

# THE EARLY CHURCH

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## **THE EARLY CHURCH**

**And so I say to you, you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against you. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosen in heaven.**

**Matt. 16:18-19 (NABRE)**

**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.**

**Matt. 19:20**

**But there stood in the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Gamaliel .... said to them .... “take care what you are about to do . . . . for if this endeavor or activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God.**

**Acts 5:34-40**

## INTRODUCTION

“In Christian usage, the word ‘church’ designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. “The Church” is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the Word and Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body.”<sup>1</sup>

The visible Church is a public institution with a hierarchical government, laws and customs. She is visible in the worldwide membership of believers who gather in community to worship, to give witness to Christ and to serve the world in love, justice and mercy. Church is also a spiritual reality with interior bonds of faith and love, forged by the Holy Spirit. The Church, as visible and spiritual, is traditionally described as the Mystical Body of Christ. It is a living body, founded by Christ, given birth by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, sustained through the powers of the Holy Spirit, preserver of the Deposit of faith, with a teaching authority given it by Christ Himself, and possessor of the sanctifying mysteries for salvation.

## PREPARATION OF THE WORLD FOR CHRISTIANITY

1. St Paul writes, “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption.*”<sup>2</sup> The fullness of time presumes a period of development during which mankind was being prepared for the coming of the Redeemer. God promised a Redeemer immediately after the fall of our first parents, but His coming was delayed for thousands of years. During that period, man learned by experience the evil and misery of sin, and of the necessity of a Divine Liberator.
2. During this long period, God chose patriarchs<sup>3</sup> from whom He would appoint a Chosen People, chose prophets to teach and to admonish their errors, led them into the land He had promised, established a nation with moral and governing laws - - all in readiness for the coming of the Promised Redeemer, Jesus Christ.
3. But, when the Christ appeared, the Jews had ceased to be an independent nation. They had lost their kings and many of their people had been scattered after the Babylonian Captivity;<sup>4</sup> they were now part of the vast empire of Rome and were called the Jews of the Diaspora. The existence of such a world-empire as that of Rome, and the fact that the Jewish nation was incorporated with it, was of the greatest significance for the spread of the Gospel and the development of the Church.
4. The Romans had succeeded in bringing under their sway all the lands that bordered the Mediterranean Sea; the Atlantic Ocean to the west, south as the Sahara Desert and Ethiopian Mountains, east into Asia Minor, and north as part of present-day

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<sup>1</sup> Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (para.752).

<sup>2</sup> Gal. 4:4-6 (NABRE)

<sup>3</sup> Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

<sup>4</sup> 608 B.C. to 538 B.C.

Germany. Most of these land and people were governed directly by Rome as provinces or as allies; taxes were levied, garrisons were stationed along the frontiers, armies and naval vessels were always in readiness to maintain the peace.

5. The Empire had broken old barriers between nations. Throughout the empire, excellent roads were built for convenient social and military access to all parts of their provinces, fleets of ships were available for travel or trade within their territories and beyond, language difficulties were overcome with the prevalence of Greek and Latin, and there were no serious obstacles for the spread of common ideas and beliefs. During this predominance of peace and order, the Pax Romana,<sup>5</sup> the empire was in readiness for the welcome of new thought.

### **THE JEWS IN THE EMPIRE**

6. Outside the limits of Palestine and among the Jewish people, the religion of the empire was predominantly paganism but there was not one common religion or philosophy for the entire Roman Empire. Pagan worship, no matter what form it took, did not make for morality; quite the contrary. It was a belief in the existence of many gods having human-like tendencies of anger, hate, jealousy, at feud feuding with one another, and whose worship in many cases consisted of nothing less than public immorality.
7. Pagan worship did not fulfill the inner needs of man; did not make for an order or rule of morality. Sin and vice, lust and cruelty are not natural to man, and therefore cannot satisfy. In recognition of this and searching for the other principles, many leaned toward the occult and the mysterious, joining any of the numerous secret cults of Baal, of Isis and those cults from Syria, Persia and Egypt. The empire was eager for new direction of thought.
8. Of all the nations of antiquity, the Jews had preserved the knowledge and worship of One True God. The Jews of the Diaspora, who had been displaced and scattered from their homeland after the Babylonian Captivity, mingled freely with their pagan neighbors, neighbors that became acquainted with the Jewish practices and sacred writings. Among other factors, this aided in paving a roadway for the spread of the New Covenant outside of Palestine.

### **FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH**

9. *“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,”*<sup>6</sup> Jesus begins His public ministry as a teacher in Israel. He announces the Glad Tidings of Salvation and confirms His preaching with signs and wonders. He chooses twelve men whom He carefully prepares as witnesses of His miracles, teachings and ultimately His Resurrection so as to become the bearers of His message to all mankind.

A year before His death, Jesus announces to the apostle Peter, *“And so I say to you, you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the*

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<sup>5</sup> A state of comparative tranquility throughout the Mediterranean world from the reign of Augustus (27 B.C. –14 A.D.) to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161 A.D. – 180 A.D.) - (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

<sup>6</sup> Lk. 3:11

*netherworld shall not prevail against it.”<sup>7</sup>*

10. The birth of the church took place on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles. Immediately the Apostles, who had been earthly minded, distrustful of themselves with a fear for their lives, were made bold and determined. *“And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to teach in different tongues as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.”<sup>8</sup>* With their experience of the Holy Spirit, they were able to convert about 3,000 persons that very day - - Jews from varied parts of the empire outside the districts of Palestine, even *“travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arab.”<sup>9</sup>*
11. As the number of believers increased, the Pharisees and priests of the temple at Jerusalem took alarm. They summoned Peter and John before the Great Council of the Sanhedrin and forbade them, under pain of severe punishment, to preach in the name of Jesus; but the apostles replied fearlessly that they were bound to obey God rather than man.<sup>10</sup> Despite imprisonment and scourging, Peter and John continued to teach and preach as before and rejoiced they had been accounted worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. But aggression and oppression continued.

## **CHURCH INVADES THE PAGAN WORLD**

12. During the persecution in Jerusalem, Saul, a Pharisaical Jew, however a Roman Citizen from Tarsus in Asia minor, accepted a commission from the High Priest in Jerusalem empowering him to seek out and arrest any followers of Jesus, and bring them back to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his objective, Jesus appeared to him, admonishing him of his determination to obstruct the spread of belief in His teachings.<sup>11</sup> By the graces of God, Saul was converted, his name changed to Paul and became the “Apostle to the Gentiles.” For the next 21 years (46 – 67 A.D., Paul and his disciples journeyed throughout Asia Minor spreading the Good News; ultimately reaching Rome where he is imprisoned and martyred.
13. Aside from the timing of the coming of the Messiah, the zeal of the Apostles and disciples, and of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the very geographical location and make-up of the Empire was a major contributor to the rapidity and ease for the spread of the message of salvation throughout the civilized world of the time.  
  
Before the death of the last apostle, St. John, circa 100 A.D., the Christian faith was firmly established in most of the provinces of the Empire. By mid-first century, less than 15 years after Christ’s Resurrection, a community of believers was already established at the very center, Rome. All roads led to Rome; any happening at any part of the empire would reach Rome immediately.
14. The rapid spread of the faith was of Divine assistance which had been promised by

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<sup>7</sup> Matt. 16:18

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:2-5

<sup>9</sup> Acts 2:11

<sup>10</sup> Acts 4:19

<sup>11</sup> Acts 9:1-6

Jesus, “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”<sup>12</sup> Conditions in the empire also played a vital role. The disciples and their converts regarded themselves appointed emissaries of God to share the gift of Faith with others, even to lay down their lives for the sake of their belief.

Christianity did not merely appeal to any one class or race of people, but to an unexpected vast variety; nor did it regard itself as one among many religions but one, true, unified revealed truth. It was a time of great social unrest for those seeking moral reformation; man was awakening to a need for better and purer modes of life. Christianity offered a feeling of unity, brotherhood and equality, comprised of one great body under the command of Christ, their Divine Supreme Lord and Leader.

## PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

15. The persecution of the Church in Jerusalem resulted in the spread of the very doctrines that it had intended to arrest. Under pressure of persecution, which now spread beyond the borders of Palestine, the disciples were scattered as far as north as Phoenicia and Syria. The missionary journeys of Paul and his disciples succeeded in bringing a large number of gentiles into the Church. Shortly, the Church ceased to be a “Jewish community” and took on its own personality; in 45 A.D. it was “*in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*”<sup>13</sup> However, where Christianity took root, there would eventually be dissention between Christians and Jews, even violence requiring police action, to the extent that Emperor Claudius (cir.50 A.D.) issued a decree banishing both sects in Rome. In fulfillment of the Gospel of Matthew, “*My cup you will indeed drink,*”<sup>14</sup> all of the Apostles except St. John were martyred.
16. About 64 A.D., some storehouses near the Circus Maximus in Rome caught fire. The flames rushed on with rapidity and engulfed the whole center of the city. A rumor spread that Emperor Nero himself was responsible for having set the blaze in order to rebuild the district to accommodate new construction for his palace. In order to divert that blame, word was spread that it was the workings of the Christians. False accusations were lodged against them as being “enemies of the human race,” of practicing magic, committing unnatural crimes of “cannibalism” and other abominable acts which were considered crimes by the Romans. The followers of Christ were further charged as enemies of the state for their refusal to bow down to the god of the empire. Those who had been seized were brought to speedy trial with false accusations and when impossible to convict, they were severely tortured to the point of death. The “Age of Persecution” had begun.
17. After the death of Nero (68 A.D.), the Christian persecutions continued until the last days of the reign of Emperor Domitian (95-96 A.D.). He was the first of the Roman Emperors to call himself officially “Dominus et Deus” (Lord and God) and it was natural that he would proceed against anyone who refused to pay him divine honors.

After a short peaceful rule of Nerva (96-98 A.D.), a new persecution broke out under Trajan (98 – 117 A.D.).

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<sup>12</sup> Matt. 19:20

<sup>13</sup> Acts 11:26

<sup>14</sup> Mt 20:23

## AGE OF MARTYRS

18. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the Truth and Christian doctrine. It means bearing witness even unto death.<sup>15</sup> The “Age of Martyrs’ is the seed of the Church, watered and nurtured by the blood of the martyrs. Persecutions of varied intensities lasted for the next 200 years until the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. To be a Christian meant a summons to martyrdom. Voluminous writings of the time by witnesses are filled with names of those so victimized.

Acceptance of the national pagan religion of the Empire was an obligation incumbent on all citizens. Failure to worship the gods of the State was equivalent to treason. This universally accepted principle was responsible for the various persecutions suffered by the Christians. However, the Jews escaped persecution; they had a national religion and a national God. It must be borne in mind that even in comparative tranquility, Christians were at all times at the mercy of every person ill disposed towards them or their religion.

19. The Christians were at once the object of hatred and contempt; they were accused of being intolerant of all other religions, refusing to offer sacrifice to or worship state gods, holding meetings in secret, they were victims of distorted reports concerning the Eucharistic rites, practicing rituals over the sick, and driving out devils among many other things. As such, they were blamed for all the ills that befell the world. “If the Tiber River comes up to the wall, if the Nile comes to the fields, if there is an earthquake, if any famine, if any pestilence, the Christians to the lions is forthwith the word.”<sup>16</sup>

The Roman government persecuted the Christians not merely to humor the populace, but primarily for reason of State; the Romans believed in the absolute authority of the State with its right to pass laws, even in matters of religion. The Christians were an organized body of men of every nation that obeyed the laws of the State as long as it did not conflict with the laws their God. Rome was the “world, the human race;” for Christianity, God was the Supreme Reality, the highest of all ideals. For Rome, there was no room in the world for two such conflicting organizations.

## FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

20. The title ‘Fathers of the Church’ or early “Church Fathers” refers to the early Christian writers who, “passed on and clarified the teaching of the apostles. Some scholars date the period of the Church Fathers from approximately the second through the eight centuries. The period begins after the original eyewitnesses were gone and runs through the seven ecumenical councils. However, there is no official approved list of Church Fathers nor is there any official period.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. First ed. New York City: Image/Doubleday, 1995. (para.2473).

<sup>16</sup> Tertullian, Roman author

<sup>17</sup> D'Ambrosio, M. (2014). *When the Church was young: Voices of the early Fathers* (pp. 1-2). Cincinnati: Franciscan Media.

## **APOSTOLIC FATHERS**

21. The title ‘Apostolic Fathers’ refers to the Christian writers of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries who are known to have had a relationship with the Apostles, or to have been influenced by them so that their writings may be considered as “echoes” of genuine Apostolic teaching. It is in these writings that the Church was able to extract some of the expressions and lessons of the very Apostles to whom Jesus taught.

The list of Fathers under this title varies. Chief in importance are the three 1<sup>st</sup> century Bishops; St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Polycarp of Smyrna. St. Clement is known to have been conversant with the Apostles Peter and Paul, and became the 3<sup>rd</sup> successor to Peter in the Papacy. St. Ignatius was the 2<sup>nd</sup> successor to Peter in the See of Antioch and during his life might have met others of the Apostolic band. An accepted tradition declares him as a disciple of Apostle John substantiated by the similarity of his ideas with the writings of St. John. St. Polycarp “was instructed by Apostles”<sup>18</sup> and had been a disciple of St. John whose contemporary he was for nearly twenty years.

22. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers are generally epistolary in form, after the fashion of the Epistles, and were written generally for the guidance of individuals, or local churches in some passing need or explanation. In the later years of the Church, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onward, the Church was endowed with theological scholastic writers who were recipients of the Tradition of these predecessors and, consequently as witnesses and representatives of the faith. A representative list of these Fathers may include Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Justin.

The Apostolic Fathers and the Patristic Fathers are identified as the “Early Fathers of the Church” from whom the Church accepts their writings as part of Tradition.

## **PERSISTENT PERSECUTION vs. FINAL VICTORY**

23. In the last decade of the 3rd century, Emperor Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into East and West, creating two Caesars. He appointed Galerius to act as his own subordinate in the East; the other, Constantius Chlorus to subdivide the government of the West with Maximian. Each of the four was placed at separate capitals. Although Constantius was friendly towards the Christian, Maximian and Galerius were eager for opportunities to exterminate them through on-going persecution.

In 305 A.D., Diocletian in the East and Maximian from the West abdicated. The sovereignty now revolved on Galerius in the East and Constantius in the West. Persecution raged in the East with greater severity than before, but by Constantius’ wishes, the Christians in the West were tolerated.

24. Persecution is abated. Upon the death of Galerius in the East and Constantius in the West, new rulers emerged; Lucinius in the East and Constantine, (the son of Constantius) in the West. In his battle against the tyrant Maxentius, Constantine experienced a vision of a cross of light in the heavens with the words, “In hoc signo vinces” (“In this sign you shall conquer.”) Thereupon he ordered the monogram of

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<sup>18</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, III, 4



Christ to be painted on the shields of his soldiers and a staff be made in a form of a cross. The battle was won; the God of the Christians had proved his superiority over the gods of the Capital.

25. The following year, 313 A.D., Constantine and his colleague Licinius, ruler of the East, met in conference at Milan, Italy, and agreed to concede to the Christians throughout the entire Empire unrestricted freedom of worship and to restore to them all the property which had been confiscated during the persecutions. This agreement became known as the “Edict of Milan.”

The edict in reality was a doctrine of religious tolerance giving complete freedom of worship both to Christians and pagans with certain specific rights to the Christians, namely, the clergy were to be exempt from taxation, the Church was permitted to receive donations and legacies, public business and servile work to be forbidden on Sundays (both for Christians and pagans alike), and crucifixions as capital punishment to be abolished.

26. The victory of Christianity over paganism was the purest ever won; for it was by witnessing and enduring, by loving and suffering, by pouring out innocent blood. It was won by weak men and women, often slaves, opposed to the mightiest of governments and all the social and intellectual pride and prejudices of the civilized world.<sup>19</sup>

27. In 320 A.D. the sole Emperor of the Empire, Constantine, moved the seat of the Empire from Rome to Byzantium, present day Istanbul, at the threshold of Asia in order to better protect the Empire from the constant threats of the Persians and to have easy access to the Danube River which flowed from the northern regions into the Black Sea. A new Empire deserved a new Capital.

Rome, then, became the center of the Church, governed by the Popes, and able to develop freely without interference of secular civil powers.

### **COUNCIL OF NICAEA**

28. Persecution was now a thing of the past. The Church had been plagued with the internal problems of heresy. Heresy, errors or beliefs in conflict with acceptable official Church teachings, existed even at the time of the Apostles as evidenced in the letters of St. Paul. The early Christians, in their attempt to better understand the particulars of the faith, and trying to put such in more simple, logical terms, using reason, erroneously speculated the mysteries of faith. These endeavors were not restricted to the general populous, but were often led by well-intended and learned Churchmen, scholars and eminent teachers. There was a need for corrective action.

29. Heresy was beginning to become so widespread that, at the urging of Pope Sylvester, Emperor Constantine called for a meeting of Bishops to a council at his imperial palace in Nicaea in the year 325 A.D. One of the main objectives was to defer the errors concerning the Trinity and the dual natures of the person of Jesus Christ. In addressing the issue, a “Creed” was formulated and agreed upon that unequivocally

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<sup>19</sup> Church History, by Rev. J. Laux

curtailed any further misunderstanding or error of doctrine. This is the very Creed that is recited at Mass to this day, the Nicene Creed.<sup>20</sup>

### **KEY PHRASES**

- ❖ “Church” means the people gathered by God into one community, guided by bishops and whose head is the Bishop of Rome, the Pope.
- ❖ The Church draws its life from the Word and Body of Christ and so becomes the Mystical Body of Christ.
- ❖ The “Age of Martyrs” was the seed of the Church, watered and nurtured by the blood of the martyrs.
- ❖ The Council of Nicaea in 325 was the originator of the Nicene Creed we recite at Mass.

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<sup>20</sup> The Niceno-Constantinopolitan or Nicene Creed stems from the first two ecumenical Councils - Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople 381.