

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE
by Fr. John Ramsay**CHAPTER 7 – THE CHURCH (Part One)**

The Ninth Article of the Creed is “THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS” so, for the next three chapters we shall be dealing with the Catholic Church. First, we shall examine the INNER LIFE of the Church, its source of life and unity - Christ Himself, the effects that unity has on its members and the manner in which people become members. Then we shall examine the VISIBLE Church: the outward structure, chain of command, the claims it makes regarding the Truth of its message, the powers entrusted to it and the authority it claims for what it says and does. And, finally we shall examine the Communion of Saints or what one might call the EXTENDED Church, including as it does, not only the members here on earth but those who have died yet still remain members of that Church.

First, then, how should we define the word “CHURCH”? The Catholic Church is the union of all the faithful under one “Head” and that head is, of course, Jesus Christ. Let us be quite clear from the start what we mean by the word UNION. A union can be quite a loose thing - you have only to look at the former Soviet Union these days to see how precarious such a union can be.

Now, the union we are dealing with here is utterly different. It is much more intimate - like the union of all the different parts of the same body, so there is no question of life apart from the other parts. Separation of one part from the rest would mean death. A finger cannot exist apart from the hand any more than a body can exist without its head. Now, in fact, we call that “UNION OF ALL THE FAITHFUL” a BODY- the Body of Christ. He is the HEAD of that body and that body cannot exist without Him. Each part of this body depends upon all the others and each contributes to the life and wellbeing of all the others. As the poet John Donne put it, “NO MAN IS AN ISLAND”. We need one another.

Since we are making rather a startling claim here, let us examine our grounds for making it. Remember first that the Church, like the Blessed Trinity is a MYSTERY so we shall not fully grasp it. Like other mysteries, however, we shall grasp enough to be able to say “Yes. It must be so because HE says so!” Our Lord first revealed this mystery to us the night before He died, when He said: “I AM THE VINE: YOU ARE THE BRANCHES”. Now just think! Branches are not separate from the vine or tied to it. They are PART of it, and if cut off from it, they die. If Christ, therefore, is the vine and we are attached to Him, then His life flows in us, ENLIVENS us, and, as He said a few moments later, “CUT OFF FROM ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING.”

How, then, did it start? The birth of the Church was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down on it and entered it. Our own birth into it was at our Baptism, when we were, as the saying is “baptised into Christ”. At our baptism, then, Christ’s life first flowed in my soul: that life which we call Sanctifying Grace. The water that flowed over my forehead symbolised that life. This sharing in God’s life raises us onto a new level - enabling us to do SUPERNATURAL things - things that are ABOVE our nature. It is these supernatural things I have to be able to do if I am to enter Heaven. Later, when we examine sin, we shall see how it cuts off this vital life supply.

Our Lord first mentioned this when He called Himself the vine. And later, after His Ascension, He emphasized it. He appeared to Saul just outside the city of Damascus. Saul was persecuting the Church - he was actually carrying warrants for their arrest on him - He was thrown from his horse, blinded, and heard a voice saying: “SAUL, SAUL, WHY ARE YOU PERSECUTING ME?” (Acts 9: 1-9) Saul called out, “WHO ARE YOU, LORD?” The answer came, “I am Jesus and you are persecuting ME”. Our Lord identifies Himself with the members of His Church. We are all parts of His Body, the Church. Saul was converted and, several years later, he became the foremost proponent of this doctrine of the “MYSTICAL BODY” as it is called. Read now what he wrote to the Christians in Corinth. You will find it is his First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 12 verses 12 to 27.

Just think of the implications! If the Holy Spirit is this body’s soul, sanctifying it and guiding it, and Jesus Christ is

its head and said He would be with it for all time, then He is STILL its head - His life is still flowing to all its members, His Spirit is still guiding it and, of course, He is still God! That being so, how can that body of His fail?... go into error? - can God make mistakes? Individuals, of course, can, just as the finger of an otherwise healthy person can go septic. But the whole Body of Christ, the Church? No!

It follows from this that there will be certain signs of His presence. We call them the MARKS of the Church - signs that it is truly HIS CHURCH, signs that it is the ONE and ONLY ONE founded by Him. The first mark is that it is ONE. Clearly, Christ has only one body so we are all parts of the one body of Christ. Thus we can expect to find ONE set of beliefs - not various schools of thought. HE is the Head: He revealed the truths to His Church: His Church teaches those truths and we have to accept them. So, then, we are ONE IN BELIEF.

We can expect to find uniformity in sacred actions like the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the Sacraments - not each one doing his own thing. In particular you can expect to find ONE MASS - HIS way of worshipping the Father, as we say. (We shall say more about this in a later chapter.) So we are ONE IN WORSHIP. Similarly, we can expect to find obedience to one supreme authority and there would be some visible head so all could see him. So then the Church is ONE in BELIEF, ONE in WORSHIP and obeys ONE SUPREME AUTHORITY.

What other marks would there be? Well, if Christ is the head and the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, is the soul, it is bound to be HOLY. This does not mean that all its members will be - Oh dear no! As it is often said, "THE CHURCH IS ALL RIGHT: ITS THE CATHOLICS I CAN'T STAND!". Sanctified by the Holy Spirit, both the Church as a whole and its individual members make up the Body of Christ and as such are holy. A third mark of the Church is that it is CATHOLIC. The word catholic means universal which is exactly what the Church is - everywhere - a GLOBAL Church not a national one. To talk of the "Church of Rome" is to misunderstand what the Church is - it is UNIVERSAL.

Is there another mark by which we may recognise the Church? Yes. We say it is APOSTOLIC. What does that mean? It means that it is the Church 'of the Apostles': the very same one founded by them. It could not be interrupted. Christ did not at any time cease to be and then start again. He is still here as He promised He always would be, and His Body, the Church is still here. It is full of people - millions of them - and some are no credit to it! The Church has always had its bad characters - Judas Iscariot was a Catholic....

So, now we have examined the INVISIBLE Church. We have looked at the inner nature of that body we call the Catholic Church. A body which St. Paul, under inspiration called the Body of Christ. The head of this body is Christ Himself and we are all the members, so parts of Him. Drawing life from Him, intimately bound to Him and one another in a body which is animated by the Holy Spirit.

We often call it the Mystical Body of Christ - a useful title since it reminds us that we are dealing with a mystery and thus need the gift of faith to grasp it. We saw that we received that life, entered that body at baptism, the water poured by the priest over our foreheads symbolising the life that Christ was pouring into us. We saw that because of its union with Christ, its head, that body would have recognisable marks by which we could identify it. It would be ONE in belief, worship and allegiance to AUTHORITY since Christ cannot be divided against Himself. Since it is Christ who is its head and the Holy Spirit is its soul it would be HOLY. It would be CATHOLIC or UNIVERSAL in its extent and appeal, reaching out to all nations in every age from Pentecost to the Second Coming. It would be APOSTOLIC not because it imitates or succeeds to the Church of the apostles but because it is the very same Church founded on them. Christ did not cease to be and then start again. He always is and so is His Body the Church. To look at the Catholic Church is to look at that body which was founded at the First Pentecost and will be here until Christ comes again.

Finally, the presence in it of many unworthy members should neither surprise nor dismay us. It is often called the CHURCH OF SINNERS - big enough and compassionate enough to find room for anyone. Our responsibility is to see that our part of it is healthy and holy and we do that by being faithful to Christ our head.