

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, God accepted the punishment himself so that anyone who will accept his free gift can 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

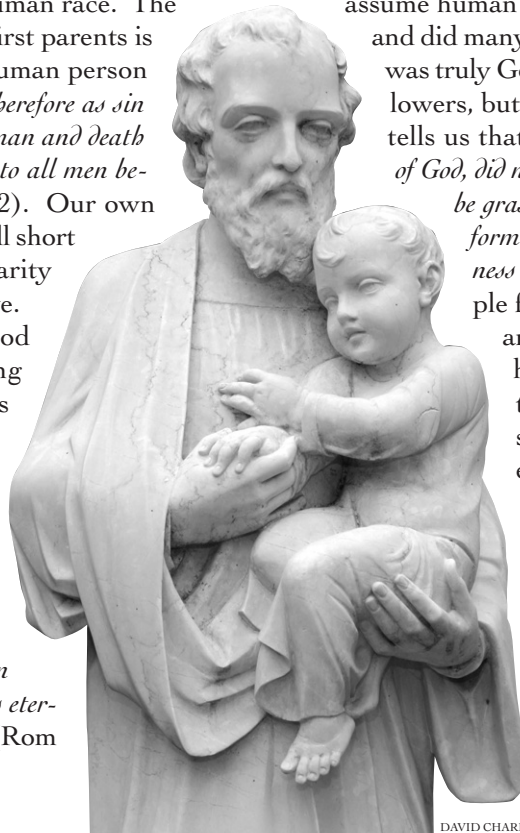
3:16).

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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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.

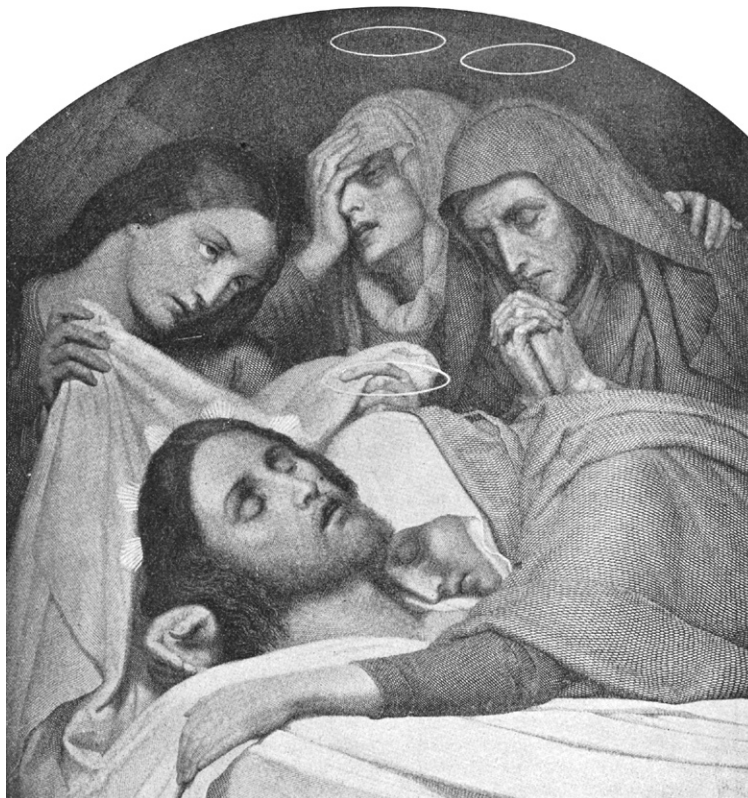
Jesus wanted to make sure that all people throughout the world and for future generations would know and have access to his saving work. So before he ascended to Heaven, he gave his apostles, who had been with him throughout his public life, the responsibility to preach the Good News of salvation to 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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Holy women mourning over the dead Christ, late 19th century lithograph

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).

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