

SERMON ON THE APOSTOLIC READING FOR THE SUNDAY OF THE
SAMARITAN WOMAN
(Acts 11:19-30)

For today's passage from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about the magnificent founding of the Great Church of Antioch in a period of harsh persecution.

After Our Lord's Crucifixion, the hatred of the Jews turned towards the Apostles and all who believed in Christ. The greatest persecution organized by the Jewish authorities against the Church of Jerusalem was in the year 36 AD. It began with the stoning of the Archdeacon Stephen (the first Martyr) and then spread beyond Jerusalem. As a result, many Christians left the city and scattered to the surrounding areas. Some of these were Cypriots and Cyrenians (from today's Libya), and they found themselves in Syrian Antioch (which is in Turkey today, called Antakya). They preached the gospel of Christ everywhere with great fervor, and with the power of the Lord helped many to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and God. This wonderful news reached Jerusalem, and in response the Church chose to send one of the Seventy to Antioch to further the work being done there. They chose the Cypriot Barnabas, who was known for his labors and his prudence. When he arrived in Antioch, he was amazed by the people who lived there believing in Christ. He happily witnessed how God's grace had enriched their lives.

So we see that God transformed the sorrow of the persecuted Christians of Jerusalem into immeasurable joy, by the establishment and growth of the Church of Antioch. This was not the only time this was to happen, and over the centuries it became a kind of spiritual rule. Who could have imagined that after three hundred years, with the horrible persecutions at the hands of the idolatrous Roman emperors, the Church of Christ would survive? It has been calculated that 11,000,000 Christians, after unspeakable tortures, shed their blood for Christ just in those first centuries. Despite that, the Church flourished in the East and West. The same thing happened in recent times with atheist regimes that wanted to destroy the Church. They are gone, and the Church is still here!

We can see this "spiritual rule" at work in the lives of the faithful. When people who reject God inflict harm upon a Christian, whatever oppression or injustice it may be, abundant blessings come by the Grace of Almighty God. Therefore, anyone who lives in communion with Christ is not afraid, because they believe in these inspired words: "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

The first Christians of Antioch received with their hearts the joyous message of salvation that was brought by Jesus Christ. When Jerusalem and all Judea suffered from famine, which affected the Christian community as well, the Christians of Antioch made manifest this acceptance of the Gospel and decided to help them. They gathered whatever they could, and sent it along with Barnabas and Saul (who would become the Apostle Paul) to the presbyters of the Church of Jerusalem (see verses 28-30).

From this we can see that the newly-baptized Christians of Antioch had understood from the beginning the true meaning of the Gospel of Christ. To understand love as an action, and take this to heart: "those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:8).

Thus, the Church of Antioch stood on a strong foundation, and as it grew it made its presence felt in the wider community. It is fitting that those who believe in Christ were called "*Christians*" for the

first time in Antioch (see verse 26). Great saints have come from the Church of Antioch, such as Saint Ignatius the Godbearing and Saint John Chrysostom. The Church of Antioch increased in importance until finally it was recognized as a Patriarchate itself.

May the Church of Antioch be a model for our own local church, to keep with us always the Grace of God. To be joined in harmony, as a great spiritual family. Let us have healing and inspiration in our hearts to reach out to those who have left the Church, and to attract others who do not know the true God. May we be moved to works of love, for the relief of our brothers and sisters in the world. Amen.