

Living in Christ

# Church History

Apostolic Times to Today

Gloria Shahin  
with Joanna Dailey



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# Introduction

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, “The Church is in history, but at the same time she transcends it. It is only ‘with the eyes of faith’ that one can see her in her visible reality and at the same time in her spiritual reality as bearer of divine life”<sup>1</sup> (770).

Studying Church history requires studying both a visible and a spiritual reality. The Church is more than what we can see; she is a spiritual reality. Through the constant action and presence of the Holy Spirit, the visible aspects of the Church communicate with us and put us in touch with her divine aspects.

Studying the history of the Church reveals many reasons to rejoice in her holiness. The Church has made wonderful and significant contributions to human life. And from her earliest history, the Church has faced many challenges. But the Holy Spirit has never abandoned the Church and guides her to continue to be what she was intended to be from the beginning of God’s plan: a sacrament, a holy sign of his presence, and a means to union with him.

Even though the Church has a divine origin and a divine mission, that mission is carried out in the midst of human events; therefore, to study the history of the Church, it is also necessary to study the events of the Church’s life intertwined with events in the life of the world. The Church, like Jesus Christ himself, is incarnated in the world.

As you learn about the Church’s history, recall that the nature of the Church transcends the actions of specific individuals who have shaped her human character, and that despite any human failings, the Church that you are a part of is willed by the Holy Trinity—planned by the Father, instituted by Christ, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Blessings,  
Gloria Shahin

## Section 1

# **The Church in the Early Christian Centuries**



## The Origin of the Church

This first section of this student book on Church history begins even before human history to discern the plan that God had formed before time. That plan was gradually revealed through salvation history. Through God's plan revealed in Sacred Scripture, we find the formation of the Church.

In the Old Covenant, which God made with Abraham, God formed his people. Through Abraham, he began a pact with the human race. The prophets renewed the promises of God and called his people to faithfulness. The prophets announced the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

When the Word of God became flesh in the Incarnation, the Father's promise of a New Covenant was fulfilled. In the New Covenant offered to us in Jesus Christ, the Church takes shape as Jesus shares the Good News and gathers followers who will spread this news to others.

After the Paschal Mystery is complete, the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles. Following this Pentecost event, the Apostles responded to the call of the Holy Spirit in their lives and Christ's call to them to bring the Good News to all people. (See Matthew 28:19–20.)

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 1: From the Father's Heart (page 10)
- Article 2: Sent by the Holy Spirit (page 14)
- Article 3: After Pentecost (page 17)



Article

# 1 From the Father's Heart

## covenant

A personal, solemn promise of faithful love that involves mutual commitments and creates a sacred relationship.

Scripture relates that God showed Abram the night sky, which must have been ablaze with stars in the total darkness of the ancient desert. Such a sight has moved many to reflect on the depth of God's mysterious power.

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When Jerusalem had been destroyed (in 587 BC) and the People of Israel—God's Chosen People—who were exiled in Babylon, were made to serve a foreign power who did not know God, the Word of the Lord came to the Prophet Jeremiah. What would God say to his people who were at such a low point in their history? This is what is recorded in the Book of Jeremiah:

For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the LORD—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. When you call me, and come to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me—oracle of the LORD—and I will change your lot. (29:11–14)

In these words God the Father renewed the plan that had been in his heart before time began, a plan that included the creation of the universe, the creation of human beings to share his own divine life, and the sending of his Son to gather all people into one family of God.

## The Old Covenant

Original Sin had disrupted the harmony between God and all people, and what could restore it? Only God's forgiving initiative, only a new beginning, sealed with a **covenant**. God had called Abraham into a new land, and promised Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky. God made a covenant with Abraham, and by this covenant he formed his people. In Abraham, God began a pact with the human race.

Yet the story of Israel, Abraham's descendants, is not a story of perfect response to God's initiative of love. It is a story full of sorrow and failure. Still, God remained faithful to his people. He saved them from slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land; he gave them wise kings to lead them and extended his mercy when they sinned, even forgiving the evil deeds of King David; and he sent his prophets to call them back to him when they faltered. Throughout the Old Testament, we see that God's loving fidelity and mercy endured, and that he always called his people back to himself.

God's saving plan, and the willing response of a man named Moses, turned the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of the Promised Land. But by Jeremiah's time, the glory days of Israel again seemed to be behind them. The great King David had come and gone. The People of God were in exile in a strange land. Yet God had revealed his heart, and hoped for a free and loving response in return: "I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).

## The Hope

Presented with the hope of a new covenant, written in their hearts, the People of God rallied. Through the **providence of God** and the agency of King Cyrus of Persia (a pagan), they were allowed to return to Israel. They slowly pulled themselves together as a nation.

But without a central Jewish authority to mediate laws, many petty kings and leaders had sprung up. Roman occupiers took over. The religious leaders encouraged the people to keep God's Law but piled on many other petty rules and regulations that seemed to separate people from God and even from one another. The hope for a new covenant, a new pact with God, seemed dim. But God further revealed his plan.

## The New Covenant

In God's plan for our **redemption**, the **New Covenant** was the Son's great task. Jesus Christ was the center of this New Covenant. He lived it, preached it, explained it, and called God's people into it—not through the prophets, as of old, but in his very Person, both true God and true man. The Son of God became man to rescue us from the sin and death that were the consequences of the Fall. The fullness of our redemption from sin and death was made possible through the Paschal Mystery—Jesus' work of salvation through his Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

To carry out the Father's plan, Jesus Christ made a new and eternal pact between God and human beings, the New Covenant, ultimately in his own blood. Thus began the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. This beginning, this community of people Jesus gathered around him, is the Church.

Christ himself is the head of the Church and the light of the Church: "The Church has no other light than Christ's;



### providence of God

God's loving care throughout salvation history and in each individual life, bringing what is needed into every situation and even bringing good out of evil.

### redemption

From the Latin *redemptio*, meaning "a buying back," referring, in the Old Testament, to Yahweh's deliverance of Israel and, in the New Testament, to Christ's deliverance of all Christians from the forces of sin.

### New Covenant

The covenant or law established by God in Jesus Christ to fulfill and perfect the Old Covenant, or Mosaic Law. It is a perfection here on earth of the Divine Law. The law of the New Covenant is called a law of love, grace, and freedom. The New Covenant will never end or diminish, and nothing new will be revealed until Christ comes again in glory.

## Mary, Mother of the Church

Mary was named Mother of the Church by Pope Paul VI in 1964. Although this was a new title, it was also an acknowledgment of something the Church, the Body of Christ, has always known: Mary is our Mother. Mary is Mother of the Church because she is the Mother of Christ, the one whom God chose from among all women, all the descendants of Eve, to be the virgin mother of his Son. Mary, ever virgin, was preserved from Original Sin from the moment of her conception and remained free of personal sin during her whole life—a dogma called the Immaculate Conception. Mary, full of grace, said yes to the New Covenant, to the Incarnation—the wonderful union of the divine and human natures in the one Divine Person of the Word, the Son of God.

Mary is also Mother of the Church because she was the first disciple and the Mother of all other disciples. After Jesus' death she continued to nurture the early Church with her prayers. Through her continual obedience, faith, and hope, she cooperated with her Son's work of redemption. Because of the unique grace given to Mary through her Immaculate Conception, as well as her singular role in bringing forth our Savior, she is the first and best fruit of the redemption of Christ. We, the members of the Church, share the life of Christ, especially through Baptism and the Eucharist. Mary is our mother because we are one with her son, Jesus Christ.



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according to a favorite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun [Christ]" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]*, 748).

Christ began the Church first through his preaching of the Good News of salvation. In his preaching, Jesus taught a new way to live—not negating the Old Covenant or basic Ten Commandments but enhancing them with the pervasive influence of love: Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Jesus taught a love that not only meets expectations but goes beyond them. Jesus also taught his disciples a new way of relating to God, not only as their Creator and Ruler of all but also as their loving Father, saying: “This is how you are to pray: / Our Father in heaven . . .” (Matthew 6:9). This prayer that Jesus taught, the Lord’s Prayer, is the prayer of the New Covenant and thus the prayer of the Church.

Christ established the Church primarily by the saving gift of himself, which was fulfilled on the cross and anticipated when he instituted the Eucharist. His words, “This is my body, which will be given for you” (Luke 22:19), express his complete self-giving in sacrificing his life for the sake of humanity.

### Structure and Sign

Jesus also gave his Church two more important elements: a structure and signs of his self-giving love, the Sacraments. The Church’s structure from the beginning was the **Apostles** united with Peter, the head. The Twelve Apostles represent the Twelve Tribes of Israel and are the symbolic foundation stones of the New Jerusalem, the Church. This structure survives today in the union of all the bishops in the Church with the successor to Peter, the Pope.



#### Apostle

The general term *apostle* means “one who is sent” and can be used in reference to any missionary of the Church during the New Testament period. In reference to the twelve companions chosen by Jesus, also known as “the Twelve,” the term refers to those special witnesses of Jesus on whose ministry the early Church was built and whose successors are the bishops.

## Catholic Wisdom

### The Holy Spirit Leads People to the Church

**T**hese words from *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* speak of Christ’s work in the Church and for the Church.

Rising from the dead (see Rom 6:9) he [Christ] sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through him [the Spirit] set up his body which is the church as the universal sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father he is continually active in the world in order to lead people to the church and through it to join them more closely to himself. (48)

The signs that Jesus left to his Church, the signs of his self-giving love, are the Sacraments. They come from him, for Christ is the original sacrament, the original sign, of our salvation. From Christ comes the Church. From Christ, through the Church, come the Seven Sacraments: Baptism, the Eucharist, Confirmation, Penance and Reconciliation, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. The Seven Sacraments, instituted by Christ, are a visible sign of an invisible reality. Christ's words and actions during his public ministry were part of his work of salvation, and they announced the gift of the Sacraments he would give his Church through the actions of the Holy Spirit. ✚

## Article 2 Sent by the Holy Spirit

The origin of all things, including God's plan for the human race, is the Holy Trinity, the central mystery of our Christian faith and our Christian life. God has made his mystery known to us by revealing himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Divine Persons are distinct from one another, yet the three are perfectly united. Inseparable from the Father and the Son, and existing, like them, always and forever, the Holy Spirit participated with them in Creation itself, as they together are the "one, indivisible principle of creation" (CCC, 316). When the Word of God became flesh in the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit participated fully with the Father and the Son, each in his own proper way, in this divine mission and in the gift of the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit was with Jesus from the moment of his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, uniting both his divine and human natures. The Spirit was with him, working with him to complete the Father's plan of establishing the Kingdom by planting the seed of the Church.

A key moment in the ministry of Jesus was his Baptism by his cousin John. In that experience of humility, of identifying most closely with those who repented and were preparing for the coming of the Kingdom, Jesus was assured that both the Father and the Holy Spirit were with him as he began his public work of announcing the Kingdom of God. His Father's voice proclaimed, "You are my beloved

Because John baptized for the repentance of sin, he resisted Jesus' request for Baptism at first, but Jesus insisted, demonstrating his obedience to God's plan.

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## The Solemnity of Pentecost

The fifty days of the Season of Easter end with the Solemnity of Pentecost. On this Solemnity the Church prays a special vigil Mass, which may be celebrated on the Saturday evening prior to Pentecost. At this vigil Mass, we may hear this Collect, or Opening Prayer:

Almighty ever-living God,  
 who willed the Paschal Mystery  
 to be encompassed as a sign in fifty  
 days,  
 grant that from out of the scat-  
 tered nations  
 the confusion of many tongues  
 may be gathered by heavenly grace  
 into one great confession of your  
 name.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
 who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
 one God, for ever and ever.

*(Roman Missal)*

On the day of Pentecost, the Paschal candle, symbol of the Risen Christ, is moved from the sanctuary, in the front of the church, to a place near the baptismal font. Candles of the newly baptized will be lit from it, and, at funeral Masses, it may be placed near the casket in place of the usual candles.



Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:10). And the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descended from the heavens upon him. The Spirit then drove Jesus out into the desert, where he remained for forty days to prepare himself for his public ministry. (See Mark 1:10–13.)

Then, on the feast of Pentecost, after the Paschal Mystery—Jesus’ work of salvation through his Passion and death, Resurrection, and Ascension—had been accomplished, the Holy Spirit descended from on high. Pentecost was a great



### charism

A special gift or grace of the Holy Spirit given to an individual Christian or community, commonly for the benefit and building up of the entire Church.

feast day for the Jews. It was a harvest feast, the feast of first-fruits, a feast of rejoicing in the first evidence of abundant life to come. The Apostles, with Mary in their midst, were gathered in an upper room. The Holy Spirit came upon them in flame and wind, to remove all fear, and to send them out to proclaim the message of Christ and begin the spread of the Gospel to all nations.

### The Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Church has never been without the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit was sent to continually make the Church holy. It is the Holy Spirit who builds, enlivens, and sanctifies the Church.

How does the Holy Spirit aid the Church in fulfilling her mission today? In the same way he did with the Apostles: through his gifts or **charisms**. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul outlines those gifts clearly (see chapters 12–14.) These gifts are given to us, to the Church, not only for our own advancement in holiness, although individual holiness is necessary, but also for the good of others. And even though our individual gifts may differ, each one is given for the benefit of the entire Church, as Saint Paul explains:

Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it. Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles;

## Pray It!

### Your Lord and Savior

**H**ave you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" Sometimes evangelists of other Christian communities ask others this question. What answer would you give? A good answer for Catholics is this: "Yes. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior at my Baptism—at least my parents and godparents accepted for me. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, with the Gift of the Holy Spirit, at my Confirmation. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior every time I go to Mass and receive Holy Communion. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior every time I try to live the New Covenant of love."

Use this question and your answer as a prayer. Choose a time each day when you can say to Jesus: "Yes, I accept you as my Lord and Savior! Help me to live your covenant of love today." Remember that through the power and Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is with you always.



second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work mighty deeds? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. (1 Corinthians 12:27–31) †

### Article 3 After Pentecost

After Pentecost everything changed for Jesus' followers. The Apostles themselves were no longer hiding in fear. Suddenly they were in public, proclaiming the Good News, announcing that Jesus was the Messiah and Savior that everyone had been seeking for so long. In his speech to the crowds gathered to hear the disciples speak, Peter invited them to repent, be baptized, and live a different way.

Peter proclaims to the crowd that Jesus *is* the **Messiah**, Jesus *is* risen, Jesus *is* with us, and we can still hear his message and follow him. Peter offers the crowds what they have been seeking for so long: a New Covenant with God and with one another, in love, and the opportunity to participate in it. (See Acts 2:14–41.) For the crowds and the Church, it is a new beginning. For the Church it is the beginning of proclaiming the Good News of evangelization. Now, after



#### Messiah

Hebrew word for "anointed one." The equivalent Greek term is *christos*. Jesus is the Christ and the Messiah because he is the Anointed One.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost empowered the followers of Christ to share the Gospel effectively.

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## Successors to the Apostles

The Twelve Apostles had a unique role in the Church. They were the foundation stones, specially chosen by Christ himself, to be the witnesses to his Resurrection, to be his emissaries, his ambassadors, who would carry the Good News of the New Covenant to the ends of the earth.

The Church realized that the promise of Christ, to be with us always, could not have been made simply for the first generation of Christians. The Apostles realized, in designating their successors, that the presence and power of Christ would be just as much with those successors, the bishops. Apostolic preaching and authority is transmitted uninterrupted from the Apostles to the bishops through the laying on of hands when a bishop is ordained in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. This is called **Apostolic Succession**.

The Pope and bishops of the Church today are the successors of the Apostles. It is their responsibility to govern and shepherd Christ's Church, leading Christ's flock to good pasture through the Word of God and the Sacraments. To them, as to his Apostles, Christ gives this awesome responsibility and privilege. He proclaims to the Apostles: "Whoever listens to you listens to me" (Luke 10:16).



Pentecost, the Apostles are beginning to do what Jesus asked of them as he gathered them together on a mountain in Galilee: “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 behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20).

This is called “the Great Commission,” Jesus’ great “sending out” of the Apostles before his Ascension. Before Pentecost the Apostles were simply Jesus’ followers. After Pentecost they became truly *apostles*, from the Greek word *apostoloi*, which means “emissaries.” They were now Jesus’ emissaries and could continue his mission and invite the whole world into the New Covenant in his name.

The Apostles could do this because Jesus kept his promise to send the Holy Spirit. He was still with them. He had not left them orphans. Jesus not only gave the Apostles their mission but also helped them to carry it out. Jesus, who suffered, died, and rose from the dead to establish the New Covenant, would be with his emissaries through the Holy Spirit, no matter what.



### Apostolic Succession

The uninterrupted passing on of apostolic preaching and authority from the Apostles directly to all bishops. It is accomplished through the laying on of hands when a bishop is ordained in the Sacrament of Holy Orders as instituted by Christ. The office of bishop is permanent, because at ordination a bishop is marked with an indelible, sacred character.

## Live It!

### You’ll Never Walk Alone

The picture of the early community of the Way in the Acts of the Apostles is almost idyllic. The followers of Jesus certainly formed a significant community united in purpose.

Today we might envy that unity. Often, it seems, we gather for Sunday Mass and then scatter our separate ways, not meeting again all week. This is not the model of Christian life presented to us in the Acts of the Apostles.

Some parishes have tried to remedy this situation with small-group communities, prayer groups that meet during the week, or other interest groups that draw people together. Almost every parish has a teen group. Look for something in your parish that interests you and to which you can bring your particular gifts. If one group doesn’t fit, try another. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to find other followers of the Way to support your faith in Jesus.

## The People of the Way

Not everyone, of course, was called to be an Apostle or an evangelist. Not everyone of that time was called to preach. So how did the ordinary followers of Jesus live their New Covenant lives after Pentecost? The Acts of the Apostles helps us to see:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. . . . All who believed were together and had all things in common. . . . Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (2:42–47)

The early members of the Church were living a Jewish life as before, centered on the Temple, but they were living it in a different way because they were following the way of Jesus, their Lord and Messiah. That is what they came to be called among the Jews: followers of the Way.

Eventually the word *Christian* emerged. When Gentiles began to join the community, they used the Greek word for *Messiah* (which means “anointed one”). That word is *christos*. In the community at Antioch, made up of mostly Gentiles, the followers of the Way, the followers of Christ, were first called Christians. †