CHRIST UNFURLED

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The First 500 Years of Jesus's Life

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To
Fr. Donald J. Keefe, SJ (d. 2018), who
taught me to love the Church,
and
Fr. Leo Sweeney, SJ (d. 2001), who taught
me Christ and the Church are One

"Modern Catholicism is nothing else but simply the legitimate growth and complement, that is, the natural and necessary development, of the doctrine of the early Church."

—St. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*

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Greater Ones Than These

CHURCH HISTORY AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

"Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (Jn 14:9–12).

Philip captured the human heart when he cried out his desire to see and to know God. From the depths of his being, he wanted to behold the fullness of all that is. He instinctually knew that if he could have that, there would really be nothing lacking in his life, and so he begs Jesus: "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied" (Jn 14:8). In his response, Jesus assures his followers that faith in him will not only lead to eternal life but will result in even greater works than they see him doing.

How can we do greater things than Jesus? What could Jesus mean here, promising that whoever believes in him will perform greater works than the ones he does? How can Jesus's followers do greater things than the Lord himself?

To ask this question is to open the door to Christ's unfurling himself *into* and *as* his Church. It is to enter into the history of the Church not as a building or even a religion but as an extension of Jesus Christ himself. To pick up a book of Church history, then, is to trace the stories of Christ's disciples as they travel and evangelize, as they gather in worship, and as they set out to defend and clarify the life-giving message Jesus imparted while he walked among them. The first followers of Jesus understood the Church not as an edifice, or as some set of instructions, or even some ceremony, however pious, but as the unfolding of Christ into the lives and lands of those who lived outside first-century Jerusalem. To flip rightly through the pages of the first five hundred years of the Church, then, is to assume a posture of faith that the Church and Christ really are one. In fact, this is precisely how most of the people who feature in the pages to follow understood the body to which they freely belonged. Today, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* captures such a theology beautifully, officially teaching:

> Christ and his Church thus together make up the "whole Christ" (*Christus totus*). The Church is one with Christ. The saints are acutely aware of this unity: "Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God's grace

> toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members; he and we together are the whole man. . . . The fullness of Christ then is the head and the members. But what does 'head and members' mean? Christ and the Church" (St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 21.8). "Our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy Church whom he has taken to himself" (St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job*, *Preface* §14). "Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III.48.2). A reply of St. Joan of Arc to her judges sums up the faith of the holy doctors and the good sense of the believer: "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter" (From the *Acts of the Trial of Joan of Arc*).[1]

As such, the Church teaches us today that "the good sense of the believer" never separates Christ from his Church, the Head from his Body. This reality then helps us better understand that the apostles and their immediate successors had no greater access to our Lord than we do today. To the truly Christian mind, every baptism is an unfolding of Bethlehem, every sacrifice is the Passion continued, each consecrated "yes" continues Mary's "let it be done to me according to your word," every feeding of the hungry is to minister to Christ, every pope is an echo of Peter's confession, every woman whose dignity is restored in Christ is

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1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [hereafter CCC] §795.

another Mary Magdalen, every chalice really is the Holy Grail.

Whereas Christ could meet a few hundred people at any one gathering, his Church today gathers billions and continues to grow. Whereas Christ preached in his native tongue, his Gospel is today proclaimed in thousands of languages. Whereas our divine Healer cured the ill and comforted the mourning throughout only a tiny part of the Middle East, how many are today healed in his hospitals and nourished in his shelters around the entire world? Since Truth can never err, perhaps this is how Jesus meant that we would do "greater things" than if he had remained on this earth's surface. Whereas Christ founded his Church on the primacy of Peter (Mt 16:18), the Pentecostal outpouring vivified that Church and equipped her with the languages and growing cultural awareness (Acts 2) of how to succeed in bringing the Gospel into every land of this world. So perhaps this is how we are to understand that bittersweet moment of Christ's revealing his ascension as being "better" for those he seemingly leaves behind: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you" (Jn 16:7). In ascending, the Son raises all of humanity into heavenly glory by sending the Holy Spirit, who in turn makes all his disciples sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father. Christ's departure from us may be mysterious, it may be confusing, but the virtue of hope knows that in the end it is better, infinitely better.

In the book of Acts, St. Luke starts a custom of writing down the story of how God's new presence in Christ

changed lives forever. The book of Acts is thus the first narration of the Church's history but was never intended to be a mere history. It is also a theology, a story based in faith that the movement of the first disciples in and out of Jerusalem was something divinely inspired and sustained. This was no mere human endeavor: this was the power of God sweeping through souls and uniting the entire world around the New Adam who has opened the gates of heaven for all. Church history is thus an echo of what Christ began and what Luke and the other apostles continued and extends to the present life of the Church today. Accordingly, these pages approach the genesis and the growth of the Church as the personal entry of the Son of God into the human condition, and then his extending his divine presence throughout the world as his Church. As such, my approach to the first five hundred years of Church history is ultimately the story of Jesus Christ alive and active in his faithful throughout the globe and across the centuries. While some see the history of the Church as the simple chronicling of events or the reporting of dates and deeds, this book understands Church history as the story of how Christ brings cultures and civilizations to a fuller understanding of the Truth that alone sets us free. The Church is neither a building nor a book, but she is instead Jesus Christ's dwelling in and deifying the human soul.

In the following chapters, the Church Fathers will be allowed to speak for themselves on this identity between Christ and Christian. This is a work of both Church history and Catholic ecclesiology, as my overall thesis and consequent methodology maintain that the two cannot be

separated. Anything else is just sociology, superficially accurate, perhaps, but nowhere near approaching the depths of Christ at work. This type of study is hence a discipline which demands both an historical awareness of various cultures and significant events—that is the historical—but it is also a species of sacred doctrine which approaches the Church as a body of believers founded and sustained by God himself—that is the ecclesial. Such an approach is, therefore, committed to the view that the Church is a replication of the incarnate God's own human and divine life: heavenly in its essence and organization but all too human in the ones who run and represent the Church's day to day affairs. Accordingly, the first Christian thinkers' words will be reproduced chronologically as we trace the first centuries of Christ and his people.

It was the Lord himself who taught us to see all of history this way. For on the way to Emmaus, the Lord explains to his faithful that to attribute goodness to anyone other than himself would be absurd: "'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:25–27). "Beginning with Moses," we learn. Jesus is not present only in the New Testament. All the great stories of liberation and love are ultimately about Jesus Christ, the Messiah who came gently to earth, took on our humanity, and vanquished all that kills and makes life cheap. He came to earth not to live but to die, and in so doing, he defeated death not through

power in himself but through obedience to his Father, not through strength but through surrender.

An ancient bishop from modern-day Turkey, Melito of Sardis (d. c. 190) led his people through much of the middle of the second century, dying around AD 180, and helped the Church formulate both a theology of Easter as well as the dating of this movable feast. Through Melito and faithful shepherds like him, the Church continued Christ's hope that in his death and resurrection, we too would see our own humanity hallowed and our own crucifixions consecrated:

> This the one who comes from heaven onto the earth by means of the suffering one, and wraps himself in the suffering one by means of a virgin womb, and comes forth a human being. He accepted the suffering of the suffering one through suffering in a body which could suffer, and set free the flesh from suffering. Through the Spirit which cannot die he slew the manslayer death. He is the one led like a lamb and slaughtered like a sheep; he ransomed us from the worship of the world as from the land of Egypt, and he set us free from the slavery to the devil as from the hand of Pharaoh, and sealed our souls with his own Spirit, and the members of our body with his blood.
>
> This is the one who clad death in shame and, as Moses did to Pharaoh, made the devil grieve. This is the one who struck down lawlessness and made injustice childless, as Moses did to Egypt. This is the one who delivered us from slavery to freedom, from darkness into light, from death into life, from tyranny into

> an eternal Kingdom, and made us a new priesthood, and a people everlasting for himself. This is the Pascha of our salvation: this is the one who in many people endured many things. This is the one who was murdered in Abel, tied up in Isaac, exiled in Jacob, sold in Joseph, exposed in Moses, slaughtered in the lamb, hunted down in David, dishonored in the prophets. This is the one who made flesh in a virgin, who was hanged on a tree, who was buried in the earth, who was raised from the dead, who was exalted to the heights of heaven.[2]

From the ancient figures of God's chosen people to the followers of Jesus today, all human encounters with truth and beauty, the legends which recall exploits that free the captive and liberate those bound by sin and scandal, all victories over death tell us ultimately of Christ at work.

It is significant that the earliest known piece of anti-Christian graffiti caricatures a simpleton named Alexamenos worshipping a crucified donkey. It was unearthed in a house which once belonged to the Emperor Caligula (AD 12–41) on the Palatine Hill in Rome, but etched into plaster much later, probably around the year AD 200. The language of ancient Rome's learned class was Greek, and one can imagine the Hellenic haughtiness with which the inscription was written under this pitiful scene: "Alexamenos worships his god." Here hangs an ass on a cross, the perennial

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[2] From an Easter homily by Melito of Sardis, as in *On Pascha* §66-70, trans. Alistair Stewart (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 2016), pp. 69–71. This is a most excellent series of English translations of major, mostly Greek, patristic works.

symbol for stupidity and foolishness; this is Rome's way of publicizing the supposed folly of this new band of believers. If this piece of public mockery is any indication, the Romans misunderstood the Christians at first not for being too strong but woefully too weak. The vulnerability of God was something that the pre-Christian world just could not fathom. How could a God deign to rely on a woman for his existence in this world, how could the Almighty dwell within a womb and, above all, how could God die such a disgraceful death before such a peasant crowd? St. Paul was, of course, right: the cross will always be a scandal and a folly to unbelievers (1 Cor 1:23).

The ancient Roman Empire teemed with gods and goddesses. The heavens were packed with powers, while the earth offered myriad cults and creeds seeking to ensure the bounty of harvests and the spoils of war. If a divinity could deliver security and success, the Romans scurried to incorporate such a power into their panoply of supreme beings. In fact, the Romans were particularly adroit at appropriating the numinous lords of the lands they had just conquered: making the ancient pantheon of Athens their own, assimilating the Druids of Britannia, the primal divinities of Egypt, and even securing the many idols of Mesopotamia. Rome welcomed such diversity because this empire alone was secure enough in their own traditions to borrow what they found useful, and strong enough to utterly crush what they found ineffective. They were a practical people, and whatever worked well was most likely assimilated into their way of life. When it came to religion, therefore, the Romans did not care so much about the identity of those

being worshipped, as long as each worshipper kept the prosperity of the empire and the well-being of the emperor first in their prayers and sacrifices. As such, interaction with the divine was less about proper doctrine than it was about efficient results.

The Latin phrases *do ut des* (I give to you, so you give to me) and *quid pro quo* (this for that) signify the contractual nature of a religion which was both truly utilitarian and civic in nature. Ancient Romans were the most practical of people, always having the interests of the empire in mind. While the ancient Greeks may have been philosophizing about the perfect avenue for crossing from point A to point B, the Romans were busy building the roads! Their approach to religion was no different. While the Romans certainly interacted with their gods and goddesses, they in no way approached them for a personal relationship or for their soul's sanctification. That is, the idols of Rome were not the kind of beings with whom intimacy was sought or a personal familiarity was fostered. The Romans prayed to the heavenly powers in order to secure imperial victory and common comforts; they were out to secure a universal cult by expanding the number of gods and goddesses available for worship. This state saw in the emperor, known as the "great bridge builder" between heaven and earth, the *Pontifex Maximus,* the representative of all the numinous deities. The emperor's ultimate task was to assuage the gods and goddesses in such a way that they propelled the Roman people forward—ever glorious in battle, enforcing all civic duties, and securing material prosperity. An emperor's success, and thus legitimacy, would be confirmed by his own

apotheosis, the recognition of his becoming one now with the heavenly deities upon his death. As such, the strongest of the Roman emperors ruled not only while on earth but even from the skies. The celestial court only continued to grow.

Along the edges of this vast sovereignty, something quite ordinary and unnoticed by most occurred. It was a simple event in a remote place, but it would soon challenge the clout and the very foundations of this supposedly eternal Roman Empire. It happened in the remote region of Palestine, on the eastern edges of the empire. This was the land of the Israelites, the *Iudaei*, as the Latins knew them, a people Rome tended to leave to themselves. Impressing any good Roman, this Jewish race could appeal to the antiquity of their religion, they paid their taxes, were fairly obedient citizens, and kept to a religion based on heredity and not on proselytizing outsiders. The Jews were not a threat to Rome.

But in the backwater town of Bethlehem not far from the ancient city of Jerusalem (*Aelia Capitolina* as the Latin speakers called it), a child was born who was recognized by some Asian astrologers as the one who would rise as the King of the Jews and be the long-awaited Messiah who would gather the scattered tribes of Judah together, challenging Roman rule and reclaiming Palestine as their geographical patrimony. The birth of this helpless little boy not only ignited the local potentate Herod's paranoia but also stirred the revolution at the bottom of every human heart. During the opening decades of the first century, as this baby matured into a man, tradesman, and teacher, he began to attract attention all throughout Judea. He went

about offering a new interpretation of God's original covenant. Some say he even worked miracles. What is clear is that he offended the wrong religious leaders, striking a fear so deep within their souls that they turned to an enemy in whom they hoped to find an ally, the gentiles of Rome. As the Jewish hierarchy did not have the power to execute a traitor (the *ius gladii*, or "law of the sword," a right which the Romans kept for themselves), they looked to the imperial armies and political leaders to carry out all capital punishment. To the Jews, this dissident Messiah challenged their love of the law and polluted their temple; to Caesar, he was being declared Rome's rival. Jesus had to be put to death, and in (what came to be reckoned later) the year 33, he was condemned to the most ignoble death the Romans had in their arsenal.

For his followers, the crucifixion of Christ completed the sacrifices of Israel and inaugurated a new way of knowing and loving God and God's people. The gloom of Good Friday could be understood only in the light of Easter Morning's radiance. Easter is to the Christian what liberation from Pharaoh was to the Jewish people: foreshadowed by the Exodus out of Egypt into the Promised Land, the Resurrection of Christ is the lens through which the first Christians understood themselves and their entire history as a people stronger than death. For it is ultimately the resurrection, not the crucifixion, of Christ that formed this new group of chosen ones. From an empty tomb, the disciples of Jesus received their identity, and from here, a new people began to go out from Jerusalem to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt

28:19). It would not be long until the Romans realized that what had occurred on that new Sabbath was not over and that the witnesses to this event were commanded not to remain silent and still.

This is what those first followers believed, that the Christ had now entered history. The Messiah had been born, the Son of David and the Son of Man. But exactly who was this Savior, and what would this mean for God to have now become one with all of humanity? These are the questions that the next five centuries of Christian life would seek to answer. How this Jesus of Nazareth could be *both* fully the Son of God, eternally consubstantial with his divine Father, *and* just as equally the Son of Mary, conceived consubstantial with his human Mother, would be the life-giving paradox the early Church had to clarify. Originally known as the *People of the Way* (Acts 9:2), these first followers of Jesus Christ believed that their Master had been raised from the dead and had instituted a Church upon the one who seemed to always emerge as a leader of the Lord's first followers, St. Peter.[3]

After the defection of the betrayer Judas Iscariot, the Holy Spirit inspired Peter to initiate the process by which the original eleven brought Matthias into their ranks (Acts

[3] Except for 1 Cor 3:22 and Gal 2:9, Peter is always listed first in the naming of the apostles; he is the first to confess Christ as the divine Son of God, the Messiah who has come into the world (Mt 16:16, Mk 8:29, Jn 6:69), and he is the one who admits that only Christ can have the words of eternal life and any other walk in life is in vain (Jn 6:68); he alone receives the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 16:19), and Peter is the first to speak on behalf of this new Apostolic College after Pentecost (Acts 2:13).

1:15–26). These men went about ordaining more and more priests, baptizing more and more households, and cleverly bringing the universality of the Gospel to fit whatever people they encountered, using pagan culture and literature to make the message of Jesus more comprehensible (e.g., Acts 17). Thus appropriating the best of Graeco-Roman civilization, these Christians were not only spreading throughout the empire but also attracting some of the best philosophers, politicians, and people. In response, local governors and prefects sporadically persecuted the Christians, and by AD 64, Christians had become noteworthy enough that the emperor Nero could exploit their novelty as his scapegoat, using the horrific fire in the summer of 64, which ravaged central Rome, as an occasion to persecute these new imperial upstarts.

Here is where this brief introduction to Christian history begins. Using the first four Church councils as signposts, we will traverse the first five hundred years of the Christian story, the first five hundred years of Jesus's life on earth. It is thus to introduce readers to the beginnings of Christ's Church: the development of Sacred Scripture, the ways in which the first Christians began to worship, the attacks they had to endure, the way they prayed, and guidance on how they came to think about God, humanity, and the world. As St. John Henry Cardinal Newman (d. 1890) gratefully came to realize in the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (*A Defense of his Life*), "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."[4] What drove Cardinal Newman was

[4] John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Image Books, [1878] 1960), p. 35; §5 of his introduction.

not first and foremost the eternal salvation of his Protestant brethren, although that was always on his mind, but it was more a matter of their identity and integrity as Christians belonging—historically and theologically—to the one true Church of Jesus Christ here and now.

Allowing ourselves to be immersed in history, we begin to understand that Christ founded and sustained a Church which was misunderstood and persecuted by the world for its countercultural teachings. We begin to understand how the Lord himself instituted sacraments as channels of his grace, especially the life-giving Eucharist, and we begin to discover this unbroken trajectory from today's Body of Christ all the way back to the original disciples who were ordained to preach the Good News through the whole world. We cease thinking of the Church as a merely spiritual and other-worldly convocation. We refuse to think that the Christian Church arose just a few centuries ago, or that this Body could ever act independently from her Head. The Church is the extension of Christ's very incarnate self, at once both divine and very human, the visible, tangible manifestation of an otherwise invisible God. This is why love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable for the Christian: in taking all of humanity to himself, the Lord has chosen to reveal his person and his plan of salvation through his own members, his holy Church.

As we studiously step into Church history, I would like to argue that we owe special attention to these first few centuries more than any other historical epoch. Any one of us might find ourselves more fascinated by the great doctors of the Middle Ages, or intrigued by modern trends

in contemporary theology, but we study patristic theology with a particular solicitude because, as C. S. Lewis once quipped, we cannot intelligently join a discussion at eleven o'clock that began at eight o'clock![5] The Christian faith is organic and holistic, and so all ongoing theology is inherently dependent upon what went before. The Church grows as a child grows: essentially the same being despite her growth in speech, movement, and self-awareness. As she grows, she is able to understand more and more who she is, defend herself from misunderstandings, and go out to others with greater confidence and charity. History moves swiftly, but the Church is the only reality "that frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age,"[6] because her teachings are not artificial, and so never adapted to meet political popularities. The truths of Christian doctrine are firm while also being flexible. What they are *not* are merely expedient and therefore possibly erroneous.

In the writings of the Church Fathers (and occasionally of some Mothers), we meet the beginnings of Christ's Church. Patristic (from *pater*, the Latin word for father) theology brings us into the only creed professing that at a particular place and point in time, God himself became human and, in so doing, has transformed the human condition forever. Studying the Fathers of the Church introduces us to the workings of the first global and universal

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5 C. S. Lewis's "Introduction" to St. Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, ed. by an anonymous Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, [1944] 1989), p. 4.

6 From G. K. Chesterton's 1926 essay "Why I am a Catholic," reprinted in G. K. Chesterton, *Essential Writings*, ed. William Griffin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2003), pp. 124–31; 124.

institution ever; in fact, the word "Catholic" comes from two Greek terms: *kata*, meaning "according to," and *holos*, meaning "the whole." This is why theologians down through the centuries are more indebted to previous generations of orthodox thinkers than any scientist or humanist whose genius can change our normal way of thinking and doing things literally overnight. The Church Fathers were commissioned with a truth not their own; they are the first messengers whom we trust and upon whom we build. Turning to the first few centuries of Christianity, we learn how it is precisely here that the Lord Jesus Christ communicated his revelation to the world for all time.

This is a reminder that we are a Church not constricted to the present only. Our Church is ever ancient, founded by Christ himself, and ever new, met visibly today in over a billion people. The Church is both in culture and above it, freeing us from fads and political expedience—*Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, as the Carthusian motto puts it ("The cross stands steady while the world is turning"). The Church is thus the unbroken continuation of Christ's own incarnate self, the extension of his divine and human presence on earth: divine in her teachings and ability to transform sinners into saints but all too human in her stumblings and scandals in her obvious need for grace. Christ founded a Church because his infinite wisdom understood well that we are a people in need of visibly tangible channels of his otherwise invisible love. This is why God became human and why he founded a Church: in order that post-Ascension people could see, hear, and still touch the Lord. This is why the Church consecrates water, bread and wine, oil, salt

and flame; this is why praying while kneeling should feel different than praying standing in adoration or sitting in contemplation; this is why we proclaim Christ's scriptures and communicate his ways in song and in sermon. The visible matters, the body communicates, God has become flesh.

It is this incarnate God who is the subject of John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." For the Christian, then, the way and the truth and life (the *via*, *veritas,* and *vita*, in Latin) is no cold dogma, it is this man Jesus Christ. It is in one's surrender and subsequent union that one is saved. It is not merely believing the right thing or even in simply knowing Jesus is the Christ—even the devil can do that: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (Mk 1:24). Theologians are, therefore, not simply people who talk about God; they must be people who talk to God in such a way that they spend as much time on their knees deep in prayer as they do actively reading and studying. What makes anyone truly a Christian is entering the Church of God freely and consciously, realizing that life here is pure gift. It is sensing deeply that these sacraments, these teachings, this new way of life is who Christ is and now he is unabashedly mine simply because he loves me.

Because he loves us, we Christians also believe that Christ gave everything the human race needed to learn about eternal salvation to his apostles, to the earliest teaching Church. It has been a common belief (what theologians call a *theologoumenon*, a long-standing but unofficial opinion) that revelation came to an end with the death of

the last apostle, John the Beloved, approximately in the year 100. In the New Testament's *Epistle of Jude*, we learn that the apostles understood that everything Christ needed to communicate to his Church for their eternal salvation was delivered once and for all to the apostles, referred to there as Christ's holy ones. The holy ones are the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, on earth still waging the war against evil, in purgatory awaiting the opening of heaven's door, and in heaven where there is only gratitude and joy. The Church was never understood as a building or a set of beliefs in the early years: she was the Bride of Christ, the Holy Gathering, the place where sinners became saints. St. Augustine calls the Church the indispensable half of how Christ understands his fullest self. Like any great lover, Jesus feels incomplete without his Bride, a Head without a Body. That is why Church history is an essential part of our growth in holiness: to see how we sheep are never without a shepherd, how we belong to this glorious family, and how we have access now within our very souls to the Lord and Lover of all, Jesus Christ.

Patristic theology thus aims to foster a sort of ecclesial devotion. The Church as founded by Jesus Christ is the continuation of his own divinely human, or humanly divine, life. He is the Son of God who took on human flesh and chose to live among us as one of us. If it were not for the Church he so intentionally and desirously started, Christianity would be nothing more than exercise in historical recall. We would be doomed to remember a Jesus who once lived, or maybe we could look forward to a Jesus who will come again. But in and through his Church, the life-giving

Body and Blood of Jesus continue to be with us in the Most Holy Eucharist. The merciful forgiveness of Jesus himself is still available in the sacrament of Reconciliation. The Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost continues in every sacrament of Confirmation, and of course, followers of Jesus continue to enjoy the rebirth he insists upon (see Jn 3:3) in the initiating gift of the sacrament of Baptism. His words continue to be heard and preached upon (as well as studied) in the Holy Scriptures, and his faithful still gather daily in prayer and in song. Jesus has not left this world, but he has continued with us as the Head of the Body, as the Lover comes to his Beloved—in one flesh and one spirit.

This Mystical Body grows, however, in a very special way. It does not grow artificially by grasping for things outside of it in order to make it look more up-to-date and more relevant to an ever-changing world. In the New Testament's *Epistle of Jude*, we learn of this Jude who presents himself as "a slave of Jesus Christ and brother of James" (Jude 1:1). This Jude communicates to his beloved audience that "being very eager to write to you of our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). From this passage and from sacred tradition, Christians have always held that everything we need to possess and to live in Christ forever, "our common salvation," was handed down "once and for all" to those to whom Christ wanted to communicate his teachings. All teaching thereafter—every papal pronouncement, every piece of Church teaching—must be an explication or an unfolding of what we have already received "once for all."

Since the Christian faith is an organic and not an artificial reality, it is something which grows from within, not something that is added to from without. This understanding of what is called the "deposit of faith" was given whole and entire to the apostles by Christ himself; future understandings of those truths will only deepen but never differ from what Christ originally imparted to his apostles. This is why, by the middle of the fifth century, a former French soldier turned Christian theologian and monk, St. Vincent of Lérins (d. c. 445), could use "antiquity" for one of the essential hallmarks of orthodoxy. In his guidebook for detecting true doctrine, Vincent laid out three criteria for judging whether a Christian doctrine or an interpretation of Sacred Scripture was developing authentically or heretically. In the opening of his *Commonitorium* (a title meaning to prompt or instruct the memory), Vincent summed up much patristic theology when he taught:

> In the Catholic Church herself we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all. That is truly and properly 'Catholic,' as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which comprehends everything across the world. We shall hold to this rule if we follow universality, antiquity, and consent. We shall follow *universality* if we acknowledge that one Faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; *antiquity* if we never depart from those interpretations which our ancestors and fathers in the Faith proclaimed; *consent*, if in antiquity itself we keep

> following the definitions and opinions of all, or certainly nearly all, the bishops and doctors alike.[7]

So, as time passes, we see a general consensus developing within Christ's Church that what his believers must hold true will always be universally accepted, apostolically ancient, and consented to consistently by the People of God. Again, this is why Church history matters; it provides us with a reliable guide into millennia of illuminating Christian doctrine, generations of passionate saints, and an ever-growing awareness of who God is and how he interacts with his beautiful creation.

In the pages to follow, we shall proceed chronologically, moving from the year 100 up to the middle of the fifth century. Chapter 1, "Preludes and Persecutions," takes up the question of why the first followers of Jesus were mercilessly maltreated and brutally tortured. How did they respond and how did these first Christians accordingly organize themselves? What was the "Church," the *ecclesia*, a word meaning "to be called" (*cleo-*) "out" (*ex-*) of the world and into a new way of life? The first generation of theologians we shall examine are known collectively as the Apostolic

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[7] St. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* §2.6; trans., C. A. Heurtley, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 11 (Peadbody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, [1894] 2004), p. 132. While these nineteenth-century translations can be sometimes stilted, the series of patristic texts edited as *Ante-Nicene Fathers* and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (in the second edition with Henry Wace), overseen mainly by Philip Schaff, a Swiss-born Protestant Church historian (d. 1893), these reprinted volumes make otherwise relatively obscure texts conveniently handy. The entire series can be found gratis under the "Fathers" tab at www.newadvent.org. We shall quote from this thirty-eight-volume series whenever its English translation would be the most available today.