

## *Chapter 1*

# The Era of the Apostles

“They’re drunk!” The crowd laughed and shouted insults as the fisherman tried to get them to listen to what he had to say.

“We’re not drunk! It’s only nine o’clock in the morning!” Peter yelled as loud as he could, waving his hands to quiet the crowd. “This is what the prophet Joel predicted would happen . . .”

The disciples tried their best to tell their story to the crowd gathered there. But who could blame the people for not believing what they had not seen with their own eyes? The Messiah had come, and had been executed, and then he had risen from the dead. His disciples had gone from the depths of despair to the heights of spiritual elation—from cowering, scattered sheep to bold shepherds—only to find themselves boldly preaching to a tough crowd.<sup>1</sup>

## Jesus’ Life

About thirty-eight years earlier, when most of the Western world had one language—in other words, at the perfect time in history—the world had changed forever, and yet at the time, most people didn’t even notice. A baby was born in a small town called Bethlehem, in a cave that was serving as a stable, and that baby would change everything. By our calendar, the year would have been about 5 or 6 BC.

But how could Jesus Christ be born five or six years “before Christ,” you ask? Well, the folks who figured out the beginning of our calendar were a bit off. As it turns out, they missed the mark by at least four years. We know from the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus was born “in the days of King Herod” (Mt 2:1). And we also know that King Herod died in 4 BC. So that means Jesus had to be born before 4 BC. As it turns out, he

was probably born a year earlier, in 5 BC, or maybe in 6 BC. We're not exactly sure. Luke's gospel tells us that the census prompting Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem was taken "before Quirinius was governor of Syria" (2:2).<sup>2</sup> But that only means that Jesus was born some time prior to AD 6. So we don't really know the exact year that Jesus was born, but for the sake of argument, let's say it was 5 BC.

Later, Luke tells us that Jesus was baptized "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (3:1).<sup>3</sup> That would be either late in the year 29 or, more likely, in the year 30. So Jesus was actually about thirty-five when he began his ministry, and about thirty-eight when he was crucified. According to tradition, the date of his crucifixion—the original Good Friday—was March 25, in the year 33.<sup>4</sup>

There is a Jewish tradition in the Talmud that says Moses died on his birthday.<sup>5</sup> This was considered a great blessing, and a confirmation of his mission in life—that he completed God's plan for himself. And since Jesus was the predicted "prophet like Moses," many early Christians assumed that Jesus must also have died on the same date on which he came into the world (see Deuteronomy 18:15–19). But for them, the date Jesus came into the world was not his birthday—it was the date of his conception, for that was the moment of the Incarnation, at the time of the annunciation. So if the early Christians (mainly in the West) assumed that Jesus' death occurred on March 25, they reasoned that his conception also must have occurred on March 25—and that's how we got the date for the Solemnity of the Annunciation. Then it was a simple math problem to add nine months to that and calculate Jesus' birth date as December 25. I know—babies rarely come after exactly nine months, but, of course, it would be assumed that Mary had a perfect pregnancy and that Jesus came right on time. In any case, this reasoning never really caught on in the East, but it explains why we celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25.

The early Christians believed that Jesus came to make an exchange on our behalf. The apostle Paul said that Jesus took on himself a curse that was meant for us, and in exchange gave to us his blessing as the heirs of God's kingdom (see Galatians 3:13–14). The anonymous *Epistle*

to *Diognetus* tells us that Jesus took on our sinfulness so that we could be justified by his righteousness.<sup>6</sup> And the second-century Church Father and theologian Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons said that he became what we are so that we could become like him.<sup>7</sup>

So Jesus' arrival was humble, and his early life was mostly lived in anonymity. When he was about thirty-five, he gathered his disciples and started teaching and healing.<sup>8</sup> People were amazed, and many didn't know what to make of him. Eventually he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They gave him a bunch of different answers, but then he got to the real question: "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter went out on a limb, answered the question, and got it right. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," he said (see Matthew 16:13–16). And for that, Jesus made Peter the leader of the disciples, which is why he was the one to preach the first Christian homily in the second chapter of the book of Acts.

The people who killed Jesus figured, "Strike the shepherd that the sheep may be scattered" (Zec 13:17). But what they didn't figure on was that this Shepherd had started something that wasn't going away, something he called a "church," in which the sheep would become shepherds. Of course, they also couldn't predict that this Messiah would refuse to stay dead. On the third day after his execution, he was back. And not as a ghost, or as some theoretical metaphor for eternal life—he was back in the flesh. He could eat breakfast with his disciples, he could be hugged, and Thomas even got to touch his wounds. After that experience, Thomas called Jesus "my Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). That's a pretty bold statement, calling a man "God." Especially for Jews. But the disciples had seen and touched him risen from the dead. They knew this was no ordinary man. Eventually they would clarify that he was the incarnation—literally the embodiment—of the divine nature (see Colossians 2:9).

## Birth of the Church

And so the Church was born. Many people are accustomed to thinking of the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples

and Peter preached that first homily, as the “birthday” of the Church (see Acts 2). But I would argue that the birth of the Church was that Thursday night when Jesus took some bread and said, “This is my body,” and held up a cup of wine and said, “This is my blood.” The Church was born when Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Then the Church was “baptized” when Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead. In fact, the Church Fathers understood our baptism as a participation in the passion of Christ—we go down under the water just as Jesus went down into the earth, and we rise up out of the water just as Jesus rose up and out of the tomb. So I would say that Pentecost could be called the *confirmation* of the Church, with the coming of the Holy Spirit. But the birthday of the Church was Holy Thursday.

Still, the disciples didn’t really know what a “church” was yet. Whatever it was, it was not an institution, and it certainly was not a building. The apostle Paul would call it the mystical Body of Christ, which a person becomes part of by sharing in the sacramental Body of Christ, the Eucharist. The very identity of the Church was connected to the eucharistic table, such that the people who make up the Church are the people who come to the table. The Church Fathers would come to believe that it was impossible to find salvation outside the Church because the Eucharist could not be found outside the Church.<sup>9</sup> And so the first Christians began the process of converting the world (and the Roman Empire) by celebrating the Eucharist and loving one neighbor at a time (see Acts 2:42–47).

*Up Close and Personal:*

## STEPHEN

Stephen, one of the Church’s seven original deacons, got himself into trouble by publicly proclaiming his faith in Jesus. We can imagine how difficult it was for Stephen to try to explain that he was not preaching against monotheism. He began by trying to

reassure the crowd that followers of “the Way” were still good Jews and still believed in only one God. But Jesus is divine, too, he said, because he is the Son of God. When the people didn’t understand, Stephen’s preaching became kind of apocalyptic, making him sound like one of those Old Testament prophets who told people things they didn’t want to hear. And then Stephen concluded by saying that it was his audience’s ancestors who had killed the prophets, just as they had killed Jesus.

At the end of his speech, Stephen looked up into the sky and proclaimed that he could see Jesus, the Son of Man, standing at the right hand of God. This reminded the people of Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man, in the book of Daniel, and Stephen was proclaiming what Jesus himself had implied—that Jesus is that Son of Man, the Messiah that Daniel foresaw. And so the leaders dragged Stephen out of the city, and the crowd stoned him to death. Before he died, he did exactly what his Lord had done: he asked God to forgive his murderers. And that’s how Stephen became the first martyr of the Church.

---

## Persecution Begins

Not long after that first homily by Peter, the people in and around Jerusalem were becoming annoyed by the incessant witnessing of the apostles. Not only were the apostles preaching, but they were healing—performing “signs and wonders.” The authorities tried to stop them, but they just kept on doing what the Spirit led them to do. In fact, they appointed deacons, or servers, to assist them in the distribution of alms and probably also in the liturgies. One of these deacons was Stephen, a guy who was really on fire for the mission of Christ, and who had the gifts for it as well.

When Stephen was out in public, speaking to a gathered crowd, some of the leaders of the Jewish faith tried to argue with him. But they were frustrated when they couldn’t humiliate him into silence, so they stirred

up the crowd with serious accusations against Stephen. And it probably wasn't hard to do, since Stephen was trying to convince people that a crucified man from the working class had come back from the dead and now should be worshipped! So they accused Stephen of blasphemy; they said he was teaching against Judaism by proposing that Jesus was another God. Stephen was stoned to death.

One of the bystanders at Stephen's stoning was a man named Saul. He held the coats of the people who were throwing the rocks. He encouraged and participated in the persecution of Jesus' followers, until one day when he met the risen Christ on the road, on his way to Damascus. This encounter changed him from a hater of the Church to one of her greatest evangelists. He started going by his Roman name, Paul, and he wrote a big part of the New Testament. As he traveled around the Roman Empire, he helped found churches in various cities and wrote letters to them. Those letters that have survived are the books of the New Testament named after the Christians in those cities or regions—Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and a letter to the Christians in Rome, even though Paul hadn't yet been to Rome when he wrote it.

## The Word Spreads

For a long time, the Roman emperors didn't know the Church even existed. If they did hear about her, they thought she was a faction within Judaism. Around the year 49, the emperor Claudius got wind of some drama going on among the Jews in Rome, probably in the section of town now called Trastevere ("across the river"). It seems there were some arguments within the Jewish community over some crucified guy named "Chrestus," or something like that. Claudius's solution was to kick all the Jews out of Rome.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, he couldn't really kick out *all* the Jews, since many of them were slaves owned by Romans. But a lot of Jews left the city, including Christian Jews (this is why Paul's friends Aquila and Priscilla were traveling around outside of Rome). And that left the church of Rome in the

hands of Gentile Christians, former pagans who didn't know the Jewish background and traditions very well. It was probably at this time that Mark started writing the first biography of Jesus, what we call a gospel.

Eventually, the Romans started to understand that Christians were something separate from the Jews. This meant Christianity was something new. New was bad. New was suspicious. The Jews got a pass and got to practice their religion because it was ancient and because the Romans were trying to avoid rebellion. But this Christianity thing—this was an unknown quantity. Rumors started to circulate that Christians practiced evil magic, or that they were a subversive political party. Hearing whisperings about the Eucharist, some Romans thought the Christians were cannibals, literally eating flesh and drinking blood. And when they heard that married Christians called each other “brother” and “sister,” they thought Christians encouraged incest.

So when a fire broke out in Rome on the night of July 18 in the year 64, and when people started to blame Emperor Nero for starting the fire, Nero in turn blamed the Christians. They were an easy target because they were already seen as somewhat antisocial.<sup>11</sup>

Nero's persecution was relatively short-lived and mostly limited to the city of Rome, but it set a precedent that would be escalated by future emperors. Nero declared that anyone who was a Christian was automatically guilty of the crime of arson. He tortured Christians, crucified them, and burned them on crosses. He was so brutal that the pagan people of Rome started to feel sorry for the Christians—especially when it became clear that the fire had conveniently leveled a section of Rome where Nero was planning to build his new palace.

Both Peter and Paul were executed in Rome, sometime in the mid-60s. Paul was beheaded—a quick death for a Roman citizen. Peter was crucified upside down in the circus of Nero. This circus, an oval horse-racing track where Romans could see chariot races, animal acts, and yes, public executions, was located at a place called Vatican Hill. Today, the left transept of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is directly over the place where Peter died. The story goes that when Peter found out that he was to be crucified,

he begged his executioners to kill him some other way, saying that he was not worthy to die in the same way as his Lord. And so they mockingly complied, turning him upside down to be crucified. Peter was buried in a cemetery behind the bleachers of the circus, and his tomb is still there today, now directly under the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica.

Sometime in the early sixties, Luke must have written his gospel as well as the book of Acts. We know that Luke wrote the gospel first and the Acts of the Apostles as a second volume, the sequel to the story. But he must have finished both books before the deaths of Paul and Peter, since there is no other explanation for the fact that Acts does not relate the accounts of the two most important martyrdoms of the Church.

In the year 66, war broke out in Judea. Jewish rebels had finally succeeded in antagonizing the Romans to the point where Roman legions were sent in to put a stop to the guerrilla warfare. The war lasted three and a half years, culminating in the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. The spoils of war, including what was looted from the Temple, would be used to build the Colosseum in Rome, where more Christians would eventually die for their faith.

---

## YOU BE THE JUDGE:

*Weren't Christian holidays originally pagan holidays?*

You may have heard that Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter were originally pagan holidays that were "baptized," or taken over by the Church when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Well, that's not really true. In fact, some pagan holidays may have actually been the Empire's attempt at competing with the Church. In other words, it's not even clear that some of them existed before Christianity.



Let's take Christmas as an example. First, we have to be clear that not all Christians observe Christmas on the same day. Most Eastern Christians celebrate Christmas on what we call Epiphany, January 6. So why do Christians in the West celebrate Christmas on December 25? Is it because it was originally the Roman celebration of Saturnalia, or some winter solstice holiday? No. As we've seen, Christmas is calculated as exactly nine months from the Solemnity of the Annunciation. Nine months after March 25 is December 25. So it has nothing at all to do with pagan holidays.

Western and Eastern Christians don't celebrate Easter on the same date, either. Although the long controversy around calculating the date of Easter is too involved to get into here, the historical debate surrounding it proves that it had nothing to do with taking over a pagan holiday. It was actually all about how to connect it to the Jewish holiday of Passover.

---

## Choices to Be Made

The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 ended the sacrificial system of the Jewish religion, and effectively ended the Jewish priesthood as well. Jewish believers were faced with a dilemma as to how to continue on with their faith. The focus would shift away from sacrifices to a devotion to the word of God. Most Jews followed the Pharisees, who after all were experts in the law. They became the rabbis and led their people in prayer and study of the Torah—the written word of God. Many Jews went a different way, however. They followed the apostles, who initiated them into the sacraments of Jesus, the living Word of God. This was how Judaism and Christianity went their separate ways and Christianity became a completely distinct religion.

Matthew's gospel was probably written in the seventies or eighties (Matthew had both Mark and Luke to work with),<sup>12</sup> as was a document

known as the *Didache*, which could have been a companion to the gospel. It contains instructions for people being catechized and preparing for Baptism. The *Didache* claims to come directly from the twelve apostles, but we're pretty sure that it wasn't written by any of them. That's the main reason why it's not included in the New Testament.

Still, the *Didache* contains some very important information for understanding the first-century Church. For one thing, catechesis was not about learning doctrine; it was about learning the moral expectations of a baptized Christian. The early bishops seem to have assumed that new converts would get their theology from the scripture readings and homilies in the Mass. That could come later. What was important for now was that they understood what they were committing themselves to in Baptism. New members of the Church had to learn how to *behave* as Christians, so that they did not embarrass the Church or, more importantly, lose their salvation through postbaptismal sin.

One of the most remarkable facets of the early Church is that Christians considered their morality as part of their very identity. This is very different from the way that pagan Romans thought of themselves. Christians would say, "We are people who behave like this, or do not behave like that." And in the *Didache*, one of the most important moral aspects of Christian identity was the conviction that abortion is murder. Even though abortion (and even infanticide) was perfectly acceptable in Roman society, the Church would have none of it. And it was things like this that made Christians seem antisocial to their Roman neighbors.

Of course, it was also assumed that Christians should not participate in pagan worship, since that would be a form of idolatry. But Romans considered their traditional rituals to be an essential part of good citizenship. So not only were Christians seen as antisocial but they were also coming to be seen as anti-Roman. The more they refused to honor the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon, the more the Christians were thought to be "atheists," because to the Roman mind having only one God was not enough.