

# MOTHER CHURCH

IT BEGAN in a very small way. After thirty years living in obscurity in Nazareth, a backwater village, one of the most remote places in the then civilised world—‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’—Jesus, son of the village carpenter, began an itinerant ministry in Palestine, preaching and healing. He ventured beyond the borders of Palestine only once or twice. He began to attract large crowds, but was wary of this initial apparent success of his mission.

After spending all night in prayer he chose twelve of his followers to be his close disciples, to witness what he did and to receive special instruction on the nature of his mission. They found it very difficult to comprehend. They enjoyed being associated with Jesus when he was popular, but all abandoned him when the crowds disappeared and the authorities became hostile.

But Jesus persevered with them. They were central to his mission. The Twelve chosen disciples corresponded to the twelve tribes of Israel, the Old People of God. The twelve represented the new People of God, the new Israel.

And Peter was appointed by Jesus to be the leader of the Twelve and to guarantee the stability of the new community. ‘You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church (*Qahal*), and the gates of the underworld will never hold out against it. (Mth. 16:18). No forces of destruction will destroy the Church, neither the forces from without, nor the forces from within (the sins and weaknesses of its members). This is called the ‘indefectibility’ of the Church built on Peter.

Whereas Matthew’s Greek version reads: ‘You are *Petros* [a first name] and on this *petra*...’ the original Aramaic version spoken by Jesus worked much better: ‘You are *kepha* and on this *kepha*...’ *Petra* is a rock of any kind, even a stone or rocky ground, but *kepha*

is the rock that one digs down to find and on which the builder lays his foundations—as the wise man who built his house on rock.

Jesus sent the twelve out to proclaim his message, and to have authority to cast out demons—the twelve were to carry out the same mission as Jesus himself. The Twelve were entrusted with the mission which they were to continue after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Others would work along with them, but they were the disciples directly entrusted with it by Jesus.

The Holy Spirit would give them strength, courage and guidance. At the last supper Jesus promised that he would not leave them orphans, that he would send the Holy Spirit so that they would be his witnesses throughout the world. At the Ascension Jesus finally sent them out with the command: ‘Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them... I am with you all days, to the end of the age.’

They were weak and prone to fear—very human and frail. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended on them and they were transformed. They went out and preached boldly, proclaiming that Jesus who had been crucified was risen and that they were witnesses to the fact. They called on the people to repent and be baptised, which they did in their thousands. Pentecost is seen as the birth of the Church. There were people in Jerusalem from all nations who became converts.

At Antioch they were called ‘Christians’, and the name took on.

Thus the Church developed from what Jesus and the Holy Spirit did with very ordinary, weak men.

Within the NT writings themselves we observe what is called the trajectory of the Twelve. They play a role of mentoring, oversight, teaching, decision-making, leadership, in the Church. They were the foundation

apostles, and the Church thereafter is called ‘Apostolic’.

Peter’s importance likewise becomes more heightened as the time of the New Testament writings wears on. This phenomenon is referred to as ‘the Petrine trajectory’. From Pentecost on he is the community leader.

Paul, with his co-worker Barnabas, was to take the Good News to the ends of the earth—Cyprus, Asia Minor, Greece, Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and ultimately to Rome. He was ‘the apostle to the Gentiles’. He established Churches with the essentials of their organisation and moved on. Thus the Jesus movement became a world-wide reality.

Paul was also the first theologian. He gave theological interpretations of the mystery of the Church: the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the pilgrim People of God. The first letter of Peter picks up the theme: ‘Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people, for you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.’ (1Pet.2.9-10)

People from all nations form one people from many races and nations, baptised in the one Spirit. (1Cor. 12:13). We are the People of God, the Church. The Church is our community, a community of faith, hope and love. We enter this community through baptism. We are re-born when we are baptised. Hence the Church is our Mother—‘holy Mother Church’.

We thank God for all God’s gifts, for God’s care and concern for us. God shepherds us.

One of these gifts is the Church institution. Jesus instituted the Church for us as the means by which he cares for our needs. This now massive world-wide institution, which began so modestly is our ‘Mother Church’.

The Church Christ established remains an all-too-human reality, but it is a divine reality as well, ‘after the nature of a sacrament’ (*Lumen Gentium* 1). The Church is the fundamental sacrament for Karl Rahner.

Because God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are intimately involved in the being and life of the Church, and because of the divine purpose in establishing the Church to be an instrument to continue Christ’s work of redemption, we believe in a Church that will endure to the end of time. This is our faith. This is the Church we believe in.

All people, as we read in the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* nos. 13-16, are called to belong to the catholic unity of the People of God. The Catholic faithful are ‘fully incorporated’ while Catechumens, separated brethren, those who have not yet received the gospel but acknowledge the Creator, those who seek the unknown God, those who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God, and finally those who have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God but strive to live a good life are all related to the Church: ‘Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel’ (*LG* 16). Mother Church cares for them all.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

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*Mother and Teacher of all nations—such is the Catholic Church in the mind of her Founder, Jesus Christ; to hold the world in an embrace of love, that men, in every age, should find in her their own completeness in a higher order of living, and their ultimate salvation. [...] To her was entrusted by her holy Founder the twofold task of giving life to her children and of teaching them and guiding them—both as individuals and as nations—with maternal care.*

—John XXIII *Encyclical Mater et Magistra, 1961.*