

Lesson 16 - The Apostolic Church

Objectives

By the end of this lesson the student should know that:

- List the four characteristics of the first Christian community described in Acts: worship, learning, sharing and fellowship.
- Explain that these elements are necessary characteristics for the Church in our day as well.
- Recognize Jerusalem as "the Mother of All the Churches."
- Know that the Christian community spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria when believers were expelled from the city at the death of St Stephen, and then to Syria and beyond.
- Know that it was at Antioch that the disciples of Christ were first called *Christians*.

For the Catechist

The Book of Acts tells us the story of the growth of the early Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We need only to read the early chapters of Acts to see the continual references to the Spirit in every aspect of the Church's life. The Spirit was the obvious Leader in this new community, rather than an object of reflection or study.

Through the Holy Spirit the Apostles comprehended and then transmitted their experience of the mystery of salvation, that Christ was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Continuing to observe the daily hours of prayer, they also came together for the Breaking of the Bread, discovering a new focus of unity in the Eucharist. The believers' life was further characterized by a sharing of goods and fellowship. As the Church became more widespread, grateful outreach to Jerusalem, the Mother Church, became an important sign of their unity.

The same characteristics are important for the life of every Church in the apostolic tradition. We must continue to worship, to study, to share and to come together in order to manifest the same way of life of the Apostolic Church. Our ministry to children must provide opportunities for them to experience all these qualities of the Church. While the church school provides an opportunity for learning, the parish must also foster increasing participation in the Church's worship as well as the parish's fellowship activities and charitable programs. The church school staff may need to serve as a catalyst for involving young people more actively in these aspects of church life.

Materials Needed:

Opening Prayer: Icon corner, student texts

Introduction: Bibles, easel or wall pad, markers,

Guided Reading: Bibles

Activity A: "Worship" Worksheet, pencils, Bibles

Activity B: "Who Are These Christians" Worksheet, pencils

Activity C: "Sharing" Worksheet, scissors

Activity D: Kingdom Tree Worksheet, craft items

Icons and Pictures:

Come Bless the Lord: St Stephen (#28)

Revelation in Color: The Kingdom of God Given to the Gentiles (#20)

1. Opening Prayer

Pray Psalm 19:2-7 on page 79 in the student text. Remind the students that the Church compares this description of the galaxies to the extension of the Church at the preaching of the Apostles.

2. Review

Review the main points of the previous lesson using the pages from your wall or easel pad. Use the time line on the Unit Page to recall that the life of Christ and His disciples coincided with the period of Roman rule in the Holy Land.

Ask the students to explain why they think Christ's followers decided to go from place to place teaching others to follow Jesus? (*Jesus had told them to teach all nations.*)

- Ask: Who or what empowered Christ's followers to teach all nations to follow Jesus? (*The Holy Spirit who came upon them at Pentecost.*)

3. Introduction

Present the group with the following scenarios. Ask whether what happened was good or bad.

1. Madge, a ninth grader, was hit by a car on her way home from school. Several of her classmates offered to donate blood to help her.
2. A storm knocked out the power to seven homes leaving them without refrigeration or cooking facilities for a week. Two nearby restaurant owners offered to send them dinners at one-third the usual cost.

Note that sometimes people turn tragedies to good by the way they respond. Ask the students to offer any other examples they may know. Add any similar experiences from your own life.

Background Reading (St Stephen the First Martyr):

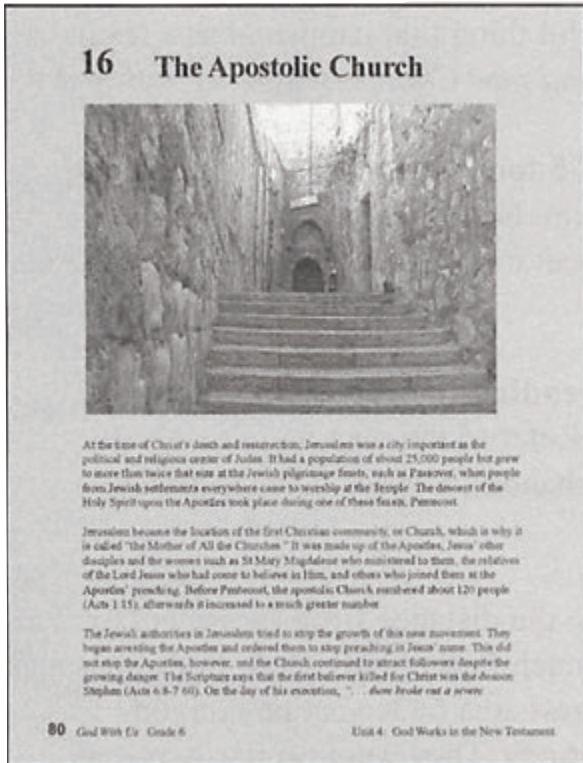
"St Luke's account of the ministry of Stephen, one of the seven original deacons, is the oldest example of what we would now call a 'life' of a saint. Pagan literature occasionally recounted a great man's death as exemplary; such was the case with Plato's account of Socrates' last hours. Christians in the second century rather quickly adopted the habit of recording the deaths of the martyrs and this custom later expanded to include longer accounts of the lives and miraculous deeds of all sorts of saints. The story of Stephen's martyrdom is very consciously patterned on our Lord's passion as recorded in the Gospels. The Evangelists had set a precedent for narrating a holy death. The deeper truth, however, is that the martyrs replicate the pattern of Christ's passion in their own deaths.

"Like Jesus, Stephen performed 'great wonders and signs' and preached in a manner his opponents could not refute. Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin is the longest speech in Acts. On the surface, it seems to have nothing to do with Jesus, who is the 'Righteous One' mentioned only at the end (7:52)."

(continued on next page)

Conclude by pointing out that in today's lesson we will see something evil become the cause of something wonderful.

4. Guided Reading, Pages 80-81



Before the reading, **summarize the objectives of the lesson** on a wall pad or easel pad so that the page can be preserved and used for review next week.

Indicate that in the last lesson we talked about how the Apostles were working men from northern Galilee but came to be courageous teachers proclaiming Christ. They had been made bold when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. Eventually they were to go throughout the Roman and Persian Empires establishing or encouraging Churches. But where the Church began was in Jerusalem.

Have the **students read the first two paragraphs on page 80**; then compare the size of the first Christian community (120) to the population of Jerusalem (25,000). Ask: If each congregation numbered 120, how many would there be in a city of 25,000? (208). If there was only 1 congregation of Jesus' followers, how many Jewish congregations would there be? (207). Would the one congregation of Jesus' followers be much of a threat to the other 207? Some people thought so.

Background Reading (St. Stephen) (continued):

"If we look at Stephen's rather long summary of OT history carefully, however, we will see four subtle emphases. One is a consistent pattern of Israel's hardness of heart and ingratitude for God's interventions (7:51-53). A second is a pattern of rejection, exemplified by Joseph, Moses and the Prophets. A third theme is worship (7:40-50): Stephen cites legitimate OT traditions that downplay the Temple and accuse the Israelites of idolatry. Finally, Stephen notes that Abraham and Moses were both aliens, born outside the land of Israel. This may be a hint at the Church's outreach to Gentiles or an attempt by Stephen (who has a Greek name) to justify his own identity.

"In his passion, Stephen reminds us of Jesus. Both are hauled before the High Priest and accused by false witnesses of threatening the Temple. Both are shown falling to their knees in prayer: Jesus in Gethsemane and Stephen at his stoning. Both are killed outside the city. At the moment of His death, Jesus forgives His killers and commends His spirit to the Father, while Stephen forgives and commends his spirit to Jesus in similar words. Jesus quotes Daniel's vision of the heavenly Son of Man at His trial; Stephen's witness that Jesus is that Son of Man whom Daniel saw is what provokes his hearers to stone him. We should note that the Sanhedrin never passes sentence on Stephen. He is stoned in an act of mob violence" (AW 26-21).

Have the students read the next paragraph to learn about this "threat." If possible read some of Stephen's story from Acts 6:8-7:60.

Remind the students that, as you had mentioned, sometimes evil things lead to something wonderful. Ask:

- What was the evil that happened? (*Stephen was killed, most of the first believers scattered*).
- What was the wonderful thing that happened as a result? (*The Gospel spread and new Churches were established*.)

Consult the map on page 175 for the location of Samaria and Galilee in relation to Jerusalem. Note that the line for Philip's journey refers to his subsequent travel to Gaza and Caesarea (Acts 8:26-40).

Have the students continue **reading the remaining three paragraphs in this section**. Refer to the map on page 175 to locate Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), Cyprus, Damascus and Antioch.

Note that Damascus is double the distance from Jerusalem to Galilee, and that Antioch is much farther still. Both Damascus and Antioch were outside the largest area of Jewish population. Cyprus is another country entirely. They were primarily pagan Greek areas, but with colonies of Jews.

Refer to the note on the map concerning Paul's journeys to Damascus in AD 36 and to Antioch in AD 40. There were already Christian communities there before Paul arrived, within ten years after Christ's death and resurrection.

Background Reading (The Holy Spirit in the Church):

"God's dwelling among us forever - this was His aim in the original creation, an aim frustrated by sin. The Son of God comes into the world to undo the fall of Adam. He succeeds, and the result is the coming of the Spirit. What Christ's work prepared for begins to happen. As far as this life is concerned, the Spirit's presence is the completion of God's plan for us. As St. Athanasius said, 'God became man so that we might receive the Holy Spirit.'

"This unique experience signaling the coming of the Holy Spirit to the followers of Christ marks the beginning of the Church as we know it. The Church is much more than a society of people with the same beliefs or principles. We are a living organism, in Christ - not because we walk with him in the flesh or even because we follow His way - but because His Spirit lives in us. The same Spirit which was shown to be in Christ at His baptism is now in the Church, creating it and giving it the divine life. Thus the Church, with the Holy Spirit as its 'soul,' becomes as it were the continuation of the incarnation of God in the world" (*WEF* 41).

4. How the First Christians Lived Page 81

Draw a large circle on the board, newsprint pad or poster and divide it into four quadrants. In each quadrant write one of the following letters "S, W, S, M." Direct the students to read this section carefully so that they will be able to identify these letters.

How the First Christians Lived

The Acts of the Apostles gives us an idea of the life of the first Christians. "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers... and were ever together, and were eating and drinking in common..." (Acts 2:42-47)

1. They studied or learned. "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles..."

2. They worshipped or "the breaking of the bread" and/or "the prayers."

3. They shared what they had "according to each one's need."

4. They met and ate together in their homes.

These are still the most important activities of our Church today.

The Teaching of the Apostles Page 82

Have them **read the section** and then identify the letters (*Study, Worship, Sharing, Meeting Together*). Emphasize that these are the chief signs of any Church's life. If a group of Christians does not study, worship, share, or meet together, it is not living as a Church of Christ.

Tell the students that the first Christians had three ways to learn the Apostles' teaching. Have **them read the section, then identify the three ways** (*personally, in the Epistles and Gospels, and through the bishops chosen to succeed them*). Ask which of these ways are available to us (**Scriptures, bishops**) and how we might devote ourselves to the Teaching of the Apostles (*Bible reading, sermons*).

The Teaching of the Apostles

As the Church grew, the Apostles went from Jerusalem to other cities, preaching the Gospel. They wrote letters to the churches they visited. These letters are called the Epistles. They also put their messages of Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit, writing the Gospels, which are the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

As the Church grew, the Apostles selected others to lead the Churches as Bishops, who are called Bishops or Bishops.

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Sharing with Those in Need

In the first century people could usually only turn to their family for help or to beg from others. From the beginning the Church's major organizing work was to help the sick, widows and orphans. Some believers, like Barnabas...

Background Reading (Pentecost):

"The Church celebrates this coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the climax of its liturgical year. The Jews kept Pentecost as a celebration of the Covenant God had made with his people at Mt. Sinai. Through this covenant, Israel became God's people and received the gift of the Law. And so this Feast celebrated God's intention not only to lead His people out of slavery (Passover), but beyond that, into a permanent and loving relationship or Covenant with Himself.

"The giving of the Holy Spirit, celebrated at the New Pentecost of the Church, marks the same design on God's part. It is not His plan to simply deliver us from death (Pascha), but to make a New Covenant with us, sealed by the indwelling presence of his very own Spirit."

(continued on next page)

The Breaking of Bread and Prayers Page 82



Refer to the circle you have drawn and to the "S" for study you have just discussed. Have the students read the next section and identify the letter referring to it ("*W*" for *worship*).

Have the students find and read 1 Corinthians 11:23-27. Stress the following points: (1) St Paul learned about the Eucharist (from the other Apostles) and passed it on, so it is one of the oldest aspects of Church life; (2) whenever we receive, we are saying we believe that Christ is risen and will come again; (3) if we receive thoughtlessly it is as if we crucified Christ.

Ask the students if they have ever attended vespers, matins, compline or any other of the Church's hours of daily prayer. Note when these services may be held in your parish and remind the students that when we attend them we are doing as the Apostles did when they attended the hours of prayer in their day.

This may be an appropriate time to answer any questions students may want to ask concerning the Church's worship.

Sharing With Those in Need Pages 82-83

Refer again to the circle you have drawn asking what the second "S" stand for (*sharing*). Read the section and point out how today we continue to share what we have, as the early Christians did. You may draw the students' attention to (1) plaques or inscriptions on icons and church windows identifying donors; (2) parish charitable programs for raising funds or donating to causes; (3) assistance given by the parish to your "Mother Church" abroad.

Background Reading (Pentecost) (continued):

"Just as the coming of the Spirit was the culmination of God's self-revelation, this festival is the consummation of the Church's paschal feast. The intimacy with God made possible at the resurrection is realized, as the Spirit comes to dwell in us. The Spirit, not given until Jesus is glorified, now springs forth from Christ risen, like rivers of living water (cf. John 7: 37-38) for the life of the faithful. To represent the life-giving effects of the Spirit's presence, many Byzantine communities have the custom of decorating their churches on Pentecost with greenery and flowers.

"The Byzantine Churches also celebrate the revelation of the Holy Trinity at Pentecost. For the first time, people were experiencing the distinct presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' followers had come to know God as the Father. They recognized Jesus as His Son incarnate. Now they come face to face with His Holy Spirit and see Him as 'Another.' By this sending of the Spirit, Christ had effectively revealed that God is Trinity - three persons in one God" (WEF 48).

Meeting in Homes Page 83

Ask the students what the "M" in your circle means (*meeting*). After reading the section, ask the students why they think that Christians continue to meet together. Remind them that church is not a place we go as consumers, like we go to a supermarket. We are meant to be a community, helping one another and supporting each other. Christians meet together to know one another more deeply and to be ready to encourage each other in living a Christian life. Illustrate with examples from your parish life or your own experience.

5. Activity A (Worship in the Apostolic Church)

Distribute Worksheet A. Have the students complete the worksheet individually, then exchange papers and correct one another's paper.

6. Activity B (Who Are These Christians?)

Distribute Worksheet B. Have the students complete the worksheet in pairs, then review the answers as a group. If possible, have one of the students conduct the review.

7. Activity C (Sharing in the Church)

Divide the class into groups of at least three each. Give each group one of the scenarios on Worksheet C and allow time for a common decision to be made. Then share with the class.

8. Activity D (The Kingdom Tree)

Remind the students of Jesus' Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32) and the project of the Kingdom Tree. Have the students draw branches coming from Jerusalem to represent the Churches of Antioch, Damascus, Cyprus (Barnabas), and Crete (Titus).

9. Time Line

Refer to the time line poster. Have the students brainstorm the names of people mentioned in this lesson (*The Apostles' co-workers, the first martyrs, St Joseph of Arimathea*) and indicate the period in which each lived. Write in the names and dates under each appropriate heading to show when the Church began to spread the Gospel of Christ.

10. Summary

End the lesson by summarizing the lesson from the aims on page 237, from the elements in the student text on which you focused and/or from any other points raised in the lesson.

11. Closing Prayer

Conclude with the reading of the troparion on page 84 in the student text.

Worship in the Apostolic Church

The Acts of the Apostles records the following incidents in which the early Church was worshipping. Read the passage and describe how they worshiped.

Acts 6:2-6 _____

Which of our acts of worship today resembles this apostolic practice? (See the list below)

Acts 8:12-16 _____

Which of our acts of worship today resembles this apostolic practice? (See the list below)

Acts 13:1-3 _____

Which of our acts of worship today resembles this apostolic practice? (See the list below)

Acts 20: 6-7 _____

Which of our acts of worship today resembles this apostolic practice? (See the list below)

**Baptism
Ordination**

**Chrismation
The Fasts**

**The Eucharist
Sunday Liturgy**

Who Are These Christians

The early Christians were not the only ones to write about themselves. They were also mentioned by non-Christian writers. Pliny the Younger (AD 61-C. 115) was a Roman senator who had served as a soldier in Syria. In 109 he became governor of Bithynia and Pontus in Asia Minor. In a letter to Emperor Trajan, written a year or two later, he described Christians this way:

"Those who were Christians would come together before dawn on a fixed day and they would sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god. They were joined to one another by a holy oath in a bond — not to do anything wrong, to commit any fraud or theft or adultery or to falsify an oath or break faith. When this was over their custom was to separate and to assemble again to partake of food of an ordinary and simple kind."

1. When did we take a "holy oath" like that described by Pliny? _____

2. What other word meaning "bond" do we use to describe our tie to God?

3. On what "fixed day" do we come together? _____

4. What food "of an ordinary and simple kind" do we share in our assemblies?

5. Pretend you are not a Christian. Write a paragraph describing what you see at a Sunday Liturgy.

Who Are These Christians

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1. When did we take a "holy oath" like that described by Pliny? Our baptismal promises
2. What other word meaning "bond" do we use to describe our tie to God? Religion (Latin:re-ligare- to tie together)
3. On what "fixed day" do we come together? Sunday, the Lord's Day
4. What food "of an ordinary and simple kind" do we share in our assemblies? The Eucharist (Holy Communion)

Sharing in the Church

Situation #1

There are some widows in the church who are unable to provide for themselves. They have no family to provide for them. Recently they have started to beg. Unfortunately there is not much money in the deacon's emergency fund to help them. What should we do?



Situation #2

The church has decided to send missionaries to Armenia. Some feel the missionaries should move there and find work; then they could build up the church in their spare time. Others feel that our church should pay their way completely. Still others believe that our church should just provide for their food and housing.



Situation #3

A few well-to-do families in the church have sold some land and given the money to the church. They are encouraging others to do the same and are criticizing those who do not agree.



Situation #4

A wealthy member has provided a lot of money to the church. Now he insists that wealthy members should get special privileges in the church.



Situation #5

A group of believers in Samaria have been experiencing severe problems. First there was a famine. Then non-believers began to harass them and they are now keeping their meetings secret.

The Kingdom Tree

