“Can you give a brief history of our faith?”
Erin O., 15

A. Jesus was the Messiah for whom the Jews were waiting (Mt 16:16). Approximately two thousand years ago He was born of a virgin (Mt 1:18–25). Around age 33, He was unjustly put to death (Mk 15:24–37). Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead. Forty days after that Jesus ascended into heaven, and then sent the Holy Spirit to empower His apostles to spread His gospel. He established the Catholic Church on Peter, the first pope, whom Jesus called the “rock” (Mt 16:18; CCC 552, 881).

The Church started out small in Jerusalem but grew as people saw the wonderful changes in their lives and the heroic martyrdoms of some of the first Catholics. In a remarkably short time, it had spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Around the year 313, Constantine decreed that Christianity could be legally practiced. Around the year 390, the Church established the final version of the Bible. Over the first thousand years of the Church’s history there were many false teachings (called heresies) and questions that sprouted up. These forced the Church to define and clarify its doctrines.
In the year 1054, a formal split occurred between the Eastern and Western Catholic Churches. The Eastern Church is still separated from us. It is referred to as the Eastern Orthodox Church, of which there are many national churches (for example, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Romanian Orthodox). Though the Eastern Orthodox accept most Catholic beliefs, they do not accept the authority of the pope.

One of the most devastating events in Christian history occurred in the year 1517 at the hands of a monk named Martin Luther. In his attempt to correct some of the abuses in the Church (and some would say to address his psychological problem of scrupulosity), he broke away from the Church and established a new system of theology. He promoted a new doctrine called *sola scriptura* (“the Scripture alone”) which basically holds that the ultimate authority for Christians is the Bible alone, not a teaching Church. Luther held that we do not need a teaching Church to guide us to Christian truth. One simply needs to interpret the Bible on his own to find out what is and is not true. This new doctrine has led to chaos. Today there are hundreds (if not thousands) of Protestant denominations, most of which were formed due to disagreements over key points of Christian belief and practice. This is a fruit of the man-made tradition of “private interpretation.”
From the 1500s until the present, the Church has continued to grow. It has nourished many of the institutions and disciplines we have today, including art, music, medicine, law, farming, architecture, formalized schooling, literature, and more. In fact, many historians would admit that the Catholic Church is clearly the most influential organization in the history of the world.

Naturally, there is much more. The life of the Church is more intriguing than any soap opera or novel you could read. It has saints and sinners. It has been heroic and cowardly. But despite any human failings, the Church is still the bride of Christ (Eph 5:21–32; CCC 796, 808). And, if anything is standing at the end of time, it will be the Church because it alone has been given the gifts of infallibility, indefectibility, and indestructibility (Mt 16:18–19, 28:20; CCC 553, 788, 889).