

The Church

Jesus came to do many things. Mainly, He came to save us through His death and resurrection. He came to teach us about God, and about ourselves. And He also came to establish His Church. What is the Church? How many churches did Jesus establish? Where can we find His Church?

In the Old Testament, remember, the Jewish people were God's chosen people. They had been called to a special mission, to prepare the world for its Savior. When God was born into the world, He was born into the Jewish people, but He came to save not only the Jews, but everyone, Jew and Gentile (non-Jew) alike.

Now there would be a new people of God, His Family. This is the Church. The Church can be called many things, such as the people of God, the Bride of Christ, and the Mystical Body of Christ. Let's look at these three titles for the Church to get a good understanding of what it really is.

The People of God

As stated above, Jesus came to save everyone, to open Heaven to everyone, to make everyone His chosen people. The people of God are assembled in the Church He established.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He stayed on earth for forty days. He spent these days primarily with those who already followed Him, especially His Apostles. These eleven men (one of the original twelve, Judas, had betrayed Jesus) would become the leaders of the Church, the first bishops. Their job was to go to the entire world, spreading the message of Jesus, baptizing people, ordaining priests and establishing church communities.

This would seem like a pretty impossible task. They had to spread Jesus's Church to the entire world! And they had to do it by word of mouth – there was no television, radio, or Internet. Not only that, they had to keep the message pure; they couldn't change it. Have you ever played the game of telephone? Try passing a message between ten friends, and it is messed up by the time it gets to

the end. How can these men spread a message to the entire world without messing it up? It is impossible!

Well, not really. The Apostles had a secret weapon, that the Church still has to this day – the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus returned to Heaven, what we call His Ascension, He told the Apostles to wait in Jerusalem for help from Heaven, the Holy Spirit, who would guide them on their mission, give them power, and make sure that the message was not changed.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to the Apostles as they were praying. The house where they were shook as wind blew through it, and tongues of fire came above each of them. They came out of the house and began their mission. That day, Pentecost, is called the birthday of the Church. The Holy Spirit came to the Church on that day, and has promised to stay with the Church until the end of time.

As the Apostles spread the message of Jesus and the Church grew, more and more people were added to God’s family. The new people of God would include Jews, Gentiles, and anyone who would have faith in Jesus and follow Him.

The Bride of Christ

God uses marital language in both the Old and New Testaments when He speaks about His relationship with His people. In the Old Testament, for example, when the people of Israel worship false gods, God often accuses them not of idolatry, but of adultery. There is no human relationship more intimate than that of a husband and a wife, which is why it is one good symbol of our relationship with God.

In the book of Revelation, John sees the people of God coming before Jesus “as a bride adorned for her husband.” Then there is a wedding feast. Jesus is asked once in the Gospels why He and His disciples were not fasting, and He offers a strange response: “Can the wedding guests fast while the Bridegroom is still with them?” Jesus does His first public miracle, at the request of His mother, at a wedding, the wedding at Cana.

And of course, on the cross, as Jesus gives Himself to His Bride, the Church, He utters the words, “It is consummated.” What does this spousal relationship teach us about the Church?

First, it teaches us that Jesus gives Himself completely to us, and we are supposed to give ourselves completely to Him. It speaks to the intimacy we should have with Jesus. And it also tells us that we should bear fruit. Just as a marriage brings forth children, we must bring forth Jesus and His goodness into the world.

The Mystical Body of Christ

We are not only united to Christ in a relationship, are in Christ, and Christ is in us. He is the Head, and the Church is His Body. We received the Holy Spirit at our Baptism, but really we received the entire Trinity. God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – shares His life with us.

Jesus says that we must be His Body, continuing His work here on earth. When we become part of the Church, we become part of Him, and through that, we are also united to each other.

St. Paul speaks about this beautifully in his first letter to the Corinthians, when he says:

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

There are many images for the Church because no one image can completely capture its reality. God uses things we are familiar with to describe it so that when we take all of the images – the people of God, the Bride of Christ, the Mystical Body of Christ, and there are even more – we can get a more complete picture of what the Church is, and how it unites us to God.

There are also four “marks of the Church.” These four marks are qualities that we can use to identify the Church Jesus established. We recite these four every time we pray the Nicene Creed, when we say that we believe in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

1. One – The Church is one because we are all one family, and we are all united in one Faith. You are united to every Catholic all around the world. Not only that, you are united to every Catholic throughout time. In Jesus Christ, you are united as members of the same family

with a Catholic peasant that lived in France in the eighth century, for example.

2. Holy – Does this mean that every Catholic is personally holy? No. It does not mean that every priest, or even every pope is personally holy. It does mean, however, that the Church offers us the tools that we need to become holy. It also refers to where the Church came from. The Church is holy because it came from God, and He is perfectly holy.

3. Catholic – The word “catholic” means “universal.” The Church is catholic because it has no limits on its membership. It is not the Church of a certain race, or ethnicity, or group of people. There is no requirement in terms of skill, intelligence, popularity, wealth, etc. Are you human? Then you are invited to be part of the Church.

4. Apostolic – The Church is apostolic because it has the same teaching and sacraments that Jesus gave the Apostles. It also has something called Apostolic Succession. The Church has powers and authority that can only come from God. Priests, for example, have gifts that no one can receive simply by studying hard enough, or praying long enough. God gave these gifts to the Apostles; the Apostles gave them to other men; who then gave them to other men; and so on, and so on, to our own day. The Catholic Church can trace its history back through the generations to the Apostles themselves, who directly received it from Jesus.

Journaling prompt: Which image for the Church do you find most beautiful?
Why?