

# **The Call of the Twelve Apostles and our Call to Apostleship Today**

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## Introduction

Jesus called the twelve apostles to perpetuate his mission of salvation. The apostles shared the closest moments with our Lord. For three years, they stayed with Jesus, listened to His teachings, watched His actions and miracles, and above all witnessed to His resurrection, the cornerstone of the Christian faith. The Bible tells us that that our Church is built on the heritage of the apostles “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). Also, the Church is built on the foundation of “the twelve apostles of the lamb” (Rev 21:14). Our Church is thus apostolic in the sense that it is built on the faith of the apostles. When we recite the creed at Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, we say, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” We gather here this evening to reflect on the lives of the apostles and our call to discipleship.

## A. The Twelve Apostles of Jesus

Who were the twelve apostles of Jesus? What do we know about them? Called individually by Jesus, the apostles were all listed in the synoptic Gospels as “Simon who is known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas, and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who was also his betrayer (Mt 10:2-4; Mk 3:16-19; Lk 6:14-16).

### i) Simon Peter

Undoubtedly, Simon Peter was the most prominent of the apostles of our Lord and we know quite much about him from the scriptures. According to the synoptic gospels, Simon Peter was the first of the apostles called by Jesus (Mt 4:18-20; Mk 1:16-18; Lk 5:1-11). Simon Peter had an intriguing personality. He loved Jesus to the core of his being. His original name was Simon, a Hellenized form of the Hebrew name Simeon. However, Jesus gave him a new name *Petros* (Peter) which means rock. In John’s Gospel, Jesus said to Simon when his brother Andrew first brought him to see Jesus: “You are Simon son of John; you are to be called Cephas \_\_which means Rock” (Jn 1:42). Peter was born in Bethsaida where his family was. But at the time of the ministry of Jesus, Peter had married and moved a little up north to Capharnaum. His mother-in-law lived with him at Capharnaum. All the synoptic gospels tell us of the cure of Simon’s mother-in-law (Mt 8:14-15; Mk 1:29-31; Lk 4:38-39).

## The Personality of Peter

Peter was the spokesman of the twelve and the leader of the Church after the resurrection and ascension of our Lord into heaven. When Jesus asked the apostles about his identity (Mt 16:16; Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20), it was Peter who spoke. Peter was the first to make a public profession of his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt 16:16-19). This led to the famous declaration of our Lord to Peter: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church (Mt 16:18). Peter is listed first among the apostles (Mt 10:2; Mk 3:16; Lk 6:14).

Although Peter loved Jesus so much he also had his share of weakness. He was an impulsive character as he tried to walk on the water with Jesus (Mt 14:22-33; Mk 6:45-52; Jn 6:16-21). He spoke before considering the implications of his words. He even boasted that even if all the others should abandon Jesus, he was ready to lay down his life for Jesus (Lk 22:33). Peter rebuked Jesus when he prophesied about his passion, death and resurrection (Mt 16:21-23). The greatest weakness and betrayal of Peter was his denial of Jesus (Mt 26:69-74; Mk 14:53-54; Lk 22:54-62; Jn 18:15-18, 25-27). Peter regretted his action and wept bitterly. Jesus gave him another chance to express his three-fold love and faith in him after his resurrection (Jn 21:15-19). As Pope Benedict XVI pointed out, “Peter, who had promised absolute faithfulness, knew the bitterness and humiliation of denial; the proud man learns the cost of humility as his own expense. ... When the mask finally fell and he understood the truth in his weak believing-sinner’s heart, he burst into liberating tears of penance, after which he was ready for his mission.”

#### Death and Burial of Peter

Peter spent the last part of his life in Rome where he was martyred around 64 or 65 AD during the persecution of the emperor Nero. Tradition has it that Peter was crucified head down because he felt unworthy to be crucified in the same way as his Lord and Master Jesus Christ. In the fourth century, Constantine built a basilica in the site where Peter’s bones were buried after being moved from the catacombs. This is the same site where the present St. Peter’s Basilica is built. Simon Peter was indeed a true apostle of the Lord. Despite Peter’s weakness, deep within him he loved Jesus wholeheartedly. Despite Peter’s imperfection, Jesus chose him as the leader of his Church. This shows that Jesus can write straight on crooked lines. The life of Peter reminds us that despite our own sinfulness and imperfections, the Lord Jesus takes us, accepts us, and uses us to accomplish his mission.

#### ii) Andrew

Andrew was the brother of Simon Peter and like Peter, he was from Bethsaida. He had a Greek name *Andreas* which means “manly, courageous” (**New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, p. 493**). According to the synoptic gospels, Andrew was called together with his brother Simon Peter (Mt 4:18-20; Mk 1:16-18). However, John’s gospel gives much prominence to Andrew with regard to his call by Jesus. John’s account reveals that Andrew was once a disciple of John the Baptist (Jn 1:35-42). It was Andrew who first met Jesus and led his brother Simon to Jesus the next day. When Andrew and another disciple of John the Baptist first met Jesus, after John the Baptist had pointed at Jesus saying, ‘Look, there is the lamb of God,’ (Jn 1:35), they not only followed Jesus but they spent the day with Jesus. Andrew not only believed in Jesus but was convinced that Jesus was the messiah.

From the outset, Andrew was eager to proclaim Jesus. He began by telling his brother Simon about Jesus. Andrew learnt much from Jesus within a short period of time and brought his brother to that fountain of life and the source of light: Jesus Christ. Through Andrew some Greeks who were not the primary focus of the ministry of Jesus, had access to Jesus like the Jews (Jn 12:24-30). The same Andrew who brought his brother Simon to Jesus also brought some Greeks to Jesus. Andrew had a way of bringing people to Jesus. For our part, I wonder how often we bring people to Jesus. Are we eager to bring people to Jesus?

Not much is known of Andrew after the ascension of our Lord. Tradition has it that he preached the gospel in Greece. Once again, he lived up to his name. With a Greek name, he saw

to it after the resurrection of Jesus that the Greeks received Jesus by preaching the gospel there. Tradition also has it that he died at *Patras* in Greece. He was crucified in an X-shaped cross. Like his brother Simon Peter, he asked not to be crucified like Jesus. He felt unworthy to be crucified in the same way as his Master and Lord Jesus Christ.

### iii) James son of Zebedee

After Simon and Andrew comes James the son of Zebedee in the list of the apostles. James is referred to as *James the Greater*, to differentiate him from James the son of Alphaeus, the cousin of our Lord, known as *James the Less*. *James the Greater* was the brother of John. James was among the first four apostles called by Jesus (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20). Our Lord gave James and his brother John the name “Boarneges or Sons of Thunder” (Mk 3:17). This reveals the personality of James. James was a zealous and fiery person. Our Lord gave them this name most likely because of the incident in Luke 9:54 when James and John asked our Lord if they could call down fire from heaven to burn the Samaritans who refused Jesus to pass through their village (Lk 9:51-56). In Mark’s Gospel, James and John were ambitious and self-centered when they came to ask our Lord for a preferred position, namely, one to sit on his right hand and the other on his left when he comes into his glory (Mk 10:37-38).

Not much is known of James after the ascension of our Lord and understandably so because he was the first of the apostles to die for Christ. He was killed by King Herod. As scripture says, “It was about this time that King Herod started persecuting certain members of the church. He had James the brother of John beheaded, and when he saw that this pleased the Jews he went on to arrest Peter as well” (Acts 12:1-2). St. John Chrysostom aptly described James: “...From the beginning he was moved with great zeal. He gave up all earthly interests and attained such an inexpressible degree of excellence that he was killed immediately.”

### iv) John son of Zebedee

John was the brother of James, sons of Zebedee; he was among the first four disciples called by Jesus. He was an evangelist but also featured prominently with Peter after the ascension of our Lord. The Oriental Church calls John a “theologian” because of his unparalleled gift of communicating the mystery of God in a simple language. His gospel is theological. Jn 1:1 attests to the theological nature of John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

John often prided himself as the ‘beloved disciple’ of Jesus because of his intimacy with Jesus. John was the ‘beloved disciple’ who leaned on Jesus’ chest during the Last Supper (Jn 13:25). He was the ‘beloved disciple’ who stood at the foot of the Jesus’ cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus (Jn 19:26). He was the ‘beloved disciple’ who ran with Peter to the tomb after the resurrection of Jesus. It was he who “saw and believed” (Jn 20:8). It was the ‘beloved disciple’ who told Peter, ‘It is the Lord’ (Jn 21:17) when Jesus appeared to them at the Sea of Tiberias after his resurrection. Undoubtedly, John had a special relationship with Jesus.

According to tradition, John lived in Ephesus until the time of the emperor Trajan (98 AD-118 AD). Tradition has it that he was brought from Ephesus to Rome and was almost killed by being placed in a cauldron of boiling oil but he was miraculously unhurt. John was the last of the apostles to die. He was believed to have died around 100 AD at the age of 94.

#### v) Philip

Philip was a native of Bethsaida like Simon Peter and Andrew (Jn 1:44). The synoptic gospels listed Philip among the twelve and said nothing about him afterwards (Mt 10:2-4; Mk 3:16-19; Lk 6:14-16). What is known about Philip comes largely from John's gospel. According to John's gospel, Philip was among the first disciples called by Jesus (Jn 1:43-44). After the call of Philip by Jesus, Philip found Nathanael and brought him to Jesus. When Jesus asked Philip where to buy bread to feed the people, Philip expressed his doubt at the possibility of feeding such a huge number of people: "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little" (Jn 6:7). In Jn 12:20-23 we see how some Greeks met Philip and asked to see Jesus. Philip went and told Andrew and both of them went to tell Jesus. Like Andrew, Philip had a desire to bring people to Jesus. He first brought Nathanael to Jesus and later on the Greeks. During our Lord's discourse on the Last Supper, Philip said to Jesus: "Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied" (Jn 14:8). It should be noted that Philip was curious, honest and eager to know the Father. He did not pretend to understand or know the Father. Hence he asked Jesus to show them the Father once and for all. In a way, Philip represented the mind set of all the apostles. Jesus was disappointed at Philip as he had been disappointed at the other apostles at different times in His ministry. On the eve of his passion, at the Last Supper, Philip did not come across as one who has understood our Lord and His mission. The other apostles were no better.

Not much is known of Philip after the ascension of our Lord. However, tradition has it that he preached the gospel in Hierapolis, Phrygia, where he was eventually crucified.

#### vi) Bartholomew

Bartholomew is listed among the apostles in the synoptic gospels (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:14) and he is not mentioned again in the NT. He was born in Cana in Galilee. Not much is known of Bartholomew. However, scripture scholars say that he is likely the same person as Nathanael mentioned in John's gospel. This is quite tenable bearing in mind that John did not have the name of Bartholomew as one of the apostles and the synoptic gospels do not have Nathanael on the list of the apostles. It was Nathanael who said to Philip "From Nazareth? Can anything good come from that place?" (Jn 1:46). Nathanael was honest of his prejudice against Nazareth. In Nathanael what you see is what you get. After meeting with Jesus, Nathanael professed his faith in Jesus "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel" (Jn 1:49). Jesus appreciated Nathanael for his honesty. Jesus said of Nathanael that he was an Israelite without deceit (Jn 1:47). Like Nathanael, are we biased too, at least sometimes? If so, we should be honest about it like Nathanael and hopefully the Lord will transform us of our prejudice as he transformed Nathanael.

Tradition has it that Bartholomew preached the gospel in Ethiopia, India, and Persia. He also probably preached in Armenia where he was believed to have been martyred. Bartholomew's body was flayed alive before he was beheaded.

#### vii) Matthew

Like the first four disciples, Matthew (known as Levi in Mark and Luke) received his call from Christ while at his duty post. And like the first four disciples, Matthew "got up and followed him [Jesus]" (Mt 9:9). Matthew not only left behind a lucrative job but a way of life. As a tax collector, Matthew was wealthy and comfortable, but he was also despised. Matthew's life changed forever when he encountered Christ. Although Matthew left his duty post to follow Jesus, he took his pen with him. The same pen he earlier used to record taxes was eventually

used to write the Word of God. Matthew left all Christians and the world with a legacy of the Word of God, which he faithfully recorded. Matthew's gospel was primarily addressed to Jewish audience. When Christ calls us, all our human skills are needed to enhance the cause of His mission. The call of Matthew shows that whatever gift, profession, skill, intelligence, talent, etc, that we have, can be fruitfully integrated in preaching the gospel and in building the Church. Thus, we must avail ourselves of all our gifts and talents in the service of God and the Church.

Not much is known of Matthew after the ascension of our Lord. Tradition has it that he preached the gospel in gentile territories, probably Ethiopia, Persia, etc. He is always venerated as a martyr though we do not know the detail of his martyrdom. Not surprisingly, Matthew is the patron saint of accountants, bankers, tax collectors and customs officers.

#### viii) Thomas

Apart from the listing of Thomas as one of the twelve apostles in the synoptic Gospels, (Mt 10:2-4; Mk 3:16-19; Lk 6:13-16), John's Gospel practically gives us all that we know about Thomas. From the outset, Thomas was ready to die for Jesus. He showed great courage when he urged the other disciples "Let us also go to die with him [Jesus]" (Jn 11:16). However, Thomas is famously remembered in his encounter with the risen Christ (Jn 20:24-29). Thomas definitely doubted and did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. But when he eventually believed, he professed the most profound, total, absolute, full, and definitive faith in the risen Lord and the divinity of Jesus, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). Thomas confession and profession of faith is the most explicit faith expressed in the divinity of Jesus in the Gospels. Undoubtedly, Thomas was a man of tremendous honesty. He was resolute in his doubt but once he believed, he expressed the most profound faith in the risen Christ.

Persistent tradition has it that Thomas preached the Gospel in India where he died a martyr's death around 72 AD. Thomas who was never afraid to die with Jesus in Judaea finally died for Jesus as a martyr in a distant land.

#### ix) James son of Alphaeus

James son of Alphaeus is distinguished from James the son of Zebedee. James is also referred to as *James the Less*, to distinguish him from *James the Greater*, the son of Zebedee. The title *the Less* literally means the little one. This refers to either size or age but not necessarily the degree of importance. *James the Less* was a relative of Jesus; he was the cousin of our Lord. *James the Less* was the bishop of Jerusalem. He was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. He presided over the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35). James played a prominent role in the growth and organization of the mother Church in Jerusalem. He not only consolidated the Church in Jerusalem but worked tirelessly in uniting it with the Gentile Church. The Letter of James is attributed to him.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, James was stoned to death around 62 AD. But according to Hegesippus, "he was cast from the pinnacle of the Temple and when the fall did not kill him, he was clubbed to death."

#### x) Jude (Thaddeus)

Jude is listed as one of the apostles. He is listed as Jude in Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13, and listed as Thaddeus in Mt 10:3 and Mk 3:18. In Jn 14:22, he is called Judas, but added "not Judas Iscariot." This apostle is called by different names, Jude, Judas, Thaddeus, etc. Matthew and Mark probably referred to him as Thaddeus in order not to confuse him with Judas Iscariot. The

Epistle of Jude is attributed to him. It was Judas who asked Jesus, “Lord, what has happened, that you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?” (Jn 14:22).

Not much is known of Jude after Pentecost. He is believed to have preached in Mesopotamia and Persia. He is believed to have died a martyr’s death.

#### xi) Simon the Zealot

The name Simon is a Greek name, but the Jews used it as a Hellenized form of the Hebrew name Simeon. Simon is named in the eleventh place in the list of the apostles in Matthew 10:4 and Mark 3:18 but he is named in the tenth place in Luke 6:15 and Acts 1:3. Simon is also referred to as Simon *the Less*, to distinguish him from Simon Peter. Simon is commonly known as the *zealot*. Simon is called the *zealot* because he probably belonged to the Jewish group known as the *zealot*. The *zealots* were a Jewish nationalist fanatical group that was absolutely committed to the independence of Palestine and the driving away of the Romans. They were ready to fight the Romans and were prepared to die for the liberation of Israel from the Roman occupation. It was this nationalist and fanatical group that Simon belonged to before he was called by Jesus.

Not much is known about Simon in the NT and not much is known of him after the Pentecost and Ascension of our Lord. But he was believed to have preached in the near East where he suffered martyrdom by being sawed into two.

#### xii) Judas Iscariot

Judas was the son of a man named Simon (John 6:72; 13:26). Judas Iscariot simply means Judas from Carioth. All the synoptic gospels in their list of the apostles maintained that Judas was the one who betrayed Jesus. “.... And Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him” (Mt 10:4; Mk 3:19; Lk 6:16). The passion narratives chronicle the tragic place of Judas in the death of Jesus. Matthew tells us that Judas repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders after which he hanged himself (Mt 27:1-10). John was poignant in describing the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. John described it theologically. Judas left the Last Supper room to inform the chief priests about Jesus. As soon as Judas left, says John the evangelist, night and darkness fell (Jn 13:30). Another translation says, “night has fallen.”

In Judas Iscariot, we see the change for worst in the human person. He was chosen to be an apostle and he turned out to be a traitor. How did he change from being an apostle to being a traitor?

Matthias was elected to replace Judas who killed himself (Acts 1:15-26). He was listed one of the apostles, thus becoming the first to be called an apostle outside the twelve. He was among the first group that followed Jesus hence it was easy to elect him as an apostle.

### B. Characteristics of the Apostles

Though the apostles differed as individuals, they had a common cause. Jesus called them so that through them and their successors the mission of evangelization will be perpetuated to the ends of the earth. It is pertinent to highlight some factors that are common to the apostles.

i) Jesus did not call them because of their accomplishments. **Jesus called them as they were in order to become what Jesus wanted them to be.** This is typical of God’s call. God does not call us because we have achieved much. God calls people because He wants them to accomplish His mission.

ii) The twelve apostles were simple and ordinary men at the time Jesus called them. They did not have impressive credentials. Apart from Matthew who was wealthy, the rest were ordinary men. This clearly shows that God can use what is ordinary to accomplish His purpose. As Paul tells us, “God chose those who by human standards are fools to shame the wise; he chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong, those who by human standards are common and contemptible\_\_indeed those who count for nothing\_\_to reduce to nothing all those that do count for something” (1 Cor 1:27-28).

iii) After the resurrection of Jesus, the eleven and Matthias were completely transformed by the power of the risen Christ that they preached the gospel courageously and fearlessly after the ascension of our Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus made a difference in the lives of the apostles. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the once timid and fearful apostles were transformed and became staunch preachers of the Gospel. The apostles had a personal experience of Jesus which they voiced to the Sanhedrin: “We cannot stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). The same Jesus who made a difference in the lives of the apostles will also make a difference in our lives. Thus the Lord will equally transform each of us and use us for the spread of the Gospel. All we have to do is to dispose ourselves and be ready to be transformed by the Lord Jesus.

iv) All the apostles died as martyrs. After Christ’s resurrection, their love for Jesus and their deep faith in Jesus became so strong that they gave their lives to Christ in martyrdom. Even John the Evangelist who died a natural death was placed in a cauldron of boiling oil but was miraculously unhurt. He later died in 100 AD at the age of 94.

### C. Jesus and the Women Disciples

It should be stated that while the twelve apostles formed the crux of the ministry of Jesus, many women equally followed Jesus throughout his ministry. Apart from the *Twelve*, there were many women disciples of Christ who accompanied Jesus and provided for the needs of Jesus and the *Twelve* out of their means and resources. By their faithful service and dedication, these female disciples contributed immensely to the success of the ministry of Jesus. These women were listed among the disciples of Christ in addition to the *Twelve*. As the Gospel of Luke tells us: “With him went the Twelve, as well as certain women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments: Mary surnamed the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:2-3). It is worth mentioning Martha and Mary of Bethany (Lk 10:38-42) who always accorded hospitality to Jesus and the *Twelve*.

### D. The Call of the Apostles and Ourselves

Each apostle had a unique personality, character, history and relationship with the Lord. Jesus called a diverse group of persons to carry out his mission. Jesus called fishermen, a tax collector, a zealot, a traitor, a biased Nathanael, a doubting Thomas, and others who were virtually unknown. Simon as a zealot would have hated a tax collector; yet our Lord called two individuals with opposite orientation. Each had to let go of their orientation in order to follow Jesus. This shows that there is enough room in the Church to accommodate all of us despite our divergent views and orientations in life. Jesus brings all to the fold to accomplish his mission.

My beloved brothers and sisters, you and I are called today by Jesus in virtue of our common baptism. Like the apostles, we may have our weaknesses and limitations, but the good Lord is willing to use us to perpetuate his mission despite our imperfections. Like the apostles, we are called to be Christians not because we are good, holy and perfect; instead, Jesus calls us as we are to be Christians in order to become what he wants us to be.

#### Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, our reflection today is merely *the tip of the iceberg* with regard to the apostles and their cherished place in the Church. It is my ardent hope that this talk will inspire us to cherish our faith and our call by Christ as his modern day apostles. Like the apostles, let us strive to give ourselves totally to Jesus Christ and commit ourselves to the cause of the gospel according to each person's gift as allotted by the Holy Spirit. May the prayers of the apostles strengthen us and "from their place in heaven [may] they [continue] to guide us still" (*Preface of the Apostles I*).

Thank you for listening and God bless you.

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