

The Covenants of God with Us



The Creation of Man, fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, by Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1475-1564

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ~ Ezekiel 37:26-27

FROM THE FIRST PAGES of the book of Genesis to the last pages of the book of Revelation, we are taken up into the story of God's relationship with humankind, the story of his gift and Revelation of himself to us and of his steadfast love for us despite our repeated falls and failures to respond to him in love. We also enter into God's "school of love," the way he has gradually taught us about himself and slowly strengthened the reciprocal bonds of trust, obligation, and commitment. The stages of divine Revelation, beginning with our first parents and reaching its climax and conclusion in our Lord Jesus Christ, show us that God, the author of history, makes use of human affairs to guide us to the full knowledge of what he has prepared for us and what he wants us to do. This entire process can be called an ingathering of the human family into a single people "that they may become perfectly one" (Jn 17:23).

God does not see us as individuals with no connection among us; there is no "me and Jesus" but instead we become members of "a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pt 2:9).

The Covenant with Adam and Eve

Covenants are solemn agreements that are an exchange of mutual promises. They differ from contracts because there is an exchange of persons — a gift of self to the other — rather than an exchange of, for example, work or money. The book of Genesis tells us the story of the first three covenants of God with humankind. Creation itself is the foundation of all the covenants, and the physical laws of the universe themselves are "the sign and pledge of the unshakable faithfulness of God's covenant"¹ (CCC 346; see Jer 31:35-37). The first covenant is with two people, our first parents Adam and Eve, and it is described in Genesis

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¹ Cf. Hebrews 4:3-4; Jeremiah 31:35-37; Jeremiah 33:19-26

1:26-2:24. We hear of the creation of human beings, both male and female, in the image and likeness of God (see Gn 1:26-27). God blesses them, commands them to be *"fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it"* (Gn 1:28). He gives them every kind of plant for food (see Gn 1:29-30), placing them in a garden (see Gn 2:8) of which they were not permitted to eat of the fruit of only one tree (see Gn 2:16-17). Following the creation of Adam alone in the more detailed description of the creation of humankind (see Gn 2:7), Eve is created (see Gn 2:18-21) and is given to Adam in marriage: *"Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.... Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh'"* (Gn 2:23-24). Thus the recipient of the covenant is the fundamental human society, a marriage. The signs of this first covenant are, first, the sabbath rest: *"God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation"* (Gn 2:3) and, second, the consummation of the marriage of Adam and Eve.

Although God commanded our first parents to obey only one specific prohibition, they failed to obey him, and thereby broke the covenant. Once they had committed their terrible sin, he punished them by suffering and death, their loss of residence in the garden, and broken communion with him (see Gn 3:8-24).

The Covenant with Noah

Yet God's plan to reveal himself to us, and to call us to him as a family, was not destroyed by sin. The next several chapters of the book of Genesis tell us of a world flooded by sin, beginning with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain (see Gn 4:3-11) until *"the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and ... every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"* (Gn 6:5). God decided to start over by destroying all humankind but the family of one righteous man, Noah (see Gn 6:7-8). He promises Noah that he will make a covenant with him (see Gn 6:18), and floods the earth, saving only the one family and a remnant of the creatures of the earth (see Gn 7). When the flood had subsided, *"God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and*

fill the earth.... Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.... I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' And God said, *"This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth"* (Gn 9:1, 3, 11-13).

In this covenant, therefore, God renewed the blessing he had given to Adam and Eve of fruitfulness and extended his gift of food from *"every green plant for food"* (Gn 1:30) to *"every moving thing that lives"* in addition to the plants (Gn 9:3), and he promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood, making the rainbow a sign of this second covenant, this time not with a married couple but with a household of eight people —

Noah, his wife, their three sons, and their wives. Yet accompanying his gift of animals for food was a prohibition against both murder of humans (see Gn 9:6) and

eating animal flesh without draining it of its blood (see Gn 9:4). In this way, God initiated his instruction in revealed law by emphasizing the sanctity of life.

As the story of humankind unfolded and God made further covenants, he did not revoke this one, which remained the covenant in force for all those outside the Chosen People until Jesus came to proclaim the Good News, that salvation would be preached to the entire world (see Mt 28:19).

The Covenant with Abraham

With God's call of Abram, whom he later renamed Abraham, the third covenant begins. In this covenant, God begins gathering a people to himself, the Chosen People, who will be the *"trustees of the promise made to the patriarchs, the Chosen People, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church² ... [and] the root onto which the Gentiles would be grafted, once they came to believe"*³ (CCC 60).

Because of Abram's response of faith to God's command to leave everything for a strange land, God tells Abram: *"I will make of you a great nation, and I will*

"We see in this wonderful promise the seed not only of God's Chosen People, the Israelites, but of the Church itself."

² Cf. Romans 11:28; John 11:52; John 10:16

³ Cf. Romans 11:17-18, 24



Abraham willing to sacrifice his son Isaac

bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gn 12:2-3). We see in this wonderful promise the seed not only of God's Chosen People, the Israelites, but of the Church itself.

Yet Abram was childless, and old, as was his wife, and he continued childless for many years after he had gone to the land to which God had sent him. Eventually, God renewed his promise, telling Abram: *"Look toward Heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your descendants be"* (Gn 15:5) and that his descendants would possess the land (see Gn 15:7, 18). He also told Abram that they would undergo a four-hundred-year period of slavery in another land (see Gn 15:13), which we know as the slavery the Israelites bore in Egypt.

Abram and his wife continued to be childless for many more years, and God renewed his covenantal promise yet again. He told Abram: *"I will make my covenant between me and you.... [Y]ou shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham.... I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to*

be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God" (Gn 17:2, 4-8). As a sign of the covenant, God commanded Abraham to circumcise all the males, the adults and boys immediately and the infants on the eighth day after birth (see Gn 17:9-14). The covenant that God made with Abraham was now no longer with a single married couple or a single household, but with a tribe of several hundred people. Finally, God renamed Sarai, Abraham's wife, Sarah and told Abraham that all the covenantal promises were to come through her son (see Gn 17:15-16) (this was important in the days of multiple wives and concubines).

God renewed this covenant with Abraham a final time after a searing test of faith. God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac, the only child of him and his wife Sarah and therefore the only heir to God's promise: *"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, ... and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you"* (Gn 22:2). At the point at which Abraham was about to slay his son, an angel called to him and God said: *"Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me"* (Gn 22:12). Abraham sacrificed a

ram caught nearby instead, and then God said: "[B]ecause you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of Heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And ... by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gn 22:16-18).

Two things are important to note here. The first is that God expects Abraham and his descendants to recognize him as their God (see Gn 17:7). The process of making this expectation reality took an exceedingly long time in human history. This should give us an understanding of how immeasurably hard-hearted we as humans are, and how patient God has been and continues to be with us. Second, the covenant with Abraham, which eventually formed the Israelites, or Hebrews, the people who later came to be called the Jews, is an everlasting covenant that God has not revoked. For Christians, the Old Testament is thus indispensable, and we must honor the Jews as our older brothers and sisters in the faith, for we know that God will never desert his own.

The Covenant with Moses

Just as God had told Abraham, his descendants eventually left Canaan for Egypt, and became enslaved there. The way this happened is told in Genesis 37-50, which recounts the story of Abraham's great-grandson Joseph and the settling of him and all of his brothers' families in Egypt.

The book of Exodus opens with the initial prosperity of the Israelites in Egypt and their later enslavement. Yet "the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied" (Ex 1:12). Eventually this led the Pharaoh (the ruler of Egypt) to order the murder of every boy at birth (see Ex 1:15-22). It was to this generation of children that Moses was born, and saved through the ingenuity of his mother and sister and the pity of one of Pharaoh's daughters (see Ex 2:1-10). Grown to manhood, Moses murdered an overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave, and



Statue of Moses, by Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1475-1564

fled to the desert of Arabia (see Ex 2:11-15). It was there that God called him to liberate his people (see Ex 3-4). There followed a tremendous struggle of wills between Pharaoh and Moses. God's plagues on Egypt, which were intended to show Pharaoh the will of God, culminated in the terrible tenth plague, the death of all the first-born of Egypt except those of the Israelites who had smeared the blood of an innocent lamb on their doorposts so that God "passed over" their homes (see Ex 5-12). Finally Pharaoh allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt (see Ex 12:31-40), an event celebrated ever since by God's command as the Passover (see Ex 12:43-13:10).

Once free of the pursuing Egyptian army, thanks to God's miraculous parting of the Red

Sea (see Ex 14), and in the desert, the Israelites had second thoughts about leaving Egypt. It was then that, through Moses, God gave them abundant sweet water and made his first covenant with the nation of Israel: "If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord, your healer" (Ex 15:26). It was just after this that God gave the Israelites miraculous food, manna from Heaven, and miraculous flights of quails for meat (see Ex 16).

God renewed this covenant in considerably greater detail when the Israelites arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; ... and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:4-6). This is the birth of the Chosen People as a nation and their election as the People of God, the sign of the future gathering of all nations to God (see Is 2:2-5).

As an enslaved people set free by God, the Israelites then receive the gift of his revealed law and ordinances (see Ex 20:1-17; Ex 21-23), not to enslave them again but to allow them to live freely in accor-

dance with his original design and to serve him as the "one living and true God"⁴ (CCC 62). The many thousands that make up the Twelve Tribes of Israel become God's "first-born son" (Ex 4:22), and he becomes their Father. The Israelites agree to the terms of the covenant: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (see Ex 24:7). The tablets of the Ten Commandments are, together with the Passover meal, the signs of this covenant.

The Covenant with David

The story of the Israelites' arrival in Canaan and how they took possession of it is told in several books of the Old Testament, right through the time of King David. It quickly becomes clear that the Israelites are prone to idolatry, and they repeatedly break the covenant, despite the great works of God that Moses' generation had witnessed. They fail to rely on God alone to preserve and protect their nation. Eventually, they seek a king. God first selects Saul and, when he proves unworthy, chooses David to replace him (see 1 Sm 11-28).

It is with the great King David that God seals the last of the Old Testament covenants. David wished to build a permanent temple to God in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant that contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments (see 2 Sm 7:1-2). God does not allow David to do this, but promises him: "I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.... Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his Kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his Kingdom for ever.... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sm 7:9, 11-13, 16).

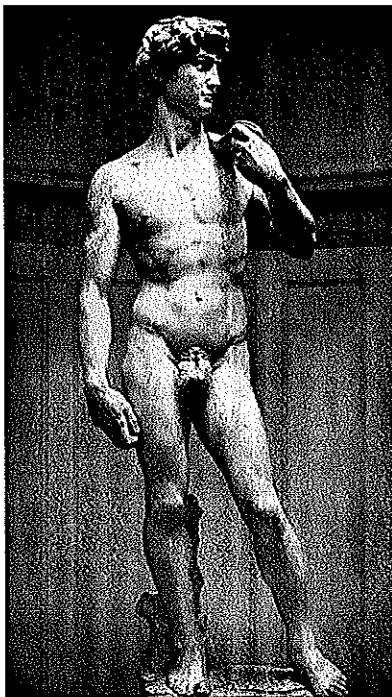
Thus God made with David's

"house" (his descendants) a covenant numbering hundreds of thousands of people, of which the signs were the throne of kingship and the Temple that God allowed Solomon to build (see 1 Kgs 5-7). David responded to this covenant with great humility and wonder (see 2 Sm 7:18-29). In one phrase, we learn that David understood the covenant to extend beyond the kingdom. This phrase, rendered in English as "thou ... hast shown me future generations" (2 Sm 7:19), in Hebrew is literally "this is the law for man," showing that the covenant actually took in the whole of humankind.

Yet the royal line of David failed to keep the covenant. The remainder of the First and Second books of Kings and the other historical books, together with several books of the prophets, record the dreadful history of the monarchial period, up to the apparently final destruction of the line of David by the Babylonians (see 2 Kgs 24-25). The period of the monarchy was the period of doing "evil in the sight of the Lord" (see, for example (out of a long list), 1 Kgs 15:26; 1 Kgs 16:30; 1 Kgs 22:52; 2 Kgs 3:2; 2 Kgs 8:18; 2 Kgs 14:24; 2 Kgs 15:28; 2 Kgs 21:16).

The period of the monarchy was also the period of the great prophets. They were inspired to understand God's covenantal relationship and promises in ever-deeper ways. Most notable was the revelation of God's covenant as a marriage between him and his people and how deeply the unfaithfulness of Israel, when it behaved as a harlot, grieved him (see Is 54:5-8; Is 62:2-4; Jer 2:1-3; Jer 3:1-2, 20; Ez 16:8-22; Hos 1:2, Hos 2:14-23). The understanding of the covenant in nuptial terms prepared for Jesus the "Bridegroom" (Mk 2:20) and the Church as his Bride (see Eph 5:25-27), and for the vision of Heaven as the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rv 19:9). The prophets also foresaw the day of a new covenant (see Is 55:3-5; Jer 31:31-34). These prophecies gave hope to a people who had repeatedly forsaken God and had

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Statue of David, by Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1475-1564

⁴ Cf. Dei Verbum 3

experienced his anger as a result, until their nation was nearly destroyed.

The Final and Eternal Covenant

The ultimate meaning of the fallen human condition and the story of the covenants "is revealed only in the light of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁵ We must know Christ as the source of grace in order to know Adam as the source of sin" (CCC 388). God, in the person of Jesus Christ, again makes a covenant with his people. The line of David, to whom God had made such great promises but which had apparently been extinguished, is found to live yet in Jesus, "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (see Mt 1:1). This final covenant of God with his people is with anyone and everyone who has faith in Jesus (see Rom 5:1), repents of his

or her sins (see Acts 3:19), is baptized (see Jn 3:5), and keeps the commandments (see Jn 14:21). In the Gospel of Matthew, the magi who came from afar (see Mt 2:1-11) represent the Gentiles, to whom Jesus is their Savior just as he is the Messiah of Israel: "[A] light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel" (Lk 2:32). The People of God is now those who choose Christ, the members of the Catholic Church and those who, by Baptism, are even imperfectly united with it as members of other Chris-



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and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:14, 19-20). When we take the Eucharist, he lives in us and we live in him (see Jn 6:56). There could be no greater intimacy except that of Heaven itself.

(CCC 53-56, 58-60, 62-66, 121, 238, 280, 346, 388, 528, 762, 781, 1080, 1611-1612, 2058, 2060, 2810)

tian communions. St. Peter tells us: "[Y]ou are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people" (1 Pt 2:9-10). The Revelation of Christ is the last revelation we will receive from God; he is the definitive Word of the Father (see Heb 1:1-2). He told us that his Revelation is eternal: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mk 13:31).

The Eucharist is the sign of the New Covenant. In this covenant, God gives himself to us in a wholly new way: the Body and Blood of his Son, Jesus Christ, who instituted the Eucharist the night before he died: "And when the hour came, he sat at table, and the apostles with him.... And he took bread,

⁵ Cf. Romans 5:12-21

God's Plan of Salvation

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the Heavenly places. ~ Ephesians 3:8-10

GOD IS LOVE, and out of the fullness of his love, he chose to create men and women who could share his life of love. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'" (Gn 1:26). God wanted us to be able to choose his love, and so he gave us free will. God made us truly free. We can reject his love and say "No" to his plan to share his life with us. We can cut ourselves off from God, and that free act is called sin.

Adam and Eve, our first parents, chose to use their freedom to disobey God. By this free action, they introduced sin into the human race. The sin that is inherited from our first parents is called "original sin." Every human person is stained by original sin. "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom 5:12). Our own experience confirms that we fall short of the life of freedom and charity that God designed for us to live.

The Good News is that God does not let even our wrong choices stand in the way of his desire to draw us into his inner life. As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, God provided a solution to the sin problem. Adam and Eve knew that the result of disobeying God would be death. The Bible tells us "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom

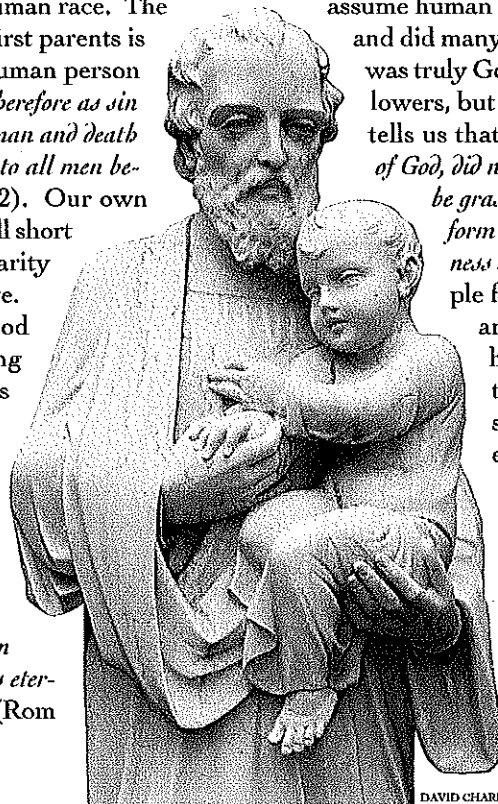
6:23). Because sin offends God's perfect justice, it cannot go unpunished.

However, in his wonderful plan, the Father sent his son "to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28), making it possible for anyone who accepts his free gift to obtain salvation. In time, God the Son took on human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He was born as a little baby even though he was the Creator of the universe. Just as divine love impelled God to create, the same accommodating love moved him to assume human nature. Jesus grew to manhood and did many wonderful things that proved he was truly God. He did not lord it over his followers, but loved and served them. St. Paul tells us that Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:6-7). Many people followed him to hear his teaching and imitate his life of love. From his many followers, Jesus chose twelve men to be his apostles. He spent most of his time with them, explaining things more fully to them and sending them on special missions.

According to God's plan, even Jesus' wonderful life was not sufficient to pay the price for sin. Ultimately, he died by crucifixion to satisfy the death penalty against humanity.

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DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

This was the ultimate demonstration of God's love, the total outpouring of his life. *"And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross"* (Phil 2:8). To show that the payment for sin had been satisfied, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. He appeared to hundreds of people, and we have written records from those who witnessed his Resurrection. He continued to teach his apostles, revealing to them the deeper mysteries of his life, death, and Resurrection. Then, after being with them for forty days, he ascended bodily into Heaven.

Jesus wanted to make sure that all people throughout the world and for future generations would know and have access to his saving work. So before he ascended to Heaven, he gave his apostles, who had been with him throughout his public life, the responsibility to preach the Good News of salvation to all nations and guard the rich deposit of grace and truth he had entrusted to them. From Heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit — the third person of the Blessed Trinity — to empower and guide the apostles. The commission that Jesus gave the apostles was, *"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"* (Mt 28:19-20).

As the apostles followed this commandment of Jesus, many people heard the message, believed, turned away from

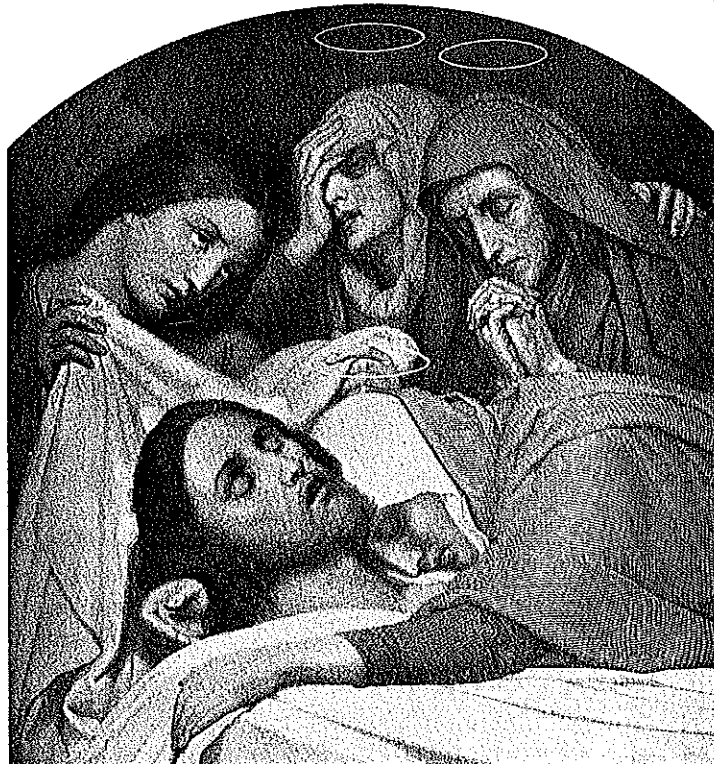
sin, and were baptized. They formed a community of believers, who followed the teaching of Christ's apostles, lived in loving fellowship with one another, broke bread together, and prayed (see Acts 2:42). This community is the early Church and its early history is recorded by St. Luke in the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles. The apostles appointed successors to continue leading the Church after their death. In this way, Jesus' saving message has been handed on from generation to generation so that in every age, all people have the opportunity to know and love God.

Today, God's offer to share his life with men and women is still available. Through the Church, those who hear the message of salvation can say "yes" to God and receive the gift of his divine life. By repenting from sin and joining the community of believers

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through Baptism, we experience God's life in us. We gain access to the deposit of grace and truth that Jesus committed to the apostles to be handed down through their successors. Through the sacraments of the Church, we continue to receive the forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of divine life, and all the gifts that God has for us. By persevering in God's grace, we can share his divine life, not only now, but for all eternity with him in Heaven. Even in the depths of our misery in sin, we have hope, for God tells us: *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine"* (Is 43:1).

(CCC 1-2, 396-412, 763-776, 2624)



Holy women mourning over the dead Christ, late 19th century lithograph