

WHAT CATHOLICS BELIEVE
An introductory booklet series



The Catholic Church

The Beginning
The Meaning of the word 'Church'
Images of Church
The Church as an Institution
Signs of the Church
Mary, Mother of the Church



The Beginning

After Jesus rose from the dead he appeared to his apostles. Then, as he had predicted, he returned to God, his Father. But before that he instructed them to preach the Good News everywhere. They were to proclaim that Jesus had risen from death to life and that those who repented of their sins and acknowledged him as Son of God would be saved from sin and death.

At first the apostles were afraid. But Jesus sent the Holy Spirit among them and, filled with courage, eloquence and energy, they began preaching the Good News. On the first day of public preaching by Peter, three thousand of his hearers were converted. As a result a seed was planted which would, in time, develop into a world-wide Church.



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The Meaning of the word 'Church'

Before we talk about what the Catholic Church is we have to consider the meaning of the word 'church'. It is a word which we hear and use very often, but we may not realise that it has more than one meaning.

In its first sense, as used in the early Greek language two thousand years ago, it means 'belonging to the Lord' (which was a short way of saying 'the Lord's house'). So it referred to the building in which the early Christians met to pray and to celebrate the Eucharist (see Booklet 6, 'The Mass'). That meaning is one which we commonly understand today (for example, when we say 'The church is being painted.').

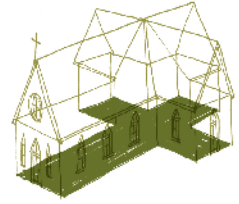


an assembly of people which had been officially called to meet together

But there was a second early Greek word which had an even more important effect upon our understanding of 'church'. That word didn't refer to a building but to an assembly of people which had been officially called to meet together. In this sense the word meant 'to summon' or 'to call out'. Both the Jewish people and the Greek people of Athens were used to being called to meetings where matters which affected their lives were discussed and decided upon. The early Christians borrowed these words to describe their own meetings which, they believed, they were 'called' to attend.

The word 'church', then, has the two meanings of a building and of a community of people who meet to pray and to worship God. At first it was the 'community' idea which was the most important to the early Christians – that is what it means in the New Testament writings. There were no special buildings at first, but when these began to be built the second meaning also became common.

The early Christians saw a connection between these two meanings: they thought of the building as a symbol of the community which built it; and because the community was understood as 'the body of Christ' churches came to be built in a way which represented Jesus. For example, they were often built in the shape of a crucifix. And because the community of Christian believers was thought of as 'God's temple', a few of those early churches, the cathedrals, were also built in a much more splendid way – like the great Jewish temple in Jerusalem.



churches came to be built... in the shape of a crucifix

The main meaning which 'church' has in the New Testament is 'a community of Christians which met to worship God'. At the same time, almost immediately, it also came to mean the community of believers in a particular place – that's why, for example, St Paul wrote his letters to 'the Church at Corinth' or to some other Church.

'Church' Today

When Catholics today speak about 'the Church' they probably mean the Catholic Church throughout the world. Almost from the start, the Church was described as the 'Church of God' in Rome, Corinth or some other place. Christians in different communities recognised each other as 'brothers and sisters' and they celebrated a new worship in memory of the Lord which distinguished them from the old worship of the Jewish synagogue and Temple, one which united them as followers of a new religion which they referred to as 'the Way'. There was frequent communication between these communities of Christians – travellers went from one place to another and letters were sent between them. Some of these letters were read at the Sunday Eucharist and were accepted as binding and authoritative for all the Churches. (They are now found in the Bible).

About the year 109 A.D. Ignatius of Antioch referred to the church as universal, and from then on this concept of the church as a worldwide institution became much more common until, finally, it became the usual meaning for Catholics.

Unfortunately, as a result of divisions and disagreements among Christians, the word 'Church' has also come to mean groups of Christians who believe different things. So people speak of 'the Roman Catholic Church', 'the Presbyterian Church', 'the Anglican Church', 'the Methodist Church', 'the Baptist Church' or 'the Church of Christ', and so on. The trouble about this is that it hides two important meanings of 'Church' – the gathering together of a local group of believers, and the group of believers worldwide.

What influence has the Church had on your life?
On world events?



St Ignatius of Antioch referred to the Church as 'universal'

Images of Church

(1) The Kingdom

The gospels use a number of images to show what the Kingdom of God is like. There's the little mustard seed which grows into a strong plant, the yeast hidden in the flour, the treasure hidden in the earth, grains of wheat sown in a paddock, a fishing net which catches shoals of fish, and so on.

In St Peter's first Letter we read,

But you are a chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were a non-people and now you are the People of God, once you were outside his pity, now you have received pity. (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Yet it can't be said that the Catholic Church and the Kingdom of God are entirely the same thing. The Church is the beginning of the Kingdom, not the fulfilment. It's the sowing of the seed, not the harvest; the setting of the net, not the catch; the calling of the sheep, not their gathering into a flock. In line with those New Testament stories, the Church has its share of weeds, of worthless fish, of wild goats among the sheep. It has its share of scandals because it isn't the Kingdom – it's only the beginning of the Kingdom. The fullness of the Kingdom of God will come sometime in the future when all things are made perfect.



the Church has its
share of weeds



believers are both
the temple of the
Holy Spirit and
God's temple

(2) The Church as Temple

This idea emerges from some words of Jesus. During his trial he was accused of saying that he would destroy the temple and build another one within three days. The great temple in Jerusalem would be replaced by a new dwelling-place of God. Jesus would be its cornerstone (*see 1 Pet. 2:4-7*). In fact, Jesus would be the new temple (*see Jn. 2:21*). And St Paul tells us that believers are both the temple of the Holy Spirit and God's temple (*see 1 Cor. 3:16*).

In this sense, believers are called to be a holy people who rely upon Jesus Christ as the foundation of their lives.



it's the purest idea
of the Church in
general

(3) The Church as the Holy City

Jerusalem was the holy city of pre-Christian times. But there was a 'new Jerusalem' referred to in the Book of Revelation, which describes

the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband (Rev. 21:2).

This is God's holy city restored to perfection once again. It isn't any particular local Church; it's the purest idea of the Church in general – and its beginnings can be found in a community of believers.

(4) The Bride of Christ

The quotation from the Book of Revelation just given refers to a bride. This is one of the sources for the image of the Church as the 'Bride of Christ'. It's also found in *2 Cor. 11:2* and *Eph. 5:22-32*. It may have found its beginning in the

fact that the Jewish people believed that their country, their nation was married to God. Obviously, it suggests the closest and most intimate of all loving relationships – Jesus loves the Church, and the Church reflects that love. One result of this feminine image is that it is customary to refer to the Church as ‘she’ and ‘her’ rather than ‘it’.



Jesus loves the Church,
and the Church reflects
that love

(5) The Church as Body of Christ

This is the most important of the images of the Church found in the New Testament. Once again it suggests the closest possible relationship of Jesus and the Church – the two are so close that they share the ‘one body’.

The idea isn’t found in the gospels. What we do find there though, are words of Jesus in which he identifies himself with those who suffer and who are in need for example,

‘In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did it to me’ (Matt. 25:40, 45).

Although it isn’t found in the gospels we can find it in St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

Now Christ’s body is yourselves, each of you with a part to play in the whole (1 Cor. 12:27).

It’s also in St Paul’s letter to the Romans:

I urge you then, brothers [and sisters], remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you as sensible people... Just as each of us has various parts in one body, and the parts do not all have the same function: in the same way, all of us, though there are many of us, make up one body in Christ,



as different parts we are all
joined to one another

*and as different parts we are all joined to one another
(Rom. 12:1, 4-5).*

You may have noted that the word ‘Church’ doesn’t appear in either of these pieces of writing. The chief idea here is that we should co-operate with each other and show each other respect. But there are statements in the New Testament which refer clearly to the Church as the Body of Christ. In St Paul’s letter to the Church at Ephesus we find the words,

He [the Father] has put all things under his [Christ’s] feet, and made him, as he is above all things, the head of the Church; which is his body, the fullness of him who is filled, all in all (Eph. 1:22-23).

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians we find the idea put very simply:

*... and he is the Head of the Body, that is, the Church
(Col. 1:18).*

The main idea in these two pieces of writing is that the Church is the Body of Jesus; he is its head. As the body of Jesus, members of the Church must show him absolute obedience – just as the body does what the brain orders it to do.

Jesus made a similar point when he said,



I am the vine, you are
the branches

‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty...’ (Jn. 15:5).

Although he was emphasising his closeness with those who believe in him, he was also saying that his followers can’t have true life unless they share in his life – just as a branch can’t live once it has been cut off from a grapevine. By sharing the life of Jesus his followers also become united to each other. By helping people who need our help they are also offering their care to Jesus.

In terms of what has just been said, Catholics believe that the work of the Church is to continue the work of Jesus – when the Church administers the sacraments it's Jesus who is present there; when the Church teaches what Jesus proclaimed, it's Jesus who speaks to us.

Catholics believe that Jesus acts through his Church bringing salvation to all people who believe in him, and that when they truly love and help each other they are able to do so because of God's life in them.

Which image of Church – 'holy city', 'Body of Christ' etc. has the most meaning or appeal for you? Why is that?



The Church as an Institution

As time went by the Christian communities became more and more structured, organised and linked. They worked out dates and times and places, ways of achieving their goals, ways of relating to each other. All these things were necessary because the good news they spoke about attracted many followers. The larger their communities became, the more necessary it was that they develop a structure to preserve the message of Jesus and make their work for him more effective.

This idea serves as a suitable introduction to three other key ideas about Church.

(1) The People of God

In a sense, this title is another way of referring to the Church as an institution or organisation. But the important thing about the title is that it puts the emphasis upon people rather than upon the rules and regulations which are part of the organisation to which they belong.

In the very early times the word ‘Church’ didn’t refer to a world-wide, organised society such as we mean now when we talk about the Catholic Church. Yet even then those early particular Churches were linked with each other in friendship, and as time went by their leaders began to meet in order to discuss matters which concerned them. At one such meeting (the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.) those who attended named the local Churches of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch as holding, in order, the first, second and third places of honour among them.



‘one, holy, catholic and
apostolic church’

The leaders of all these local Churches came to be called bishops – later in this booklet more will be said about them and their duties. Although they retained their separate identity, at the time we are speaking of they had formed a very definite sense of what they had in common, including (1) their understanding of baptism; (2) which books of the New Testament were ‘genuine’; (3) the way in which the bishops of the most important churches were descended from the apostles.

At the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. reference was made to the ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’. Each of these terms will be looked at more closely later, but at this point it needs to be said that even though the statement seemed to suggest that there was one worldwide Church, in fact the Church did not have any such general organisation and administration.

At first Christianity was unlawful in the Roman Empire. By 385 A.D. however, it became the official religion of the Empire. This remarkable change in attitude towards Christianity also brought about remarkable changes within Christianity. The word ‘Church’ had already come to be applied to the community of believers in different places. Now it was used not only within the Empire but beyond it, as in Persia and among the Germanic tribes. It was because all of these had a sense of common identity that the Council of Constantinople came up with the description

of the Church as being ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’. As the local Churches were hierarchical, with the bishop as the chief pastor and the centre of unity, so the meetings of bishops (called councils) which, in those days, were usually summoned by the emperor began to operate as organisations for regional and universal order and unity. The harmony that Jesus prayed for was never fully attained and as the organisation grew bigger and more diversified disputes and arguments erupted.

Some groups resented the way in which the Church became more identified with the Roman Empire. Or they resented the way in which some local Churches seemed to gain authority over others. They also resisted the ‘internationalising’ of the Church because they wanted to keep their own local culture, their own authority. Some of these groups broke away from the main stream of the Church – just as other groups did later.

Yet all these people were convinced of one thing – they were the true People of God.

(2) The Structure of the Church

We have been speaking about how, over time, the Church came to be more and more organised. It’s now time to speak of how the Church is organised at present.

Who is the head of the Church? The answer to that is simple – Jesus Christ is the head of the church. ‘But,’ you might say, ‘I thought the Pope was.’ No; not at all. Jesus Christ has authority over the whole church. He is its head.

What about the Pope? As Bishop of Rome, the Pope is the successor of St Peter, who was the chief of the apostles. This fact may seem extraordinary because, while Jesus was suffering, Peter three times denied that he knew him.



the Church is organised

After Jesus rose from the dead Peter was challenged by a threefold question – his answer was a threefold statement of love:



When Jesus commanded Peter to be a shepherd

When they had eaten, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He replied, ‘Yes, Lord, you know I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Look after my sheep.’ Then he said to him a third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt that he asked him a third time... and said, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep’ (Jn.21:15-17).

When Jesus commanded Peter to be a shepherd to the sheep, he gave him the task of ruling, guiding and caring for the Church. At the last supper Jesus told Peter,

‘I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers [and sisters]’ (Lk. 22:32).



a series of good popes earned people's respect

Among all bishops, the Pope holds a special place. Above all, he is responsible for the unity of the Church. The special authority of the Bishop of Rome was, with few exceptions, recognised from the beginning, but it was in the early fifth century that Pope Leo the Great claimed this authority in the way in which we understand it today.

Not everything went well with the papacy. Between 885 and 1049 A.D. some Popes treated their office as if it were an ordinary kingship. At times they behaved disgracefully. But after 1049 A.D. a series of good popes earned people's respect. From that time on the popes exercised their authority in a most definite way – exactly as the Pope does today.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would preserve his

followers from error. So, today, the Church is said to be without error (infallible) when it makes solemn statements, guided by the Holy Spirit, on matters of faith or morals. Catholics are obliged to believe and obey these statements. The Pope is also said to be infallible when making such pronouncements as the chief teacher of God's people. (This role sounds very grand, yet it has a special purpose – the Pope calls himself 'the servant of the servants of God'.)

Much more commonly though, the Pope writes widely published letters to guide Catholics. Catholics are also guided by statements of the bishops. But none of this should obscure the fact that individual people can also be guided by the Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit guides communities of believers.

The bishops share the Pope's responsibilities. Even before that, they have an immediate responsibility for the particular Church over which they preside. In the Catholic Church a bishop is thought of as a successor of the apostles and just as the apostles had responsibility for a particular Church, so too bishops have responsibility for a particular Church, a region of the universal Church which is called a 'diocese'. The bishops take care of the Christian communities in their diocese, giving special responsibilities to some people, and ordaining priests and deacons. (Within their dioceses, the bishops share their responsibilities not only with the priests but with all who are baptised.) Thus the Catholic Church is a communion of particular Churches, and if it is to be a valid communion, it must be in communion with the Bishop of Rome (the Pope). Responsibility for the Church internationally rests with the Pope and the bishops who meet from time to time in great Councils. The last was the Second Vatican Council which met from 1962 to 1965.

All this sounds political and bureaucratic. In a sense it is, because people, even the People of God, need an organisation. Israel was a federation of tribes and then a kingdom. But the



The bishops take
care of the Christian
communities in
their diocese

People of God comprise much more than an organisation or a bureaucracy; the Holy Spirit dwells in the people. Hence it is the whole body that is infallible. The hierarchy and the bureaucracy are means to achieve its faithfulness – they operate by way of real consensus not by arbitrary power.

The next section highlights the difference between purely political associations and the Church, which is depicted as a Mother. In the former it is power which dominates; in the Church it should be love.



we should honour her as
our mother and teacher

(3) The Church: our Mother

‘Holy Mother Church’ is a term which goes back to the earliest times. The Church is called a mother because, through preaching and baptism, she gives birth to many children. In addition, it can be said that, in a particular way, Jesus Christ is born and grows in us through the efforts of the Church.

Because Jesus nourishes us through the Church there is a very good reason why we should honour her as our mother and teacher. The Church is the Bride of Christ. In fact, Jesus is united so closely to the Church that when she cares for us we owe her the love we would show a mother.

Hundreds of years ago St Cyprian said all that needs to be said about this matter: ‘You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the Church for your mother.’

(4) The Church: Mystery and Sacrament

It would never do to believe that only Church officials have responsibility to continue the teaching of Jesus. All believers share that responsibility too, because they are ‘the People of God’.

Those who live in this country can truly be referred to as ‘the People of New Zealand’. What is so very different then about the title ‘People of God’? The main difference is that the Church is also a mystery or a sacrament. By saying this we mean that she has a unique relationship with God and therefore with God’s world. As the body of Christ, the Church also has a very special relationship with God our Father. So the mystery of the Church is aligned with the mystery of the Trinity – she has a relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit.



‘the People of
New Zealand’

Because the Church is related to God in this way she also shares in the task of Jesus – she presents God’s saving mercy to the people of the world.

Her task, then, is to teach the good news of the Kingdom of God and to prepare human beings for the coming of the Kingdom.

Yet the Catholic Church recognises that many people are made holy and that an enormous amount of truth and holiness are found among other Christian communities and non-Christian religions. So it is committed to respect other religions and to work for the unity of all Christians.

(5) The Church: Brothers and Sisters

Members of any family which functions properly communicate well with each other, share what they have, and help each other. They feel united. It is sadly true that not all Christian churches relate in this way. How can this be achieved?

Catholics believe that those who have a common faith (those who believe the same things) share the same hope, the same love, and a common life, which is in fact the life of Jesus, the life of the Spirit, the life of God.

Catholics also believe that they share both God’s life and



By their baptism they
have been called

the task which God entrusted to Jesus. They believe that the work of Jesus can't be left to priests, bishops and ministers. By their baptism they have been called to share in the mission of the Church. This notion has led to a much better understanding of the role of people who are not ordained ministers (not priests, for example). Catholics are expected to become actively involved in the work of the Church and many respond very generously, welcoming their chance to share with others the life of God which has been given to them.

The Holy Spirit

It is the Holy Spirit who keeps the Church true to the teaching of Jesus and gives her life. The same Spirit brings life to each person who does God's work.



the Spirit of God will
help them if they pray

The coming of the Holy Spirit is described in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus had gone to his Father as he said he would. The apostles felt very lonely, afraid and bewildered. They met in Jerusalem every day to pray and discuss plans. They didn't know how to begin the impossible task which Jesus gave them to preach his message to the whole world.

As they wondered and feared and prayed, the Holy Spirit came to them and made them strong. They had been slow to understand what Jesus taught them; now they realised much more about his teaching. They had been afraid, but now they came out to live and die for Jesus Christ.

Catholics believe that the same Spirit strengthens and inspires the Church today – and strengthens and inspires them individually. They believe that when they don't fully understand their task as baptised Christians, the Spirit of God will help them if they pray, and that when they feel reluctant or unworthy to tell others about the teaching of Jesus, the Spirit of God will strengthen them.

Signs of the Church

From the fourth century the Church described herself as ‘one, holy, catholic, and apostolic’. These are signs of the presence of Jesus Christ. But they are also more than signs – they are special gifts. What do they mean?

The Church is One (Eph. 4:5)

Members of the true Church of Jesus Christ will share one faith. They will worship in one particular way. They will be united to the one sacrifice of Jesus commemorated in the Sacrament of the Eucharist and eat the one Bread that unites all who share it. They will receive the same sacraments. They will be united in a common bond to the Pope, who is both a sign and a servant of unity. This unity, which Jesus promised, is a sign of God’s life in his Church.



one faith

The Church is Holy (Eph. 5:27)

Jesus Christ is head of the Church. Because he is holy, the Church which is his body is also holy. Because of him the teachings of the Church are holy – as are the sacraments which nourish people so that they can live holy lives.



The Church asks all its members to be holy

The Church asks all its members to be holy. She has always done so, despite the fact that her ranks include sinners. History shows only too clearly that there is sinfulness in the Church, but it also shows that she has a great holiness. This is evident in the fact that many of her members lead holy lives and some have even accepted torture and death in imitation of their Lord, Jesus Christ.



'catholic' –
means 'universal'

The Church is Catholic (Eph. 2:19)

The Church of Jesus Christ must be 'catholic' – the word means 'universal'. The Catholic Church is a Church for all people, everywhere and at all times. In addition, the Church can be said to be universal, or catholic, in the sense that she continues to teach everywhere what Jesus Christ taught.



to reflect the culture and
the circumstances
of the people

The Church is Apostolic (Eph. 2:20)

This means that the Church which exists now is the same Church as the one which existed at the time of the apostles. Jesus founded his Church with the apostles as its first members, witnesses and ministers. The Church is apostolic because she traces her descent from the apostles and teaches the same doctrine and way of life which they taught. When we call the Church apostolic we mean that the teaching of Jesus Christ, first preached to the world by the apostles and the communities to which they belonged, is the same teaching which the Catholic Church presents today.

In all times and places it's the Church's duty to be the means by which Jesus brings his truth and his gifts to people. If the Church is to communicate these things well it needs to reflect the culture and the circumstances of the people she serves. But, at the same time, the basis of what she teaches must be seen to be unchanging.



What is the most
appealing quality of the
Catholic Church for you?
What do you struggle
with most of all?

Because we are human, because we are sinners, because we need God's help, the actions of individuals and groups in the Catholic Church may fail to demonstrate the virtues expected of them. But the Church as a whole does – and she must if she is to be faithful to the task entrusted to her.

Mary, Mother of the Church

Mary is the mother of Jesus. Because of the closeness of Jesus to the Church we can also claim that Mary is the mother of the Church.

Before ending this booklet it's necessary to say something about the place of Mary in the Catholic system of belief. Catholics don't worship Mary; they worship God. But they honour her because she is the mother of the Son of God. They also pray to Jesus through her, believing that her intercession with her son will make their prayer more acceptable. Catholics believe that Mary is the window through which they see Jesus, her son.

When she accepted the call to become the mother of the one who was to redeem people from their sins she showed the kind of deep faith which is a model for us. She loved him during his life and her love for him drew her to the foot of the cross upon which he died.

She was his first believer and loved him more than anyone else. In this sense she was the first Christian – that's why we can call her the mother of the Church.



we can call her the mother
of the Church

Conclusion

God has given the world a blueprint for our salvation. The details of this blueprint were first revealed by Jesus Christ during his life on earth two thousand years ago. After his death and resurrection his teachings were faithfully handed on by the apostles.

The subsequent conversion of great numbers of people resulted in the foundation of local Churches. There were many disputes among them, many cultural differences, but

they held many things in common – including the fact that Jesus had chosen the apostle Peter to be the cornerstone of his Church.

Peter died in Rome. In time, his successors as Bishop of Rome became known as the Popes. Under Jesus Christ as Head of the Church the Popes have continued to unify and lead the Church exactly as the apostle Peter did all those years ago.

A Prayer

When we pray for the Church we pray for ourselves. We pray that we may play our part in bringing God's message of love to the world:

Lord, we are the living stones, laid upon the cornerstone that is Christ. Let us pray to our all-powerful Father for his Son's beloved Church, professing our faith in her as we say – This is the house of God and the gate of heaven.

Father, like the farmer, prune your vineyard, protect it and increase its yield – until it extends before you throughout the world.

Eternal shepherd, protect and increase your flock – that all the sheep may be gathered into one flock under your Son, the one shepherd.

All-powerful sower, plant the word in your field – that it may yield a hundredfold for your eternal harvest.

Wise builder, sanctify your home and your family – that the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, your spouse, may appear before all as your glorious bride.

Did you know?



The Catholic Church

The ship symbolises the Church tossed on the sea of disbelief, worldliness, and persecution, but it finally reaches the safe harbour with its cargo of human souls. In times of persecution the mast-top was often depicted as a cross (see Mk. 4:35-41, 1 Pet. 3:20-21).

Nihil obstat
Rev Merv Duffy SM, S.T.D.


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