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Jesus the Alpha and Omega. Fourth-century wall painting from the Catacombs of Commodilla, Rome, Italy.

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St. Benedict blesses one of his pupils, St. Maurus, before the monk leaves on a mission to teach in France. In the background is an event from St. Maurus’ life when he saved a drowning boy named Placid by walking on the water.

CHAPTER 1

The Founding Of The Church And The Early Christians

*"Christ is the Spouse and Savior of the Church...
The more we come to know and love the Church,
the nearer we shall be to Christ."*

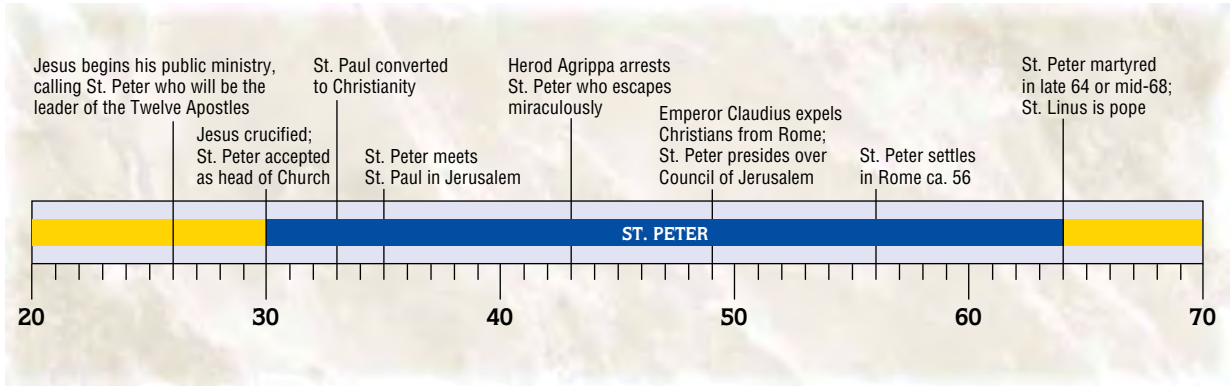


CHAPTER 1

The Founding Of The Church
And The Early Christians

In the days directly following the crucifixion of Jesus, his disciples were afraid. The Sanhedrin had condemned their Master to death, and the disciples believed that they would be the next targets of persecution. Since they no longer had Jesus to guide them, they feared for their safety and were uncertain of the future, being for the first time without their leader. At first the Resurrection appearances only increased doubt and fear among the disciples. Though their Master had returned to them, He remained among them for only a short time. After the Ascension into Heaven, the Apostles, Mary, and other followers of Jesus were again suddenly alone.

But God did not leave His infant Church alone and unguided. Before departing, Christ declared to his disciples that they would soon receive the Holy Spirit. Ten days later, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, and subsequently resolved all their doubts, fears, and worries. The Apostles, through the power of the Holy Spirit, were certain that the Church of Christ would stand throughout all time as a living sacrament of His love, truth, and power. Christ is the cornerstone of His Church, and St. Peter is “the rock,” Christ’s vicar, upon whom the Church would be built. In the years following the Resurrection, the Apostles, filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, boldly set about the great task of building the Church. They proclaimed the Good News that the long-awaited messiah had come and that he had paid in full the terrible price required for the redemption of all mankind. Christianity began to spread quickly through the ardent and intrepid preaching of the disciples. They carried the message of salvation proclaimed by Jesus all over the known world. Thus began the history of Christianity – a unique history that, simply stated, reflects Christ’s constant presence in the world through the Church and how he interfaces with human history. The history of the Church is a record of the life and actions of men and women under the guiding light of the Holy Spirit acting in the Church. This narrative about the development of Christ’s kingdom on earth is forged as the Church interacts and responds to every culture and historical situation.



Christ is the cornerstone of His Church, and St. Peter is “the rock,” Christ’s vicar, upon whom the Church would be built.

PART I

The Jews

The history of the Jewish people is particular to the ancient world. Besides being monotheistic, the Jewish people believed that they had a special role in God’s providential plans to serve as his chosen people. One of the unique characteristics of the chosen people was their realization of a personal God. A long history of suffering and oppression molded a people whose faith stimulated their expectation for a messiah. Being cognizant of their obligation to worship the one true God and keep his commandments, they shunned the religions and immoral ways of the Gentiles, typified especially by the Greeks and Romans.

The Jewish world of Jesus was a crossroads of cultures, under Hellenist, Latin, and traditional Jewish influences. This Jewish culture was different than the one depicted in the Old Testament. Influenced by Greek thought and ideas, many new groups of scholars, priests, and ascetics developed schools of Jewish theology. Roman, not Mosaic Law governed society, and despite some special concessions for worship, Jews were held as second class to the Roman citizens. Palestine during the life of Christ was rife with tension and expectations as many Jewish groups were looking for the messiah to free Israel from the Roman yoke. In AD 70, the temple would be destroyed and the Jews would be cast out of Jerusalem.

PART II

The Life of Jesus Christ

Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem in Judea around the year 4 BC. In the humblest of surroundings, the Word of God became Incarnate; love and mercy found perfect expression, and the vessel of God's salvation was born into human history. The foundational principles of Christianity were present there in the quiet little stable in Bethlehem with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Peace, simplicity, material poverty, spiritual abundance, God's love, and sacrifice are the chief message of Christ's birth.

The Bible only records a few key events concerning Jesus' childhood. One of them is the Presentation in the Temple. After the birth of Christ, in accordance with the Jewish Law, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to be consecrated to God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, an old man named Simeon, to whom it had been revealed that he should not die until he had seen the messiah, recognized the Infant, blessed His parents, and spoke of Jesus' destiny. Anna, an elderly prophetess, was also present and, recognizing the messiah, began to speak about the child to all who were waiting for Him (Lk 2: 22-39).

Shortly after the birth of Jesus, Joseph was warned in a dream by an angel that Herod, the King of Judea, had learned of the birth of the messiah and planned to murder the baby. The angel instructed Joseph to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus immediately, so that the Holy Child would escape Herod's wrath. When Herod failed to discover the precise location of Jesus, he sent his soldiers to kill every male child in Bethlehem aged two and under. Known as the "Slaughter of the Innocents," this dreadful massacre was the first shedding of blood among countless unnamed martyrs for the Christian Faith (Mt 2:16-18). After some time in Egypt, an angel appeared to Joseph in a second dream, telling him that it was safe for the Holy Family to return to Israel. Ever obedient, Joseph began the journey back to Israel with Jesus and Mary. Upon hearing that Herod's son Archelaus was now king of Judea, Joseph did not return there, but went to Galilee instead, and settled his family in Nazareth (Mt 2:19-23).

After the Holy Family returned to Nazareth, the Gospels record very little of their lives. One can assume that their lives were very ordinary, consisting of work, observance of the Jewish Law, finding joy in the company of one another and of their friends. Joseph was a carpenter, and Jesus most likely trained in the trade of his father, learning to work with wood and build with his hands. Until the beginning of His public ministry, the only event the Gospels describe is the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus speaking with the elders in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Holy Family traveled to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover, and when they set out to return home, Jesus was lost for three days. After frantically looking for their son, his parents finally discovered the child Jesus in the temple, which the boy called his "Father's house." The young Jesus was confidently conversing with the elders, whom he astounded with his wisdom and understanding (Lk 2: 41-52).



PALESTINE IN THE TIME OF CHRIST



The Jordan River entering the Sea of Galilee



Jesus' New Law taught his followers to love their enemies and to avoid violence.

Following this event, there is a period of eighteen years before the inaugural event of his public ministry: Jesus' Baptism at the hands of St. John the Baptist. During this time it is recorded that Jesus spent time in the desert fasting, praying, and preparing for his public ministry.

Jesus' teaching constitutes part of the Deposit of Faith, that is the heritage of Faith contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, handed down by the Church from the time of the Apostles (cf. CCC 84, 1202). The most concise and direct collection of Jesus' teaching is given at the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). Fulfilling the traditional Law found in the Ten Commandments, Jesus taught the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. He transformed the Old Testament notion of justice, fulfilling and perfecting it with the call to charity, which includes compassion and mercy. In contrast to the Old Law, expressed by the rule of "an eye for an eye," Jesus' New Law taught his followers to love their enemies and to avoid all forms of violence, drowning evil in an abundance of good. The institution of mercy to the point of loving one's enemies was radically new. Jesus redirected the spirit of worship, instructing his followers to serve the Father and each other in "spirit and in truth," thereby rejecting a legalistic interpretation of the Law. The New Covenant founded by Christ would perfect the Old Law through the New Law based on love and grace. His teaching and his many miracles—from the wedding feast at Cana to the raising of Lazarus—laid the groundwork for the contents of the Catholic Faith that would develop in response to the circumstances of every time period.

Jesus' teachings were brought to their fulfillment through the example of Christ's suffering, death, and Resurrection. Around the year AD 33, Jesus and his followers went to Jerusalem to participate in the celebration of the Jewish Passover. Despite his initial warm welcome on Palm Sunday, the Jewish leaders mounted a major opposition against Jesus. They charged him with heresy and blasphemy, but finally they accused Jesus of being insubordinate to Caesar in order to force the civil authorities to execute him. Under tremendous pressure and risk of widespread civil dissent (not to mention his own blindness to the truth of Christ; cf. Jn 18:38), Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion. Jesus, according to the plan of the Father, willingly submitted himself to his passion and death on the cross, the perfect sacrifice for the salvation of all mankind. By his Resurrection three days later, he showed his victory over death, thereby calling every person to repentance and the fullness of filiation with the Father.

THE FOUR GOSPELS

Most of what is known about Christ's life comes from the four canonical gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The word "gospel," which means "good news," is applied to these four books that describe the life and teachings of Jesus.

Although all four gospels share the same subject, each has its own point of view and emphasis, depending on the source of the account and the audience for whom it was written. Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the "synoptic" gospels (from Greek words meaning "seeing together") because their accounts are so similar. The gospel of St. John stands apart because of its more abstract, theological scope.

Both Sts. John and Matthew were themselves Apostles. Both gospels seem to be directed toward a Jewish Christian audience. St. John's was the last gospel to be written. St. Mark's is thought to be the first gospel written. St. Mark, though not an Apostle, traveled with St. Peter, who is very likely the primary source for this gospel intended for the Christians of Rome. St. Luke, who accompanied St. Paul, wrote mainly for gentile Christians and his main source is thought to be Mary the mother of Christ because this gospel includes stories about Christ's origins and early life.

The four authors, known as the Evangelists, are often identified with four symbols. St. Matthew's symbol is a man because his gospel emphasizes Christ's humanity and opens with his genealogy. St. Mark's symbol is a lion because it opens with the command "Prepare the way of the Lord." St. Luke's symbol is a bull because early on it speaks of priestly duties and temple

sacrifices. St. John's gospel is symbolized by an eagle because of the lofty language of its opening verses.

These four gospels have always been held as authentic and canonical (officially declared as such at a synod in Rome in AD 382) by the Sacred Tradition of the Church, though there exist several "unofficial" gospels, known as the apocryphal gospels, which appeared in the first centuries of the Church. These gospels were discredited early in the Church's history because of their dubious origins and because many are tainted by errant beliefs.



The Book of Kells

"The work not of men but of angels..."
(Giraldus Cambrensis, ca. AD1150)

One of the most famous books in the history of the world completed in AD 800 contains the Four Gospels. It was created by Columban monks who lived on the remote island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. The Book is on display at the Trinity College Library in Dublin.

PART III

Pentecost, the Birth of the Church

When the day of Pentecost had come, they [the Apostles and Mary] were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)

On the Jewish feast of Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ, Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims from nearly every nation—from Persia, Rome, Arabia, North Africa, and all around the Mediterranean. The Apostles were all gathered in one place, most likely still fearing persecution. Just as Christ promised before he ascended to Heaven, the Holy Spirit descended upon them, anointing the Church for her mission of evangelization of the world.

On Pentecost, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, to complete and perfect that which Jesus Christ had begun:

By his coming, which never ceases, the Holy Spirit causes the world to enter into the “last days,” the time of the Church, the Kingdom already inherited though not yet consummated. (CCC 732)

Immediately following the Holy Spirit’s descent, the Apostles began to preach the crucified and risen Christ with great power and authority (Acts 2:5-47). They were given the gift of tongues and found themselves miraculously speaking to the multitude, each hearing in his own tongue from among the languages spoken by the many pilgrims present in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 2:8-11). St. Peter, responding to skepticism that the disciples were “filled with new wine” (Acts 2:13), addressed all who were present. He proclaimed the special calling of the Jews in God’s plan of salvation for the world, used the Old Testament writings as proof of Christ’s fulfillment of the prophets and the Law, and, like St. John the Baptist, called his hearers to repentance. St. Peter invited Jesus’ new followers to be forgiven of their sins through the reception of Baptism.

Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

Many converts came to the Faith through this first proclamation at Pentecost:

Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42)

The annual celebration of this feast is an opportunity to recall all that took place at the first Pentecost, whereby the Apostles were empowered with the strength of the Holy Spirit to preach Christ in word and in the heroic witness of martyrdom. Pentecost marks the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church that enables Christians to announce the truth of Christ’s Gospel. It also shows that Christ will live in his Church throughout all ages.



Pentecost marks the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

THE EARLY SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY



PART IV

The Church

What is the Church exactly? The Scriptures teach that the Church is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph 1:22-23). The English word “church” etymologically comes from a Greek word meaning “thing belonging to the Lord,” which applied originally to the church building. The Latin word *ecclesia* derives from another Greek word that means “assembly” or “congregation.” The origins of these two words help to illustrate the many meanings the word “church” evokes for followers of Christ. This section will briefly look at the meaning of the Church, her aim, nature, names that have been employed to better understand her, and, finally, her four marks.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that, “The Church is both the means and the goal of God’s plan: prefigured in creation, prepared for in the Old Covenant, founded by the words and actions of Jesus Christ, fulfilled by his redeeming cross and his Resurrection, the Church has been manifested as the mystery of salvation by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. She will be perfected in the glory of heaven as the assembly of all the redeemed of the earth (cf. Rv 14: 4)” (CCC 778).

Willed by the Father, the Church founded by Jesus Christ enjoys the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Church that God carries out his plan of salvation for all people. The teaching authority and sanctifying power of the Church serve as a means to bring all men and women to greater union with God, and with each other as well.

The groundwork for the Church was already being laid down when God made a covenant with the Jewish people. After this time of preparation in the Old Testament was completed, Jesus instituted the Church. The Church’s foundation, goal, and fulfillment is in Jesus Christ. Through the Church, Jesus Christ unites himself with all men and women.

The Church has two dimensions: visible and spiritual. The Church is a visible, hierarchical society that is present in the world, just like any other organization or society. Unlike other societies, the Church has a spiritual dimension. The governing and teaching authority of the Church enjoys perennial guidance from the Holy Spirit. Moreover, she is the Mystical Body of Christ, a spiritual community, imbued with the healing and sanctifying power of God’s grace.

The Church is made up of God’s people, a people “born” into his family through faith in Christ and Baptism. The term “People of God” is taken from the Old Testament, in which God chose Israel to be his chosen people. Christ instituted the new and eternal covenant by which a new priestly, prophetic, and royal People of God, which is the Church, participates in the mission and service of Christ (cf. CCC 761, 783 at the end of this chapter). The Head of this people is Jesus Christ, and they enjoy the dignity and freedom of being sons and daughters of God, who dwells within their hearts.



The Church forms the Mystical Body of Christ.