

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:

- The Church is both an institution and a living body.
- Christians are to live as Christ's body in the world.
- The Holy Spirit faithfully guides the Church to the truth.



united vision of God—a people acting as one through the Holy Spirit dwelling in their hearts.

*"By Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body. As an 'adopted son' he can henceforth call God 'Father,' in union with the only Son. He receives the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and who forms the Church."*

CCC 1997

Read the Scripture passages below and identify how the Church is described:

Colossians 1:18

1 Peter 2:9–10

Ephesians 2:19–20

1 Corinthians 3:9

1 Timothy 3:15

Galatians 3:28

## Why Do We Need the Church?

We are made in the image and likeness of God. Since God is a loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are created to be in community as well.

Jesus came to draw us into the "community love" of the Trinity. Jesus lived, died, and rose to bring all people into one family (John 10:16–18). At the Last Supper, he asked us to love one another as he loves us (John 15:12) and prayed that we would be one, as he and the Father are one (17:20–21).

## The Church as Community

What do you think of when you hear the word *church*? You might have thought of a building or the pope and bishops. Perhaps you thought of your RCIA group or the Mass.

The word *church* has many different meanings. For Catholics, however, church is more than a building or a group of people or a liturgy. The truth is expressed at the beginning of Mass: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (*The Roman Missal, Third Edition*).

The unity of Christians lies in the Trinity. The Church is people united, not by a building or a hierarchy or an organization, but by someone.

The Second Vatican Council declares that the Church shines forth as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [*Lumen Gentium*], 4). The Church is the community of all those who have been drawn into the life of God "by faith and Baptism" (CCC 804) and the continuing presence of Christ leading them to a

Jesus formed the community of believers into the sign of his continuing presence on earth: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). When Saul was persecuting Christians after Jesus had ascended into heaven, he encountered the risen Christ asking him, "Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). Saul (later called Paul) came to understand the unity between Christ and believers: in persecuting Christians, he had been persecuting Jesus himself.

*"There are many parts, yet one body....If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy. You are Christ's body, and individually parts of it."*

1 Corinthians 12:20, 27-27

## What Did Paul Mean by Calling the Church Christ's Body?

Paul uses the terms *body of Christ* and *church* interchangeably. **Church** (*Ekklesia* in Greek) is an assembly of people called forth, "the people of God." Christ calls forth believers to share him with the world, saying: "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The Church must continue the love of Christ on earth and mirror the love of the Trinity.

Christ put a great deal of trust in his apostles and in us. He depends on all Christians to continue his work. His ongoing mission through the Church depends on his followers being Christ to the world. Before Jesus was crucified, he lived in his own mortal body through which he could speak, listen, touch, forgive, heal, comfort, share, pray, love, unite, and bless. Now the Church is his body.

*Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the  
world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.*

St. Teresa of Ávila

Parents raising their children, students attending class, adults at their jobs, priests in their ministries, the elderly in nursing homes—all are the body of Christ by virtue of baptism.

- What gifts do you bring to the body of Christ?



## The Mystical Body

The **Mystical Body of Christ** describes the whole Church, united with one another and with Christ as its head. In addition to calling the Church the Body of Christ, we use the terms People of God, Bride of Christ, and Temple of the Holy Spirit (CCC 781-798).

Each member is uniquely part of the body of Christ. All Christians are called to work together as one, just as the parts of the human body work together. Although made up of individuals, members of the Church don't live for themselves alone but for the entire body of Christ. In the celebration of the Mass, Catholics are joined in prayer as one body.



## Did Jesus Intend to Start a Church?

The first generation of Christians believed that Christ intended to establish a Church (Matthew 16:18) with leaders who would make decisions ratified by God (Matthew 18:18). Christ gave them ritual observances (Luke 22:19), rules of conduct (Matthew 6:21–22), and guidelines for marriage (Mark 10:11).

We know Jesus wanted to build a community because he gathered disciples around him. He called them his “little flock” and spoke to them of his kingdom. He taught them the message they were to proclaim and appointed twelve of them as apostles. But he didn’t leave a clear plan for how to continue this work after his ascension into heaven.

The apostles drew upon Jesus’ sayings, teachings, and commands as well as his lived example. His death and resurrection were vindication and approval of all he’d done. Finally, he sent the Holy Spirit to remind them of all he said and did to guide their journey even as times changed and new questions emerged in the area of faith and morals.

## How Does God Guide the Church?

Since the Church on earth is made up of human beings who aren’t perfect, it’s to be expected that the Church will be less than perfect. “The Church... will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven” (*Lumen Gentium*, 48).

Jesus knew that those who would represent him were subject to failure. Peter denied him three times, but Jesus, after his resurrection, gave Peter a threefold commission to care for his flock (John 21:15–18). The apostles ran away when Jesus was arrested, yet he appeared to them after his resurrection and sent them to preach the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:16–20).

The early Church had all the problems found in the Church today. (And indeed, similar problems can be found in any large, human organization.) Scanning through the Acts of the Apostles, readers will find liars and hypocrites (5:1–11), complaints of unfairness (6:1), use of religion for personal gain (8:9–24), disagreements about doctrine (15:24), conflicts among Church leaders (15:36–41), and preaching that failed to make an impact (17:22–34). The community in Corinth struggled with questions about pastors’ salaries, disorder at worship ceremonies, scandal, and neglect of the poor (1 Corinthians 5—11). All these problems naturally arise when people try to follow Jesus and fall short because of human weakness and sin.

In spite of these challenges and human failures, the Church has been the means through which millions of people in every age and of every class and race have come to know Jesus Christ and his life-giving message. From its ranks, the Church has produced individuals universally recognized for their outstanding goodness and holiness—people like Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Calcutta, Óscar Romero, and Dorothy Day.

At times in the Church’s history, some of its members have been unfaithful to the Spirit of God. But the Spirit always remains faithful, leading the Church to the truth. That’s why the Church continues to be a sign of Christ’s presence in the world and to proclaim his message of love, forgiveness, dignity, joy, hope, and peace.

All members of Christ’s body are responsible for making Christ physically present to those among whom they live and work. They carry on the tradition—the gifts, legacy, mission, and truths—they have received. They not only strive to learn about the Church but also endeavor to be the Church, the body of Christ in the world today.

- How can you make Christ present in the world through your daily life?





There are many inspiring examples of Catholics today actively living as part of Christ's body.

Search your parish bulletin, diocesan publication, or a national Catholic media site for an example of a person or organization that:

1. offers their particular gifts and talents for the greater good.
2. illustrates Christ's presence in the world.
3. reflects the love of the Trinity.
4. works for reconciliation and/or greater unity within the Church.

Share your findings with the rest of the group.

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