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## Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue

### CHAPTER TWO

# The Church as the Sacrament of Salvation

## INTRODUCTION

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb 1:1-2)



As we read in the previous chapter how salvation history is fundamentally about God gradually calling his people together into unity. Although God selected particular men to serve as mediators of his covenants, those covenants were always made not with a single person but with a group of people. This group of people, in turn, witnessed to the rest of humanity God's holiness and love. God's plan from the beginning has always been to save the entirety of the human race, and he worked through a particular part of the human race to make that happen. This Chosen People gradually grew to encompass more and more people as God revealed himself to the world progressively.

Over the course of this chapter, we will begin by exploring the divine foundation of the Catholic Church, namely:

- ✦ God the Father planned the Church, the Sacrament of Salvation, from the beginning of time.
- ✦ The Church was prefigured in the People of Israel.
- ✦ The Church was divinely instituted by Jesus Christ, God's own Son.
- ✦ The Church is guided, sustained, and sanctified by the Father through the Son and Holy Spirit.
- ✦ The Church is the Body of Christ, with Christ as the Head and the faithful as members of the Body.

We will also discuss the role of the Church in proclaiming what God has revealed:

- ✦ Christ founded his Church upon the Apostles and entrusted them to preach the Gospel that he had taught them.
- ✦ The Apostles have handed down this role and the authority of proclaiming God's Revelation to the Popes and bishops in an unbroken line of succession.
- ✦ The Pope and bishops today continue their ministry of teaching God's Revelation faithfully.



*Feed My Lambs* by Tizotto.  
Christ founded his Church upon the Apostles and entrusted them to preach the Gospel that he had taught them.



*St. Peter's Square filled with the People of God.*

The visible dimension of the Church is seen in people united around the teaching of the Apostles, the Sacraments, and the hierarchical order of Pope and bishops.

## THE CHURCH: SACRAMENT OF SALVATION

Just as each of the Seven Sacraments is a visible sign by which God confers his grace, so, too, is the Church a visible sign of God's grace. She is the Sacrament of Salvation because she is both the sign and the means of God's salvation for all people. She is also the Sacrament of Communion because she gathers all people into communion with God and with one another. As the *Catechism* teaches:

"The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men."<sup>1</sup> The Church's first purpose is to be the sacrament of the *inner union of men with God*. Because men's communion with one another is rooted in that union with God, the Church is also the sacrament of the *unity of the human race*. In her, this unity is already begun, since she gathers men "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues";<sup>2</sup> at the same time, the Church is the "sign and instrument" of the full realization of the unity yet to come. (CCC 775)

The New Testament word communion—in Latin, *communio*; in Greek, *koinonia*—expresses the essential core of the Church's mystery.<sup>3</sup> In communion there is a *vertical dimension*: man's communion with God who is "above" us; it also has a *horizontal dimension*: our communion with the other members of Christ's faithful in a relationship of radical equality.<sup>4</sup>

What does this mean? Recall that the Church is both a visible reality and an invisible reality. For the Church to be a sign it must be visible, and the Church is a visible, human institution. The Church's communion is sacramental, then, because she is a visible sign of an invisible reality. The *visible dimension* is seen in people united around the teaching of the Apostles, the Sacraments, and the hierarchical order of Pope and bishops. The *invisible dimension* is our intimate communion with the Holy Trinity and the other members of Christ's Church on earth, in Heaven, and in Purgatory.

We can point to the Pope, bishops, priests, deacons, members of religious orders, and a vast number of lay people who are members of the Church. We can see church buildings and all the other properties that she operates directly or indirectly, including schools, hospitals, soup kitchens, and orphanages. The Church has a visible government and her own laws. She has a visible liturgy and a vast literature, which includes the Sacred Scriptures. And she has a 2000-year history that can be studied.

All these exist as instruments to carry out God's intention to share his divine life with all people: "At the end of time...all the just, from Adam and 'from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect,' will be gathered together with the Father in the universal Church" (LG 2). All the Church's visible means and activities exist to accomplish what is essentially invisible to us now: communion with God and with one another.

## THE CHURCH: PLANNED FROM THE BEGINNING OF CREATION

God created human persons to live in communion both with him and with one another. In his infinite wisdom, by a plan that remains a great mystery to the human mind, he created the entire universe for us and chose to raise humanity up to share in his own divine life in communion with him. This communion already prefigures the Church, the gathering of his people into one body, which will be perfected at the end of time.<sup>5</sup>

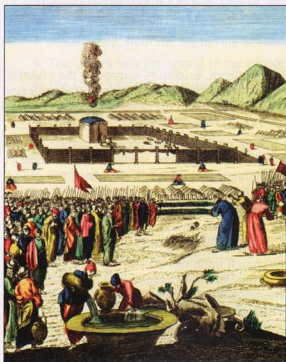
Christians of the first centuries said, "The world was created for the sake of the Church."<sup>6</sup> God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the "convocation" of men in Christ, and this "convocation" is the Church. The Church is the goal of all things,<sup>7</sup> and God permitted such painful upheavals as the angels' fall and man's sin only as occasions and means for displaying all the power of his arm and the whole measure of the love he wanted to give the world... (CCC 760)

The gift of grace offers us a share in God's divine life. Baptism, by which we enter the Church, confers upon us sanctifying grace that cleanses us of all sin, including Original Sin, by which our first parents lost the state of grace in which they were created. The Church, by way of her Sacraments and moral teachings, presents us with the means to cooperate with this free gift of grace throughout our lives so we may be saved and enter into perfect communion with God for all eternity.

As the *Catechism* teaches, quoting St. Clement of Alexandria: "Just as God's will is creation and is called 'the world,' so his intention is the salvation of men, and it is called 'the Church.'"<sup>8</sup>

## THE CHURCH: PREFIGURED IN THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

After our original communion with God was broken by sin, God immediately began to repair this communion, to regather his people.<sup>9</sup> The Chosen People, who gathered as Israel, therefore prefigures the formation of the Church.



*The Israelites' Camp and Wilderness Tabernacle at Mount Sinai.*  
God set apart one people to be a light to the world.

The gathering together of the People of God began at the moment when sin destroyed the communion of men with God, and that of men among themselves. The gathering together of the Church is, as it were, God's reaction to the chaos provoked by sin. (CCC 761)

The remote preparation for this regathering began when God called Abraham and promised to make him the father of a great nation. With Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, and through his twelve sons, God gave his people their identity. With Moses and the liberation of Israel from captivity in Egypt, a nation was created to serve God in both right living and right worship. God set apart one people to be a light to the world so all would see the proper way to honor and serve him.

With Moses in the wilderness, the people of Israel ratified the covenant that God had offered them: "By this election, Israel is to be the sign of the future gathering of all nations."<sup>10</sup> The people, as the People of God, had accepted their special communion with God and with one another.

God is a God of infinite mercy. Although the Israelites turned away from him frequently, he did not



*Joshua Passing the River Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant by West.*

The people of Israel, as the People of God, had accepted their special communion with God and with one another.

abandon them. He continued to mold them, sending prophets to announce to them the ways of God. Eventually, he formed them into a kingdom, first under Saul, but then more definitively under David and his son Solomon. He promised David that his kingdom would reign forever and that his son would rule forever.

Yet, his people were not faithful, and the prophets pointed out how Israel had broken the covenant. God's people failed to live up to their great calling: to become who they were called to be. The people began to worship foreign gods and disobey the Commandments. Eventually, ruin came to the kingdom, and the Israelites were conquered and exiled.

Even then, God did not forget his promises to them. God, in his faithfulness, one day offered a new and eternal covenant, the prophets announced. It was not to be David's immediate son Solomon who was to rule forever but a future descendant, a "son of David"—and that would be Jesus Christ, the Son of God born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a descendant of David.

The Church founded by Christ in the New Testament is that New Covenant, the fulfillment of the People of God formed as the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. The Church can therefore be called the Fulfillment of Israel, as she fulfills the promises and covenants that God made to his people.

To "fulfill" means to complete, to bring something to its ultimate goal. As God worked through Israel to bring salvation to the world, so now he works through the Church. The mission of Christ was not to reject the Old Testament or to abolish it; rather, he came to bring it to completion. Christ said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them."<sup>11</sup> The coming of Christ must not cause us to forget or reject the Old Testament—"the law and the prophets," as the Scriptures that had already been written were called in the Gospels—for it is the very foundation of the New Testament.



## THE CHURCH: FOUNDED BY JESUS CHRIST

**W**hen God, in the fullness of time, entered decisively into history at the Incarnation to bring about our salvation, he did not change his way of interacting with humanity. As in the past, he selected a person to mediate and to be the instrument of his covenant with a people. But this time he did not select a person out of the human race; he sent his own Son to become part of the human family and to form the New People of God, the Church.

It was the Son's task to accomplish the Father's plan of salvation in the fullness of time. Its accomplishment was the reason for his being sent.<sup>12</sup> "The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Reign of God, promised over the ages in the scriptures."<sup>13</sup> To fulfill the Father's will, Christ ushered in the Kingdom of heaven on earth. The Church "is the Reign of Christ already present in mystery."<sup>14</sup> (CCC 763)

Salvation comes to the world through the Church, the people formed by Christ for this mission. Far from being an "accident" of history, the Church is the reason that Christ came. The Church is a sign of God's Kingdom in the world and a sign of the Kingdom of Heaven, and she is given the sacred duty to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God and to draw all people to Christ. The members of the Church are the "seed and beginning of the Kingdom," the "little flock" who "form Jesus' true family."<sup>15</sup>

The Twelve Tribes of Israel that came forth from the twelve sons of Jacob formed the foundation upon which God built the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. In the New Testament Christ built his Church on the foundation of the Twelve Apostles: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel"<sup>16</sup>:

The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head.<sup>17</sup> Representing the twelve tribes of Israel, they are the foundation stones of the new Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> The Twelve and the other disciples share in Christ's mission and his power, but also in his lot.<sup>19</sup> By all his actions, Christ prepares and builds his Church. (CCC 765)

We will return to the topic of the structure of the Church and the role of the Apostles later in this chapter.



*Christ's Charge to Peter* by Raphael.

In the New Testament Christ built his Church on the foundation of the Twelve Apostles.

## THE CHURCH: GIVEN DIVINE ASSISTANCE FROM THE BLESSED TRINITY

Ever since Christ's *Ascension* into Heaven, his work on earth has been the work of the Church. Before Christ entered into his Passion, he promised the Apostles that he would send the "Counselor, the Holy Spirit" who would "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."<sup>20</sup> The Holy Spirit would be the guide who would lead Christ's Church to all truth as well as help her grow in holiness.

At Pentecost, the fulfillment of this promise came to pass:

**When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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)**

The Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in effect revealed the Church by animating the Church, which inspired and empowered the Apostles to understand and to take on their sacred mission courageously. The Holy Spirit transformed a small group of frightened men into bold witnesses of the Faith who, for the sake of Christ, persevered joyfully through hardships and sufferings. They did this in order to proclaim the Good News that Jesus Christ had died and risen for the salvation of the world.

It seems impracticable, in the days leading up to Pentecost, that this seemingly insignificant group of ordinary men—who had trades and families of their own before leaving them to follow Christ—would become some of the most influential men who ever lived. Yet, that's what happened. The only explanation is the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The Holy Spirit is the "soul" of the Body of Christ, the Church, who gives her life and direction so as always to remain firmly in the truth of God's Revelation.

We see, then, that the Church enjoys divine assistance from all three Persons of the Blessed Trinity: The Father sent the Son, the Son established the Church, and the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit so the Church can carry out her divine mission to the world.<sup>21</sup>



*Pentecost (detail) by Juan de Flandes. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in effect revealed the Church by animating the Church.*

## THE CHURCH: THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

The salvation of humanity comes to us through the life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. By becoming man, the Son of God made his earthly Body the means by which people can come to a union with God. And after his Ascension it is still the Body of Christ—the Church—that is the path to salvation in this world. As members of the Body of Christ, we are united intimately to one another. St. Paul explained,

**As in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; if he who teaches, in his teaching; if he who exhorts, in his exhortation; if he who contributes, in liberality; if he who gives aid, with zeal; if he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom 12: 4-8)**

## ST. PAUL, APOSTLE



How many Apostles were there? The first number that probably comes to mind is "twelve." After all, at the beginning of his public ministry, Christ selected twelve men to be Apostles, and that was no arbitrary number: the Twelve Apostles are the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament Twelve Tribes of Israel. Chosen by Christ himself, these twelve men lived and traveled with him during his public ministry and were his witnesses after his Resurrection. In fact, after Judas Iscariot had taken his own life, the remaining eleven were inspired to replace him as soon as possible, selecting St. Matthias to fill Judas's vacant "office" (Acts 1:15-26).

Yet, there is another man called "apostle" who did not follow Christ during his earthly ministry and was not among his chosen Twelve: St. Paul, the "Apostle to the Gentiles."

St. Paul, when he was known as Saul, was a Pharisee who persecuted the young Christian Church ferociously because he thought her Faith was a dangerous subversion of Judaism by errant Jews. But the ninth chapter of Acts recounts the turning point of his life—an event that would change the world: En route to persecute more Christians, Saul received his calling directly from Christ:

**As [Saul] journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. (Acts 9:3-7)**

One of the defining characteristics of every Apostle is that he encountered the risen Christ (cf. Acts 1:22). This would seem to



*St. Paul by Castillo.*  
St. Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, became the Church's greatest evangelist.

limit the number of potential Apostles to those who had followed Christ during his earthly ministry. However, St. Paul was given a unique gift in that he witnessed the risen Christ *after* his Ascension into Heaven. Because of this grace, he is considered an Apostle just as much as the other Twelve.

After his dramatic conversion, St. Paul became the Church's greatest evangelist, traveling throughout the Roman Empire in an effort to bring people to Christ. His letters to various local churches and fellow disciples make up the bulk of the New Testament. His influence on the early Church is inestimable.

In the Church every member—from the Pope to a newly baptized infant—has a role to play, but all these roles are united in one purpose: the salvation of souls. Furthermore, we are united in one Body with Christ as the Head:

[Christ] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:18-20)

The Holy Spirit unites the diverse members of the Church from different cultures and backgrounds into one unified Body. And by that Spirit the Church brings salvation to the world.

The *Catechism* states it this way:

Believers who respond to God's word and become members of Christ's Body, become intimately united with him: "In that body the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe, and who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ in his Passion and glorification."<sup>22</sup> This is especially true of Baptism, which unites us to Christ's death and Resurrection, and the Eucharist, by which "really sharing in the body of the Lord,...we are taken up into communion with him and with one another."<sup>23</sup> (CCC 790)

One of the greatest theologians and philosophers of Christian history, St. Thomas Aquinas, described it simply: "Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person."<sup>24</sup> The Church as the Mystical Body of Christ is a true mystery, one that we must accept on faith: By the Sacraments of the Church, we become intimately united to Christ and to one another in an utterly incomprehensible way.

## THE CHURCH: FOUNDED UPON THE APOSTLES

As you might expect, God revealed himself gradually to his people, sent his Son to establish his people as a Church, and then sent the Holy Spirit to guide the Church in truth for a special purpose. The Church is endowed with a sacred mission: to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ and proclaim salvation to the world.

To accomplish this, Christ established a structure for his Church, founding her upon his inner circle of friends, the Apostles. The Apostles and their successors continued Christ's work of salvation after his Ascension and will continue it until the end of time, when he will return in glory.

In the office of the apostles there is one aspect that cannot be transmitted: to be the chosen witnesses of the Lord's Resurrection and so the foundation stones of the Church. But their office also has a permanent aspect. Christ promised to remain with them always. The divine mission entrusted by Jesus to them "will continue to the end of time, since the Gospel they handed on is the lasting source of all life for the Church. Therefore,...the apostles took care to appoint successors."<sup>25</sup> (CCC 860)

To these Apostles Christ revealed himself in a deeper way than he revealed himself to the crowds who came to hear him preach. Although he taught the people many things, he reserved special instruction to the Apostles themselves: "Privately to his own disciples he explained everything."<sup>26</sup> They were, after all, his chosen witnesses



*The Transfiguration by Carracci.*  
Christ revealed himself to the Apostles in a deeper way than he revealed himself to the crowds who came to hear him preach.

whom he sent out to preach his Gospel. We find many instances in the Gospels where Christ spoke to the Apostles alone, teaching them deeper truths and answering their questions.

While he appointed twelve Apostles, to one of them he gave primacy over the others. That man was Simon Peter.

### St. Peter Is Given the “Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven”

Scripture tells us that Christ, in making Simon Peter the head of his Church, gave him the “keys to the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>27</sup> These words were highly significant in light of the Old Testament.

When God established a kingdom for Israel, he also established the office of prime, or chief, minister, a high official who had authority over the kingdom. The symbol of this authority was the “key of the house of David,” which would be given to him by the king.

A *prime minister* is someone who is granted the authority of an ultimate ruler such as a king or queen. The power wielded by a prime minister is not his or her own; it flows from the ultimate ruler. When a prime minister speaks, he or she speaks in the name of the king. The keys given to the prime minister of the Kingdom of Israel, then, was a symbol of his granted authority. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the succession of one prime minister, Shebna, to the next prime minister, Eli’akim. God told Shebna:

**In that day I will call my servant Eli’akim the son of Hilkiah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. (Is 22: 20-22)**

Eli’akim, although not the king, had complete authority to determine who could enter the “house of David;” he was vested with the Keys of the Kingdom.

This office of prime minister provides a model for the role of St. Peter, whom Christ established as the head of his Church, which is continued today in the office of the Pope. We see this office continue in the New Testament when Christ gives the *Keys of the Kingdom* to St. Peter:



St. Peter Preaching in the Presence of St. Mark by Fra Angelico.

“The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved.”  
(CCC 765)

[Jesus] said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Mt 16:15-19)

## WHY ST. PETER IS "THE ROCK"

**T**he life of St. Peter is truly remarkable. Although he was born and raised a humble Galilean fisherman named Simon, he was chosen by Christ to be "the rock" on which the Lord would build his Church, the New People of God (see Mt 16:15-19).

The name "Peter" is not really a name but rather the Greek *petra*, "rock." While it appears obvious from the English translation of these verses that the Apostle Simon is being named the "rock" on which Christ will build his Church, most non-Catholics dispute this interpretation, basing their disagreement on certain variations in the Greek text in which the New Testament was originally written. The key words in Greek are italicized here:

**"You are *Petros*, and on this *petra*  
I will build my church." (Mt 16:18)**

*Petros* is the Greek word for "little rock" or "pebble," whereas *petra* is the Greek word for "rock" or "stone." Therefore, some claim that the Apostle Simon was not the rock to which Christ was referring but his profession of faith, or Christ himself, that is really the "rock." There are at least three problems with this interpretation.

First, claiming that St. Peter is not the "rock" flies in the face of the obvious meaning of Christ's words. Christ renamed Simon, which in the Bible implies a new mission in life (for example, God renamed Abram as Abraham). If Simon himself was not the "rock," why rename him at all? Why not just keep his name Simon and say that his profession of faith was the "rock?"



Apostle Peter (detail) by Mengs.

Second, Christ and St. Peter spoke in the Aramaic language. The account found in St. Matthew's Gospel is a translation written in Greek. In the original Aramaic, the word *Cephas* ("rock") would have been used in both instances with no distinction of the size of the stone.

Finally, a deeper understanding of the Greek language helps us to more clearly understand this passage. In Greek, as in many languages (but not in English), nouns are masculine, feminine, or neuter. The Greek word *petra* (rock) is feminine. However, Christ is using the word "rock" as a new name for Simon, and a man cannot have a feminine name, so using the masculine form of the word would be natural, which is *Petros*. Thus, the difference between the two Greek words is not a difference in meaning but simply a difference in gender.

The Apostle St. Peter is truly the "rock" on which Christ built his Church.

Thus, the Apostle St. Peter was given a leadership role in the New People of God, the Church: He was given the “keys to the kingdom of heaven,” allowing him to rule with the authority of the King himself, the Son of David—Jesus Christ.

**The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head.<sup>28</sup> Representing the twelve tribes of Israel, they are the foundation stones of the new Jerusalem.<sup>29</sup> The Twelve and the other disciples share in Christ’s mission and his power, but also in his lot.<sup>30</sup> By all his actions, Christ prepares and builds his Church. (CCC 765)**

Thus, the basic structure of the Church is not manmade; neither is it something that can be changed or adjusted to fit human whims. It is divinely instituted by Jesus Christ himself as the fulfillment of a plan begun at the foundations of the world.

## The Primacy of St. Peter

Aside from Christ, no one comes to the fore in the Gospels quite like St. Peter. It seems that at every major event of Christ’s adult life we find nearby this Galilean fisherman. And Christ speaks to none of the other Apostles quite like the way he speaks to St. Peter, giving him specific duties and authority that he does not grant the others.

The New Testament presents St. Peter as preeminent; he is mentioned much more than any other Apostle or disciple, he is always mentioned first when grouped with other Apostles, and he is always shown to be their leader. For example, note the language St. Matthew used to list the Apostles:



*Christ’s Charge to Peter by Veronese.  
One of St. Peter’s primary tasks was to help keep  
the other Apostles from falling away.*

**The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Mt 10: 2-4)**

The other Apostles are simply listed, but St. Matthew points out that “Simon, who is called Peter” is “first.” St. Peter is not just listed first by happenstance; the language of Scripture is precise, and here it is making clear that he has a leadership position among the Apostles.

At the Last Supper, this special role for St. Peter is made even clearer. Christ proclaimed,

**“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you [plural, the Apostles] like wheat, but I have prayed for you [singular, Peter] that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.” (Lk 22: 31-32)**

Note the distinction between the two instances of “you” in this passage: Christ told St. Peter that Satan wants to sift all the Apostles like wheat, but he then said that he prayed only for St. Peter. In addition, he told only St. Peter to strengthen his brethren, that is, the other Apostles. Undeniably, Christ was giving him a special ministry. One of St. Peter’s primary tasks was to help keep the other Apostles from falling away.

In the last chapter of the Gospel of St. John, three times Christ asked St. Peter if he loved him.<sup>31</sup> Recall that he had recently denied three times that he even knew Christ. When St. Peter affirmed that he loved Christ, Christ’s response was not the expected “I forgive you” or “I love you.” Instead he told St. Peter to “feed” or “tend” the Lord’s sheep. He is to be a shepherd of Christ’s flock. Here, too, it is clear that Christ was giving St. Peter a specific ministry in the Church, one not shared by any of his companions.

### St. Peter as the “Rock”

But the clearest sign of St. Peter’s special ministry in the Church is his very name. Although his given name was Simon, Christ himself changed his name to “Peter,” which means “rock,” thus signifying his role in the Church.

From the Gospel narrative “upon this rock” (Mt 16:15-19), we can glean several truths:

- ✦ **Christ established a Church.** This passage makes it abundantly clear that Christ intended to and did establish a Church.
- ✦ **Christ established a *visible* Church.** Some non-Catholic Christians claim that the Church is “invisible,” meaning that it has no visible structure or *hierarchy* with authority over its members, and only God knows its membership. As we read in the previous chapter, the Church was prefigured at the beginning of time and was present “invisibly” in the regathering of the people of Israel; now, with the dramatic event at Caesarea Philippi, Christ established the Church in its visible dimension. Christ took a real person—Simon—and made him the rock (Peter) on which the Church would be built. By the fact that Christ established St. Peter as the head of the Church in such a public way, it is clear that this Church and its hierarchy would be visible to all.
- ✦ **Christ gave St. Peter certain authority over this visible Church.** Christ established a hierarchical Church with someone to govern it. By giving St. Peter the “Keys of the Kingdom,” he was giving him a unique authority in the Church. Likewise, the power to bind and loose, which was extended also to the other Apostles later in the Gospels, denotes a position of authority in the Church community.



*St. Peter Enthroned* by Guido di Siena.

Christ took a real person—Simon—and made him the rock (Peter) on which the Church would be built.





*Appearance on the Mountain in Galilee (detail) by Duccio.*

After his Resurrection, Christ continued to explain his Revelation to the Apostles and commanded them to go out as his emissaries in the wider world.

## THE APOSTLES ENTRUSTED TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL

**I**n the New Testament the Apostles are presented as having pivotal importance. Throughout most of the Gospels, they were clearly ignorant of Christ's intentions and mission, yet the Lord poured himself out to them continually, teaching them, admonishing them, and promising them great responsibilities and powers in his future kingdom. They were with him throughout his public ministry, and Christ was careful to pass on his teachings to them. After his Resurrection, Christ continued to explain his Revelation to them and commanded them to go out as his emissaries in the wider world.

His parting instructions, which we read in the previous chapter, bear repeating here. Before Christ ascended to his Father, he told his Apostles:

**"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Mt 28:18-20)**

With these words, sometimes called the "Great Commission," Christ commanded his Apostles to make disciples, entrusting to them two primary tasks: administering the Sacraments ("baptizing") and proclaiming his Revelation ("teaching"). This was to be their task until the "close of the age"—until the end of time.

At Pentecost, as we read earlier in this chapter, the Holy Spirit empowered the Apostles to begin to carry out this sacred mission on their own for the first time. The followers of Christ were not called to focus solely on their own holiness in order to be a sign for the rest of the world like the Israelites were called to do; rather, filled as they were with the Holy Spirit, the People of God became a missionary people, evangelizing the whole world with the Gospel just as Christ had instructed them to do.

The whole Church is apostolic, in that she remains, through the successors of St. Peter and the other apostles, in communion of faith and life with her origin: and in that she is "sent out" into the whole world. All members of the Church share in this mission, though in various ways. "The Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well." Indeed, we call an apostolate "every activity of the Mystical Body" that aims "to spread the Kingdom of Christ over all the earth."<sup>32</sup> (CCC 863)

Throughout the Old Testament the Lord promised that eventually all peoples would be blessed through Israel—that through the example of Israel's faithfulness to the covenant, all nations would come to adore the Lord. However, they were never commanded to go out actively to bring others into the Family of God. After Pentecost, we see clearly that the mission of God's People was changed: St. Peter and the Apostles were sent out to accomplish the conversion of the whole world, preaching to the ends of the earth the Good News about Jesus Christ.

During the life of Christ, the Apostles were far from impressive, showing at different times such defects as pride, self-interest, slowness in understanding, and cowardice. Yet, after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they were transformed into bold proclaimers of Christ's Resurrection. They established a Faith that spread eventually throughout the world. One of the great proofs of the truth of Christianity is the humanly unexplainable transformation of these common men.

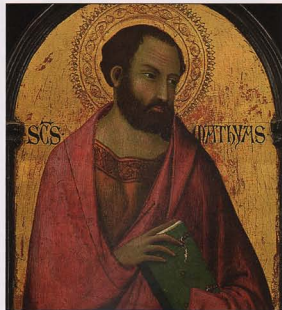
The important role of the Apostles continues to be demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of the early Church. To be more accurate, it relates primarily the story of two Apostles: St. Peter, the first head of the Church, and St. Paul, whose missionary zeal among non-Jews earned him the moniker "Apostle to the Gentiles." The Apostles are shown to be the foundation of the Church, the primary means by which Christ's Revelation is passed on to the world.<sup>33</sup> This book includes the conversion story of St. Paul, a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians who was transformed by the power of Christ to become his greatest evangelizer.

Take some time to read the Acts of the Apostles. You will see that the Church is not inward looking but always looking beyond her boundaries to reach those still outside.

## APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

According to Christ's instructions, the Apostles were to continue the mission of Christ on earth until his glorious return at the end of time. Yet, human mortality presented a problem: The Apostles themselves were not to live forever. How were they to carry out Christ's command until the end of the world?

The Apostles tackled that situation almost immediately after the Ascension. One of the original Twelve, Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Christ, had died. That left only eleven Apostles rather than the Twelve, who represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel.



*St. Matthias* by Mantegna.

With the appointment of St. Matthias to succeed Judas Iscariot, a model for Apostolic Succession was created.

Immediately following the Ascension of Our Lord at the beginning of Acts, we find the Eleven together in prayer in the Upper Room. St. Peter declared: "One of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Christ went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection."<sup>34</sup>

The office of Apostle required a replacement, one who could be a "witness to his Resurrection" and fulfill the command of Christ to make disciples by administering the Sacraments and proclaiming God's Revelation in Jesus Christ. So the Apostles chose St. Matthias and appointed him as the successor of Judas Iscariot.

St. Matthias was entrusted with the same task as the first Apostles. In this way, a model for succession was created: When an Apostle had died, another man was to take his place in the ministry. These successors are the bishops, who continue the task of the Apostles to administer the Sacraments and hand on Revelation.

Today we have far more than twelve Catholic bishops in the world. As the Church rapidly grew and expanded throughout the region, the Apostles had to appoint more bishops to minister to the ever more numerous faithful, and these bishops were not necessarily personal witnesses to the Resurrection. These bishops ordained other bishops, and the process has continued since apostolic times. Because of this line of succession, today's Catholic bishops trace their authority and office directly to the Apostles. Therefore, they are true successors to the Apostles, and are thus charged and empowered to continue the Apostles' sacred mission given to them by Christ.

As the Fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican proclaimed:

[The] divine mission, entrusted by Christ to the apostles, will last until the end of the world,<sup>35</sup> since the Gospel they are to teach is for all time the source of all life for the Church. And for this reason the apostles, appointed as rulers in this society, took care to appoint successors... They therefore appointed such men, and gave them the order that, when they should have died, other approved men would take up their ministry.<sup>36</sup>

Among those various ministries which, according to tradition, were exercised in the Church from the earliest times, the chief place belongs to the office of those who, appointed to the episcopate, by a succession running from the beginning,<sup>37</sup> are passers-on of the apostolic seed.<sup>38</sup> Thus, as St. Irenaeus testifies, through those who were appointed bishops by the apostles, and through their successors down in our own time, the apostolic tradition is manifested<sup>39</sup> and preserved.<sup>40</sup> (*Lumen Gentium*, 20)

In other words, the task of faithfully transmitting the Revelation of God to future generations is given to the bishops, including the Pope, who is the Bishop of Rome. *Apostolic Succession* is a great gift to the faithful, for it allows every follower of Christ to know with confidence the teachings of Jesus Christ.<sup>41</sup>

## THE TRANSMISSION OF DIVINE REVELATION

The Catholic Church, then, in and through the Pope and the bishops in communion with him, is in turn entrusted with continuing the mission that Christ gave to his Apostles so all people may come to a saving knowledge of God's plan of salvation. So how did the Apostles, and later the bishops, hand on what had been entrusted to them? The same way any information is handed on to future generations: through spoken word, written word, and living witness.



*The Four Evangelists* by Bloemaert.

Left to right: St. Luke with the Ox, St. Mark with the Lion, St. John with the Eagle, St. Matthew with the Angel. Through their lives, writings, and preaching, the Apostles handed on the Revelation given to them by Christ to the next generation of believers.

The Apostles committed their lives to teaching others about the Gospel of Christ: They preached far and wide, some wrote down accounts of our salvation through Christ, and they lived out the New Commandment of Christ for all to see. Through their lives, writings, and preaching, the Apostles handed on the Revelation given to them by Christ to the next generation of believers. This is still how bishops hand on Revelation from generation to generation.

We refer to the sacred writings of Revelation as the Bible, or *Sacred Scripture*, and we refer to the teachings handed down from the time of the Apostles to the present as *Sacred Tradition*. These two elements together, Scripture and Tradition, are called the *Deposit of Faith*. Together they provide the means by which God's Revelation is passed on to us.