

Catholic Scripture Study International

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

SUGGESTED RESPONSES LESSON 1

WITNESSES TO THE END OF THE EARTH

ACTS 1:1-26

1. Luke addresses his Gospel and The Acts of the Apostles to Theophilus, whose Greek name means “lover of God.” In Luke 1:1-4, Luke explains that he’s writing an “orderly account” so that Theophilus “may know the truth” concerning Jesus Christ. In Acts 1:1-2, Luke writes: “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.” In his Gospel, Luke focuses on the earthly life of Jesus and all that he began to do and teach prior to his Ascension. The book of Acts is about all that Jesus continues to do and teach through his mystical body, the Church.
2. In Acts 1:3, Luke recounts that during the 40 days following the Resurrection, Jesus presented himself alive “by many proofs.” Luke 24:13-29 describes how the risen Jesus meets two of his followers on the road to Emmaus and explains Scripture to them, although they fail to recognize him. It’s not until the meal presided over by Jesus and described in Luke 24:30-31 that the two understand: “When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.” The language used to describe that meal is the same that is used in Luke 22:19 to describe Jesus’ institution of the Eucharist: “And he took bread, 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.’” Luke 24:36-43 describes the risen Jesus’ appearance to his 11 disciples in Jerusalem, showing them the wounds in his hands and feet, and eating a piece of broiled fish. John 20:11-17 recounts Jesus’ Resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene and his instructions that she should tell his disciples that he’s ascending “to my Father and your Father.” John 20:19-23 describes how the risen Jesus’ then appears to 10 of the disciples in a locked room. In John 20:26-29, the risen Jesus appears to all 11 of his disciples and invites Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands and side. John 21:1-23 describes another of the risen Jesus’ appearances to his disciples, this time at the Sea of Tiberias, where three times he asks if Peter loves him. In Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians 15:5-7, he writes: “[The risen Jesus] appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.” Paragraph 643 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “Given all these testimonies, Christ’s Resurrection cannot be interpreted as something outside the physical order, and it is impossible not to acknowledge it as an historical fact.” Paragraph 644 of the *Catechism of the*

Catholic Church goes on to teach: “[T]he hypothesis that the Resurrection was produced by the apostles’ faith (or credulity) will not hold up. On the contrary their faith in the Resurrection was born, under the action of divine grace, from their direct experience of the reality of the risen Jesus.”

3. In Acts 1:4, the risen Jesus instructs the disciples to wait for the promise of the Father, which, Jesus tells them, “you heard from me.” Luke 24:49 records the risen Jesus telling his disciples: “And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.” The promise of the Father is the Holy Spirit. In John 14:16-18, Jesus promises that when he leaves his disciples he will send the Holy Spirit to them: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.”
4. In Acts 1:6, the disciples ask Jesus: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” This question indicates that Jesus’ followers are expecting him to restore an earthly kingdom similar to that ruled over by the Davidic kings. Jesus’ reply, found in Acts 1:7, is: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.” Paragraph 672 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “Before his Ascension Christ affirmed that the hour had not yet come for the glorious establishment of the messianic kingdom awaited by Israel which, according to the prophets, was to bring all men the definitive order of justice, love, and peace. According to the Lord, the present time is the time of the Spirit and of witness, but also a time still marked by ‘distress’ and the trial of evil which does not spare the Church and ushers in the struggles of the last days. It is a time of waiting and watching.” Paragraph 673 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further teaches that Christ’s coming in glory “could be accomplished at any moment, even if both it and the final trial that will precede it are ‘delayed.’”
5. The idea of bearing witness is found in the Old Testament writings of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 43:10-12 prophesies: “‘You are my witnesses,’ says the LORD, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,’ says the LORD.” Isaiah 44:8 also records a prophecy concerning witnesses: “Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses!” Matthew 28:18-20 records what is known as the “great commission,” in which the risen Jesus gives more detailed instructions to his disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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; and behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” Jesus specifically tells his disciples to baptize and teach. Paragraph 995 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “To be a witness to Christ is to be a ‘witness to his Resurrection,’ to ‘[have eaten and drunk] with him after he rose from the dead.’ Encounters with the risen Christ characterize the Christian hope of resurrection. We shall rise like Christ, with him, and through him.”

6. Acts 1:9 describes the way that Jesus ascended in a cloud. In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel experiences a vision that pulls back the curtain of heaven to reveal what's going on beyond this cloud. Daniel 7:13-14 provides background for much of the New Testament: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed." The Ascension involves more than Jesus taking leave of his disciples. It's at his Ascension that Jesus is presented to God in heaven and given an eternal kingdom. In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly refers to himself as the "Son of man," clearly identifying himself as the prophesied and long-awaited Messiah. In Revelation 14:14, the son of man and a cloud both figure into the apostle John's description of his apocalyptic vision of heaven: "Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand." Paragraph 697 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "In the theophanies of the Old Testament, the cloud, now obscure, now luminous, reveals the living and saving God, while veiling the transcendence of his glory—with Moses on Mount Sinai, at the tent of meeting, and during the wandering in the desert, and with Solomon at the dedication of the Temple. In the Holy Spirit, Christ fulfills these figures. The Spirit comes upon the Virgin Mary and 'overshadows' her, so that she might conceive and give birth to Jesus. On the mountain of Transfiguration, the Spirit in the 'cloud came and overshadowed' Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, Peter, James and John, and 'a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"' Finally, the cloud took Jesus out of the sight of the disciples on the day of his ascension and will reveal him as Son of man in glory on the day of his final coming."
7. In Acts 1:11, two men dressed in white tell the disciples that Jesus will return "in the same way" that he departed. In his First Letter to the Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul teaches about Jesus' second coming: "But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words." Paragraph 678 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that on the last day, the conduct of each one and the secrets of hearts will be brought to light: "Then will the culpable unbelief that counted the offer of God's grace as nothing be condemned. Our attitude about our neighbor will disclose acceptance or refusal of grace and divine love. On the last day Jesus will say: 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"
8. In Acts 1:12, the disciples return to Jerusalem to wait in an upper room for "the promise of the Father." Luke 22:7-13 records Jesus' instructions to Peter and John to make ready an upper room in which to celebrate the Passover. Luke 22:14-20 describes Jesus' institution of the

Eucharist, which takes place in the upper room. In Acts 1:15, Luke records that the company of persons in the upper room was “in all about a hundred and twenty.” The number 120 is significant in early Jewish tradition because that’s the minimum number of people required for a new community. By mentioning this detail, Luke is calling attention to the fact that the Church is a new community with its own religious council. Paragraph 726 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “At the end of this mission of the Spirit, Mary became the Woman, the new Eve (‘mother of the living’), the mother of the ‘whole Christ.’ As such, she was present with the Twelve, who ‘with one accord devoted themselves to prayer’ at the dawn of the ‘end time’ which the Spirit was to inaugurate on the morning of Pentecost with the manifestation of the Church.” Paragraph 2617 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “Mary’s prayer is revealed to us at the dawning of the fullness of time. Before the Incarnation of the Son of God, and before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, her prayer cooperates in a unique way with the Father’s plan of loving kindness: at the Annunciation, for Christ’s conception; at Pentecost, for the formation of the Church, his Body.”

9. Acts 1:15 records that Peter stands up among the brethren and begins to speak, establishing that he’s the head of the Church. He decrees that a twelfth man is needed to take the place of Judas. In Acts 1:20, Peter paraphrases Psalm 69:25 (“May their camp be a desolation, let no one dwell in their tents”) and Psalm 109:8 (“May his days be few; may another seize his goods!”), interpreting these Scripture passages for the early Church: “His office let another take.” The replacement of one apostle with another is a pattern continued within the Church from the 1st century until the present time.
10. Acts 1:26 records that the disciples cast lots to decide who will replace Judas, and the lot falls on Matthias. This method of selection is consistent with Old Testament religious practice. Leviticus 16:7-10 describes how Aaron is instructed to cast lots in order to determine which of two goats will be sacrificed on the altar, and which will be sent into the wilderness as a scapegoat. Proverbs 16:33 records: “The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD,” and Proverbs 18:18 teaches: “The lot puts an end to disputes and decides between powerful contenders.” Revelation 21:12 describes the apostle John’s apocalyptic vision of the heavenly new Jerusalem: “It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed.” Revelation 21:14 continues the description: “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” Paragraph 765 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head. Representing the twelve tribes of Israel, they are the foundation stones of the new Jerusalem.”

Responses to the Questions for Reflection will vary.