

Journey of Faith



In Short:



- The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost marks the Church's beginning.
- Followers of Christ quickly grew beyond a Jewish sect to include Gentiles.
- Persecution of Christians was common until Constantine decreed religious tolerance.

Just as his new name indicated ("rock" in Aramaic and Greek), Peter became the foundation of Christ's Church.

The apostles were commissioned to carry the good news of Christ to the ends of the earth. They would speak in the name of Jesus. Responding to the circumstances of daily life and discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they grew to understand the path on which God was leading them.

The Day the Church Was Born

The descent of the Holy Spirit on **Pentecost** is considered the birthday of the Church. After Jesus ascended to heaven, the Twelve feared for their lives and gathered in a locked room. As Jesus had directed, the apostles and Mary, Jesus' mother, prayed and waited for the Holy Spirit.

"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."

Acts 2:2-4

The Early Church

Catholics mark the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the start of the Church. The Spirit has helped believers spread the message of Christ. The first followers of Jesus couldn't have envisioned today's Church, with more than a billion people and spanning the globe.

Did Jesus Start the Church?

It's clear from reading the New Testament that Jesus founded a Church and chose a group of twelve to follow him. He appointed Peter the leader of this Church:

"Jesus said to him, ...'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. 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 it.'"

Matthew 16:17-18

Although the apostles spoke in Aramaic, the foreign-born Jews celebrating the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem understood them. Each person heard the apostles' words as if they were spoken in his or her own tongue.

On that day, Peter preached that the Messiah, predicted of old, had come and had been crucified. Many people came forward to be baptized.

Christians or Jews?

The early followers of Christ still followed their Jewish roots even though they believed in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. They looked forward to Christ's return and eternal reign.

The crucified Messiah was bound to become a stumbling block to the Jews. While Christ's followers prayed in the Temple as good Jews, they also met privately in homes for the "breaking of bread," the sacrifice the Savior had left them. This rite was a pledge of his return. The Eucharist was the bond that would hold them together until he returned.

This bond still holds us together as one.

- How did Jesus fulfill the hopes of the Jews who accepted him as their Messiah? How might he fulfill your hopes?



When Did Christians Separate From Judaism?

Judaism might have tolerated the followers of Christ had not Stephen, in preaching about Jesus, minimized the importance of the Temple. He emphasized the worship of God in spirit and in truth, not merely in the Temple. Stephen was stoned to death by a mob. Stephen's death for his faith made him the first Christian martyr. His final words are captured in sacred Scripture:

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit....Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Acts 7:59-60

Christianity Spreads

Persecution against the followers of Christ broke out in Jerusalem (see Acts 8:1). It forced most of Jesus' followers to leave the city. By the time the Romans destroyed the Temple in AD 70, Christianity had spread well beyond Jerusalem.

In Antioch, disciples realized they were no longer Jews awaiting the Messiah. The Messiah had come! His name is Jesus Christ. Therefore, they became known as "Christians" (see Acts 11:26).

When Peter received the Roman centurion, Cornelius, into the Church, the Holy Spirit showed the followers that salvation was for all people, not merely for Jews.

The zealous Pharisee named Saul opposed this growing community and their faith. He was determined to crush them. An encounter with the risen Christ converted Saul to Christianity (Acts 9:1-9).

Saul, now called Paul, became a great Christian **missionary**, taking the good news of Christ to others. He preached first to the Jews, but when they rejected him he went to the Gentiles, that is, people who were not Jews. Paul ran into many conflicts, some from Jews who regarded him as a traitor, some from those who made their living from idol worship, but he also gained many converts.

- Who helped bring the good news of Jesus to you?



Desire for Good News

Christianity spread quickly. God used many factors to open hearts to the gift of salvation.

Public morality in the Roman Empire was very low. Divorce destroyed upper-class family life. To keep people entertained, the emperors and officials

sponsored public spectacles that appealed to blood lust or immorality. The public cult of the mythological gods, encouraged by the government to maintain order, didn't foster morality or offer hope in the face of death. Many religions of Egypt and Persia led people further away from God.

Reaction against immorality and brutality—as well as a concern for salvation after death—caused many people to welcome the good news of Christ. Rome was tolerant of different religious beliefs, which meant Christians managed to live in peace. In spite of later persecutions, there were several million believers by the year 300.

- *What does Christianity offer that you haven't found anywhere else?*



Why Were Christians Persecuted?

When Rome burned in the year 64, Nero blamed the Christians for the fire. He had Christians crucified and ignited as human torches. It was during Nero's persecution that both Peter and Paul died as martyrs for Christ.

The Christians were an easy scapegoat. Nero blamed them for everything that went wrong and decreed that no one could profess Christianity. Romans accused Christians of crimes and terrible behaviors—from treason (because Christians refused to worship the emperor) to cannibalism (because Romans misunderstood the Eucharist).

By the third century, the growing number of Christians made it clear that persecution was failing. Every time a Christian died for the faith, others realized there was something unusual and special about this group, leading to more people being baptized. In a dynamic the oppressors didn't anticipate, persecution led to the growth of Christianity.

- *When have you experienced persecution?*



Challenges From Within

The early Church also had to contend with internal strife. Many Christians denied their faith to save their lives in times of persecution only to return to the Church when persecutions subsided. Christian communities were divided about what to do with those who wished to return after denying their faith. They decided to accept them back after a period of public penance.

Life in the Early Church

Despite persecution and doctrinal wrangling, the Church developed and grew. After lengthy instruction, new members were baptized, usually by immersion in a river. The ceremony of the breaking of bread, the Eucharist or Mass, bound the Christian community together in the real flesh and blood of Jesus.

When baptized Christians sinned and sought forgiveness, they were forgiven and given a penance to indicate their contrition and firm resolve to follow Christ anew.

Bishops, as successors of the apostles, shepherded the Church in their particular areas. In larger communities, the bishop would ordain presbyters (priests) to assist him. Deacons saw to the various charities of the Church, instructed the faithful, and distributed the Eucharist.

Each bishop who succeeded Peter as bishop of Rome (the pope) was seen as having authority in the wider Church. As early as the year 97, Pope Clement in Rome exercised power over a dispute in Corinth.

Saint Irenaeus (130–200) said in his book *Against Heresies* that if a local bishop taught the same thing as the bishop of Rome, he was surely teaching the faith of Christ: "For with this Church [Rome], because of its superior origin, all churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world. And it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition" (*Against Heresies*, 3:3:2).

Constantine and Christianity

In 303, Diocletian unleashed the worst persecution against Christians yet. It resulted in the deaths of thousands of Christians in Asia Minor, Africa, and Greece. This persecution lasted through his two successors. In 312, at the battle of Milvian Bridge, the western Emperor Constantine had a dream in which Christ told him to use the sign of the cross against his enemies. Constantine marked his soldiers' shields with the cross.

Constantine won the battle and gave credit to the God of the Christians for his success. In 313, Constantine decreed that no one "should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion" (Edict of Milan). Christians could finally live and proclaim their faith openly.



- What might the world be like today without the presence and influence of Christianity?
- Some say we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. What does that mean to you in relation to what you've learned about the history of the Church?

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