



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES I

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Lesson 20 Commentary Acts 1 - 2

Lesson 21 Questions Acts 3 - 5

THE CHURCH BEGINS UNDER THE APOSTLES Acts 1 - 2

I. INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

This interesting historical account of our first faith-roots after Jesus was also written by Luke, the author of the Gospel and a Gentile convert of Paul. Luke addresses "Theophilus" again, giving us the surety of knowing the author of this important book. This Greek name means "friend of God" so it could be a name of anyone reading the book; therefore it fits us, too. In Acts, we are going to travel around the Roman Empire with the Apostles, and our faith will be enriched.

Acts begins with Jesus' ascension and closes around 61 A.D. For some reason, Luke ends Acts with Paul still in prison, and Peter still head of the Church in Rome.

It is interesting that the role of the three Persons in God in the new Testament began with the Father sending the Son, who then sent the Holy Spirit—the Person most active in the history of the church after Jesus. We will see the importance of the Spirit again and again in Acts and hopefully, it will bring this Divine Person nearer to us.

Luke leads us through the first twelve chapters of Acts with Peter, showing us clearly his role as the "Rock" that Jesus chose for him when He told Peter that He would build His Church on him (Matthew 16:18-19). Peter was martyred in Rome around 67 A.D., leaving the Church to his successor, St. Linus, according to Eusebius, the first historian of the Church (Also see 2 Timothy 4:21).

In chapter thirteen the chief character shifts to Paul, the great missionary to the Roman empire, forever linked with Peter as the main founders of the Faith. "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose upon earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). And of Paul: "This man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites" (Acts 9:15).

II. JESUS' LAST VISIT AND ASCENSION

Final Instructions (Acts 1:1-11):

The book of Acts has been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit; Luke in his first sentence notes that Jesus had chosen His apostles “through the Holy Spirit.” As He spoke to them after the Resurrection He told them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for “what the Father promised.” Jesus foretells that the Apostles will be “baptized in the Holy Spirit,” (John 7:14-26) and receive power to enable them to be His witnesses “even to the ends of the earth” (Mark 16:15; Isaiah 49:6b). For them that was Rome. There is a hint here of the coming importance of Rome to the Church. For us, the Church has truly reached the ends of the earth.

When Jesus rose from the earth and disappeared into a cloud, two men stood by them saying, “This Jesus will return, just as you saw him go.” Later in Series V, we will study more about the return of Jesus in His resurrected body in the letters of Paul. Here, Jesus ascended from Mt. Olivet near Jerusalem. (See Luke 24:51).

III. THE UPPER ROOM IN JERUSALEM (Acts 1:12-26)

A. Those Present. The eleven apostles are listed here as they gathered again in the upper room, probably the one of the Last Supper. This room had been hallowed, made holy, by the unique event there of the Eucharist which Jesus celebrated and left to the Church through the Apostles—the first bishops as we now call the successors of an Apostle. Here they prayed.

Luke adds another fact which is characteristic of him. He mentions in his gospel the women in the church: he began the story of Jesus with the announcement by an angel to the holy young virgin, “blessed among women,” of her coming motherhood. Here, Luke adds again that the women of the infant church were “in the company, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” (Acts 1:14).

Who were these “brothers”? They were His kinsmen. The same word is used elsewhere for

close relatives (Genesis 13:8, 14:16, Leviticus 10:4). Mary’s question in Luke’s gospel only makes sense in this way (Luke 1:34). “How can this be since I do not know man?” (have sexual relations), even though she is engaged to be married. Her engagement to Joseph, arranged then by parents or guardians, had not left her free from an evident private vow to God. This has been the constant tradition of the Church from its earliest written records after Luke. “The Church prays as she believes,” says St. Augustine. “In union with the whole Church we honor Mary, the ever-virgin mother of Jesus,” we pray in the Eucharistic Prayer I of the Mass.

B. Mary, Mother of the Church. Luke, who so carefully recorded the Annunciation and the whole infancy story of Jesus and all the events prior to it, is believed to have, as he says in his first verses of his gospel, “carefully traced the whole sequence of events from the beginning...” (Luke 1:3). Having traveled with Paul to Caesarea, he could easily have visited Jerusalem, Nazareth, Ain Karin (John the Baptist’s home). If John the Apostle had taken Mary to Ephesus when he moved there, then Luke could have gotten information about Mary there.

Just before Jesus died He willed all that He had on earth, His mother, to the Apostle John, who represented the Church and who was standing at the foot of the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus. John himself records the words in his Gospel: “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved,” He said to each of them: “Behold your mother; behold your son.” Early church history from the first freedom given to it under Emperor Constantine, shows that among the first churches was one named after Our Lady in Rome, called St. Mary Major, still standing. Jesus’ mother is the church’s mother, given to us by Him as our mother. Devotion and celebrations in honor of Mary have come down from the earliest times. In the 1800’s and 1900’s there have been reports of appearances of Mary all over Christen-

dom. She is acting as a concerned mother of a child in danger.

Have we given some response to these pleas and messages from Our Mother, Mary, whom God Himself gave to us and to the whole human race? As Eve was the mother of our race, Mary is the spiritual mother of all, the second Eve.

C. The First Successor to an Apostle (Acts 1:15-26). We learn in verse 15 that this time together in prayer included over a hundred people. This was the first assembly of Christians, all of whom had probably known Christ.

The first official act of the Apostles was to replace the fallen-away Apostle (this was a realism that sadly comes in all ages). Two different stories are told of Judas after his betrayal of Jesus. This one said that he bought land and in some accident, he fell and burst open.

It is significant that the leader of the group, the one to take leadership, was Peter, a name Jesus gave to Simon, son of Jona, when He said, "You are a 'Rock' (petros in Greek) and on this rock I will build my Church..." (Matthew 16:18-19). In Acts, Peter is presented again and again as the leader of the Church after Jesus ascended. Of the two present in Acts 1 who fulfilled the necessity to have been "of our company and who witnessed the resurrection," Matthias was the one chosen by lot and so was added to the eleven Apostles.

This succession to an Apostle began the pattern of church leadership: what Jesus set up as roles in the Church were to be passed down through the Church from then on.

About fifty of the first popes (from the Greek "papas" "father") were martyrs, as was Peter, who was crucified under Nero. The 263 popes after Peter are listed in histories of the church, and also in one small modern paperback, Pocket Catholic Dictionary.

IV. THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH (Acts 2:1-41)

A. Pentecost Day (Acts 2:1-13). The Jews had a Pentecost ("fiftieth") feast (Leviticus 23:15-21) on the fiftieth day after a plentiful harvest. After the temple feast, the followers of Jesus gathered in the upper room to await Jesus' promise. It was a time of prayer and sharing. Jesus' words in John 3:8 about the wind and its sounds, sudden and from nowhere, with its effect, "those born from above, born of the Spirit," became a startling reality in that upper room, with audible and visible signs.

A "driving wind" was heard in the entire house and around it. Moving tongues "as of fire" rested above each one there. All of them began to speak in different languages "as the Spirit gave them to proclaim" (Acts 2:4). These were probably known and current languages, for at the sound of the powerful driving wind around the house, a "large crowd from every nation under heaven" gathered. Peter and the apostles, no longer afraid, stepped out on the balcony. They began to speak, and the astonished people below heard them each in their own language, languages listed in verse 8, and used in the Roman Empire from the far east to the western shores. Luke says they spoke "as the Spirit gave them to speak."

This gift was a symbol of the beginning of the missionary spirit in the church. From then on, the Spirit sent by the Father and the Son from heaven, was and is the driving force in the Church, the strength of martyrs and the persecuted, the fidelity of the faithful. This Pentecost was a powerful event from the centuries to come, to ours, and times to come. This missionary church is the subject of the rest of Acts.

Some commentators see two types of speaking in tongues here: "dialektos" (other languages) and "glossalalia" an ecstatic speaking as in I Corinthians 14:2 and in modern Charismatic gifts.

Whatever it is, this gift is from the Spirit as a sign of His presence among us, though Christ Himself, filled with the Holy Spirit as God and as man, did not use either of these signs. So many of us do not. It is God's decision.

B. Peter's Speech (Acts 2:14-36). The Holy Spirit that very day gathered a crowd around the house which the wind so powerfully surrounded. Since it was an important feast, fifty days after Passover (Leviticus 23:15-21), there were Jews from all over the Roman Empire in Jerusalem. As these gathered in the street below the house, the formerly frightened Apostles now threw open the doors and surrounded Peter as he proclaimed that the event was the fulfillment of a prophecy of Joel (Acts 3:1-5).

He exultantly taught that Jesus, the descendant of David, was their Messiah, whom they had allowed to be crucified but who had risen from the dead. Then He had spent "forty days" (a long period) with the Apostles.

C. The First Conversions (Acts 2:37-41). Struck to the heart, the Jews in the crowd asked: "What are we to do?"

This is a question for all of us to ask after an experience of God in our lives. Faith and grace need a response from us in order to take root in our spirits and be lived in our lives.

Peter's response actually describes three of the sacraments of the Church. "Repent (Sacrament of Reconciliation), be baptized (Baptism), and receive the Holy Spirit (Confirmation). That day, about three thousand persons were baptized" (Acts 2:41).

This speech of Peter is considered by most scholars to be composed by Luke, as are all the speeches in Acts. He included these from a solid pre-Lucan tradition, since these speeches were not recorded at that time. The teachings in the speeches link Acts with Luke's gospel. This

scholarly opinion illustrates for us the existence and importance of Sacred Tradition, which is doctrine come down to us, but not through the Bible alone. Many Christians do not know the history of the book we call the Bible. As a book, it was collected by the Church in 394 A.D. through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who guides the Church, guides us throughout our lives, and throughout the ages. In Acts, we will learn more and more about this Divine Being and His role, after Christ went to the Father, promising the Holy Spirit.

V. THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY (Acts 2:42-47)

A. Characteristics. The first sentence (Acts 2:42) lists four activities that the first Christian community was faithful to:

1. "The teaching of the Apostles." From the beginning, there was a teaching Church, a church with authority from Jesus the Son of God. Sadly many other Christians assume the teaching role without any receiving of it through the line of succession from the apostles, as was so carefully guided by the early church. There are, it is reported, more than four hundred churches teaching Christianity in different ways in the United States.

2. They were faithful to the "brotherhood" meaning the community of the faithful, the "fellowship" that bound them to Christ and to each other.

They gathered together in the two next ways:

3. "the breaking of the bread." This was the Eucharist that Jesus gave at the Last Supper: "This is my Body, this is my Blood; take and receive" (Matthew 26:26f, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

4. "and to the prayers." These were prayers in common, prayers when they were all

together, as we saw when the apostles gathered in the upper room “with Mary the Mother of Jesus and his brothers” (Acts 1:14).

B. Signs and Wonders (Acts 2:43; 5:15-16). The Lord had sent the apostles out “to cure and to preach” and now they emulated (or tried to copy) Him and His marvelous deeds, “and all were cured.”

C. A New Thing (Acts 2:44-45). The origin of religious communities can be traced to the next verse: “And all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.” This amazing step was not, apparently, taken up in any of the other early Christian churches, but in this first one, it lasts for all ages as the immediate effect not only of Jesus as personally known by them all, and His own example in His life, but also as the effect of the tremendous grace of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on them. What a wondrous balance among Christians of today could there be if this were done today! The forever-with-us challenge to help the truly poor, the destitute, the ones among us who can not afford housing, etc., would be solved through love, not taxes and welfare. It makes us think of the Gospel when Peter said to Jesus:

“Lord, we have left all things to follow you.” Jesus said; “In truth, I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land—and persecutions, too ... and in the world to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:28-31, Matthew 9:27-29).

D. Unity of the First Christian Community (Acts 2:46). “With one heart” they went each day to the Temple for worship and prayer. Then they “met in their houses for the breaking of bread.” This again is the name in Acts and the rest

of the New Testament for what we call the “Eucharist”—a Greek word meaning “thanksgiving.” Until three hundred years later, the Eucharist was celebrated in their homes.

VI. THE HOLY SPIRIT IN US

A. The Sacrament of Confirmation. The Divine Persons come to baptized persons and dwell there as we grow, accept, and live our Baptism (Acts 8:14-17). The Holy Spirit is an influence who wants to get hold of us, not one that we get hold of. After we have reached the use of reason and personal choice, we are offered the confirming of our Baptism in another sacrament, a celebration of grace received from God and confirmed by the Holy Spirit. Seven special graces that Christ left to the Church come to us: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. These develop and grow strong as we live by the word of the Lord and by the teaching of the Church.

B. Living as Baptized Christians (I Corinthians 3:16 - 4:11). If we have recognized, accepted, and lived by the Faith that we received through the Church from our parents’ request or our own, then we certainly are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (unless by a mortal sin we caused Him to depart). Sometimes this indwelling becomes a sudden and obvious rush of grace as many Christians have had. Sometimes it is a steady power in us that deepens as we live.

A condition that is needed to grow in His grace is threefold:

- 1) yield your will to God (I Thessalonians 5:19)
- 2) confess your sin (Ephesians 4:30)
- 3) walk by faith and obedience

Today, in the religious confusion of protesting churches against the historical Church that came down from the Apostles on; and in the irreligious atmosphere in our country, shown so clearly by

the lack of mention of God or faith or religion in most newscasts, most newspapers, the Church not only fosters Catholic education in the home and school, but more and more is encouraging parishes to offer the Sacrament of Confirmation in later adolescence as young persons mature and begin making independent choices.

There is a vital need to encourage a year of religious education in young adult Catholic life, ending in a choice to receive the sacrament of Confirmation, a personal choice of a maturing faith, needing the Holy Spirit's gifts. This ratifying of baptismal graces means a choice to live as a

* * * * *

Catholic Christian under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We may not realize or experience the quiet influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but He guides the Church, He guides us throughout our lives, throughout the ages. In Acts, we will learn more and more about this Divine Being and His role after Christ went to the Father, promising the Holy Spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 21
Acts 3 - 5

Day 1 Read the Notes. As you go, mark a passage that stands out for you. Share it with the others.

Day 2 Read Acts 3:1-10.

a. Comment on Peter's words in Acts 3:6.

b. How does this event as told in Acts 3:7-8 signify what the Church, through its priests and the sacraments, do for our human race?

Day 3 Read Acts 3:11-26, Peter's speech.

a. Mark any words that mean something for your life. Share them.

b. Read Acts 4:1-22. What did you learn?

c. Why are the Jewish leaders so opposed to the Apostle's teaching?

Day 4 Read Acts 4:23-37.

a. What happened as they prayed with the Christian Community?

b. How has the Holy Spirit manifested Himself at times in Christian history? Give an instance.

c. What impresses you in Acts 4:32-37?

Day 5 Read Acts 5:1-11.

a. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?

b. Read Acts 5:12-16. What are miracles a sign of?

c. What did these events in Acts 5:1-16 teach these people about God and His Church?

Day 6 Read Acts 5:17-42.

a. How did you feel about Acts 5:17-20?

b. How did you feel about Acts 5:21-25?

c. Share an effect on you or a help for you in Acts 5:26-42.