in 1377. After a disputed election in 1378, rival lines of popes reigned in Rome and Avignon, each excommunicating the other; the Council of Pisa (1409) tried to end it and instead produced a third claimant. The Council of Constance (1414–1418) secured the resignation or deposition of all three and elected Martin V in November 1417. Constance's decree *Haec Sancta* (1415) claimed a council's authority over a pope.

The criticism

For almost forty years ordinary Christians could not know who the true pope was, and canonized saints backed rival claimants (Vincent Ferrer supported Avignon). If a visible infallible head is necessary for unity, the system failed exactly when it was needed; and it took a council deposing popes to fix it.

Catholic response

The dispute was over a question of fact, which election was valid, not over any doctrine; the Church remained one in faith and sacraments throughout. The Roman line is now regarded as legitimate. Rome later rejected the conciliarist claim that councils rank above popes (Fifth Lateran Council, 1516; Vatican I, 1870).

Was it corrected? Corrected (resolved at Constance, 1417). Conciliarism remains a live historical argument used against papal claims.

4. Renaissance popes and nepotism

c. 1470–1534 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Sixtus IV (1471–1484) enriched his nephews and was implicated in the Pazzi conspiracy (1478), in which Giuliano de' Medici was murdered during Mass in Florence's cathedral. Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia, 1492–1503) won election by bribery and fathered several children, including Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia. Julius II (1503–1513) led armies in person. Leo X (1513–1521) spent lavishly and authorized the St. Peter's indulgence that provoked Luther. The friar Savonarola, who denounced Alexander VI, was executed in Florence in 1498.

The criticism

These men claimed to be the Vicar of Christ while living as Renaissance princes. A church whose head could be bought shows the danger of concentrating spiritual authority in one office with no accountability to Scripture or to the congregation.

Catholic response

Catholics do not defend these popes. Pope Adrian VI himself, through his legate at the Diet of Nuremberg (1522–1523), admitted that "for some years many abominable things have occurred in this Holy See." No doctrine was changed by any of them, and the Church's reform produced saints such as Pius V, Charles Borromeo and Ignatius of Loyola.

Was it corrected? Corrected. Trent's reforms; Innocent XII's bull *Romanum decet Pontificem* (1692) banned popes from enriching relatives and ended the office of "cardinal-nephew."

5. The sale of indulgences

13th–16th c. PARTLY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Indulgences began as reductions of canonical penance, but by the late Middle Ages they were commonly granted in return for donations and peddled by professional preachers ("quaestors" or pardoners), whom Chaucer satirized. In 1517 Johann Tetzel preached an indulgence for rebuilding St. Peter's in the lands of Archbishop Albrecht of Brandenburg, who had borrowed from the Fugger bank to pay Rome for permission to hold several sees; half the proceeds went to repay that loan. The jingle "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs" was attributed to the preaching. Luther's Ninety-Five Theses followed.

The criticism

Grace was turned into a commodity, which contradicts the free gospel (Acts 8:20; Isa 55:1). The underlying doctrines (purgatory, a treasury of merit, temporal punishment) are not in Scripture, and indulgences are still granted today.

Catholic response

The sale was a grave abuse, condemned by the Church. But the doctrine of indulgences, the Church applying the merits of Christ and the saints to remit temporal punishment, is distinct from the abuse and is grounded in the power to bind and loose (Matt 16:19).

Was it corrected? Abuse corrected; doctrine retained. Trent abolished the quaestors (Session 21, 1562) and condemned "evil gains" (Session 25, 1563); Pius V in 1567 cancelled every indulgence involving payment. Paul VI's *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1967) simplified the system and dropped the "days and years" reckoning. Indulgences remain part of Catholic teaching (CCC 1471–1479), which Baptists still reject.

6. Forged documents: the Donation of Constantine and the False Decretals

8th–17th c. ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

The "Donation of Constantine," forged in the 8th century, claimed that Constantine had given the pope rule over Rome and the Western empire; popes cited it in disputes with emperors and with Constantinople. Nicholas of Cusa doubted it around 1433, and Lorenzo Valla proved it a forgery in 1440. The Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals, forged in the Frankish church around 850, included invented letters of early popes that strengthened bishops' right of appeal to Rome; they entered medieval canon law. The Magdeburg Centuriators attacked them in the 1550s, and David Blondel proved them false in 1628.

The criticism

Papal power over kings and bishops was built in part on forgeries that Rome used for centuries. Claims of papal supremacy should be judged with that history in mind.

Catholic response

The forgeries were not produced by the papacy, and the Church accepted the scholars' findings; Valla himself later served as a papal secretary. Rome's primacy is attested centuries before either forgery, in Clement of Rome (c. 96), Ignatius (c. 110) and Irenaeus (c. 180). Temporal power over the Papal States ended in 1870 and is not part of Catholic doctrine.

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. Both are universally recognized as forgeries. Whether papal claims depended on them is disputed.

7. Vatican financial scandals 1970s–present ONGOING

WHAT HAPPENED

The Vatican Bank (IOR) under Archbishop Paul Marcinkus was entangled with Banco Ambrosiano, which collapsed in 1982; its chairman Roberto Calvi was found hanged under Blackfriars Bridge in London. In 1984 the IOR paid about $244 million to creditors, citing "moral involvement" while denying legal liability. Leaked documents ("Vatileaks," 2012 and 2015) exposed mismanagement. Losses on a London property deal led to the 2023 conviction of Cardinal Angelo Becciu for embezzlement (5½ years); in March 2026 the Vatican appeals court annulled parts of that trial for procedural errors and ordered a partial retrial, which was under way in autumn 2026.

The criticism

Secrecy and wealth have repeatedly bred scandal at the center of a church that claims to be the visible Body of Christ. Christ had nowhere to lay His head.

Catholic response

These are crimes of individuals, and the fact that a cardinal was tried and convicted in the Vatican's own courts is itself a sign of reform. Since 2010 the Holy See has opened itself to European anti-money-laundering inspection (Moneyval), closed thousands of IOR accounts and centralized financial oversight.

Was it corrected? Ongoing. Financial Information Authority (2010); Secretariat for the Economy (2014); new constitution of the Curia *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022). The Becciu case was not finally resolved as

of November 2026.

8. The Crusades: massacres of Muslims and Jews 1095–1291

ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

Urban II launched the First Crusade at Clermont (1095), offering remission of penance to those who took the cross. In 1096 crusading bands led by Count Emicho massacred Jewish communities in the Rhineland (Speyer, Worms, Mainz), though some bishops tried to shelter them. When Jerusalem fell in 1099 the crusaders massacred Muslim and Jewish inhabitants; medieval chroniclers gave figures up to 70,000, while modern estimates run from about 3,000 to 10,000. Later crusades repeated such violence. In 1146 Bernard of Clairvaux intervened to stop the monk Radulf from inciting attacks on Jews.

The criticism

Popes promised spiritual rewards for killing. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword (Matt 26:52) and said His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36); holy war has no place in the New Testament.

Catholic response

The Crusades began as a response to centuries of Islamic conquest of Christian lands and to Byzantine appeals for help after the defeat at Manzikert (1071), and historians such as Jonathan Riley-Smith and Thomas Madden have challenged popular caricatures. But the massacres were real; many contradicted papal and episcopal orders, and the Church has confessed "the use of violence in the service of truth."

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. Included in John Paul II's confession of sins on the Day of Pardon (March 12, 2000). Catholic teaching today allows force only under just-war conditions (CCC 2307–2317), never to spread the faith.

9. The sack of Constantinople (Fourth Crusade) 1204

ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

Crusaders diverted by Venetian debts attacked the Christian city of Zara (1202) and then sacked Constantinople in April 1204, looting churches and killing civilians, and set up a Latin empire and patriarch. Innocent III had excommunicated the Venetian leaders over Zara and condemned the sack, but then accepted the new Latin hierarchy.

The criticism

Western Christians plundered the greatest Christian city in the East, and Rome profited from installing its own patriarch. This deepened the schism and shows the papacy's political ambitions.

Catholic response

The pope had forbidden attacks on Christians and condemned the sack. The crime belongs to the crusaders and Venice, though Rome's later acceptance of the outcome is admitted.

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. John Paul II expressed sorrow to the Orthodox in Athens (May 2001); in November 2004 he returned relics of Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom taken in 1204.

10. The Albigensian Crusade 1209–1229 ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

After the murder of his legate Peter of Castelnau (1208), Innocent III proclaimed a crusade against the Cathars of southern France. At Béziers (July 22, 1209) the crusading army massacred the population; the papal legate Arnaud Amalric reported to the pope that nearly 20,000 were killed "without regard to rank, sex or age" (modern historians think the true figure was lower). The famous line "Kill them all; God will know His own" is attributed to Amalric by Caesarius of Heisterbach, writing about 1219–1223, and its authenticity is doubted. About 200 Cathars were burned after the fall of Montségur (1244).

The criticism

Rome waged war on fellow Europeans for their beliefs. Some Baptist successionist histories (*The Trail of Blood*) count Cathars among persecuted faithful Christians.

Catholic response

The Cathars were dualists who taught that the material world was evil, rejected the Old Testament God, the Incarnation in the flesh, the sacraments and marriage; they were not proto-Baptists. Nonetheless, killing them, and indiscriminate slaughter at Béziers, is acknowledged as wrong.

Was it corrected? Acknowledged under the general confession of 2000. The episode led directly to the papal Inquisition.

11. The medieval Inquisition and judicial torture 1230s–15th c.

CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Gregory IX (1231–1233) entrusted heresy investigations to Dominican and Franciscan inquisitors. Innocent IV's bull *Ad extirpanda* (1252) authorized torture to obtain confessions, short of maiming or killing. Unrepentant or relapsed heretics were handed to the secular authorities, who burned them. Most cases ended in penances or imprisonment rather than death, but Waldensians, Cathars and others were executed.

The criticism

Torture was authorized by a papal bull, an official act of the papacy, not just the excess of individuals. Waldensians, Anabaptists and others later persecuted for conscience see in it proof that coercion of belief is foreign to Christ.

Catholic response

Inquisitorial courts were often more procedurally careful than secular courts of the day, and most cases did not end in execution. But the Catechism itself concedes that "in times past, cruel practices were commonly used by legitimate governments," often "without protest from the Pastors of the Church, who themselves adopted in their own tribunals the prescriptions of Roman law concerning torture" (CCC 2298).

Was it corrected? Corrected. The Church now condemns torture (CCC 2297–2298) and teaches religious liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1965); in 2018 it declared the death penalty "inadmissible" (CCC 2267). A Vatican symposium on the Inquisition (1998, published 2004) opened the archives to historians. Confessed on the Day of Pardon (2000).

12. The Spanish Inquisition 1478–1834 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Sixtus IV authorized Ferdinand and Isabella to establish a royal inquisition (1478), aimed first at *conversos*, Jews who had converted (often under pressure) and were suspected of secretly practicing Judaism; later at *moriscos*, Protestants and others. Sixtus IV protested its abuses in 1482. The crown expelled unconverted Jews in 1492. Scholars estimate about 3,000–5,000 executions over its whole history; trial records for 1540–1700 show roughly 826 executions in person out of about 44,000 trials. Protestant groups were burned at autos-da-fé in Seville and Valladolid (1559). It was abolished in 1834.

The criticism

Spain tortured and burned people for their faith, including Protestants, with papal authorization.

Catholic response

The Spanish Inquisition was a state institution controlled by the crown, and popes at times objected to it. Modern research has shown that the "Black Legend" figures of hundreds of thousands or millions are vast exaggerations. Its injustices are nonetheless acknowledged.

Was it corrected? Abolished (1834); acknowledged in the 2000 confession of sins.

13. The Roman Inquisition, the Index, Bruno and Galileo

1542–1966 CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Paul III founded the Roman Inquisition in 1542. Paul IV issued the first Index of Forbidden Books (1559), which banned works including many Bible translations and lasted until 1966. Giordano Bruno was burned in Rome on February 17, 1600, chiefly for theological heresies (on the Trinity, Christ and transubstantiation) rather than his cosmology. Galileo was condemned in 1633 for teaching that the earth moves, made to recant and kept under house arrest for the rest of his life.

The criticism

The Church suppressed books, science and conscience, and executed people for their opinions. The Galileo affair shows that Church authority can be wrong even on matters it treated as settled.

Catholic response

Galileo's case was a disciplinary judgment by a congregation, not an infallible definition. The Church has admitted the error.

Was it corrected? Corrected. John Paul II set up a commission (1981–1992) and on October 31, 1992 acknowledged the Church's error in Galileo's case; the Vatican expressed regret for Bruno's execution in 2000 without endorsing his teaching. The Index was abolished in 1966.

14. Executing reformers and Anabaptists 1415–1558 ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

Jan Hus was burned at the Council of Constance (July 6, 1415) despite a safe-conduct from Emperor Sigismund. England's heresy statute (1401) sent Lollards to the stake. The Anabaptist leader Michael Sattler was tortured and burned by Catholic authorities at Rottenburg (May 1527). William Tyndale, translator of the English Bible, was strangled and burned near Brussels (1536) by imperial authorities. Under Mary I about 280–300 Protestants were burned in England (1555–1558), including Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer. Several thousand Anabaptists were executed by Catholic and Protestant governments in the 16th century.

The criticism

Protestants and Anabaptists remember them as martyrs, in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1563) and the Anabaptist *Martyrs Mirror* (1660), and Baptists count them among their spiritual ancestors. They died for translating Scripture, for believer's baptism and for following conscience.

Catholic response

The executions were carried out under heresy laws common to all of Christendom, and Protestant governments executed Catholics and Anabaptists too. The Church has expressed sorrow for them.

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. John Paul II expressed "deep regret" for Hus's death (1999). The Catholic–Mennonite dialogue report *Called Together to Be Peacemakers* (2003) included mutual repentance for the persecution of Anabaptists. Pope Francis asked the Waldensians' forgiveness in Turin (2015). Catholics and Lutherans jointly commemorated the Reformation at Lund (2016).

15. Wars of religion and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre 1562–1648 ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

The French Wars of Religion (1562–1598) set Catholics against Huguenots. Beginning on August 24, 1572, Catholic mobs and royal forces killed Huguenots in Paris (about 2,000–3,000) and across France (estimates from 5,000 to 30,000). Told that a Huguenot plot against the king had been foiled, Gregory XIII had a *Te Deum* sung in thanksgiving, struck a medal inscribed *Ugonottorum strages 1572* ("slaughter of the Huguenots") and commissioned Vasari frescoes of the events in the Vatican's Sala Regia. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) devastated Central Europe in a mix of religious and dynastic conflict.

The criticism

A pope publicly celebrated the mass murder of Protestants.

Catholic response

Gregory XIII acted on the French court's account of a plot, but the celebration is indefensible. The wars were as much dynastic and political as religious, and Protestants also committed massacres (the Michelade at Nîmes, 1567).

Was it corrected? Acknowledged. During World Youth Day in Paris (August 1997), John Paul II recalled the massacre and said Christians had done things the Gospel condemns; included in the 2000 confession.

16. Witch hunts 1450–1750 ENDED; SHARED GUILT

WHAT HAPPENED

About 40,000–60,000 people, mostly women, were executed for witchcraft in Europe, most of them in the Holy Roman Empire, in both Catholic and Protestant territories. Innocent VIII's bull *Summis desiderantes* (1484) authorized the inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger in Germany; Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486/87) became a witch-hunting manual, though it was never officially endorsed by the Church.

The criticism

A papal bull helped launch the witch craze.

Catholic response

Most executions were carried out by secular courts, and Protestant regions (parts of Germany, Scotland, England, Salem in 1692) were as active as Catholic ones. The Spanish and Roman Inquisitions were comparatively skeptical: after the Basque trials of 1609–1610, the inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías persuaded the Spanish Inquisition (1614) to demand real evidence, effectively ending witch executions in Spain.

Was it corrected? Ended by the 18th century in both Catholic and Protestant lands. The guilt is shared across confessions.

17. Treatment of Jews 4th–20th c. LARGELY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

The charge that "the Jews" collectively killed Christ fed centuries of hostility. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required Jews and Muslims to wear distinctive dress. The Talmud was burned in Paris in 1242. Jews were expelled from England (1290), France (1306) and Spain (1492) by Catholic rulers. Paul IV's bull *Cum nimis absurdum* (1555) confined Rome's Jews to a ghetto that lasted until 1870. In the Mortara case (1858), papal police removed a six-year-old Jewish boy who had been secretly baptized by a servant from his family in Bologna; Pius IX refused to return him, and Edgardo Mortara grew up to become a priest. The Good Friday liturgy prayed for the "perfidious Jews" until John XXIII removed the word in 1959.

The criticism

The Church taught contempt for the Jewish people and used state power against them, and it beatified Pius IX (2000) despite the Mortara case.

Catholic response

Popes also protected Jews at times: Innocent IV condemned the blood libel (1247), and Rome's Jewish community survived continuously under papal rule. Protestants share this history; Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543) called for burning synagogues. The Church has decisively repudiated anti-Judaism.

Was it corrected? Largely corrected. *Nostra Aetate* (1965) rejected collective Jewish guilt for Christ's death and deplored antisemitism; John Paul II visited Rome's synagogue (1986), issued *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998) and prayed at the Western Wall (2000). Pius IX's beatification and Pius XII's wartime record remain disputed.

18. The conquest of the Americas and the "Doctrine of Discovery"

1452–1800s PARTLY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Papal bulls (*Dum Diversas*, 1452; *Romanus Pontifex*, 1455; *Inter caetera*, 1493) granted Portugal and Spain rights over newly encountered lands and, in the earlier bulls, permission to reduce "Saracens and pagans" to perpetual servitude. Spanish and Portuguese conquest brought forced labor (the *encomienda*), violent subjugation and enormous loss of life, chiefly through disease. The bulls were later cited in colonial and U.S. law (*Johnson v. M'Intosh*, 1823) as the basis of a "Doctrine of Discovery."

The criticism

The papacy blessed colonial conquest and enslavement, and mission work went hand in hand with violence.

Catholic response

Many churchmen defended Native peoples: Bartolomé de las Casas, Antonio de Montesinos and Francisco de Vitoria; Paul III's *Sublimis Deus* (1537) declared that Native peoples are free and must not be enslaved or deprived of their property. The bulls were political documents, not teachings of faith.

Was it corrected? Partly corrected. Pope Francis apologized in Bolivia (July 9, 2015) for "crimes committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God," and the Vatican formally repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery as "not part of the teaching of the Catholic Church" (March 30, 2023). The bulls themselves were not formally rescinded, which some Indigenous groups had asked for.

19. The Church and slavery

15th–19th c. CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

The Church long accepted forms of servitude it considered just. Fifteenth-century bulls permitted enslaving non-Christians in Africa; Paul III allowed slave ownership in Rome (1548); religious orders, including the Jesuits, owned enslaved people in the Americas. In 1838 the Maryland Jesuits sold 272 enslaved men, women and children to Louisiana plantations to pay debts at Georgetown College.

The criticism

The Church held and sold human beings and did not clearly condemn slavery for centuries.

Catholic response

Popes repeatedly condemned enslaving Native peoples and the slave trade (Eugene IV, 1435; Paul III, 1537; Urban VIII, 1639; Benedict XIV, 1741; Gregory XVI, *In supremo apostolatus*, 1839; Leo XIII, 1888), though Catholic powers often ignored them. Baptists share the record: the Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 to allow slaveholders to serve as missionaries.

Was it corrected? Corrected. Vatican II listed slavery among the "infamies" that poison society (*Gaudium et Spes* 27, 1965). The Jesuits apologized to descendants of the Georgetown 272 (2017) and pledged $100 million for reconciliation (2021). The SBC apologized for its defense of slavery in 1995.

20. Canadian residential schools 1870s–1996 PARTLY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

About 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were taken to government-funded boarding schools designed to assimilate them; Catholic dioceses and religious orders ran roughly 60–70% of them, with the rest run mainly by Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian (later United Church) bodies. Children suffered neglect, disease and physical and sexual abuse, and thousands died. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) called the system cultural genocide. In 2021 the detection of possible unmarked graves by ground-penetrating radar at Kamloops and other sites renewed attention; most have not been excavated.

The criticism

Catholic institutions abused children in the name of evangelization, and Catholic entities paid only a fraction of what they were expected to raise for survivors under the 2006 settlement.

Catholic response

Protestant churches ran many schools too, and the policy was the Canadian government's. The Church has apologized and committed funds.

Was it corrected? Partly corrected. Pope Francis apologized in Rome (April 2022) and in person at Maskwacis, Alberta (July 25, 2022). Canadian bishops pledged $30 million for healing in 2021. Survivors' groups continue to press for records and fuller restitution.

21. Clergy sexual abuse and cover-up 1950s–present ONGOING

WHAT HAPPENED

Investigations in many countries found that priests abused minors and that bishops often moved abusers to new parishes and concealed crimes. The U.S. John Jay Report (2004) found allegations against 4,392 priests (about 4% of those serving 1950–2002), involving 10,667 allegations. A Pennsylvania grand jury (2018) named 301 priests and over 1,000 victims. Ireland's Ryan (2009) and Murphy (2009) reports documented abuse in church-run schools and cover-up in Dublin. Germany's MHG study (2018) counted 3,677 victims and 1,670 clerics; France's CIASE report (2021) estimated about 216,000 minors abused by clergy and religious since 1950. In Chile all 34 bishops offered their resignations (2018). Former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was laicized in 2019.

The criticism

The scale and the cover-up point to structural causes: clericalism, secrecy, an unaccountable hierarchy, and a church that protected its reputation above children. Failures reached the top: the Vatican's own McCarrick Report (2020) found that John Paul II promoted McCarrick despite warnings, and Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legion of Christ, was shielded for decades before Benedict XVI removed him from ministry in 2006. Many bishops who moved abusers were never disciplined.

Catholic response

Abuse is a horrific betrayal, and the Church has said so repeatedly. Studies show most abuse peaked in the 1960s–70s and fell sharply after reforms, and rates are comparable to other institutions; Protestant bodies, including the Southern Baptist Convention, have faced similar scandals. (The Houston Chronicle's 2019 investigation found about 380 Southern Baptist leaders and volunteers accused, with some 700 victims over 20 years, and the 2022 Guidepost report found SBC leaders had stonewalled survivors.) The Catholic Church's central structure allowed global reforms that congregational polity makes harder.

Was it corrected? Ongoing, with major reforms. U.S. bishops' Dallas Charter (2002) with zero tolerance and lay review boards; Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (2014); *Vos estis lux mundi* (2019, made permanent 2023) requiring reporting and holding bishops accountable; pontifical secrecy lifted for abuse cases (December 2019); revised penal law (2021); Benedict XVI's letter to Irish Catholics (2010). Survivors' groups argue bishops still face too little accountability.

22. Irish Magdalene laundries and mother-and-baby homes 1922–1998 PARTLY CORRECTED

WHAT HAPPENED

Four Catholic religious orders ran Magdalene laundries where more than 10,000 women and girls were sent after 1922, many held against their will and made to work unpaid; the last closed in 1996. The 2021 report of Ireland's Commission on Mother and Baby Homes found that about 9,000 children died in the 18 institutions it investigated (1922–1998), around 15% of children born there, with very high mortality at Tuam and elsewhere. Many children were adopted abroad without their mothers' consent.

The criticism

Church institutions treated unmarried mothers and their children with cruelty, using shame and religious authority.

Catholic response

These were joint church–state institutions reflecting the moral culture of Irish society; families and the state sent women there. The Church has apologized.

Was it corrected? Partly corrected. The Irish state apologized for the laundries (February 19, 2013) and for the mother-and-baby homes (2021); religious orders and bishops issued apologies, but the four orders declined to contribute to the state's laundry redress scheme, which drew strong criticism.

23. The Nazi era, Croatia and Rwanda 1933–1994

DISPUTED / ACKNOWLEDGED

WHAT HAPPENED

The Holy See signed a concordat with Hitler's Germany (July 20, 1933), then condemned Nazi ideology in Pius XI's encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (1937). Pius XII's public restraint during the Holocaust has been debated since the 1960s; his supporters point to Church networks that hid thousands of Jews, his critics to his silence. The Vatican opened his archives to scholars in March 2020. In the Ustaše state of Croatia (1941–1945), some Catholic clergy, including the Franciscan Miroslav Filipović, took part in atrocities against Serbs, Jews and Roma. In the 1994 Rwandan genocide some priests and nuns participated in killings and were later convicted.

The criticism

The concordat lent legitimacy to Hitler, and the Church's silence and the involvement of clergy show the cost of putting institutional interests first.

Catholic response

Thousands of Catholic clergy were imprisoned or killed by the Nazis (Maximilian Kolbe, Bernhard Lichtenberg), and Church institutions sheltered many Jews. Protestant churches had similar failures (the pro-Nazi "German Christians"). Clergy who took part in killings acted against Church teaching.

Was it corrected? Disputed (Pius XII); acknowledged (Rwanda). Pope Francis asked forgiveness for the Church's failures in the Rwandan genocide (March 20, 2017). Research on Pius XII continues.