

saint mary's press

Christ's Mission Through the Church

A Primary Source Reader



Robert J. Brancatelli

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Introduction

Welcome to this collection of primary source readings presented here to enhance your study of the Church. This text is meant to broaden your understanding of the Church so that you can see what the Church means for you personally, for other Christians, and for the wider society.

In it you will find an eclectic and fascinating collection of essays from all kinds of people, from Popes, bishops, priests, and martyrs to an evolutionary biologist, two novelists, a young Jewish woman, and a pioneer in the cause of social justice for the poor. They write about all kinds of wonderful things, including the rich history of the Church, her great witnesses, and the struggles that all of us go through to live our faith meaningfully and allow it to come alive in our everyday lives.

There are many themes throughout these chapters. You will discover writings about the Body of Christ; the meaning of mystery at the core not just of faith but of personhood; suffering and persecution as they relate to discipleship; and the relation between science and our belief in things that transcend the physical.

Perhaps the most important theme, however, one that is not explicit but weaves its way quietly through these chapters, is that we're all in this together. No matter who we are, where we come from, or how we got here, we have been called to be part of the people of God. God stands with us in community in good times and bad, whether we have been blessed with long life and material success or have suffered great pain and loss.

Being in this together means that we need not fear anything. This is a powerful claim but one that is easy to forget, which is why Saint Paul reminds us: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

As you read the chapters that follow, keep this in mind. Make it your daily prayer as we, together, follow Jesus as his disciples, his brothers and sisters, his beloved community, the Church.

Part 1

**Christ Established His One
Church to Continue His
Presence and His Work**

1 The Church Proclaims Jesus Christ

Introduction

The excerpt you are about to read from the Acts of the Apostles may be quite familiar to you already. You may have come across it in previous studies, at a retreat, or in preparation for Confirmation. Part of it is proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word during the Easter season. If you are a lector in your parish, chances are you have proclaimed what is arguably the most difficult tongue-twister in the entire lectionary. Chapter 2, verses 9 through 11, includes a listing of travelers to Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost: “We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome.”

Pentecost

The word *pentecost* is Greek for “fiftieth day.” For Jews it was a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest and a commemoration of the Law of Moses. It was celebrated fifty days after Passover. For Christians Pentecost celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ. In the Catholic Church, this feast is given the highest rank, that of a *solemnity*.

But beyond the difficulty of proclamation, chapter 2 of Acts gives us an inside view of the Church in the first century. Specifically, it tells us what was considered necessary to be a disciple of Jesus, the preacher who was crucified by the Romans but then was resurrected by the “right hand of God” (v. 33). For instance, in verses 38 and 39, Peter tells those gathered that they must turn back to God and have their sins forgiven

through Baptism. They will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then he adds something quite extraordinary: Jesus' message of salvation is not just for those assembled but for everyone: "For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call" (Acts of the Apostles 2:39). Although he was referring to Jews throughout the Mediterranean, eventually the Church and her message of salvation—called the *kerygma*—spread beyond Judea to Samaria, the Middle East, and the rest of the Roman Empire (see Ephesians 3:4–6).

Chapter 2 also describes a fourfold pattern of Christian living. In verses 42 through 47, we see that the community of believers "devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles," (v. 42) helped one another by sharing possessions and property, broke bread together (what we now know as the Eucharist), and praised God in prayer. They were united and nourished by the Holy Spirit, which descended upon them and gave them new life. This is the central theme of the Acts of the Apostles, which continues the story begun in the Gospel of Luke by proclaiming that the promise of salvation has been given to everyone in Christ's name through the Holy Spirit. As you read this selection, try to identify some basic elements of Christian life and teaching that can still be found in the Church today.

kerygma Greek for "proclamation." Refers to the preaching of the Word of God as Gospel, or the Good News of salvation, offered to all through Jesus Christ. *Kerygma* has two senses. It is both an event of proclamation and a message proclaimed. See Romans 10:14 and Acts 8:31; for the "Easter *kerygma*," see 1 Corinthians 15:3–5.

Excerpt from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on

each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, "What does this mean?" But others said, scoffing, "They have had too much new wine."

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them, "You who are Jews, indeed all of you staying in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and listen to my words. These people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'It will come to pass in the last days,' God says,
 'that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh.
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
 your young men shall see visions,
 your old men shall dream dreams.
Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids
 I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days,
 and they shall prophesy.
And I will work wonders in the heavens above
 and signs on the earth below:
 blood, fire, and a cloud of smoke.
The sun shall be turned to darkness,
 and the moon to blood,
 before the coming of the great and splendid day of the Lord,
and it shall be that everyone shall be saved
 who calls on the name of the Lord.'

You who are Israelites, hear these words. Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which

God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it. For David says of him:

‘I saw the Lord ever before me,
with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.
Therefore my heart has been glad and my tongue has exulted;
my flesh, too, will dwell in hope,
because you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld,
nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption.
You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

My brothers, one can confidently say to you about the patriarch David that he died and was buried, and his tomb is in our midst to this day. But since he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that neither was he abandoned to the netherworld nor did his flesh see corruption. God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses. Exalted at the right hand of God, he received the promise of the holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth, as you (both) see and hear. For David did not go up into heaven, but he himself said:

‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool.”’

Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?” 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 will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. For the promise is made to

“ God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified. ”

you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.” He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. 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.

For Reflection

1. In his speech to the crowd, Saint Peter states the need for repentance. Why is this so important, and where do you see the need for repentance in your life?
2. Why does Peter state emphatically that “God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses” (2:32)?
3. What do you think of the members of the early Church sharing their possessions with others, “according to each one’s need” (2:45)? Would you be willing to do that?

2 Witness to Christ

Introduction

Saint Ignatius was Bishop of Antioch in Syria. He lived during the time of the Roman emperor Trajan (98–107 BC) and was martyred in the Flavian Amphitheatre (the Coliseum) in Rome around 107 BC. This chapter's reading (from the *Epistle of Saint Ignatius to the Romans*) is taken from his letter to the Christians of Rome, which he wrote while under military escort from Smyrna, in Turkey, to Rome for his trial. At the time, Christianity had been outlawed, and Christians were required to worship the emperor as a god, which Ignatius and many others refused to do. He is explicit in this letter about what will become of him in Rome but knows that "Jesus Christ will give me my liberty, and in Him I shall rise again as a free man." To understand the circumstances in which this letter was written, it is necessary to understand martyrdom.

Martyrdom was a harsh but commonplace reality in the life of the early Church. We have numerous accounts of Christians who were put to death because of their faith, such as Saints Stephen, Peter, Paul, Ignatius, Polycarp, Perpetua, and Felicity. Roman authorities viewed Christians as a threat to the social and political stability of the empire, and thus they were executed in dramatic fashion. The Roman historian Tacitus even refers to Christianity as "a deadly superstition," both "sleaze-ridden and shameful." Part of the revulsion Romans may have felt toward Christianity was the belief that Christians ate flesh and were cannibalistic, which is a misconception that Ignatius turns to great rhetorical advantage in referring to his own body in Eucharistic images (e.g., "I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ").

Martyrdom is also characteristic of the Church in modern times in places like South and Central America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, where many—from ordinary Christians to catechists and bishops—have been killed and many continue to die for their faith. It seems, then, that giving witness to the faith is not an “extra” or an adornment but rather part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian.

In his *Epistle to the Romans*, Ignatius identifies his experience of imprisonment and impending death with the Crucifixion of Christ. Ignatius sees the suffering to come as his way to full life in Jesus Christ, and so begs his friends in Rome not to intercede for his release. His writing is replete with Eucharistic images, as he compares himself to the Eucharistic bread that is broken so that the life of Christ may abound. Ignatius cautions Christians not to be hypocrites, claiming one thing but acting in an entirely different manner. He was, perhaps, ahead of his time in exhorting his readers to get real: “Do not have Jesus Christ on your lips, and the world in your heart.” In a significant way, this letter is “the last will and testament” of a martyr and a saint and gives an important witness to the faith of the early Church.

Excerpt from *The Epistle to the Romans*

By Saint Ignatius of Antioch

4. For my part, I am writing to all the churches and assuring them that I am truly in earnest about dying for God—if only you yourselves put no obstacles in the way. I must implore you to do me no such untimely kindness; pray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions’ teeth to be made purest bread¹ for Christ. Better still, incite the creatures to become a sepulchre for me; let them not leave the smallest scrap of my flesh, so that I need not be a burden to anyone after I fall asleep. When there is no trace of my body left for the world to see, then I shall truly be Jesus Christ’s disciple. So intercede with Him for me, that by their instru-

mentality I may be made a sacrifice to God. However, I am not issuing orders to you, as though I were a Peter or a Paul.² They were Apostles, and I am a condemned criminal. They were free men, and I am still a slave³ (though if I suffer, Jesus Christ will give me my liberty, and in Him I shall rise again as a free man). For the present, these chains are schooling me to have done with earthly desires.

5. All the same, I have already been finding myself in conflict with beasts of prey by land and by sea,⁴ by night and by day, the whole way from Syria to Rome; chained as I am to a half-a-score of savage leopards⁵ (in other words, a detachment of soldiers), who only grow more insolent the more gratuities they are given. Still, their ill-usage does at least enable me to make some progress in discipleship; though that is not to say that my sins are yet wholly absolved. How I look forward to the real lions that have been got ready for me! All I pray is that I may find them swift. I am going to make overtures to them, so that, unlike some other wretches whom they have been too spiritless to touch, they may devour me with all speed. And if they are still reluctant, I shall use force to them. You must forgive me, but I do know what is best for myself. This is the first stage of my discipleship; and no power, visible or invisible, must grudge me my coming to Jesus Christ. Fire, cross, beast-fighting, hacking and quartering, splintering of bone and mangling of limb, even the pulverizing of my entire body—let every horrid and diabolical torment come upon me, provided only that I can win my way to Jesus Christ!

Persecutions

Because Christianity was not afforded the benefits of protected religions in the Roman Empire (as Judaism was, for example), Christians were singled out for persecution simply because of their faith. The first major persecution occurred during Nero's reign (AD 64), with another during the reign of Domitian (AD 95), and continuing through Decius (AD 250) and Galerius in the east (AD 311). Emperor Constantine, a convert to Christianity, later granted toleration to Christianity, which became the state religion through the Edict of Thessalonica (AD 380).

6. All the ends of the earth, all the kingdoms of the world would be of no profit to me; so far as I am concerned, to die in Jesus Christ is better than to be monarch of earth's widest bounds. He who died for us is all that I seek; He who rose again for us is my whole desire. The pangs of birth are upon me; have patience with me, my brothers, and do not shut me out from life, do not wish me to be stillborn. Here is one who only longs to be God's; do not make a present of him to the world again, or delude him with the things of earth. Suffer me to attain to light, light pure and undefiled; for only when I am come thither shall I be truly a man. Leave me to imitate the Passion of my God. If any of you has God within himself, let that man understand my longings, and feel for me, because he will know the forces by which I am constrained.

7. It is the hope of this world's prince to get hold of me and undermine my resolve, set as it is upon God. Pray let none of you lend him any assistance, but take my part instead, for it is the part of God. Do not have Jesus Christ on your lips, and the world in your heart; do not cherish thoughts of grudging me my fate. Even if I were to come and implore you in person, do not yield to my pleading; keep your compliance for this written entreaty instead. Here and now, as I write in the fullness of life, I am yearning for death with all the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father.' There is no pleasure for me in any meats that perish, or in the delights of this life; I am **fain** for the bread of God, even the flesh of Jesus Christ, who is the seed of David; and for my drink I crave that Blood of His which is love imperishable.

8. I want no more of what men call life. And my want can come true, if it is your desire. Pray, then, let it be your desire; so that in your turn you also may be desired.⁶ Not to write at more length, I appeal to you to believe me. Jesus Christ will make it clear to you that I am speaking the truth; he is a faithful mouthpiece, by which the Father's words of truth find utterance. Intercede for me, then, that I may have my wish; for I am

not writing now as a mere man, but I am voicing the

fain Archaic, meaning "desirous of."

mind of God. My suffering will be a proof of your goodwill; my rejection, a proof of your disfavour.

9. Remember the church of Syria in your prayers; it has God for its pastor now, in place of myself, and Jesus Christ alone will have the oversight of it—He, and your own love. As for me, I feel shame to be styled one of its members; I have no right at all to the name, for I was the very last of them all, an embryo born untimely⁷ (though if I ever manage to reach the presence of God, by His mercy I shall be somebody then).

“ *In me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, ‘Come to the Father.’* ”

I greet you in spirit; and the churches who have been my hosts in the name of Jesus Christ also send you their love. (It was no common wayfarer’s welcome I have had from them, for even churches that were not naturally on my route at all came and escorted me from one city to the next.)

10. This letter comes to you from Smyrna, by the hands of our praiseworthy men of Ephesus. Crocus, specially dear to me, is here too, and a number of others besides. I believe you have already been told of certain persons who went on ahead of me from Syria to Rome, for the glory of God. Tell them that I am not far away now. One and all, they have deserved well of God and of you; and it is only right for you to do what you can to set their minds at rest.

As I write this, it is the twenty-fourth of August. Farewell now until the end, and wait with patience for Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

1. Only bread of the finest quality, as a symbol of purity, was used in sacrificial offerings.
2. Both of whom had been at Rome, and spoken with apostolic authority to the Roman church.
3. This has led some commentators to think that Ignatius had been, or perhaps still was, an actual slave. It may only refer, however, to his present helpless condition.
4. If this is meant literally, we must assume that the first stage of his journey had been made by ship from Seleucia (the port of Antioch) to Attalia, in Pamphylia. From there the party could make their way overland to Laodicea.
5. This is the earliest known occurrence of the word in literature. Since leopards were well known in Syria (whence they were sometimes brought for exhibition at Rome) the comparison would come naturally to Ignatius.
6. i.e., by God.
7. St Paul, too, describes himself in the same way (1 Cor. xv, 8). Here, as there, the image suggests both a sudden conversion to Christianity, and a slow and feeble growth.

For Reflection

1. What does Ignatius mean when he says: “You must forgive me, but I do know what is best for myself. This is the first stage of my discipleship; and no power, visible or invisible, must grudge me my coming to Jesus Christ”?
2. Scholars believe that Ignatius is writing to the Church of Rome so that it will not intercede on his behalf and, possibly, have his life spared. Why do you think Ignatius would ask this of his Christian friends?
3. What can we learn about the Eucharist from Ignatius’s many references to and love for the Body and Blood of Christ?

3 The Church Expands

Introduction

Augustine, saint and Doctor of the Church, was born in the ancient city of Thagaste in North Africa (modern Algeria) in AD 354. The chronicle of his conversion to Christianity in his *Confessions* has been a staple of Christian spirituality and moral formation for centuries. In it Augustine tells of his dissolute life and sexual promiscuity as a young man, his conversion experience in Milan, Italy, in July 386, and his baptism by Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, the following Easter.

Following his conversion and baptism, Augustine returned to North Africa and devoted himself to a life of prayer, fasting, and study. He later became a priest and then Bishop of Hippo in 395. His writings have become classics in the Christian canon, particularly such works as *On the Trinity* (*De Trinitate*) and *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*).

In *The City of God*, from which you will read an excerpt in this chapter, Augustine sets out for the reader two ways of being human: an earthly way filled with selfishness, jealousy, corruption, and sin, and a heavenly way characterized by trust in God and selfless love of both God and neighbor. Writing in a time when the Roman Empire was facing an onslaught of invasions and was

Doctor of the Church

The Church gives this title to men and women who have contributed to the Church's learning and spirituality through their scholarship and saintliness. Four of the early Church Fathers have been named Doctors of the Church: Pope Saint Gregory the Great, Saint Ambrose (Bishop of Milan), Saint Augustine of Hippo, and Saint Jerome, who translated the Bible from its original languages into Latin.

The City of God

Saint Augustine wrote *The City of God* in AD 413 to 427. It is considered to be his masterpiece. In this book Augustine lays out a plan for the Church to be a beacon of hope for the world and instructs individual Christians to be “in the world but not of it,” that is, doing good in society but not influenced by society’s harmful choices (see John 17:15–16, in which Jesus prays that his followers in the world be kept from evil).

becoming increasingly weakened, Augustine was defending the Christian faith from those who accused it of causing the breakdown and weakening of the empire. He was also describing the distinctly Christian lifestyle—one which he himself followed—of charity, prudence, and moral courage in the face not only of the invasions but of persecutions and challenges to orthodox Christian teaching. Augustine viewed the world as corrupt but the City of God as a place where justice reigned and

the love of God pervaded all hearts so that suffering was no more and the city was filled with the natural light of Christ. He recognized, however, not only that the two cities were distinct but also that the City of God would be realized only in the next life.

In this selection from *The City of God*, Augustine describes the Church’s expansion beyond Judea and Samaria, highlighting the role of persecution. He exhorts his readers to stand firm until the end, for they will be justified in their faith and resurrected by Christ. Quoting Saint Paul, he reminds us that “all those who want to live piously in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” Augustine died in AD 430, as Hippo was facing the threat of a **Vandal** invasion. Augustine’s writings assured the Christians of his time, and

Vandals A Germanic tribe that sacked Rome in 455. *Vandalism* has come to mean senseless destruction.

ours, that the Church would endure, even through times of persecution and civil destruction.

Excerpt from *The City of God*

By Saint Augustine of Hippo

CHAPTER 50

The Church expanded from Jerusalem out, in accordance with the well-known prophecy: ‘The Lord’s commands shall go out from Sion, his word from Jerusalem,’ (Isa. 2.3) and with what our Lord said to His disciples who were marveling over His Resurrection from the dead: ‘He opened their minds that they might understand the Scriptures, and said to them: Thus is it written; and thus the Christ should suffer, and should rise again from the dead on the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’ (Luke 24.45–47) This prediction was repeated when He answered their question about His second coming by saying: ‘It is not for you to know the times or dates which the Father has fixed by his own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the very ends of the earth.’ (Acts 1.7,8)

It was only after many in Judea and Samaria had believed that the disciples went out to other peoples to preach the Gospel, like lamps which the Lord had equipped with the wick of His word and lit with the light of the Holy Spirit. For He had told them: ‘Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.’ But they were so hotly fired with love that they did not feel this chilling fear. In this spirit the Gospel was preached throughout the whole world—to the accompaniment of horrendous persecutions, manifold torturings, and death of martyrs—by men who had seen and heard Christ before His passion and after His resurrection and by those who carried on where they left off. Meanwhile, God gave them solemn attestation by signs and wonders and various **prodigies**; and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, too.

As a result, the Gentiles believed in Him who had died for their redemption

prodigies Unusual, extraordinary, or inexplicable accomplishments, deeds, or events.

and began, with Christian tenderness, to venerate the martyrs' blood—the very blood they had spilled in diabolical fury. Even the kings whose laws had depopulated the Church came to bow down before that saving Name, which their earlier savagery had tried to abolish from the earth, and even undertook to drive out the false gods for whose sake they had persecuted the worshipers of the true God.

CHAPTER 51

When the Devil saw the human race abandoning the temples of demons and marching happily forward in the name of the freedom-giving Mediator, he inspired heretics to oppose Christian teaching under cover of the Christian name as though their presence in the City of God could go unchallenged like the presence, in the city of confusion, of philosophers with wholly different and even contradictory opinions!

Heretics are those who entertain in Christ's Church unsound and distorted ideas and stubbornly refuse, even when warned, to return to what is sound and right, to correct their contagious and death-dealing doctrines, but go on defending them. When they leave the Church they are ranked as enemies who try her patience. Even so, their evil-doing profits the loyal Catholic members of Christ's Body, for God makes good use of bad men, 'while for those who love God all things work together unto good.' (Rom. 8.28) Actually, all foes of the Church, whether blinded by error or moved by malice, subserve her in some fashion. If they have power to do her physical harm, they develop her power to suffer; if they oppose her intellectually, they bring out her Wisdom; since she must love even her enemies her loving kindness is made manifest; and whether she has to deal with them in the persuasiveness of argument or the chastisement of law, they bring into play her power to do good.

So it is that the diabolical prince of the ungodly city is not allowed to harm the pilgrim City of God, even when he stirs up his tools and

dupes against her. Beyond all doubt, **Divine Providence** sees to it that she has both some solace of prosperity that she may not be broken

Divine Providence The guidance, material goods, and care provided by God that is sufficient to meet our needs.

by adversity and some testing of adversity that she may not be weakened by prosperity. Thus, the one balances the other, as one can see from the words of the psalm, ‘According to the multitude of sorrows in my heart, so thy consolations have gladdened my soul,’ (Ps. 93.19) and those of St. Paul: ‘Rejoicing in hope, being patient in tribulation.’ (Rom. 12.12)

St. Paul also says: ‘All who want to live piously in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.’ (2 Tim. 3.12) Persecution, therefore, will never be lacking. For, when our enemies from without leave off raging and there ensues a span of tranquility—even of genuine tranquility and great consolation at least to the weak—we are not without enemies within, the many whose scandalous lives wound the hearts of the devout. These people bring discredit upon the Christian and Catholic name—a name so dear to ‘all who want to live piously in Christ Jesus’—that they grieve bitterly to see their own brethren love it less than pious people should. There is that other heartache of seeing heretics, too, using the name and sacraments, the Scriptures and the Creed of genuine Christians. They realize how many would-be converts are driven into perplexed hesitancy because of heretical dissension, while the foul-mouthed find in heretics further pretext for cursing the Christian name, since these heretics at least call themselves Christian.

So it is that those who want to live piously in Christ must suffer the spiritual persecution of these and other aberrations in thought and morals, even when they are free from physical violence and vexation. This explains the verse: ‘According to the multitude of sorrows in my heart’—there is no mention of the body. On the other hand, they recall the unchangeable, divine promise that no one of them can be lost. As St. Paul says: ‘The Lord knows who are his,’ (2 Tim. 2.19) and ‘For those whom he has foreknown he has also predestined to become conformed to the image of his son.’ (Rom. 8.29) And the psalm just cited goes on: ‘Thy consolations have gladdened my soul.’

Yet, even the mental suffering which the devout undergo because of the lives of bad or pretended Christians is a source of spiritual profit because it flows from their charity, in virtue of which they would not have sinners be lost or go on blocking the salvation of others. Besides, the

“ So it falls out that in this world, . . . the Church walks onward like a wayfarer stricken by the world’s hostility, but comforted by the mercy of God. ”

devout experience immense consolation when conversions flood the souls with a joy as great as the previous anguish on their account was excruciating.

So it falls out that in this world, in evil days like these, the Church walks onward like a wayfarer stricken by the world’s hostility, but comforted by the mercy of God. Nor does this state of affairs date only from the days of Christ’s and His Apostles’ presence on earth. It was never any different from the days when the first just man, Abel, was slain by his ungodly brother. So it shall be until this world is no more.

For Reflection

1. Dividing human existence into two realms is a form of dualism, which is “either / or” thinking. Do you agree with Augustine’s dualistic logic and his assessment of earthly life as sinful and corrupt? Explain.
2. Augustine mentions “Divine Providence,” or God acting in the lives of individual believers, as well as in the entire Church. Do you believe that all things happen according to providence, that is, for a reason? Explain your answer.
3. Augustine explains that, in the life of the Church, adversity is balanced with prosperity. How do you see the Church experiencing both adversity and prosperity today?

4 The Body of the Church

Introduction

Mystery is a word that you will find throughout this book, because it is used by many of the writers whose works are included here to describe not only their personal journeys of faith but also the nature and purpose of the Church. You will even encounter the term used as an image of the Church. If it seems like an odd word to describe the Church, then we must find out what these authors mean by it and how their understanding differs from the common one.

In common usage today, *mystery* refers to a problem or dilemma that can be solved by applying the right kind of information. To us, a mystery is like a jigsaw puzzle that requires us to figure out how to put the pieces together and, after a while, the picture becomes clearer and it is just a matter of time before the puzzle is solved.

Yet *mystery* as a way to describe the Church is different. Saint Peter Damian, the writer of this chapter's excerpt, certainly understood it differently. For him, an eleventh-century bishop of Ostia, in Italy, the Church was a living body composed of many members: arms, ears, tongue, mouth, nostrils, feet, and so on, each with a specific purpose. This was not a new idea, for Saint Paul had described the Church as a body made up of different members, each fulfilling a certain function, like teacher or prophet, and bestowing certain gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12:4–31 in "The Church as Body" in part 2 of this book). To this basic understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, Peter Damian added a subtle distinction.

As we will discover in the following reading, Peter Damian explained that the mystery of the Church as body is not so much that

it has parts but rather that the whole is represented in each part and each part constitutes the whole. This mystery of “inward unity” is brought about by the Holy Spirit, who is “both one and manifold,” just as all parts of the Church “form a single whole” yet are manifold. The mystery is that this singleness and multiplicity exist in the body of the Church *at the same time*. Thus, for Peter Damian, mystery was not a problem to be solved but the opposite: a paradox of life in which things do not make sense in the usual way but are filled with God’s grace so that the closer we get to them, the less we really know and the more we need to rely on God.

According to Peter Damian, the paradox of the mystery of the Church is this: the Church is both one in many and many in one. The Church is made up of many Christians, and each single Christian embodies the entire Church.

Excerpt from *The Book of the Lord Be with You*

By Saint Peter Damian

CHAPTER FIVE

Indeed, the Church of Christ is united in all her parts by such a bond of love that her several members form a single body and in each one the whole Church is mystically present; so that the whole Church universal may rightly be called the one bride of Christ, and on the other hand every single soul can, because of the mystical effect of the sacrament, be regarded as the whole Church. Certainly Isaac with his prophetic nostrils could detect the presence of the whole Church when he said concerning one of his sons: ‘See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field.’ (Gen. xxvii, 27) And that widow who was in debt and who at Elisha’s command scattered her too small quantity of oil like seed and soon reaped a rich harvest when it overflowed her vessels was undoubtedly a symbol of the Church.

If we look carefully through the fields of the Holy Scriptures we will find that one man or one woman often represents the Church. For though because of the multitude of her peoples the Church seems to be of many

parts, yet she is nevertheless one and simple in the mystical unity of one faith and one divine baptism. And although the seven women had a single husband, (Isa. iv, 1) a single virgin was said to be espoused to the heavenly bridegroom. Of her the apostle says: 'I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.' (2 Cor. xi, 2)

Now it can be clearly deduced from all this, as I said before that since the whole Church is represented in the person of one man, and because of this is called a single virgin, holy Church is one in all her members, and complete in each of them; her many members form a single whole in the unity of faith, and her many parts are united in each member by the bond of charity and the various gifts of grace, since all of these proceed from one source.

CHAPTER SIX

For indeed, although holy Church is divided in the multiplicity of her members, yet she is fused into unity by the fire of the Holy Spirit; and so even if she seems, as far as her situation in the world is concerned, to be scattered, yet the mystery of her inward unity can never be marred in its integrity. 'The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.' (Rom. v, 5) This Spirit is indeed without doubt both one and manifold; one in the essence of His greatness, and manifold in the diverse gifts of His grace, and He gives to holy Church, which He fills, this power: that all her parts shall form a single whole, and that each part shall contain the whole. This mystery of undivided unity was asked for by Truth Himself when He said to His Father concerning His disciples: 'I do not pray for these alone, but for them also who shall believe in Me

Scriptural Allusions

Theologians such as Peter Damian write for an audience that knows Scripture well, and thus they use Scripture to illustrate their points. In this excerpt, "the Apostle" refers to Saint Paul and his letters to the early Church. "Isaac and Jacob" refers to Isaac's blessing of his son, Jacob, in Genesis 27:27–29. The reference to Elisha and the widow refers to 2 Kings 4:1–7, in which the miracle of Elisha the prophet saves a woman's children from slavery.

through their word; that they may all be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me. And the glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one.’ (John xvii, 20–22)

If, therefore, those who believe in Christ are one, then wherever we find a member according to outward appearances, there, by the mystery of the sacrament, the whole body is present. And so whatever belongs to the whole applies in some measure to the part; so that there is no absurdity in one man saying by himself anything which the body of the Church as a whole may utter, and in the same way many may fittingly give voice to that which is properly said by one person. Hence, when we are all assembled together we can rightly say: ‘Bow down thine ear O Lord and

“ *And so it is clear that any action of an individual member is the work of the whole body; and conversely each of the parts participates in the action of the body as a whole.* ”

hear me: for I am poor and needy. Preserve my soul, for I am holy.’ (Ps. lxxxvi, 1–2) And when we are by ourselves, there is no incongruity in our singing: ‘Sing aloud unto God

our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob.’ (Ps. lxxxi, 1) And it is not irrelevant that many of us say together: ‘I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth’; (Ps. xxxiv, 1) or that often when we are alone we sing with many tongues: ‘O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together’ (Ps. xxxiv, 1) and other things of this kind. For on the One hand the solitariness of a single person does no harm to the words of many; and on the other the vast number of the faithful does not prejudice their unity since by the power of the Holy Spirit who is in each of us and fills the whole our solitude is manifold and our multiplicity singular.

CHAPTER NINE

Moreover the eyes, tongue, feet and hands each have their own particular function in the human body; yet the hands do not touch, the feet do not walk, the tongue does not speak nor the eyes see of themselves and for their own sake; the special function of each part of the body can be

attributed to the whole. And those functions which belong to a particular member by virtue of its nature can be said to be performed by the body which is the whole, so that the whole may properly be said to manifest the activity of its parts and the part that of the whole. That is why St. Paul's tongue could truthfully say: 'I suffer trouble in Christ's gospel even unto bonds,' (2 Tim. ii, 9) although his tongue was not itself in chains; and he goes on to say: 'The word of God is not bound.' Peter and John ran to Christ's sepulchre, although it was only their feet which performed the act of running; Stephen saw the heavens opened, although seeing is the special function of the eyes. Isaac touched and felt his son Jacob, yet the power of touching and feeling belongs particularly to the hands. And so it is clear that any action of an individual member is the work of the whole body; and conversely each of the parts participates in the action of the body as a whole.

For Reflection

1. Define *mystery* both in everyday terms and as Peter Damian understands it.
2. What does it mean that the Church is both one and many at the same time? What significance does this hold for you?
3. How do you participate in the whole Church? How is the entire Church shown in you?

5 Christ's Presence in the Church

Introduction

It has often been said that you can learn more about yourself from acquaintances than from immediate family members, who are either too close to you or too reluctant to tell the truth. Such may be the case with Simone Weil, a French Jew born to an agnostic family in 1909. Weil studied the classics of Greek and Roman literature and was reared in a liberal humanistic environment. Yet despite the influence of Marxism and Greek philosophers, she seems to have been graced with an innate love of God and a religious sensibility that drew her to Roman Catholicism. From this double perspective of secular, even atheistic, studies and her own religious intuition, she was able to appreciate the beauty and **sacramentality** of the Church, as reflected in many of her letters and essays. Her education and background also gave her the ability to offer constructive criticism of the Church when she found it too closed within itself or failing in its mission to preach the Good News.

There is an endearing but fundamental characteristic of Weil's personal spirituality—that of “waiting upon truth”—that may provide a partial answer to the question that many have asked since her death in 1943: Given her fervent love of Christ, the Sacraments, and the teachings of the Church, why was she never baptized a Christian? Undoubtedly, this characteristic of her spirituality was also part of her personality. For example, “waiting upon truth”

can be explained by quoting from one of her essays on education: “In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting

sacramentality God's grace permeating the Church's life in all of its actions, not just the Seven Sacraments.

upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it. There is a way of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself. . . ." In fact, what Weil tried to do was to "wait upon truth" from God, discerning God's call so that she could be certain that accepting Baptism was the right thing for her to do. That she was never certain is a testament to the seriousness with which she took the Sacrament. She also thought that being on the outside allowed her to see what was most "catholic," or universal, about the Church and its practices. By not being too close, she believed she could see what others may have overlooked.

The selection in this chapter is from an essay entitled "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," in which Weil reflects on Christ's presence in the Church and in the Eucharist. It is remarkable for its theological insight and its view of Christ's presence from a wider, sociological perspective. Its core value lies in its expression of deep faith in the Church and in the Eucharist, which the writer fully affirms in the faith-offering of her writing.

Note: In this and other essays in this book, the words *man* and *men* are used in a universal sense, meaning both men and women.

Excerpt from *Waiting for God*

By Simone Weil

The virtue of religious practices is due to a contact with what is perfectly pure, resulting in the destruction of evil. Nothing here below is perfectly pure except the total beauty of the universe, and that we are unable to feel directly until we are very far advanced in the way of perfection. Moreover, this total beauty cannot be contained in anything tangible, though it is itself tangible in a certain sense.

Religious things are special tangible things, existing here below and yet perfectly pure. This is not on account of their own particular character.

Convention

A convention is an agreement about basic principles. For example, a literary convention is long-established technique, practice, or device upon which everyone agrees. (Beginning letters with *Dear* is a literary convention.) In Weil's description of the Eucharist as a "convention . . . ratified by God," she is stating that the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of Christ, not because bread is naturally associated with God but because of God's agreement with us to come to us in this mediated way, through sacramental symbols.

The church may be ugly, the singing out of tune, the priest corrupt, and the faithful inattentive. In a sense that is of no importance. It is as with a geometrician who draws a figure to illustrate a proof. If the lines are not straight and the circles are not round it is of no importance. Religious things are pure by right, theoretically, hypothetically, by convention. Therefore their purity is unconditioned. No stain can sully it. That is why it is perfect. It is not, however, perfect in the same way as **Roland's mare**, which, while it had all possible virtues, had also the drawback of not existing. Human conventions are useless if they are not connected with

motives that impel people to observe them. In themselves they are simple abstractions; they are unreal and have no effect. But the convention by which religious things are pure is ratified by God himself. Thus it is an effective convention, a convention containing virtue and operating of itself. This purity is unconditioned and perfect, and at the same time real.

There we have a truth that is a fact and in consequence cannot be demonstrated by argument. It can only be verified experimentally.

It is a fact that the purity of religious things is almost everywhere to be seen in the form of beauty, when faith and love do not fail. Thus the words of the liturgy are marvelously beautiful; and the words of the prayer issued for us from the very lips of Christ is perfect above all. In the same way Romanesque architecture and Gregorian plain chant are marvelously beautiful.

At the very center, however, there is something utterly stripped of beauty, where there is no outward evidence of purity, something depending wholly on convention. It cannot be otherwise. Architecture, singing,

language, even if the words are chosen by Christ himself, all those things are in a sense distinct from absolute purity. Absolute purity, present here below to our earthly senses, as a particular thing, such can only be a convention, which is a convention and nothing else. This convention, placed at the central point, is the Eucharist.

“ *There is nothing in a morsel of bread that can be associated with our thought of God. Thus the conventional character of the divine presence is evident. Christ can be present in such an object only by convention. For this very reason he can be perfectly present in it.* ”

The virtue of the dogma of the **real presence** lies in its very absurdity. Except for the infinitely touching symbolism of food, there is nothing in a morsel of bread that can be associated with our thought of God. Thus the conventional character of the divine presence is evident. Christ can be present in such an object only by convention. For this very reason he can be perfectly present in it. God can only be present in secret here below. His presence in the Eucharist is truly secret since no part of our thought can reach the secret. Thus it is total.

No one dreams of being surprised that reasoning worked out from nonexistent perfect lines and perfect circles should be effectively applied to engineering. Yet that is incomprehensible. The reality of the divine presence in the Eucharist is more marvelous but not more incomprehensible.

One might in a sense say by analogy that Christ is present in the consecrated host by hypothesis, in the same way that a geometrician says by hypothesis that there are two equal angles in a certain triangle.

It is because it has to do with a convention that only the form of the consecration matters, not the spiritual state of him who consecrates.

Roland's mare A legendary horse that appears in the *Chanson de Roland*, a late eleventh- to early twelfth-century French epic poem about Roland, a military commander under Charlemagne (reigned AD 768–814).

Real Presence The true presence of Christ in the Eucharist under the species or appearances of bread and wine.

If it were something other than a convention, it would be at least partially human and not totally divine. A real convention is a supernatural harmony, taking the word harmony in the Pythagorean sense.

Only a convention can be the perfection of purity here below, for all nonconventional purity is more or less imperfect. That a convention should be real, that is a miracle of divine mercy.

For Reflection

1. Have you ever had a less than perfect experience of liturgy but encountered the Risen Christ anyway? Describe your experience.
2. In referring to Christ's presence in the Eucharist, Weil states, "That a convention should be real, that is a miracle of divine mercy." What does she mean by this?
3. Name one time when you "waited upon truth." What was it like?

6 “More Closely Bound”

Introduction

The Sacrament of Confirmation confers “special strength” from the Holy Spirit and makes a baptized Catholic “more closely bound to the Church.”¹ This means that a confirmed Catholic becomes a full member of the Body of Christ and can enjoy the privileges of the Catholic faith: the opportunity to participate in various ministries and to exercise leadership in the parish community. Confirmation also carries responsibilities that last a lifetime. These, listed below, are extremely important for the Church as a whole and for each individual’s walk with Christ. What are they? Those celebrating the Sacrament “are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ.”²

Spreading the faith is about evangelization. This means knowing the Catholic faith, knowing Christ, and sharing that knowledge with others. It’s not proselytizing, because in evangelization we respect others’ beliefs and opinions, but it is telling the faith story of the dying-death-Resurrection of Christ and what that means at school, at work, and among friends and family. Evangelization is the lived reality of having faith, including struggles, doubts, and unanswered questions. Defending the faith is the same thing. It’s about explaining to others a way of life that makes the most sense, a way of life based on love, respect, and justice. This is often a countercultural message, so all Christians must be prepared for the disapproval that may come from others, even loved ones. Perhaps the most important point of the message of Confirmation is that evangelization is done by word and deed: not merely talking about faith but also living it. In *Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975)*, Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) said

that people today are more willing to listen to the Word of God if it is lived rather than preached. Because this Pope shepherded the Church during years of the modern Church after Vatican Council II (1962–1965), he was responsible for implementing the decrees of that Council, many of which included the renewal of sacramental theology and of the rites of the Sacraments. In this introduction to the Rite of the Sacrament of Confirmation, Paul VI draws on the history of the celebration of this Sacrament, and describes the way in which it should be celebrated by the Church.

In his introduction, Paul VI outlines two theologies of Confirmation (initiation and maturation). He begins with a beautiful quote from Tertullian, a third-century theologian, recalls the scriptural roots of the Sacrament, outlines its history in the understanding and teaching of the Church, and then describes the actual rite in which the person is anointed with holy Chrism, or blessed oil. In the act of anointing with Chrism, the individual receives the Holy Spirit and is empowered to witness to Christ “by word and by deed.” Anointing was used in the Old Testament to confer special status on kings and priests and to describe the deliverance of Israel from its oppressors in the person of a Messiah, or Anointed One, which is also the meaning of the Greek word *Christos*, or Christ. Throughout the Gospels Jesus is referred to as the Anointed One.

Note the special attention given to the words and actions of the Rite of Confirmation, printed in capital letters at the end of this excerpt. In every Sacrament both the words and the actions are essential to its celebration. Through the words and actions of the bishop (or a priest with special permission), Confirmation continues the saving work of God in the name of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit begun at Pentecost.

Excerpt from “Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation”

By Pope Paul VI

PAUL, BISHOP

Servant of the Servants of God For an Everlasting Memorial

The sharing in the divine nature received through the grace of Christ bears a certain likeness to the origin, development, and nourishing of natural life. The faithful are born anew by baptism, strengthened by the sacrament of confirmation, and finally are sustained by the food of eternal life in the eucharist. By means of these sacraments of Christian initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity. It has rightly been written: “The body is washed, that the soul may be cleansed; the body is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated; the body is signed, that the soul too may be fortified; the body is overshadowed by the laying on of hands, that the soul may be enlightened by the Spirit; the body is fed on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul may be richly nourished by God.”¹ . . .

The New Testament shows how the Holy Spirit was with Christ to bring the Messiah’s mission to fulfillment. On receiving the baptism of John, Jesus saw the Spirit descending on him (see Mk 1:10) and remaining with him (see Jn 1:32). He was led by the Spirit to undertake his public ministry as the Messiah, relying on the Spirit’s presence and assistance. Teaching the people of Nazareth, he showed by what he said that the words of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” referred to himself (see Lk 4:17–21).

He later promised his disciples that the Holy Spirit would help them also to bear fearless witness to their faith even before persecutors (see Lk 12:12). The day before he suffered, he assured his apostles that he would send the Spirit of truth from his Father (see Jn 15:26) to stay with them “for ever” (Jn 14:16) and help them to be his witnesses (see Jn 15:26). Finally, after his resurrection, Christ promised the coming descent of the Holy Spirit: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; then you are to be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8; see Lk 24:49).