

# Who were the apostles?

They were "ordinary men, with defects, with weaknesses. And yet Jesus called them to be stewards of God's grace," St. Josemaría reminds us. Answers to some of the most common questions about Jesus's twelve apostles.

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## Summary

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## **1. What is an apostle?**

An apostle is a witness chosen and sent on a mission by Christ Himself. From the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus chose some men from among those who followed Him upon whom He would build the Church. He made these men sharers in his evangelizing mission: St. Mark tells us that *Jesus went up on a mountain and called to him those whom he wished, and they came to him. He appointed twelve, whom he named apostles, to be with him and to be sent out to preach* (Mk 3:13-14).

The word “apostle” comes from the Greek “*apostoloi*,” which means *sent*. It refers to Jesus Christ's call to the apostles to continue his mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God throughout the world. *As the Father has sent me, even so I send you (Jn 20:21)*. The mission Christ sends his apostles on is universal and it determines the apostolic task: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20)*.

## Meditate with St. Josemaría

The first Apostles, for whom I have great affection and devotion, were nothing to boast about, humanly speaking. With the exception of Matthew, who probably earned a comfortable living which he left

behind at the behest of Jesus, the Apostles were mere fishermen. They lived a meagre existence, fishing all night to keep food on the table.

But social status is unimportant. They weren't educated; they weren't even very bright, if we judge from their reaction to supernatural things. Finding even the most elementary examples and comparisons beyond their reach, they would turn to the Master and ask: "Explain the parable to us."

When Jesus uses the image of the "leaven" of the Pharisees, they think that he's reproaching them for not having purchased bread.

They were poor; they were ignorant. They weren't very simple or open. But they were even ambitious. Frequently they argued over who would be the greatest when — according to their understanding — Christ would definitively restore the

kingdom of Israel. Amid the intimacy of the last supper, during that sublime moment when Jesus is about to immolate himself for all of humanity, we find them arguing heatedly.

Faith? They had little. Jesus Christ himself points this out.

They had seen the dead raised, all kinds of sicknesses cured, bread and fish multiplied, storms calmed, devils cast out. Chosen as the head, St Peter is the only one who reacts quickly: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

But it is a faith beset by limitations, which lead Peter to reproach Jesus Christ for his desire to suffer and die for the redemption of men. And Jesus had to upbraid him: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men."

"Peter was too human in his thinking," St John Chrysostom comments, "and therefore he reasons that those things" — Christ's passion and death — "were unworthy of him, something deplorable. Consequently, Jesus reprimands him and says: No, suffering is not beneath me; you only think so because your mind is limited to human thoughts."

And did these men of little faith at least stand out in their love for Christ? Undoubtedly they loved him, at least in word. At times they were swept away by enthusiasm: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

But at the moment of truth, they all fled, except for John who truly loved with deeds. Only this adolescent, youngest of the Apostles, can be found next to the cross. The others didn't find within themselves that love as strong as death.

These were the disciples called by our Lord. Such stuff is what Christ chose. And they remain just like that until they are filled with the Holy Spirit and thus become pillars of the Church.

They are ordinary men, complete with defects and shortcomings, more eager to say than to do. Nevertheless, Jesus calls them to be fishers of men, co-redeemers, dispensers of the grace of God. (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 2)

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## **2. Who did Jesus call to be an apostle?**

Strictly speaking, we can define the apostles as the Twelve called directly by Jesus. They receive and participate in his mission and witness his words and actions. Their task is a continuation of Christ's mission, as He tells them: *He who*

*receives you receives me* (*Mt 10:40; cf. Lk 10:16*). Thus He constantly reminds them that they need the Son to fulfill their mission. Without Jesus they can do nothing. *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing* (*Jn 15:5*). Moreover, "In the office of the apostles there is one aspect that cannot be transmitted: to be the chosen witnesses of the Lord's Resurrection and so the foundation stones of the Church" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 860).

However, the Gospels show us that it is not only the apostles who follow and are sent by Jesus. On one occasion he also sent 72 other disciples out: *The Lord appointed 72 others, and sent them two by two before him into every town and place where he was to go* (*Lk 10:1*). These disciples received the task of preaching the Kingdom of God and

healing the sick from the Lord. The Gospel also mentions several women who accompanied our Lord during his preaching from the beginning until the last moment of his life (cf. *Lk* 8:2-3; *Mt* 27:55). After the Resurrection, Christ sends them, together with the others, to preach the Gospel and to make *disciples of all nations* (*Mt* 28:19). In this way it is understood that following Jesus and his consequent evangelizing task has a meaning that is not exclusive to the Twelve: we all participate, and the mission must last until the end of time (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 20).

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

'Behold, I will send many fishermen, says the Lord, and I will catch those fishes.' That is his way of explaining the great task we have before us: we must become fishermen. The world is often compared, in conversation or in books, with the sea. It is a good

comparison, for in our lives, just as in the sea, there are quiet times and stormy seasons, periods of calm and gusts of strong wind. One often finds souls swimming in difficult waters, in the midst of heavy waves. They travel through stormy weather, their journey one sad rush, despite their apparently cheerful expressions and their boisterousness. Their bursts of laughter are a cover for their discouragement and ill-temper. Their lives are bereft of charity and understanding. Men, like fish, devour each other.

Our task as children of God is to get all men to enter, freely, into the divine net; to get them to love each other. If we are Christians, we must seek to become fishermen like those described by the prophet Jeremiah with a metaphor which Jesus also often used: 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men', he says to

Peter and Andrew. (*Friends of God*, no. 259)

'Simon Peter, hearing him say that it was the Lord, girded up the fisherman's coat, and sprang into the sea.' Peter personifies faith. Full of marvellous daring, he leaps into the sea. With a love like John's and a faith like Peter's, what is there that can stop us? (*Friends of God*, no. 266)

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### **3. Who were Jesus's twelve apostles?**

From the beginning of Christianity, the Church has encouraged the faithful to remember the apostles, along with the martyrs and all the saints, and to have recourse to their intercession. "When the Church keeps the memorials of martyrs and other saints during the annual cycle, she proclaims the Paschal mystery in

those who have suffered and have been glorified with Christ. She proposes them to the faithful as examples who draw all men to the Father through Christ, and through their merits she begs for God's favors" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1173).

The liturgical calendar sets out specific dates for celebrating the memory of the Apostles.

Saints Philip and James (called the Less) are celebrated on May 3. Philip was born in Bethsaida. He was first a disciple of John the Baptist and then followed Christ. He is known for the words with which he invites Nathanael to meet Jesus, *of whom Moses wrote in the law and the prophets* (Jn 1:45): *Come and see* (Jn 1:46). According to numerous martyrologies, he had previously preached the Gospel in Scizia (Asia Minor) and later in Lydia and

Phrygia (Middle East), where he lived his last years. James, son of Alphaeus, a close relative of the Lord, presided over the Church of Jerusalem, where he participated in what is recognized as the first council (cf. *Acts* 15), and died a martyr in the year 62.

Saint Matthias is celebrated on May 14. He was chosen by the apostles to take the place of Judas, as a witness of the resurrection of the Lord (cf. *Acts* 1:15-26). According to tradition, he preached first in Judea and then in other countries. The Greeks maintain that he evangelized Cappadocia and the coasts of the Caspian Sea. He suffered persecutions from the barbarian peoples and obtained the crown of martyrdom in Colchis (now a region of Georgia) in the first century.

St. Peter and St. Paul, pillars of the Church, are celebrated on June 29. St.

Peter was the apostle whom the Lord constituted as head of the Church. We know him as the first Pope. He preached mainly to the Jews and suffered martyrdom in Rome. St. Paul was called by the Lord to his apostolic mission after his conversion. He is not one of the Twelve, but is known as the "apostle of the Gentiles" by command of Christ: *Thus has the Lord commanded us: I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth* (Acts 13:47). In his numerous travels he preached the Gospel and founded Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire. Like Peter, he was martyred in Rome.

St. Thomas is celebrated on July 3. He is known for his unbelief, but also for the words by which he explicitly recognized Jesus's divinity: *My Lord and my God!* (Jn 20:28). He was the first to do so, and the liturgy uses his

words as a sign and expression of faith. According to tradition, he evangelized India and was martyred.

St. James (called the Greater) is celebrated on July 25. Born in Bethsaida, he was the son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John. He was present at the main miracles worked by the Lord. He was condemned to death around the year 42. Since ancient times, it has been held that James had preached the Gospel in the confines of the West. During this preaching, while in Saragossa, the Virgin appeared to him and encouraged him to continue without discouragement. After the Muslim invasion of Spain, the apostle St. James was venerated as the patron saint of Spain and its Christian kingdoms. His tomb in Compostela attracts pilgrims from around the world.

Saint Bartholomew is celebrated on August 24. He is identified with Nathanael, who the apostle Philip brought to Jesus (cf. *Jn* 1:45-51). According to tradition, as reflected in the Roman Martyrology and mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea, after the Ascension, Bartholomew preached the Gospel in India, where he left a copy of the Gospel of Matthew in Aramaic and was martyred. Armenian tradition attributes the preaching of Christianity in the Caucasian country to St. Bartholomew and St. Jude Thaddeus. They are patron saints of the Armenian Apostolic Church since they were the first to found Christianity in Armenia.

St. Matthew is celebrated on September 21. He was born in Capernaum, and when Jesus called him he was a tax collector (cf. *Mt* 9:9). He is recognized as the author of the first Gospel. Of the four

evangelists, he is the one who is represented as a man. According to tradition, Matthew preached in many places, including Ethiopia, where he was martyred.

Saints Simon and Jude are celebrated on October 28. Jude, nicknamed Thaddaeus, is the apostle who asked the Lord why he manifested himself to his disciples and not to the world at the Last Supper (*cf. Jn 14:22*). Simon's name appears in eleventh place in the list of the apostles. We know that he was born in Cana. According to Western tradition, as it appears in the Roman liturgy, Sts. Simon and Jude met in Mesopotamia and preached in Persia for several years. They were both martyred there,

St. Andrew is celebrated on November 30. Andrew, born in Bethsaida, was first a disciple of John the Baptist, then followed Christ and

introduced him to his brother Peter. He and Philip are the ones who brought some Greeks to Jesus (cf. *Jn* 12:20-22), and Andrew was the one who let Christ know that there was a boy who had some loaves and fishes at the multiplication of the loaves (cf. *Jn* 6:8-9). According to tradition, after Pentecost he preached the Gospel in many regions, mostly in Greece, where he was crucified.

St. John is celebrated on December 27. He is distinguished as *the beloved disciple of Jesus* (cf. *Jn* 13:23). He was the only one of the Apostles who stood at the foot of the cross with the Virgin Mary and other pious women. Jesus commissioned him to take his Mother into his care (cf. *Jn* 19:26). According to tradition, he was the youngest of the twelve Apostles and went to evangelize Asia Minor. He is the only one of the Apostles who was not martyred and the last to die (at the end of the first century or

beginning of the second). He is recognized as the author of the fourth Gospel, the three letters that bear his name, and the book of Revelation. Of the four evangelists, he is the one who is represented as an eagle.

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

Then there is St Paul. How admirably he behaves! Imprisoned for spreading the teachings of Christ, he misses no opportunity of preaching the Gospel. Brought before Festus and Agrippa, he declares unflinchingly: 'Thanks to God's help, I still stand here today, bearing my witness to great and small alike. Yet there is nothing in my message which goes beyond what the prophets spoke of, and Moses spoke of, as things to come; a suffering Christ, and one who should show light to his people and to the Gentiles'

by being the first to rise from the dead.'

The Apostle doesn't silence or hide his faith, or his apostolic propaganda that had brought down on him the hatred of his persecutors. He continues preaching salvation to everyone he meets. And, with marvellous daring, he boldly asks Agrippa: 'Do you believe the prophets, King Agrippa? I know you do.' When Agrippa comments: 'You would have me turn Christian with very little ado. Why, said Paul, it would be my prayer to God that, whether it were with much ado or little, both you and all those who are listening to me today should become just as I am, but for these chains.'

Where did St Paul get all his strength from? *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat!* I can do all things, because God alone gives me this faith, this hope, this charity. I find it very hard

to believe in the supernatural effectiveness of an apostolate that is not based, is not solidly centred, on a life of constant conversation with Our Lord. Yes, right there in our work; in our own home, or in the street, with all the small or big problems that arise daily. Right there, not taken away from those things, but with our hearts fixed on God. Then our words, our actions — our defects! — will give forth the *bonus odor Christi*, the sweet fragrance of Christ, which other men will inevitably notice and say: 'Here is a Christian.' (*Friends of God*, nos. 270-271)

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#### **4. Are there still apostles today?**

The apostolic college, a way of referring to the apostles as a whole, ends with the death of the last of the

Twelve. Nevertheless, the Apostles took care to establish successors who would continue the mission entrusted to them by Christ until the end of the world (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 20). Examples of this are found in the letters of St. Paul; Timothy and Titus were instituted as bishops of Ephesus and Crete. "Just as becoming an Apostle begins with being called and sent out by the Risen One, so the subsequent call and sending out to others was to be brought about, through the power of the Spirit, by those who are already ordained in the apostolic ministry. And this is the way in which this ministry, known from the second generation as the episcopal ministry, was to be continued" (*Benedict XVI*, Audience May 10, 2006). Thus, those who are ordained bishops preserve what we call apostolic succession, the continuation of the apostles in the time of the Church.

The apostles' primary characteristic is the pastoral task of preaching, governing and administering the sacraments, in addition to having been eyewitnesses of the life of Christ (cf. *2 Pet* 1:16). The bishops, although they have not been eyewitnesses of Christ's life, inherit pastoral tasks from the Apostles. "In this way, succession in the role of Bishop is presented as the continuity of the Apostolic ministry, a guarantee of the permanence of the Apostolic Tradition, word and life, entrusted to us by the Lord (...) Consequently, through Apostolic Succession it is Christ who reaches us: in the words of the Apostles and of their successors, it is he who speaks to us; through their hands it is he who acts in the sacraments; in their gaze it is his gaze that embraces us and makes us feel loved and welcomed into the Heart of God. And still today, as at the outset, Christ himself is the true Shepherd and Guardian of our souls

whom we follow with deep trust, gratitude and joy" (Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 10-V-2006).

All Christians participate in the sending of the apostles, in the apostolic mission. "The whole Church is apostolic insofar as she is 'sent' to the whole world; all the members of the Church, even if in different ways, have a part in this sending" (*Catechism*, 863). Indeed, being a Christian implies making one's own the very life of Christ (cf. *Gal* 2:20), who came to bring everyone closer to the truth (cf. *Jn* 18:37). "In love with Christ, young people are called to bear witness to the Gospel everywhere, with their own lives" (Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, n. 175). Following Christ is already an acceptance of the apostolic mission: *Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to all creation* (*Mk* 16:15). As Benedict XVI pointed out, it is incumbent upon all Christians "to

gather the peoples together in the unity of his love. This is our hope and also our mandate: to contribute to this universality, to this true unity in the riches of cultures, in communion with our true Lord Jesus Christ" (Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 22-III-2006).

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

If you were to fall into the temptation of wondering, 'who's telling me to embark on this?' We would have to reply: 'Christ himself is telling you, is begging you.' 'The harvest is plentiful enough, but the labourers are few. You must ask the Lord to whom the harvest belongs to send labourers out for the harvesting.' Don't take the easy way out. Don't say, 'I'm no good at this sort of thing; there are others who can do it; it isn't my line'. No, for this sort of thing, there is no one else: if you could get away with that argument, so could everyone else.

Christ's plea is addressed to each and every Christian. No one can consider himself excused, for whatever reason: age, health or occupation. There are no excuses whatsoever. Either we carry out a fruitful apostolate, or our faith will prove barren. (*Friends of God*, no. 272)

We are contemplating the mystery of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. It is time to ask ourselves: Do I share with Christ his zeal for souls? Do I pray for the Church of which I form part, in which I must carry out a specific mission which no one else can do for me? To be in the Church is already much, but it is not enough. We must be the Church, because our Mother must never be a stranger to us, something external, foreign to our deepest thoughts.

Let us conclude our consideration of the marks of the Church. With the help of the Lord they will become

engraved on our souls, and we will be confirmed by this clear, sure, divine criterion in order to love more this holy mother, who has brought us to the life of grace and who nourishes us, day by day, with inexhaustible care. (*Loyalty to the Church*, no. 16)

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