

The pillar and foundation of the truth: one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church

At Senatus in April, several expressed the request that I clarify some of the basic contents and obligations of our Catholic faith. A difficulty in the Church for some decades has been confusion on this question of exactly what it is we believe as Catholics. There *need not* be confusion, because really, all the information is available to resolve the issues, which the Magisterium itself has provided; so it's really a matter of making that known.

As a preliminary, we'll go back to some basics in Scripture of why we believe in the authority and infallibility of the Catholic Church in the first place. Ultimately of course, we go back to Christ's teaching. He wanted his disciples to know the divine truth he'd come to bring; to share that truth with others, in its fullness; and to be united as one family in believing the true faith.

Because for Jesus himself, the truth he brought us from the Father was absolutely precious. He would never say that this or that point that the Father had spoken didn't really matter; that we could believe it or not as we pleased. So he said to Pontius Pilate: 'For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.' (*Jn* 18:37)

Jesus wants his disciples to know God's truth, in its completeness: '*All* that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.' (*Jn* 15:15) 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will *know* the truth, and the truth will make you free.' (*Jn* 8:31-32) And those who hear him are to *pass on* his truth to all the world, in its completeness: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to *observe all* that I have commanded you.' (*Mt* 28:19-20).

And, Jesus wants his followers to be *united* in the true faith. Jesus only ever speaks of one Church: 'You are Peter, and upon this rock, I will build *my Church*' (*Mt* 16:18). At the Last Supper he prays for his followers 'that they may all be one', even as he and the Father are one (*Jn* 17:21-22). As St Paul explains, all who are united in him are one body with one Spirit, with 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (*Eph* 4:4-5).

Yet it seems hard for this 'unity in truth' to happen, because when people read the teachings of Jesus and other teachings of the Bible, often they've disagreed about the right meaning, and have separated into different groups, with opposing teachings. So unity is lost; and truth is lost (because at most only one of them can be giving Jesus' teachings complete and without error).

Jesus didn't leave us without an answer to this problem. One reason he sent the Holy Spirit was to guide the disciples into always correctly giving his teachings, and rightly interpreted. So he tells them at the Last Supper: 'The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you *all things*, and bring to your remembrance *all that I have said to you*' (*Jn* 14:26). 'I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you *for ever*, even the Spirit of Truth' (*Jn* 14:16-17). 'I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into *all the truth*' (*Jn* 16:13). And Jesus tells us that he himself will never leave us, until his final coming in glory: 'I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.' (*Mt* 28:20)

And so, the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit of Truth unites the disciples into ‘the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth’ (*1 Tim 3:15*). It is because of all these promises of Jesus that we believe the Church he started with the Twelve Apostles is ‘infallible’ in her proclamations of God’s truth. To go against the infallible teachings of the Church is to not trust the promises Jesus made that the Holy Spirit would be with his people for ever, and guide them into all truth. So Jesus even told his disciples, ‘He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me’ (*Lk 10:16*).

Now, if Jesus’ promises have power, his one infallible Church must still exist in the world today, just as the same Church must have existed in all the centuries since the time of Jesus. So, which Church is it? This is where the four visible marks of the Church point the way: the true Church of Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

So, unity: we see that the Catholic Church is *one* body, visibly united in faith (at any one time, and across all times). She is *holy* – in her teachings, in the grace of her sacraments. Since we all have free will, we her members, her ministers included, do remain sinners; and yet, the true Church will certainly bring forth countless saints across the ages. And, the Church is *catholic*, meaning universal – more than any other Christian body, spread across so many nations. Finally, the Church is *apostolic*: tracing her teachings and her leadership back in history to the Apostles.

That includes in particular her link with St Peter, Prince of the Apostles, whom Jesus appointed Rock and Shepherd. We’re familiar with Jesus’ words to Simon Peter: ‘You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ (*Mt 16:18*) And after the Resurrection, Peter receives the mission of Shepherd, to be the visible presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd after the Ascension: ‘Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep’ (*Jn 21:15-17*) – feeding and tending the flock being the specific role of the shepherd.

Just as the mission to teach all nations didn’t end with the Apostles, neither did the essential visible unifying authority of Peter end with his death. The early Church, guided into all truth by the Holy Spirit as Jesus promised, understood that Peter has successors in the Popes, the Bishops of Rome, where he himself was Bishop and was martyred. So, in Christ’s plan all the sheep of the flock can easily know which Church is his: not by all becoming great theologians themselves and passing their own ‘infallible’ judgement on all the complicated teachings, but because the true Church of Christ will be the one with the clear link to Peter, appointed Rock and Shepherd by Christ – a simple and visible test, not restricted to the scholars.

In the coming months we’ll look at the different ways that the Catholic Church, led by the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him, gives to us, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the teachings of Christ in their purity and completeness.