



One Church

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

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever," St. Paul tells us. The Jesus who taught and healed, who died and rose, 2000 years ago is the same Jesus who teaches and heals today, the same Jesus who hands over his dying and rising to us in the Eucharist and draws us into communion with the Church he established there and then for here and now. "Behold, I will be with you all days," he promised, "even to the end of the world."

But except for the Church that he founded there would be no memory of this Jesus; his promise would have foundered long ago. Except for his Church, there would be no record of his words and deeds in the Gospels which his Spirit inspired the evangelists to write and the Church to adopt as her own. Except for his Church, the "living water" of sacramental life would not flow into our lives again and again to wash away our sins and set us free.

But the saving waters do flow; his saving Word does resound; we do break the bread in memory of him. Jesus is true to his promise to be with us always, because in every succeeding generation his Spirit has never failed to move the Church to carry out the command he left his apostles: "Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

At first hearing his teachings can be hard to take. When he spoke of his intention to give

his body as the Bread of Life, many of his disciples reacted sharply: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" And many of them "drew back and no longer walked with him." "Will you also go away?" a disappointed Jesus asked his Apostles. St. Peter voiced the response of the Church's faith from that day to this: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Peter's question confronts every Catholic who comes under pressure to "go away," to depart from communion with the Catholic Church. If we too cease to walk with him in his Church on account of one or another "hard saying" of his, where else will we go to find him who has promised to remain with his Church forever? When we break 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 Church to the end of the world ceased to be true?

The faithful transmission of the Gospel has always been betrayed by the unfaithful behavior of Catholic Christians. In the face of longstanding corruption in the Catholic Church, sincere and well-meaning Protestants in the 1500s chose to "go away" and establish new churches reformed to meet the needs and dictates of the times. In their eyes the Catholic Church could no longer offer authentic witness to the Gospel of "one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

But breaking the ancient Catholic unity did not suffice to fashion Protestant unity. Divisions multiplied and hardened among the baptismal heirs of the Lord who willed all to be one. From that day to this Peter's question has come to the fore in every

succeeding generation: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” By what divinely-revealed authority did Martin Luther, John Calvin, King Henry VIII, and countless others step out of Catholic unity to establish a church of their own making? To whom shall we go when their claims differ so markedly one from another?

For 500 years now Christians in the West have lived with this painful division. In the past century the Holy Spirit has brought considerable healing to the wound of division by inspiring much clearer understanding of what keeps us apart and much greater respect for what brings us together. This has been an enormous gain for all concerned. But the basic issues that divided us in the 1500s still divide us today. And when they surface publicly, Catholics still need to take their bearing from St. Peter: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”