



The Faith of the Church

The first of a series of columns on the "Marks" of the Church

"Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you," St. Peter tells us in his First Letter. How can we explain why we believe in "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church"?

Apostolicity answers the fundamental question religious faith invites: on whose *authority* do you believe as you do? Jewish authorities asked the Apostles "by what power or by what name" they dared to preach the Resurrection. "[I]n the name of Jesus of Nazareth," Peter replied for the Twelve. To follow Jesus as they had done meant to accept his authority.

And to *these* men Jesus entrusted the fullness of *his* authority—that is, "*all* authority in heaven and on earth." Our faith in the "one, holy, catholic" Church rests on this Christ-conferred "apostolic" authority—the foundational testimony of the eyewitnesses, which rests on the authority of Jesus himself. And Jesus claimed the authority of God.

If it were not for his Church—the "one" Church we confess in the Creed--no one would have troubled to record Jesus' saving words and deeds, and there would be no one to pass them on to us. No one would "Do this in memory of me" because no one would remember him. Without the one Church he founded Jesus of Nazareth would long ago have been forgotten. Everyone would have

walked away from him, as many did when he said he would give his flesh for them to eat. "Will you also go away?" he asked his apostles. "Lord, to whom shall we go? St. Peter replied. "You have the words of eternal life."

Peter's question confronts every Catholic tempted to "go away" from unity of faith in the Catholic Church. Where else will we find him who promised to remain with his Church forever? To which of his followers did Jesus convey the authority to break the ancient unity and establish a different church of their own making? If we break off communion with Peter and the Apostles, what are we saying to the Jesus who entrusted his words and his sacraments to their care? Has his promise to be with his Bride to the end of the world ceased to be true?

At the Last Supper Jesus prayed that *Peter's* faith would not fail and commanded him to "strengthen" the other Apostles. In the very hour that he instituted the priesthood and the Eucharist, Jesus entrusted specifically to Peter the authority to fortify the Church's sacramental unity against the Devil's divisive assaults upon the Breaking of the Bread.

The word "catholic" comes from two Greek words which mean "according to the whole." Early Church Councils settled fundamental questions of Christian identity decisively "according to the whole" world of Mediterranean Christianity at the time. When Peter's Successor, the Bishop of Rome, confirmed the teaching of a Council, that made it *Catholic* teaching. For to Peter alone did Jesus entrust the mission of leading the *universal* Church to unity.

Bishops stand in unity “according to the whole” when they maintain visible communion with the pope and, *through him*, with every other bishop and with all other Catholics. Every Mass we attend anywhere in the world attests to this catholic unity, for we pray in union with “Francis our Pope” and with the local bishop. If these men are not mentioned by name, the Mass is not celebrated “according to the whole.”

Christian holiness begins with baptism, our “adoption” as “children of God,” in the words of St. Paul. And that adoption has an immediate consequence: inheritance. Baptized into adoption in Christ, *every* Christian inherits all the riches Jesus won for us by his Cross and Resurrection.

But no one can take for himself grace that the Lord does not freely give. No one baptizes himself. No one absolves himself. No one ordains himself. On his own terms and through the hands of his Body, the Church, Christ gives the sacraments to deepen her unity and strengthen her holiness.

“This is our faith,” the priest proclaims at the Easter Vigil, “this is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We should always be ready to give reasons for the hope our faith engenders.