

## The Early Church

(to A.D. 300)

**“The community of believers was of one heart and mind.”**

(Acts of the Apostles 4:32)

**+ Leader:** How did the first Christians pray?

**Reader:** Those who came to Christianity as Jews prayed by marking the Jewish times of prayer. They did this by gathering together and singing psalms. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, “Peter and John were going up to the temple area for the three o’clock hour of prayer” (Acts of the Apostles 3:1). These hours of prayer were the foundation for the Christian practice of prayer that we call the *Liturgy of the Hours*.

**Leader:** Let us pray together in this ancient tradition now.

**Group 1:** Our soul waits for the LORD,  
who is our help and shield.

**Group 2:** For in God our hearts rejoice;  
in your holy name we trust.

**Group 1:** May your kindness, LORD, be  
upon us;  
we have put our hope in you.  
(Psalm 33:20–22)

**Group 2:** Glory be to the Father  
and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,

**Group 1:** as it was in the beginning  
is now, and ever shall be  
world without end. Amen.

**Leader:** Let us now pray as Jesus taught us.  
(All pray the Lord’s Prayer.)

Lord, be our help always. May our hearts  
rejoice in you. May we, the people whom  
you have gathered into your  
Church, trust in your holy name  
and hope always in your  
kindness. We ask this in your  
name, Lord Jesus.

**All:** Amen.



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## The BIG Question:

What connects me to a community?

**Discover** how much you know about the first Christian community. Answer these questions about the disciples of Jesus Christ. (You might want to use your Bible.)

**1** Who were they?

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**2** Where did they come from?

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**3** Why did they come together?

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**4** What happened to them after Jesus died? after he rose from the dead? after he ascended to his Father?

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How are you connected to Jesus' first disciples? How is your life similar to theirs? different from theirs?

### In this chapter

we will explore the origins of the Church and her expansion into the world. Through this chapter, we hope



to understand the history behind the spread of the early Church



to appreciate the faith and courage of the early Christian believers



to resolve to follow Jesus as they did, in sincerity of heart.





*Labor Day in Bungalowville* by Charles Wysocki (1929–2002)

**T**hink about all of the different types of communities, small and large, that exist in the world. Communities can consist of people linked together by many different things. A community may be made up of people with common interests or hobbies. Or a community may simply be a group of people that live in the same area. A group of people who actively cooperate with one another is also considered a community. A group of people who share the same religious beliefs is a community, too. Though their members may be scattered throughout the world, they are united by their beliefs. The word *community* can also be used to describe a group of people who share similar economic or political backgrounds. People with a common profession also can form a community; for example, doctors make up the medical community.

**Activity** Right now you belong to several communities. Below, list the communities that you are a part of—those of which you are a member by choice and those to which you belong by circumstance. Then, consider why each of these communities is important to you. How does each community influence your life, and how do you affect each community?

“There are no strangers in this world,  
only friends we haven’t met yet.”  
(Anonymous)





## The Church begins and grows.

Imagine that you were living in Jerusalem around the year 30—the year of Jesus’ Death. You were living in the Roman Empire, where the Roman emperor had the highest authority. But you were also part of the first Christian community. What might you have experienced at that time? Perhaps you saw and heard Jesus teach. Perhaps you witnessed the horrors of his suffering and Death and then rejoiced at the news of his Resurrection from the dead and Ascension into heaven. Perhaps, too, you heard about Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus’ disciples.

On that morning, Peter and the other disciples were gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. 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” (Acts of the Apostles 2:2–3). At that moment the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and strengthened to proclaim the Good News

of Jesus Christ. It was then that “the Church was openly displayed to the crowds and the spread of the Gospel among the nations, through preaching, was begun” (CCC, 767).

Peter told the people of Jerusalem, “Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts of the Apostles 2:36). When people in the crowd asked, “What are we to do?” Peter answered, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit” (Acts of the Apostles 2:37, 38). About three thousand people were baptized that day and received the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was with the members of the first Christian community, guiding them to believe in Jesus and helping them to remember and live out Jesus’ teachings. And the members of this first Christian community, the early Church, “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. . . . All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (Acts of the Apostles 2:42, 44–45).

With the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the community of Jesus’ disciples had become something that we can recognize today, over two thousand years later: the Catholic Church growing and working as a community to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

**Activity** What are some ways that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in the communities to which you belong?



## Early Christians are martyred for their faith.

The world in which Christianity began offered some advantages to those who wanted to spread the Gospel. The Roman Empire was at peace, with good roads and safe harbors. Romans spoke Latin but also favored the Greek language. Thus, Christian missionaries who spoke Greek could be understood by many. The most famous of these Christian missionaries was Paul. After experiencing a conversion to belief in Jesus Christ and Jesus' call to share the Good News, Paul spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

But Paul and the other early Christian missionaries faced many challenges. One was the tension with the Christians' Jewish neighbors. This tension resulted in the disciple Stephen being put to death in Jerusalem, falsely accused of "speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God" (Acts of the Apostles 6:11). Stephen died a martyr rather than denying his belief in Christ.



Saint Paul

There was also tension with the Roman authorities. They did not require Jews within the empire to worship the Roman gods. So, at first the Roman authorities also ignored the early Christians, who seemed to be a group within Judaism. But the Romans soon became suspicious of the Christians. And, in time, the authorities began to fear that Christianity, with its emphasis on the dignity and equality of all people in God's eyes, might also be a revolutionary political movement.

When the Christians refused to worship the Roman gods and denied that the Roman emperor was himself a god, the Romans started to persecute the Christians. The first recorded persecution of Christians began in Rome around A.D. 64, under the Emperor Nero. Other persecutions followed, and thousands of Christians accepted death rather than deny their faith. Yet the number of converts to Christianity grew.

**Activity** Name some ways that people today are persecuted. How can our communities work together against these kinds of persecutions?

## Saints Peter and Paul

Every year on June 29, the Church celebrates the feast day of Saints Peter and Paul. This feast day is noted on even the oldest existing Roman calendar, which dates back to A.D. 354.

Jesus chose Peter to lead the Apostles and to guide the growing Church. In the Acts of the Apostles we find that, when any major decisions were to be made, it was Peter to whom the other Apostles and leaders of the early Church turned. And Paul journeyed to bring the Good News to the world:

- On Paul's first journey he traveled to the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean, to the city of Antioch

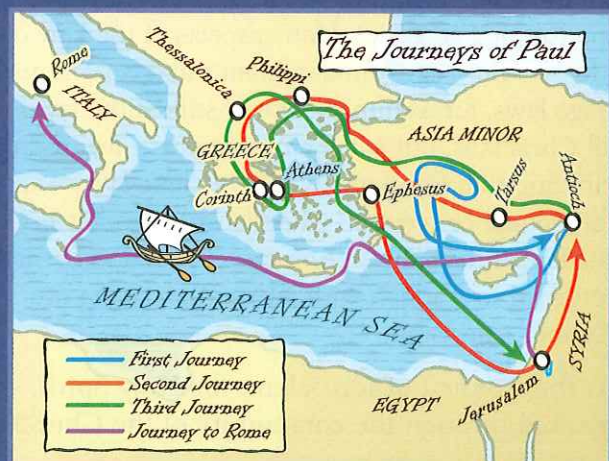
in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and to other cities in what are now Turkey and Syria.

- On his second and longest journey, he traveled to Greece, where he established a center of Christian faith in the city of Corinth.

- On his third journey he returned to Asia Minor, where he helped set up other Christian communities, including one in the city of Ephesus.

Nothing could stop Paul from preaching the Gospel. When he couldn't travel to a community to share the Christian faith, he would write a letter.

Both Peter and Paul died in Rome as martyrs. Their courage and witness are important for Catholics everywhere to honor and celebrate. Pray a prayer of thanksgiving for them.





## The Church meets at the Council of Jerusalem.

*When have you had to stand up for your faith?*

The young Christian community, the early Church, faced external problems and internal issues. Toward the end of his first missionary journey, Paul and a disciple named Barnabas visited the Christian community at Antioch. And in Antioch, in about the year 40, the word *Christians* was first used to refer to the followers of Jesus Christ. But many of these Christians were **Gentiles**, or people who were not Jews. So, at Antioch, a controversy arose. People were asking whether Gentiles first needed to become Jews before becoming Christians. In Jerusalem the Christians of Antioch were to present their dispute to the Apostles and to a new generation of leaders called *presbyters*—men whom Catholics today would call priests. “The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter.” (Acts of the Apostles 15:6) This meeting became known as the Council of Jerusalem, the first great council of the Catholic Church. It took place in Jerusalem in about the year 49. The Apostle Peter told the Council that “God, who knows the heart,” granted Gentiles “the holy Spirit just as he did us” (Acts of Apostles 15:8). Peter also reminded the Council that “we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they” (Acts of the Apostles 15:11).

### Faith Words

**Gentiles**

Then the Apostle James presented the position that the Council accepted: Many aspects of the Law of Moses—the Ten Commandments and certain marriage laws, for example—would still be the law for all Christians. But some requirements—for instance, circumcision for men—would be done away with for Gentile converts to Christianity. This has been the law of the Church ever since. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with a letter describing the Council’s decision.

At the Council of Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit worked through the community of the Church,



Model of ancient Jerusalem at the time of Herod the Great (first century B.C.)

helping the leaders to decide on important matters about which Jesus had left no specific instruction. With the Holy Spirit’s guidance, it was clear that the Christian faith was meant for all people.

**Activity** Compose and pray together a prayer to the Holy Spirit to guide the Church today in all of her decisions.



## The Church is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The first Christians spread the Good News of Jesus Christ by word of mouth, but as the first eyewitness Christians began to die, the accounts of Jesus' life and teachings were written down for future generations. Many scholars agree on the following timeline:

About A.D. 60–70—The Gospel of Mark is written.

About A.D. 70–90—The Gospels of Matthew and Luke are written, based on Mark and other early Christian sources. Mark, Matthew, and Luke have many similarities.

About A.D. 90—The Gospel of John is written. It is similar to the first three Gospels but also includes material not found in them.

Other books of the New Testament were also written at this time. Fourteen of these, said to be the oldest books in the New Testament, are *Epistles*, or letters, to the early Christian communities that were written by, or at least attributed to, Saint Paul. Seven are letters that were written by other leaders of the early Church. There is also an account of the very earliest days of the Church—



15-century illuminated manuscript of Book of Revelation

the Acts of the Apostles—and a book called the Book of Revelation, which is the last book of the Bible and calls believers in Christ to look forward with hope to eternal glory. The Holy Spirit inspired the human authors of the Scriptures to write what would faithfully present God's saving truth. And as the early Christians lived their faith, the Holy Spirit was also working in the Church, guiding the development of Tradition. Tradition refers to the written and spoken beliefs and practices that have been passed down to us from the time of Christ and the Apostles. Together, Tradition and Scripture make up “a single sacred deposit of the Word of

God” (CCC, 97). As the Church relies on the Bible as a book of faith, the Church looks to Tradition as a living witness of faith.

For more information on Scripture, see “Bible Basics” on pages 310–311.

**Activity** Reread this page to find out how many books there are in the New Testament. Share with a partner a New Testament passage that has particular meaning for you.

## The Magisterium

The pope today can trace his authority directly back to Saint Peter, and our bishops can trace their authority directly back to the first Apostles. This is what we mean when we speak of “apostolic succession.” Under the guidance of the Holy

Spirit, the pope and the bishops lead the Church to be faithful to God's original Revelation in Jesus and to the developments in Tradition that have taken place over the long history of the Church.

We call the teaching authority of the pope and the bishops the *Magisterium*, the living teaching office of the Church. The Magisterium's presence in the Church guarantees the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit through apostolic succession.

Through letters, statements, and documents for the whole Church, the Magisterium continually teaches us about the truth. And when the Church encounters new circumstances, questions, and issues of importance to our faith, the Holy Spirit guides the Magisterium and the whole Church to develop its understanding of Divine Revelation in Scripture and Tradition.

In what ways do the pope and bishops guide the Church today?

CATHOLIC  
IDENTITY



## Recognizing Our Faith

Recall the question at the beginning of this chapter: *What connects me to a community?* What connects you to your family? your neighbors? your parish? the world?

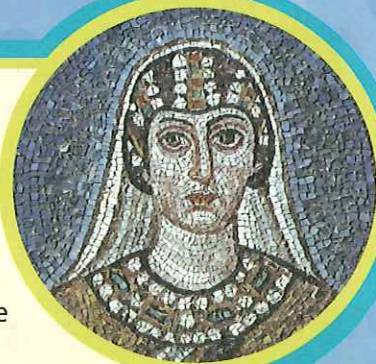


## Living Our Faith

How will you share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others?

## Women of the Early Church

The lives of Saints Lydia, Prisca, and Perpetua give us some of the greatest examples of the role of women in the early Church. Lydia was baptized by Saint Paul. Her conversion to Christianity was very important because she was one of the first prominent Gentiles to accept Christian belief.



## Partners in FAITH

Prisca, also called Priscilla, was a Gentile married to Aquila, a Jew. They became Christians at a time when Christianity was not accepted by the Romans. Forced to leave Rome, the couple relocated to Corinth, in Greece, and became involved in Saint Paul's mission to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. In his letter to the

Romans, Paul called this couple "my co-workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3).

Perpetua, an early Christian living in North Africa, and her servant Felicity were arrested and imprisoned for practicing their Christianity. Perpetua's wealthy father visited her and begged her to give up the faith. Yet she refused. Eventually, the Roman emperor ordered the deaths of Perpetua and Felicity. They became martyrs of the early Church.

Who are some women who share the Good News of Jesus Christ today?



## Putting Faith to Work

Talk about what you have learned in this chapter:



**We understand** the history behind the spread of the early Church.



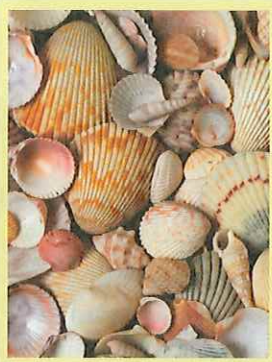
**We appreciate** the faith and courage of the early Christian believers.



**We resolve** to follow Jesus as they did, in sincerity of heart.

Decide on ways to live out what you have learned.

## ENCOUNTERING GOD'S WORD



Life in the early Christian community is described in the Acts of the Apostles:

**“The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and . . . had everything in common.”**

(Acts of the Apostles 4:32)

- ➔ **READ** the quotation from Scripture.
- ➔ **REFLECT** on the following question:  
What are some ways your parish fulfills this Scripture passage?
- ➔ **SHARE** your reflections with a partner.
- ➔ **DECIDE** on ways to help other young people in your parish become part of a “community of believers.”

Choose four events discussed in this chapter and explain their significance to the Church then and now.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Write **True** or **False** next to the following sentences. On a separate sheet of paper, change the false sentences to make them true.

5. \_\_\_\_\_ Scripture is the only means by which God's Revelation comes to us.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ At the Council of Jerusalem, the Apostles made a decision that is no longer the law of the Church today.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The fourteen letters, or Epistles, that are attributed to Paul are said to be the oldest books of the New Testament.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ As the Church relies on the Bible as a book of faith, the Church looks to Tradition as a living witness of faith.

**9–10. ESSAY:** Explain the importance of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' Apostles.



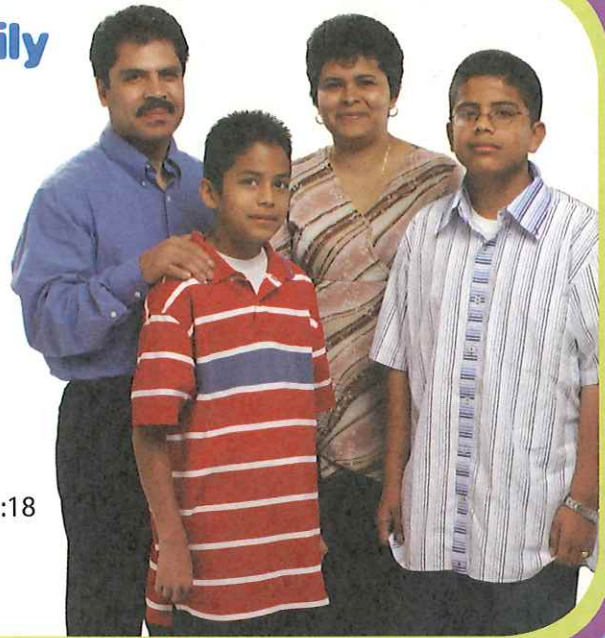
## Sharing Faith with Your Family

Discuss the following with your family:

- The Church begins and grows.
- Early Christians are martyred for their faith.
- The Church meets at the Council of Jerusalem.
- The Church is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Spend a week with Saint Paul. Each day this week, look up one of the Scripture passages referenced here. Each is from one of Saint Paul's letters. Copy each reference on a separate index card and display the card as you read and discuss the Scripture passage together.

1 Corinthians 13:13	Ephesians 4:32	1 Thessalonians 5:18
Romans 8:31	2 Corinthians 5:7	Philippians 4:4
	Galatians 2:20	



## The Worship Connection

Many of our Catholic liturgical practices have their origin in Jewish worship. The reciting and singing of the psalms is one such practice. During Mass pay special attention to the *Responsorial Psalm* that follows the first reading.

## More to Explore

Research Catholic people and organizations who are helping to fight persecution throughout the world.

## Catholic Social Teaching Checklist

### Theme of Catholic Social Teaching:

Solidarity of the Human Family

**How it relates to Chapter 7:** As Catholics we respect and care for all human beings as one human community, one human family—no matter where they live.

### How can you do this?

☐ At home:

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☐ At school/work:

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☐ In the parish:

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☐ In the community:

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Check off each action after it has been completed.