

# Contents

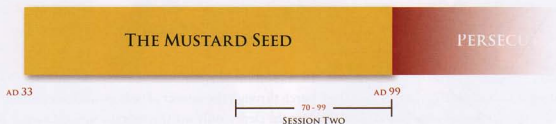
Introduction .....	v
<b>Session 1</b> The Mustard Seed .....	1
<b>Session 2</b> The Ways of Life and Death .....	15
<b>Session 3</b> Martyrs and Apologists .....	29
<b>Session 4</b> The Faith Attacked .....	43
<b>Session 5</b> The Dawn of Christendom .....	57
<b>Session 6</b> The Arian Attack .....	71
<b>Session 7</b> The Bitter Fruit of Heresy .....	85
<b>Session 8</b> Heroes of God .....	99
<b>Session 9</b> Councils and a Great Pope .....	113
<b>Session 10</b> Splintering of an Empire .....	127
<b>Appendix</b> .....	141
<b>Suggested Readings</b> .....	147
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	149

In a real sense, as you encounter the people, places, and events of these centuries, you are likely to discover perhaps for the first time, fascinating aspects of the Catholic faith that will strengthen you in your own journey as a Catholic. Each of these stories—some famous, some not, some inspiring—helps us to understand, appreciate, and remember who we are as a family of faith.

We are the inheritors of the legacies of great men and women who for two thousand years have spread the gospel throughout the world and built a great and lasting civilization.

## SESSION TWO

# The Ways of Life and Death



*"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you."*

— John 15:20

*"There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The way of life, then, is this: First, you shall love God who made you; second, love your neighbor as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you. And of these sayings the teaching is this: Bless those who curse you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you."*

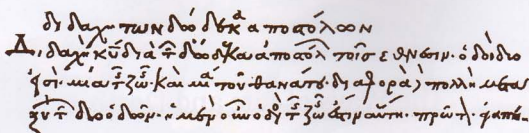
— Didache, Chapter 1<sup>1</sup>

## A. Overview

In 1883, the original text of the *Didache*<sup>2</sup> or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* was rediscovered in an ancient monastery in Constantinople. Although the original dating of this long-lost and extremely important document is sometimes disputed, respected scholars have traced the origins of this early Church manual to near the end of the first century (AD 80).

<sup>1</sup> The text of the *Didache* can be found in the "Downloads" section of OurCatholicHistory.com.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced "DID-uh-kay."



δι δαχ τω ν δ ο ο δ ο κ α πο α ο λ ο ο ν  
 Δι δαχ κ υ δ ι α τ δ ο ο κ α α πο α ο λ τ ο ι σ ε θ ν α τ μ ο δ ο δ ο  
 γ ο ι μ ι α τ ζ ω κ α ι μ ι τ ο ν θ α ν α τ ο δ ι α φ ο ρ α πολλ η μ ε τ α  
 ζ ν τ δ ο ο δ ο ο μ κ ι μ β ο ο ω ο δ γ τ ζ ω α τ μ α τ η π ρ ω τ η γ α π η

First lines of *Didache* from 1056 manuscript.

The *Didache* records an early rite of baptism, exhorts the faithful to prayer, and discusses the liturgy. Moreover, it indicates the hierarchical constitution of the Church through the subject of bishops and priests. Sage advice is also given in reference to who should be selected for the clergy: only worthy, morally upright men. It is a brief document; you may wish to read it in preparation for your group discussion.

This early Catholic document is invaluable, for it provides insight into the worship and doctrine of the early Church. The *Didache* stresses the “two ways”—the way of life and the way of death. In this document, we are encouraged to live the way of life through imitation of Christ and observance of the Ten Commandments. The alternative—the way of death—was the path frequented in imperial Roman society, which was tainted by all kinds of immorality, including both infanticide and abortion. The *Didache* illustrates that, even in the midst of persecution, the Church was concerned with preserving and transmitting the apostolic faith.

## The Spread of the Faith

During the latter part of the first century, the Catholic faith spread throughout the Roman Empire despite violent opposition and persecution. Early Catholic communities arose in the provinces and towns of the empire, and Roman citizens eschewed the pagan gods to embrace the one true God.

There are several reasons for this burgeoning of faith. The empire was at peace and was united culturally through a common language—Greek. Roman society at this time was also very religious. The people participated in nature cults, emperor worship, and mystery religions from the East. Thus, the soil of the Roman Empire was fertile for the planting of the mustard seed.

“JUST AS THE OFFICE which the Lord confided to Peter alone, as first of the apostles, destined to be transmitted to his successors, is a permanent one, so also endures the office, which the apostles received, of shepherding the Church, a charge destined to be exercised without interruption by the sacred order of bishops.” (CCC 862, citing *Lumen gentium*, 20)



*Saint Clement I* by Tiepolo

### Pope St. Clement I: A Herald of Unity and Authority

One of the most significant events in the first century of Church history involved the fourth bishop of Rome, Pope St. Clement I. When he received word that the Corinthian faithful had revolted against their clergy, the pope intervened. This revolt was disconcerting for the universal Church, and it was causing non-Christians to mock and reject the Church. The pope sent a firm, fatherly reprimand to the Corinthians, illustrating the authority of the Church at Rome and the primacy and universal jurisdiction of the Roman pontiff during the earliest days of the Church. St. Clement writes:

*...the Church is governed by the Pope, the Successor of St. Peter...*

*Disgraceful, beloved, indeed, exceedingly disgraceful and unworthy of your training in Christ, is the report that the well-established and ancient Church of the Corinthians is, thanks to one or two individuals, in revolt against the presbyters. And this report has reached not only us but also people that differ from us in religion ...*

— Pope St. Clement I, *Letter to the Corinthians*, 47

Pope St. Clement I's letter was revered in Corinth (indeed, it was still being read there a hundred years after it was sent) as well as throughout the Church as an authentic expression of the successor of St. Peter who spoke with the authority of Christ.

The Mustard Seed period ends with the death of the last apostle, St. John (around AD 100). The Church was still a small but growing organization, having weathered the initial onslaught of the might of Rome. However, imperial displeasure would be unleashed with unmitigated fury in the next time period.



The Greatest Extent of the Roman Empire, Early Second Century AD





Neptune at Piazza Navona

## The Church Under Siege

Although this period of imperial history proved exceedingly ripe for the spread of the Catholic faith, the Roman Empire struggled in its dealings with the Church, which was unlike anything Rome had ever encountered.

The Church was a unique entity within the Roman Empire. Neither a nation nor an unorganized association of believers who vaguely shared a few principles of faith, the Church was an organic institution that developed within the empire. The Church's organization and hierarchy revealed unified and disciplined believers who steadfastly held to essential doctrines. They prayed for the emperor, served in the army, and participated in all aspects of imperial life, but their ultimate loyalty did not reside in any temporal kingdom.

As a small but thriving organization, the Church weathered the initial onslaught of imperial fury leveled at them by the emperors Nero (AD 64–67) and Domitian (AD 81–96). However, these outbreaks of violence were fairly limited in scope, and the delusions of these men ultimately turned the Roman people against them. Both men met untimely and violent ends.

Despite the real dangers that early Catholics encountered during these periods, especially those who lived in Rome, the faithful throughout the empire experienced times of indifference and even tolerance during this period. However, a subtler form of persecution arose from pagan propagandists, who attacked the teachings of the Church and sought to prevent Romans from joining the body of Christ.

Some critics attacked the Faith at its roots, including the most basic precepts about the life of Jesus Christ. In the following example, the Roman philosopher Celsus—who rejected the Faith as a “new fad” and Christians as a revolutionary group inappropriately separated from Roman culture and tradition—proffers his objections to the Incarnation in a treatise entitled *True Doctrine* (AD 170).

*The assertion that some God or son of God has come down to earth as judge of mankind is most shameful, and no lengthy argument is required to refute it. What is the purpose of such a descent on the part of God? Was it in order to learn what was going on among men? Does he not know everything?*

— Celsus, as quoted by Origen in *Contra Celsum*

Other pagan authors attacked the Church's membership, Scriptures, worship, and doctrines. Christians were called atheists, bad citizens, unreasonable fools, baby killers, and cannibals. Despite their faithful service to the community, both in helping the poor and marginalized members of society and in serving the needs of the state in the military and political arenas, the early Catholics suffered intense calumny and gossip at the hands of popular Roman philosophers and writers.

Within the Church, the first apologists rose up to meet the challenge, as recorded in the works Minucius Felix, who exposed the lies being attributed to the initiation rites of the Church.

*The story about the initiation of new recruits is as detestable as it is well known. An infant, covered with flour, in order to deceive the unwary, is placed before the one who is to be initiated into the mysteries. Deceived by this floury mass, which makes him believe that his blows are harmless, the neophyte kills the infant ... They avidly lick up the blood of the infant and argue over how to share its limbs.*

— Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9, 6

Despite this evil campaign of misinformation, the Church gained members as the truth of Christ shone brightly in the authentic lives of followers of Jesus. Over time, well-educated Catholic philosophers, thinkers, and writers continued to develop well-reasoned responses to false criticisms in defense of the Faith.



### Defending the Faith: Was the Early Church an “Organized Religion”?

“Oh I believe in God, I just don’t believe in organized religion!” Have you ever heard this phrase? Many people today claim to be believers in Jesus Christ, but are very comfortable with a “personal” faith and don’t feel any need to attend a church. This attitude would have been incomprehensible to members of the early Church.

Living as a community of believers is part of the very essence of the Faith. Organization and structure are necessary elements in any community. This can be seen clearly in the letter of Pope St. Clement I to the Corinthians. St. Clement’s letter provides key evidence of the intervention of the Church of Rome in the life of another local church, and, as such, it represents an important phase in the development of the papal ministry. The Corinthians revolted against the clergy and were admonished for doing so by the head of another community (the pope). St. Clement reminds the Corinthians that it was the apostles who, following the command of Christ, chose successors to share in Christ’s authority to lead the particular churches. This structure is not the mere creation of man, but rather a divine construct.

## B. Quick Quiz!

1. What was the *Didache*, and why was its discovery in the 1880s so significant?
2. What are the three main points raised in the letter of Pope St. Clement I to the Church at Corinth?
3. What factors contributed to the spread of the Catholic faith in the Roman Empire?
4. What were some of the accusations that were leveled at the early Christian community based on a misunderstanding of its beliefs?





## SPOTLIGHT

### *The Church in the Roman Empire*

It is extremely important to understand what the Church was and how it affected the empire. Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953) posed this question in his book *Europe and the Faith*.

Belloc first answered what the Church was not: an opinion, a habit, a theory, or a philosophy. The Church was a unique organization within the empire, transcending national and ethnic boundaries: Catholics came from all walks of life, professions, and areas of the empire. The two aspects that set the Church apart from all other sects and groups were its unity in belief and its organization.

Catholics were very different from their pagan neighbors. This difference was noticeable and drew attention, both negative and positive, from their fellow Romans. The Church professed several central doctrines, but chief among them was the incarnation of the Lord and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The Church “proposed statement instead of hypothesis, affirmed concrete historical facts instead of suggesting myths, and treated its ritual of ‘mysteries’ as realities instead of symbols.”<sup>3</sup>

As a result of the Church’s beliefs, unity, and universality, many Romans, especially those in government, viewed the Church with great anxiety and uncertainty. Some Roman officials were not troubled by the Christians and remained indifferent to their existence; others viewed them with great suspicion and derision. In essence, the Church was an enigma to the Roman world—some were intrigued enough to find out more about the Church’s teachings, while others were so concerned by its message that they attempted to eradicate the Church’s existence.



Pantheon

3 Hilaire Belloc, *Europe and the Faith* (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1992), 38.

## C. Follow the Signs

Our Lord granted his authority to the apostles to teach, govern, and sanctify the People of God until his return. As the apostles and those they ordained died, the early Church clearly understood the need to continue the office of bishop. Pope St. Clement I indicated that the practice of men succeeding to the office of apostle came from the apostles themselves:

*Our Apostles ... laid down a rule once and for all to this effect: when these men die, other approved men shall succeed to their sacred ministry.*

— Letter to the Corinthians, 44

The Catholic teaching of apostolic succession assures the faithful that those ordained bishops continue in the ministry of the apostles themselves (see CCC 861). Catholic bishops can trace the lineage of the office back to the apostles! No other Christian group (except the Eastern Orthodox) can make this claim.

It is a blessing to know the Lord foresaw the need for continuity and authority in the Church. Pope Benedict XVI recognized this blessing when discussing Pope St. Clement I's letter in his Wednesday general audience: "The Church is above all a gift of God and not something we ourselves created" (March 7, 2007).

We are reminded of the importance of the gift of apostolic succession every time we go to Mass and are led by the priest during the Eucharistic Prayer to pray specifically for our local bishop. Take that moment to remember that your bishop is the living representative of the apostles!



Christ Handing the Keys to St. Peter, by Pietro Perugino

## D. Learn the Story

### Session Two: *The Ways of Life and Death*

#### Talk Notes

*Epic Periods: The Mustard Seed and Persecution*

*Session Two Period: AD 70–99*

#### I. The Teachings of the Apostles

##### A. The *Didache*

###### 1. Way of Life

###### 2. Way of Death

#### II. The Spread of the Faith

##### A. *Pax Romana* and cultural unity

##### B. Religion

###### 1. Political expression of civic duty

###### 2. Nature cults

###### 3. Family gods

###### 4. Emperor worship

###### 5. Mystery religions

##### C. The Christian difference

### III. The Persecution of Domitian

- A. First Roman emperor to deify himself
- B. Kills Catholic family members

### IV. Pope St. Clement I's *Letter to the Corinthians*

- A. Lay uprising against clergy in Corinth
- B. Key points of letter
  - 1. Clergy authority
  - 2. Apostolic succession
  - 3. Primacy and universal jurisdiction of bishop of Rome

### V. Pagan Myths: Attacks on the Christians

- A. General criticisms
- B. Major critics
  - 1. Celsus
    - a. View of Christians
    - b. Theological criticisms
  - 2. Porphyry
    - a. Christian attacks against
    - b. Scriptures
  - 3. Julian the Apostate





## E. Discuss the Story

Answering these questions will help you learn the story of the early Church. If other questions come to mind, write them down to discuss in the group.

1. What is the significance of the *Didache*? Read the *Didache* and discuss your thoughts and share your opinion of this early Church document.

2. The first chapter of the *Didache* reads in part:

*Blessed is he who gives according to the commandment, for he is free from guilt; but woe unto him that receives. For if a man receive being in need, he shall be free from guilt; but he who receives when not in need, shall pay a penalty as to why he received and for what purpose; and when he is in tribulation he shall be examined concerning the things that he has done, and shall not depart thence until he has paid the last farthing.*

To what does the reference to “tribulation” refer? Does this passage remind you of any Scripture passage (see Matthew 5:23–26, 18:23ff)? What does this document teach us about the authentic Catholic view of almsgiving at this time in Church history? What does this imply for us today?

## Did You Know?

*At its height in the second century, the area of the Roman Empire was approximately equal to that of the United States today. More than one million people lived in Rome—a population density unmatched until nineteenth-century London.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Nick Constable, *Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome* (New York: Thalamus, 2003).

3. In Pope St. Clement I's *Letter to the Corinthians*, the bishop of Rome admonishes the faithful for not recognizing the source of the presbyter's authority, which comes from God, and not from man. What does this say about the spiritual authority that a priest has in a parish today? (See CCC 1547.)
4. What were the main theological criticisms against the Catholic faith by the pagan author Celsus?
5. In his book *Europe and the Faith*, Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953) observed that Roman society “believed man to be sufficient to himself, and all belief to be mere opinions” (p. 38). Do you think this attitude has been unique to imperial Rome? Why or why not?

## A Closing Prayer

*Lord Jesus, your earliest followers were compelled to choose each and every day which path they would follow: the path of darkness or the path of light; the path of courage or of compromise; the path of holiness or the path of convenience. As I continue on my Christian journey, give me strength to choose as bravely, consistently, and well as did my past brothers and sisters in Christ. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*



## F. Continue the Story

Pagan authors wrote scathing critiques full of propaganda, gossip, and calumny against the early Church. In response, educated and articulate followers of Christ countered pagan arguments with truth, and their writings provide for us an apologetic record of the beliefs and practices of the first Catholics. Unfortunately, hostile individuals and groups continue to attack the Church today in order to eradicate traditional, faith-based values in society. Too often, they receive little or no opposition.

### Challenge

1. Think about times in the past when you have encountered individuals who criticize some aspect of Catholic teaching on issues concerning faith and morals. What have you done to counter these views with truth? What more could you be doing now?
2. Ask God to give you courage and wisdom, and to be open for the next opportunity to present the truth.
3. Create a list of possible ways you could counter error with truth: write a letter to the editor, post a comment on a blog, or follow up on a previous conversation with a family member or friend.
4. Choose one of these options, and follow up this week.



Saint Peter, by Peter Paul Rubens

### Quick Quiz! Answer Key

1. *This first-century document on the moral life describes some of the earliest liturgical and sacramental practices of the early Christians.*
2. *1) The clergy derives its authority from God, not from the people; 2) the bishops are the successors of the apostles; and 3) the primacy, authority, and universal jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome.*
3. *This religiously diverse society shared a common language (Greek), making it easy to communicate the gospel message. The empire was at peace and Romans were a religious people.*
4. *Followers of Christ were labeled cannibals (e.g., the Eucharist and the lies about nonexistent initiation ceremonies involving killing and eating babies), superstitious fools and atheists (because they refused to worship the emperor), and bad citizens.*