

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:

- The Church is both a formal institution and a living body.
- All Christians are part of Christ's Mystical Body.
- Christians work together in Christ's body with unique roles and duties.
- In Christ, the Church possesses the fullness of truth.



## The Church as Community

Walter and Rita, the parents of nine grown children, were facing a problem. Their children lived all over the city, and it was hard for everyone to get together. But Walter and Rita wanted to stay close to their children and be a big part of their grandchildren's lives.

So Walter came up with a plan. Every Sunday evening, he and Rita cooked a large dinner and gave all nine children and their families an open invitation to come over. Dinner was at six o'clock, and card games or board games came out at seven. The children could stay for both dinner and games—or just one or the other. It didn't matter to Walter and Rita. They just wanted to offer their children and grandchildren the opportunity to stay connected.

The Sunday evening meals were a success. Everyone made an effort to stop by. The games became a tradition that sometimes lasted well into the evening. As the family grew, card tables had to be set at the ends of the big family table to accommodate everyone. And while the family

sometimes got tired of Grandpa Walter's famous beef stroganoff, no one ever got tired of Sunday evening games and conversation.

Sometimes people ask, "Why do I have to go to church on Sunday? Isn't it good enough to just pray and talk to God on my own?"

To remain tied to one another through our faith in Jesus Christ, we have to spend time as a "family." Relationships and families can't thrive and develop without members spending time with one another. You probably know what it's like to lose touch with old friends because you get busy with other things—you might still be friends, but you don't feel as close. The Catholic Church has long recognized that its members can only grow as the family of God if they take time for worship, thanksgiving, and celebration.

When you think about "church" you might think of a building, the pope and bishops, or the Mass. For mature Catholics, however, **Church** is much more. The truth is expressed at the beginning of Mass.

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

It is here that our unity as Christians lies. The Church is people; people united, not by a building or a bishop, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

The Second Vatican Council, a gathering of the world's bishops, was convened by the pope in the 1960s for guidance and teaching of the Church. A Vatican II document describes the Church as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and 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. The Church is the real and living presence of Jesus Christ here in our world, continually leading people to God. The Church is a people with one "soul"—the Holy Spirit dwelling in their hearts.

- Why is it important for Catholics to put time and effort into their parish communities?



In sacred Scripture, Jesus makes it clear that prayer as a community, not just as individuals, is extremely important.

**Take a moment to look up one of the Bible passages below. How does the Bible describe the Church?**

Colossians 1:18

Ephesians 2:19–22

Galatians 3:26–29

### What Does St. Paul Mean By Calling Us "Christ's Body?"

*"As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ."*

1 Corinthians 12:12

Paul uses the terms "body of Christ" and "church" interchangeably. The word church is rooted in the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means "an assembly of people called forth by God."

Christ calls us to bring him to the world through our love and community. He tells us, "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). It is the work of the Church to be Christ's body here on earth. During his life on earth, Jesus possessed his own physical body, but now we are the ones who act as Christ's body on earth.

We give Christ our lips to speak his words of love and to comfort the lost. We give him our ears to listen to the troubled. We give him our arms to hold the lonely and the sick. We give him our hearts to bring compassion and hope to a despairing world. When we forgive, Jesus forgives. When we heal, Jesus heals. Through our love, Christ's love takes human form.

- Can you think of a time someone was Christ's body for you?



Paul also says that we each have different gifts. We represent different parts of Christ's body. "We, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Romans 12:5–6). Whether our gifts are academic, athletic, social, musical, artistic, creative, or yet to be discovered, we are all parts of the body of Christ. Without each of us (no matter how insignificant we may feel), Christ's body is in some way incomplete.

### The Mystical Body

Because being a member of the Church means being a part of the body of Christ, Catholics sometimes use the term **Mystical Body** to describe the Church. This Mystical Body includes every member of the Church, not just those with physical bodies here on earth. Members of the Mystical Body in purgatory are in the process of being perfected before they enter heaven. Those in heaven are interceding to God on our behalf.

*The Church is the Body of Christ. It is also an assembly of the saints. The saints are God's holy ones, those perfected in holiness and those seeking to be perfected, those who stand before the Throne of God and those who continue the pilgrimage of life with their eyes set on Christ and pursuing life in Christ. These are united with one another in grace, prayer, and good works (see CCC 946–948).*



What this means for us is that we are called to be members of Christ's Mystical Body not only during our earthly life, but in our eternal life. It also means that those Catholics who have come before us are still a part of us. Those souls in heaven intercede for us not because it's their celestial job, but because we're still united as family in the body of Christ.

*"If [one] part [of the body of Christ] suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy"*

1 Corinthians 12:26

- What does being part of the Mystical Body of Christ mean to you?



## Did Jesus Intend to Establish a Church?

We know Jesus wanted us to live as a close community because he always gathered his friends and followers around him and called them his flock. He requested that they pray together and taught them the message of love he wanted them to proclaim.

These early Christians believed that Christ wished to establish a Church (Matthew 16:18) with leaders who would make decisions through the power of God (Matthew 18:18). They believed that Christ gave them the Eucharist (Luke 22:14–20) and a guiding commandment (Matthew 22:39).

Jesus, however, did not leave a clear-cut plan or set of directions telling us exactly how to build his 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 it"*

Matthew 16:18

However, Jesus backed up all his words, teachings, and commands with his personal example. Through his death and resurrection he shows us that he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life of the world. Jesus also left us the Holy Spirit to be our guide and a source of strength. The first Christians used all these gifts in the creation of the Church.

## Looking at Some of the Things That Have Been Done in the History of the Church, How Can It Claim to be Guided by God?

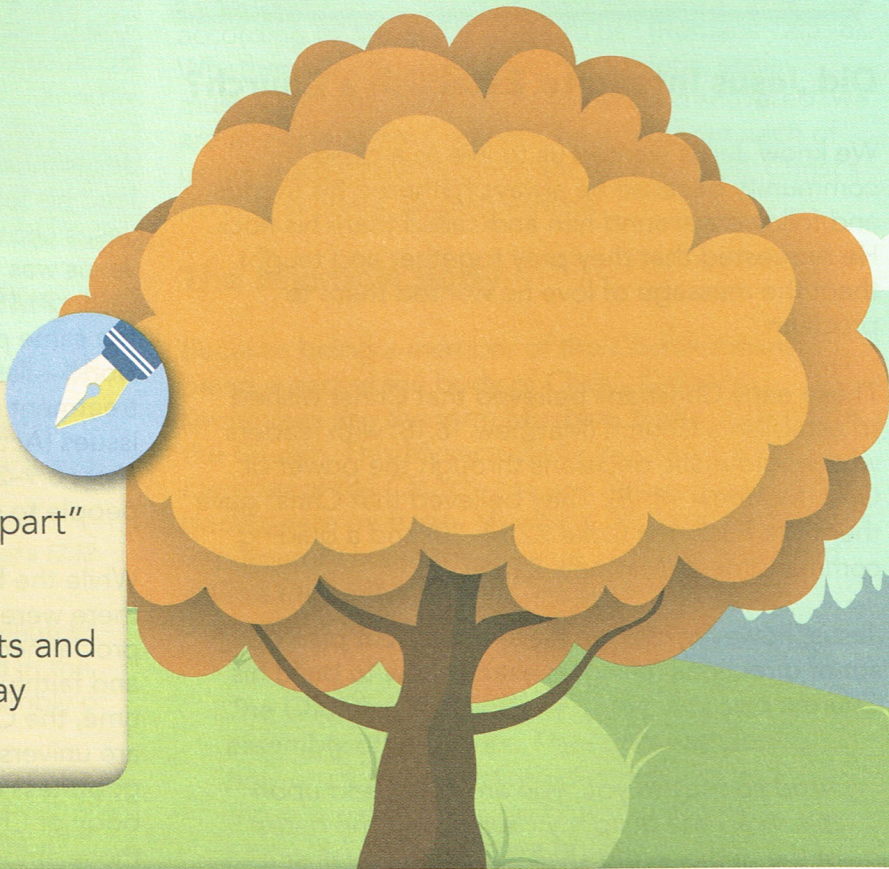
The Church is made up of human beings who are not perfect, and therefore the Church has made decisions and taken actions that have been less than perfect. At times, human actions, in the name of the Church, have contradicted the teachings of Jesus. The Church has had leaders who failed the Church because of the power of greed, prejudice, and other wrongs.

Jesus must have known that those who would lead his followers were subject to failure. After all, Jesus chose Peter as the Church's foundation, and Jesus was fully aware of Peter's human weaknesses (John 21:15–18). The early Church was burdened by the same problems as the Church of our modern world—liars and hypocrites (Acts 5:1–11), unfair treatment (Acts 6:1), disagreement over religious issues (Acts 15), abuse of power by Church leaders (Acts 8:9–24), and even sermons so long they put people to sleep (Acts 20:7–12)!

While the followers of Jesus sometimes failed him, there were many more who were true heroes. They proclaimed and lived the gospel with courage and faithfulness in their everyday lives. In our own time, the Church has produced individuals who are universally recognized for their outstanding goodness and holiness. Our task, as members of the body of Christ, is to make our Lord visibly present to those among whom we live, learn, work, and play.



There are many inspiring examples of Catholics living as the body of Christ. With a partner or on your own, find one biblical holy person or modern saint and do some research. Find at least one way they were Christ's body in the world. Share with the rest of the group.



Read St. Paul's Letter to the Romans 12:3-8. As a member of the body of Christ, which "part" are you?

Keep in mind your special gifts and talents, however small you may think they are.

**Journey of Faith for Teens: Inquiry, Q13 (826337)**

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