

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:



- The Christian Church developed over time.
- Saints Peter and Paul led the early Church.
- Christian in the early Church faced persecution.

children with learning disabilities in Catholic grade schools. Max never could have imagined where his new beginning would lead him, but his guitar still goes with him—everywhere.

- *How did Max decide what he wanted to do with his future?*
- *How have you been changed by new experiences?*



## The Early Church

Following his high-school graduation, Max wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. All his friends saw college as a great new beginning, but Max couldn't decide if college was the right choice for him. He couldn't imagine himself enjoying any of the careers chosen by his friends.

Max's one true love was music. He played the guitar well. Every minute he could spare, Max played his guitar, wishing he could somehow build his future around it. Max decided to postpone college for a year. He found a job as a teacher's aide working with young children who had learning and behavioral difficulties. Instinctively, Max took his guitar to work with him, thinking the kids might enjoy hearing him play.

Almost immediately, the children grew very fond of Max and his music. The teacher began using Max and his guitar as a reward for good behavior, and soon the children were working well above her expectations. At Christmas, the class entertained the school with a holiday music program.

Max went on to pursue a degree in special education with a minor in music. Today he is known for setting up resource programs for

When faced with his new beginning, Max was confused and unsure of the future. We've all experienced times when the future seems frightening or uncertain.

Whatever your new beginning, you probably had no idea where you would end up. But you had to take that first step. Two thousand years ago, the Church was in the same position. Not one of those early Church members could begin to imagine the Church of today when they first started out. If the early Church had stayed the way it was back then, we would still be a small part of the Jewish faith.

But like Max, the Church moved forward, one step at a time. Like Max, early Church leaders felt uncertain about their future. It took courage to face that new beginning.

It's clear from the New Testament that Jesus founded the Church to be a community for his followers. He chose a group to follow after him, his apostles. Simon was renamed Peter (which means rock) because he was to be the foundation of Christ's Church. The apostles were given a **commission** (a special purpose or mission) to carry the good news of Jesus' life, death, and

resurrection to the farthest ends of the earth. Our Lord promised to remain with this community of believers until the end of time.

*"In Christian usage, the word 'church' designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers...."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."*

CCC 752

The first Christians didn't inherit an organization with ready-made laws and a book of instructions on how it should operate. All they had to go on was Jesus' example when he led and preached on earth. Only through time, by responding to the problems and needs of everyday life and by being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit would the early Christian leaders come to understand the direction in which God was leading them.

- Have you ever had to do something you felt totally unprepared for? How'd you do it?



## The Start of the Church

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

Acts 2:4

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' disciples on **Pentecost** is celebrated as the birthday of the Church. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples went to the upper room and prayed. They were full of fear and felt very uncertain about their future. They wondered what was expected of them and how they could possibly carry out the great commission Jesus had given them.

In spite of doubts and fears, the mighty power of God became very real when all of them were filled with the courage and strength of the Holy Spirit. We don't know exactly how the Spirit influenced these disciples, but we do know that their hearts underwent an incredible and unexplainable transformation. By the power of the Spirit, these frightened people, huddled in the safety of the upper room, were suddenly transformed into courageous beings unafraid to proclaim the Good News to everyone they met. Scripture tells us that a large number of Jews came to Christ that day.

Read Acts 2:1–33, the story of Pentecost.

- When have you felt scared like the apostles were in the upper room?
- When have you felt like the apostles, inspired by the spirit?
- Read Peter's speech closely. Find a verse that stands out to you. Which did you choose and why?



## Christians or Jews?

Sometimes we talk about discovering who we really are, about finding ourselves, about seeking our true identity.

Christians went through a similar experience during the early years of the Church. The converts to Christ did not feel cut off from other Jews. They simply felt that they lived in the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The long-awaited Messiah had finally come. These early Christians faithfully went to the Temple to worship God, their "Lord and Christ."

Nevertheless, they were different. The fact that they saw Jesus Christ as the Messiah eventually became a clear division between the Jewish and Christian faiths. Though Christ's followers frequented the Temple, they also met privately in their homes for "the breaking of bread," the sacrifice Jesus had left them. This Eucharist was the bond that would hold them together. In sharing in his Body, they themselves became the body that is the Church.

- Has your desire to be a Catholic ever made you feel isolated or separated? Part of a community?



## When Did the Separation from Judaism Occur?

*"The Church, and through her the world, will not be perfected in glory without great trials."*

CCC 769

Judaism and Christianity lived side by side for a while, but eventually the two faiths became divided over small questions of how to live their faith. Some of these disagreements included whether or not Gentiles needed to convert to Judaism before becoming Christian or whether or not Gentile Christian men needed to be circumcised.

Persecution broke out against the community of Christ in Jerusalem (see Acts 8:1). But God brought good out of the persecution; it forced many Christians to leave Jerusalem and go into the world, taking the good news of Jesus with them.

The Holy Spirit also showed the Christian community that the salvation of Christ was for all people, not just for Jews. This set the stage for another new beginning. A zealous Pharisee named Saul, who was determined to crush the young Christian communities, was miraculously converted by God (see Acts 9:1–9). Saul became the great St. Paul.

Paul was the one God called to preach to the Gentiles, people who were non-Jews. In Paul's missions, he preached the good news of Christ first to the Jews, but if they rejected him, he went to the Gentiles. Many Jews saw him as a traitor and rejected him, but he also gained many converts to the Christian faith.

## Different Views of Christianity

*"For though languages differ throughout the world, the content of the Tradition is one and the same. The Churches established in Germany have no other faith or Tradition, nor do those of the Iberians, nor those of the Celts, nor those of the East, of Egypt, of Libya."*

CCC 174

As Christianity grew, it started to reach many cultures that looked at this new religion from different points of view. Salvation was not and is not limited to one way of understanding reality. Jesus came for all people. He came so that all the ends of the earth might see the power and love of God.

For Greeks, interested in philosophy, Christianity had to be understood in terms of metaphysics, which attempts to understand and describe the origin and structure of the universe. Jesus was the wisdom of God made flesh and the communicator of divine wisdom. This community placed great emphasis on creeds and dogma (principles of belief).

Rome, with its great tradition of justice and law, gave Christianity an inheritance of morals. Christ was the greatest of all lawgivers. As a result, ethics and morals became central to the faith. Jesus was the perfect man.

The rapid spread of Christianity was due primarily to a God who gives faith, strength, and vision to believers. People were hungry for a faith that gave meaning to their lives and offered hope in the face of death. Because the Roman Empire's gods did not foster any sense of morality or neighborly love, many people gladly opened their hearts to receive the good news of Christ when they heard it.

## Why Were Christians Persecuted?

When Rome burned in the year 64, Emperor Nero had to save himself from the anger of the people, so he blamed the Christians for the destruction. Nero had Christians crucified and ignited as human torches. He decreed that no one could profess a belief in Christianity. It was during Nero's persecution that both Peter and Paul died for Christ. Though it seems that Christian martyrs may have numbered in the millions, they were not continually under persecution for the next few centuries.

The early Church also had to deal with disagreement from inside. Many Christians denied their faith to save their lives. Then when persecution subsided, they would want to return to the Church. The decision over how to handle this divided many Christian communities, although the approved approach was to accept them back as people who must do penance.

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Despite persecution from without and disagreement from within, the life of the Church developed. Converts, after lengthy instruction, were baptized, usually by immersion in a river. The ritual of the breaking of bread, the Mass, bound the Christian community together in the real Body and Blood of Jesus.

If a Christian community grew large enough, the bishop would ordain **presbyters** (priests) to assist him. Deacons, besides instructing, saw to the various charities of the Church and distributed the Eucharist. The bishops who succeeded Peter as bishop of Rome (the pope) continued to have authority in the Church. Though the government of the Church was not centralized as it is today, there is much evidence that the bishop of Rome was looked to for authority.

The persecution of Christians continued until Constantine, the western emperor, defeated his rival, Maxentius, and in 313 decreed tolerance toward Christianity. At long last, Christians could practice their faith without fear of persecution.

But this freedom, too, was only another new beginning.



With a partner or as a group, put yourself in the position of those early Christians. Discuss how you might have handled the common struggles of the early Church, such as persecution, Christians who denied their faith out of fear, or establishing Church leadership.

Are there issues you see the Church struggling with today? How can today's Church work to overcome them? If you need help getting started, use a Bible or the *Catechism*.



Think of an example from your own life when you had to make a new beginning.

What happened?

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