

The Church

An Image

Imagine sitting at the edge of large, peaceful pond. Into the water drops a stone. From the spot where it enters, ripples slowly spread out across the surface. Expanding waves swell to lift whatever is in their path. On the water, floating twigs and living things react and move. Fish and other creatures in the pond feel the effects. Some objects on the surface that are touched form new ripples that spread along their own courses. Expanding circles carry the record of an unexpected event that moves both the water and the things that live in its depths.

The event that we find at the beginning of the Christian Church is a person—the Christ Event (life–death–Resurrection). In the earliest description we have of the Church, we hear preaching—news of Jesus of Nazareth alive and then risen—by his followers. This event / message is called the *kerygma*, a Greek word meaning “proclamation” or “announcement.” In a striking turnaround, the same people who ran away to save their lives when Jesus was arrested and killed are described in Jerusalem shortly after, calling Jesus the Christ (*Messiah* in Hebrew) and the Lord of all creation. Looking back on their own scriptures, they describe Jesus Christ as a stone rejected by other builders who has become a cornerstone for a new living building—a gathering together of people (see Psalm 118:22, Mark 12:10, 1 Peter 2:4–8). In the pond metaphor, the Risen Jesus is the stone that enters the waters of human history and sends ripples through the centuries.

Each person who joins himself or herself to Jesus Christ in Baptism (from the Greek word *baptismo*, “to immerse”) adds new ripples. Saint Paul writes that we become part of Christ himself (see 1 Corinthians 12:12–13). As Jesus draws people into a living body, richer, larger, more complex waves of movement are created. Christ’s ongoing presence and message grows in depth and strength.

What Then Is the Church?

We begin with the etymology of the root word for the insights it gives us. Originally the Christians borrowed from the Hebrew word *kahal*, which meant those that were “assembled and assembling in the Lord.” The Greek word used by early Christians was *ekklesia*, which meant “assembly” and which became *ecclesia* in Latin. This word is still heard in the Romance languages (Roman or Latin-based) of Spanish (*iglesia*), French (*eglise*), and Italian (*chiesa*). When the Christian faith spread to northern Europe, emphasis was placed on assembling “in the Lord’s (house)” (Greek = *kyriakon*), which became *kirche* in German and *church* in English. In these etymologies, the key point is that it is an assembly that continues to gather for the purpose of worship of the Lord. In the academic discipline of theology, the study of the Church is called “ecclesiology.”

We now move to the traditional definition of *church*, which is offered in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “In Christian usage, the word ‘church’ designates the liturgical assembly,¹ but also the local community² or the whole universal community of believers.³ These three meanings are inseparable” (752). But why this gathering? What is it called to do? How are these people connected to one another and to later generations? As we follow the story of the Church, we will concentrate on its basic roots. A full look at Church history would include discussion of the way the Church leadership follows a hierarchy of offices. We would find too that many Christian communities have expressed their identity as a community of disciples. As Saint Paul reminds us, there are many gifts in this body of Christians (see 1 Corinthians 12:4–11).



How the Ripples Started

As we reflect on how the Christ Event sends ripples through history, we can find no better place to begin than the scriptural passage in Acts of the Apostles (2:1–47) that has, since ancient times, shown the Church, those who are immersed with Christ, what their common birth looked like and what it meant. In first-century Jerusalem, after Jesus ascends into Heaven and the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the disciples on the feast of Pentecost (which coincided with the Jewish holy festival of the first fruits of the grain harvest in the spring, sometimes called the feast of “weeks” and called in Greek the “fiftieth” [see Exodus 23:14–17]), the Apostle Peter emerges from the upper room and addresses a crowd made up of people from all over the known world, telling them of God’s breathtaking work, how it is described by the prophets, and how it is meant to spread. When Peter is asked by his hearers, “What happens next?” we can see how the impact of the *kerygma* begins to play out in their lives:

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?” Peter [said] to them, “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. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call.” He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 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. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meal with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

(Acts of the Apostles 2:37–47)

Waves of later generations will be moved by the gospel; they too will be shaped by arguments and exhortations. They too will be challenged by corruption and shaped by communal life. When they succeed in handing on what they have received, it will be because they devote themselves together to the breaking of the bread. The bases for the Church are in place early on, developing in structures and forms we recognize today.

The Church Is a Paradox

As an ongoing event related to the Christ Event, the Church is always a combination of stability and movement. It is a place for believers to recognize one another and take strength from coming together. It is also where believers gather so they can be sent out. The Church is where the Spirit of God creates us and moves us. Vatican Council II teaches:



When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth (cf. John 17:4) was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that he might continually sanctify the Church, and that, consequently those who believe might have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). He is the Spirit of life, the fountain of water springing up to eternal life (cf. John 4:47, 7:38–39). . . . Guiding the Church in the way of all truth (cf. John 16:13) and unifying her in communion and in the works of ministry, he bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her; and he adorns her with his fruits (cf. Ephesians 4:11–12, 1 Corinthians 12:4, Galatians 5:22). (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964], 4*)

This modern description of the Holy Spirit in the Church is nothing more than a modern expression—the latest ripple—of the early insight of Saint Paul:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. (1 Corinthians 12:4–7)

An Ongoing Vision for the *Ekklesia*

The event of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit of God at Pentecost sets out a vision and a mandate; from the start, the Church gathers diverse people. Central to this story is the message that unity is built in diversity. Saint Paul writes that we need one another in order to be the Body of Christ. We all have gifts or charisms (the Greek word *charis* means “grace”). These gifts are given for all who embrace Christ and are given the Holy Spirit. What is rippling in the Church? The presence of the Spirit of God, to enliven, to inspire different talents, and yet, to unify.

The Second Vatican Council takes up the root meaning of *ekklesia* when it emphasizes the biblical image of the Church as “the People of God.” It is tempting to think of the Church in terms of its leaders, to see the Church as the Pope and the bishops, but the council reminded us that the Church is everyone gathered. Recalling the words of 1 Peter 2:9–10, the council describes followers of Christ as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation [who] . . . / Once were ‘no people,’ / but now you are God’s people” (see *Church*, 9).

This is a people who live in and change the world with the Gospel message. Vatican II captures that activity with another image: We are a Pilgrim Church (see *Church*, 48). Pilgrims are people who are going somewhere. They seek a destination. They travel a certain way. The less baggage they carry, the better. The better their sight and sense of direction, the better they understand their journey; the better they know their companions, the more effective they are in meeting challenges and arriving at their new home.

Starting with the group that Jesus chose to follow him and sent to spread the Good News of the Reign of God coming near, the Apostles themselves, the Church has had to face a paradoxical challenge. In order to be true to the apostolic message, it has had to adapt and reexamine its structures and practices. In the unfolding generations, bishops, understood as successors to the Apostles, preached the Gospel and brought unity to the Church by rehearsing its story. Over the years the Church has gathered these leaders into councils to respond to new controversies and deepen the Church’s understanding of the Gospel. When it traveled to new lands and learned to speak new languages, Christianity remained true to its mandate to preach to all nations, and in doing so, it became inculturated. The Church



expresses the face of Christ in the features and manner of each group that embraces the Gospel. In Baptism, the Eucharist, the leadership of bishops, the basic creeds, and the canon of scripture, the identity of the Church is preserved and at the same time evolves and moves as a living tradition. Pope John XXIII expressed this basic way of life in the Church when he opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962 with the words, “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another” (Abbott, 1966, 715). He challenged the council fathers to take up the work of *aggiornamento* (to bring “up to date”) to bring the Gospel to the modern world. To do so he wanted to throw open the doors to the world. The council soon invited Catholic women to attend, as well as people of other Christian denominations and other experts from around the world. Pope John’s successor, Pope Paul VI, and other council leaders worked to deepen the Roman Catholic Church’s cooperation with other Christians as well as with women and men from other religious traditions. This bore fruit most notably in the council’s *Decree on Ecumenism* (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964) and its *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965).

This article is adapted from *Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith*, by J. J. Mueller, SJ, et al. (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2007), pages 143–147.

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Endnotes Cited in Quotation from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition

1. Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:19,28,34,35.
2. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2, 16:1.
3. Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6.

