

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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CHAPTER 8 – THE CHURCH (Part Two)

In the last chapter, we took our first look at the Catholic Church - the INVISIBLE Church which we defined as “the union of all the faithful under one head, Jesus Christ.” We saw that the union was of a very intimate nature - like the parts of a body, in fact that it is called the Mystical Body of Christ, Recognisable for what it is by four clear signs or “MARKS” - it is ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC and APOSTOLIC. Now we shall examine the outward structure of the Church - the VISIBLE Church.

Almost all Christians say “I BELIEVE... IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH” but meanings vary and all but one of them say that the Church is invisible. The exception, of course, is Catholics. We say that not only is Christ present in His Body the Church but that this Body is plain for all to see. It is a visible organisation made up of visible people.

Moreover, it has a visible head - the Bishop of Rome, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, the Pope. Who says so - and what right have we to say so? You may remember that when we were dealing with the Incarnation, I said that Our Lord gradually brought the apostles to realise who He was. That it was Simon Peter who, in answer to the question “who do you think I am?” answered, “YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD”. Then, if you remember, Our Lord showed him he was right by answering, “Simon, son of Jonah, you are a happy man because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.” So God was telling him that this was something that had been revealed by God! You could not have greater certainty than that.

Our Lord then added further remarks and prefaced them by doing something extremely significant - He changed Simon’s name. To a Jew of that time that meant very clearly that he was being given special work to do. The word He used was KEPHA - a word meaning a rock or stone. As a matter of interest, in French, the word PIERRE means both rock and the name Peter. The point to remember is that the name meant what he was to BE. So Peter was to be a ROCK - the rock on which Our Lord was to build his Church. On another occasion, Our Lord had talked of a house built on rock which could stand up to any sort of bad weather or storm. So the point here, therefore, was that Peter was to be the rock - the firm foundation - on which Our Lord would build his Church and that it would weather any storm: stand up to any opposition.

Our Lord then went on to say, “I WILL GIVE YOU THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN: WHATSOEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND ALSO IN HEAVEN: WHATSOEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH SHALL BE LOOSED ALSO IN HEAVEN”. So, this man, then, PETER, was not just to be a rock, a firm foundation, but he also had the right to admit or exclude whomever he wanted and the right to make or dispense with any law he liked and that those decisions of his would have divine backing. What actually happened? The man who was called the Rock, in order to spread the Gospel most effectively went to what was then the centre of the civilised world - Rome. He chose well, Christianity spread with the march of the Roman Legions. WHERE he went is of secondary importance. What matters is WHO went there - Peter - the ROCK on whom the Church was founded. His position was unique. He was the Rock: he had supreme authority and EVERYBODY RECOGNISED IT. So when he died (by crucifixion in the Vatican Arena) another man succeeded to his position and authority called LINUS and he was succeeded by a man called ANACLETUS who was followed by a man called CLEMENT. The present holder of the post is a German who took the name Benedict XVI – he is the 265th Pope in this continuous line.

Now let’s go back to the beginning again. Peter was not the only apostle. The others were there too. He was the only one declared a ROCK but together with him the others were recipients of two great powers. The first of these powers is described in four different places in the New Testament:- Matthew Chapter 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; and St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 11. They all describe a meal - the Last Supper - and what happened at the end of it. Remember, Jesus Christ is God, so He can do ANYTHING and He always tells the Truth

Well, what did He do? He took some bread off the table, blessed it, broke it and distributed it to the apostles saying, “THIS IS MY BODY”. Then He took some wine and distributed that saying “THIS IS MY BLOOD”... AND SO IT WAS!

He then added, “DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME”. How could they unless He was giving them the Power to do so? And so of course, He was. And the power was passed on because everybody took Him at His Word and so it was for a thousand years... before anyone even questioned it. To this day, the Catholic Church possesses that power which is passed to priests at their ordination and exercised at the consecration in every Holy Mass.

The other power is described in John 22. It was Easter Sunday evening..., the doors were closed in the upper room where the apostles were... and Jesus walked straight through them and stood among them.... “SHALOM!” He said, “Peace be with you!” and then the Gospel account goes on to say that He BREATHED on them and said: “RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT” (the word for Spirit and Breath are the same in Aramaic) “FOR THOSE WHOSE SINS YOU FORGIVE: THEY ARE FORGIVEN. FOR THOSE WHOSE SINS YOU RETAIN: THEY ARE RETAINED.”

There are two points to notice here - First, a POWER is given - the power to forgive sins, and Secondly, they have to make a DECISION - whether to use that power or not. An act of judgement was called for - to forgive or not to forgive. What are the criteria? Well, think! How can you forgive if you don't know WHAT you are forgiving? And secondly, since this is God's power being used in His name, how can you use it on one who is UNREPENTANT? Your decision to forgive, therefore, is subject to two clear conditions. You know what it is you are forgiving and you are satisfied that the person is repentant. But how can you know unless they tell you? So, of course, the one wanting to be forgiven has to CONFESS to one who has the power to forgive - a priest.

You might hear a lapsed or badly-instructed Catholic say “I don't need a priest! I just tell God I'm sorry in my heart.” This does not take into account something we shall deal with later - the social aspect of sin. All we shall say here is that this is how Christ demands that we ask for forgiveness for serious sin.

Now, so far we have seen that one man, the Rock, was given supreme authority: all the apostles received two powers and were instructed to pass them on -

the power to consecrate and the power to forgive Sin. Then, He gave instructions to a wider audience (described in Luke 10) and He finished that instruction by saying “He who listens to you, listens to me” so He gave His divine backing to them also. He told His apostles to TEACH all that He had commanded them and to ‘teach’ means to tell others something that you know which they have not yet learned. Now since that ‘something’ comes from God, it must be true and you must accept it. There is no room here for private opinion. The Catholic Church alone teaches in this way and demands acceptance of what it teaches, claiming divine authority for doing so. Moreover, as we saw last time, how can that Body of which Christ is the head be in error? So the Church claims the gift of INFALLIBILITY, or freedom from error, when it pronounces solemnly upon doctrine or morals whether through a Council or the Pope on his own speaking officially on behalf of the whole Church.

We can see in all this a definite chain of command - The Rock (and his successors, the Popes) who enjoys supreme authority; the Apostles (and their successors, the bishops) who have two great powers and the ability to pass them on; those who have the powers but cannot pass them on, Priests - and all of them have been commissioned to teach the truth and demand acceptance of it. Since that truth has divine backing, the Church claims it has the gift of infallibility. The Catholic Church alone makes all these claims.

Let us not forget, however, that the Church, the Body of Christ, is nevertheless made up of human beings with all the usual failings and thus it is unreasonable to expect perfection of anyone in it. Our Lord, Jesus Christ never promised that it would be a PERFECT Church... or that ALL would enter it... or that it would be POPULAR. But He DID say that it was the Body of which He was the head: He gave it lavish powers for us to make use of and He promised that it would survive for ever.

How lucky we are! Let us strive to make our corner of it better!