

**Apostle.** In the New Testament, the term ‘apostle’ (from the Greek ‘apostello’ or ‘to send’) indicates in a generic way an authorized messenger or emissary. For this reason, the name is applied to Christ, sent by his Father, in the *Letter to the Hebrews*; to the Twelve and to Saint Paul in many places; to the 72 disciples who, were sent two by two ahead of Christ at certain moments; to the emissaries sent by the Church of Jerusalem to quieten the fears of the Christians of Antioch (Paul, Barnabas, Jude and Silas); to the emissaries sent by St Paul to take care of the collections for the needs of the mother Church at Jerusalem; to many collaborators of St Paul, particularly those mentioned in the aforementioned *Letter to the Romans*. By antonomasia, in any case, the term ‘apostle’ is applied to the Twelve chosen by Christ, the nature of which relationship is explained by the three synoptic gospels. These were: Simon, to whom Jesus gave the name Peter, James son of Zebedee (or ‘James the Greater’) and his brother John, whom Jesus called Boanerges, or ‘son of thunder’; Andrew, brother of Peter, Philip, who like Peter and Andrew came from Bethsaida; Bartholomew (Nathaniel), who came from Chana in Galilee; Matthew, also known as Levi; Thomas; James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Cananite, called ‘the Zealot’; Jude son of James, called Thaddaeus or Lebbaeus; Judas Iscariot, who was the traitor. At the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles* eleven of them are mentioned as waiting for the arrival of the Holy Spirit: Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and Jude son of James. These were joined by Matthias, as the text goes on to relate. In the description of what was required of the person who would take the place of Judas the betrayer the following are specified (Acts 1: 21-22): ‘It is necessary that someone should become a witness to his resurrection together with us, someone who from among those who were companions through the time in which the Lord Jesus lived among us, from the baptism by John to the day in which he was taken up from among us into heaven’. After that, there would be no more replacements, not even when James the brother of John died a martyr. The characteristics of the Twelve are, thus as follows: they accompanied Christ during his journeying on earth across Palestine, and, above all, they were witness to His resurrection. They received directly from the Master the command to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth (as the epilogues or ‘final instructions’ of the synoptic gospels tell us) and they had special spiritual powers, conferred by Christ, in particular, the power to pardon sins and to consecrate the eucharistic species; and they exercised, as an office especially assigned to them, the ministry of the Word. Therefore, even if little is known of the life of some of them, the profile of the Twelve is perfectly clear. The only problem is that in the New Testament there are three disciples called James: James the son of Zebedee - brother of John - who was the first to shed his blood for Christ, around the year 43, on the orders of Herod Agrippa I, King of Judaea; James son of Alphaeus, clearly identified as one of the Twelve; and James ‘the brother of the Lord’ (Gal. 1: 19), who was the leader of the Church of Jerusalem and died a martyr’s death around the year 62, at the instigation of the High Priest Hanan II. It seems that the last named was the son of Cleophas and of Maria, sister of the mother of the Lord, even if there is still some dispute about the matter. In any case, he had a very high status among the first Christians, wrote the canonical epistle that bears his name, and is called a ‘column’ of the Church by St Paul (Gal. 2: 9), and a witness of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15: 7), distinguishing him from the Twelve. There is a reference which implicitly includes him to the brothers of Jesus who, after the Ascension, joined in prayer with the Eleven, with Mary the Mother of Jesus and the holy women (Acts 1: 14) and it is possible to believe that he received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost together with the group just mentioned. The *Acts of the Apostles* furthermore shows him as one of the protagonists of the important meeting at Jerusalem, at which the question of the admission of gentiles into the Church was clarified, and were exempted from the obligations of the Mosaic Law (Acts 15: 13-21). In consequence, in addition to the Twelve, who are synonymous with

the apostles, some other disciples too, such as St Paul and James ‘the brother of the Lord’, acquired a real right to the name.

It is not known how and when the Twelve dispersed. All we have is some more or less reliable traditions, based mainly on apocryphal literature. In any case, tradition is unanimous that they all died as martyrs.

One by one, an identifying attribute was linked in Christian iconography to each of the Twelve (with St Paul included): Paul with a sword, John with a chalice (or eagle, when he is represented as an Evangelist); James the Greater with a pilgrim’s staff or stick; Andrew with a cross in the form of an X; Philip with the Latin cross; Bartholomew with the knives that were used to flay him; Matthew with the sword, or with the angel-man, when he is represented as an Evangelist); James son of Alphaeus with a knotted stick; Thomas Didimus with a lance; Matthias with a cord; Simon the Zealot with a saw; Judas Thaddaeus with a book, or stones or a square frame. Judas the traitor, when he is represented at the Last Supper, always carries a purse of money in his hand.

From the Twelve, who are the columns of the Church, it receives its ‘apostolicity’.

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**Bibliography:** X. LÉON-DUFOUR (ed.), *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*, Paris, 1962, *ad vocem*; N. LÓPEZ MARTÍNEZ, «Apóstoles» in C. IZQUIERDO (ed.) et al., *Diccionario de teología*, Pamplona, 2006.