

THE CHURCH (PART ONE)

Sacrament of God's Love and Salvation (C 748-810, USC Ch. 10)

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1Pet 2:9)

The church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation.

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 771)

This is the first of two articles on the Church. In this article we will look at:

- The Church as planned by God, founded by Jesus, and led by the Holy Spirit
- The Church as mystery
- Images of the Church
- Membership and ministries in the Church
- Leadership and authority in the Church

In Part Two, we will look at the *Four Marks of the Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.*

In English we use the word “church” to refer to a building where people gather to worship, or to a community of believers. The community of believers may be a local parish or diocese, or a universal community all connected because of their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. The word *church* originated from Hebrew and Greek words which can be translated as “assembly” or “called forth.” Through Jesus and his message, God calls forth a community of believers who enter into a covenant relationship with him and with each other. Within the context of Catholicism, “the word church means the people gathered by God into one community, guided by bishops who are successors of the Apostles and whose head is the Bishop of Rome, the Pope” (USC p.113).

Planned by God, founded by Jesus, led and sanctified by the Holy Spirit (C 758-769, USC 113-115)

The Catholic Church believes and teaches that God created the world so that we could share in the life and love that exists between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God the Father prepared for the Church with the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1-4) and the formation of the people of Israel (Ex 19 & 20). Israel, as a consecrated people, foreshadows the Church.

In God's own time, he sent **Jesus** into the world to establish the Church which came about as a result of Jesus' preaching and his suffering, death and Resurrection. In Mt 16:17-19 Jesus explicitly speaks of his plan to establish the Church: “*You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.*” The *Catechism* states that the Church was born on the cross: “*As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam's side, so the church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging on the cross*” (C 766).

But the Apostles and disciples of Jesus need the enlightenment of the **Holy Spirit** to awaken them to what Jesus has done on the cross, and to help them realize that they are the New Israel who has now entered into a new covenant relationship with Christ.

In Mt 28:19-20, Jesus commissions his Apostles to go forth and make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In *Acts* we see Peter and other disciples acting on Jesus' command. His message is preached and people are called to repent. Those who respond are baptized and a community of disciples is born.

Today we refer to this process as the beginnings of the Church. As we read the *Acts of the Apostles*, sometimes called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit,” we notice how much the Holy Spirit is present and active in the early Church. Down through the 2,000 years of her history, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church despite the sinfulness of her members and despite attacks from without. “*The Holy Spirit maintains the stability, durability, and continuity of the church both in favorable and unfavorable historical circumstances*” (USC p. 115).

Pause: How has the church changed during your lifetime? What one change do you like the most? Is there a change that you do not like?

The Church as mystery (C 770-773, USC 112)

When the bishops of the world gathered together in Rome for Vatican Council II (1962-65), they produced sixteen documents, the most important of which is the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, also called *Lumen Gentium*, or “Light of Nations.”

The opening chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is called *The Mystery of the Church*. The Church, like the Trinity, is a mystery which human reason alone cannot comprehend. The mystery of the Church lies in the reality that she is one and, at the same time, both visible and spiritual. It is easy to see the *visible* dimensions of the Church—buildings, the pope, bishops, priests, lay faithful, ministries, etc. But only a person of faith can recognize the invisible or spiritual dimension of the Church—the presence of the Trinity in her.

Jesus proclaims that he will be with the Church at all times to the end of the world. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to guide and empower the Church to continue his mission. Without faith, we are unable to see this presence of God in the Church.

Five images of the Church (C 781-786)

Because the Church, like Jesus her founder, is a mystery where the human and divine meet, she cannot be defined; she can only be described or envisaged. *Lumen Gentium* (paras. 6,7,9) offers many beautiful scriptural images of the Church. We will now look at some of these images that help us to gain some insight into the mystery of the Church.

***The Church as the people of God* (C 791-786, USC p.116).** The primary image used by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council to describe the Church is “People of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, ch 2). This representation is deeply rooted in Scripture. In the Old Testament, we find God calling and forming the people of Israel into his own special people and entering into a covenant relationship with them. The people of Israel understood themselves to be the people of God (Ex 6:7).

The first Christians who were Jews continued to see themselves as God’s “Chosen People” who had now entered into a new covenant relationship with him. Speaking to the first Christians, Peter says: “*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God’s own people*” (1Pt 2:9). This new people of God was to be universal in nature embracing all races and cultures. One is not born into this people through physical birth but through faith and baptism.

***The Church as the Body of Christ* (C 787-795, USC p. 118).** The “Body of Christ” image of the church is drawn from the writings of St. Paul. In 1Cor 12:12, 27, Paul writes: “*For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... Now you are Christ’s body and individually parts of it.*”

This image of the Church especially stresses the intimate connection between Christ and the Church—something Paul experiences firsthand when he had his conversion moment on his journey to Damascus. During his trip, Jesus appears to Paul and says: “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4). In persecuting the Church, Saul is also persecuting Christ.

This image of the Church should help us to remember that when we separate ourselves from the Church, we are also separating ourselves from Christ who is the Head and life of the Church (Eph 4:15). The Body of Christ representation of the Church also reminds us that every member of the Church is important to her life and mission (1Cor 12:15-17). Everyone is endowed by the Holy Spirit with gifts needed for building up of the Body of Christ.

***The Church as the Bride of Christ* (C 796).** In his letter to the Ephesians (5:21-33), Paul compares the relationship between Christ and the Church to that between husband and wife. “*Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loves the Church and gave himself up for her*” (5:25). This spousal image of the Church also reflects the wonderful intimacy that exists between Christ and his Church. It is the Bride of Christ image that the Church is traditionally referred to as “she.”

***The Church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit* (C 797-798).** Quoting St. Augustine, the *Catechism* states: “*What the soul is to human body, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ, which is the Church*” (C 797). The Holy Spirit is the source of the Church’s life, unity, gifts and special graces—given to the Church so that she may proclaim Jesus and his message to the world. Just as one cannot separate the Church from Christ, neither can one separate the Holy Spirit from the Church. An early Church Father, St. Irenaeus states: “*Indeed, it is to the church itself that the ‘Gift of God’ has been entrusted...for where the Church is, there is also God’s Spirit; where God’s Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace*” (C 797).

The Church as the sacrament of God’s love and salvation. The *Catechism* states: “*The Church in this world is the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion between God and men*” (C 780). A sacrament is defined as an “*efficacious symbol,*” which means that it brings about what it points to and embodies the reality it represents. In this context, Jesus is often described as the sacrament of God’s love and salvation.

When people encountered Christ with the eyes of faith, they were encountering the invisible God in a visible way and experiencing his love and saving grace. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, we too meet Christ in a visible and tangible way in the Church. Thus the Church is the sacrament of God's love and salvation in our world. Professor Thomas Groome of Boston College calls the Church "the instrument that God uses to come looking for us and that which we use to go looking for God."

Pause: Of the five images of the church mentioned above, which one appeals to you most? Which one best describes the church as you experience it?

Membership and ministries in the Church (C 888-931, USC p. 134-135)

In the Catholic Church, we distinguish three categories of membership: the hierarchy, the consecrated life and the lay faithful. The *hierarchy* refers to ordained ministers, bishops, priests and deacons. *Consecrated religious* include both ordained and non-ordained persons (e.g., ordained Franciscans, religious Franciscan brothers or sisters, and lay Franciscans). Consecrated religious devote their whole life to God in a special way. Most of them also embrace what is called the *Evangelical Counsels of poverty*, (renouncing ownership of property), *chastity* (abstaining from sexual activity), and *obedience* (submission to a superior in community). All the above persons join together to respond to Jesus' Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. The three main roles or ministries of the hierarchy, especially of the bishops assisted by their priests, are:

- To *teach* the truths of the Catholic faith faithfully and fully;
- To *sanctify* the members of the Church especially through the celebration of the sacraments;
- To *govern* the Church wisely as caring shepherds of God's people.

These three roles of the clergy are similar to the priestly, prophetic and kingly roles of Christ which all the baptized are called to actively participate in.

Priestly role (C 901). Through baptism every member of the Church shares in the priesthood of Christ (1Pet 2:9). While the priesthood of the laity differs in essence from the priesthood of the ordained, they are nevertheless interrelated (Lumen Gentium, 10). Through participation in the prayer of the Church, especially

in the Eucharist, by works of charity and by living good Christian lives, the laity not only grow in holiness but they also help others to become holy, thus sharing in the bishops' role of sanctifying the Church.

Prophetic role (C 904-907). The lay faithful share in the prophetic ministry of Christ and the Church both by teaching and witness of life. The most effective prophet or teacher is the one who *witnesses* to the teachings of Christ in their daily life. St. Francis of Assisi used to say: "*preach the gospel always, if necessary use words.*"

Today, more and more lay people are engaged in the prophetic or teaching ministry of the Church as Directors of Religious Education, the R.C.I.A. (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and as catechists to children, teens and adults. This is a very exciting development in our Church.

Within the prophetic ministry of the Church, bishops in union with the Pope, hold a special role. They are the official teachers of the Church, sometimes called the *Magisterium* (from the Latin "to teach"). In the earliest days of the Church, Paul and others warn their people that false teachers will arise in their midst (1Tim 4:1-4, Acts 20:26-27).

Kingly role (C 908-913). Jesus is called Christ the King because he is the King of the universe and the source of all authority. During his life on earth, Jesus modeled for us a servant style of leadership. He said that the son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life for others (Mk 10:41-45). Clergy and laity alike exercise their baptismal kingly role in a Christ-like way when they carry out their ministry within the Church in a humble servant-like manner.

Pause: If you are or have been involved in a ministry in the parish or outside the parish, what do you enjoy most about your ministry? How can pastors get more people to be involved?

Leadership and authority in the Body of Christ (C 874-877, USC p. 119)

In the Church, all members through baptism have equal status: all are equally important and are called to promote the message of Christ to those who do not know him. In the New Testament, leadership and authority are presented as a call to serve others. Once when some of the Apostles are competing for the places of honor in the kingdom that Jesus is inaugurating, he tells them that in his kingdom, leaders and those in authority are not to lord it over

others. Rather, their leadership is to be a form of humble service to others (Lk 22:24-27, Mk 9:30-37). Jesus models this form of servant leadership when he washes the feet of the apostles at the last supper (Jn 13:1-15).

A hierarchical form of leadership (C 874-886). The Catholic Church has a hierarchical form of leadership as opposed to a democratic form where issues are decided by a vote. The dictionary defines *hierarchy* as a ruling body of clergy organized into orders and ranks, each subordinate to the other one above it.

The Pope, our universal shepherd. In our hierarchical form of leadership, the *Pope*, the successor of St. Peter, is our universal shepherd or pastor. He has the final say when it comes to matters of doctrine, morals and discipline. The development of the papacy into what it is today, is a long and complex story. Gradually, the bishop of Rome, where tradition tells us Peter and Paul died, came to be recognized as the head Bishop of the Church.

By the fourth century, the Bishop of Rome was called “Pope” (Papa). Sometimes the Pope’s ministry is referred to as the *Petrine Ministry* (Peter). In this role, the Pope is the symbol of *unity* in the universal Church and his role is to protect the unity of the Church and to work for reconciliation among all Christian churches.

Bishops – successors of the Apostles. When it comes to the governing of the Church, bishops work very closely with the Pope. In Catholic tradition, bishops are recognized as successors of the Apostles. Bishops are pastors of local churches called *dioceses*, which oversees the functioning of many *parishes*. The whole body of bishops is referred to as the “College of Bishops.”

Priests and deacons are co-workers of the bishop in his role of *teaching, sanctifying and governing* the Church. Both of these ordained ministries have their roots in the New Testament.

Lay faithful play a leadership role in the Church by sharing with her their baptismal gifts and graces and by serving on various councils and committees within the Church.

Gift of infallibility (C 888-892, USC p. 133-134). The gift of infallibility was given to the Church when Jesus promised to be with her at all times until the end of the world (Mt 28:20), and when he promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead the Church into the fullness of the truth (Jn 16:13). It would be pointless for Jesus to

give his Church an infallible Bible, if he did not also give her infallible teachers to protect her from teaching error when interpreting the Bible and teaching the core beliefs of the Church. The gift of infallibility which Christ gave to his Church is often misunderstood. It does not mean that popes cannot sin; obviously they can. It does not mean that they cannot err when speaking about non-Church matters. It does not mean that they cannot err in Church matters when writing a book as a private member of the Church. The gift of infallibility only comes into play when the Pope is speaking “from the chair” that is, *ex cathedra*, or is speaking as universal shepherd in matters of faith and morals. The College of Bishops, when speaking as a body in union with the Pope, can also teach infallibly about matters of faith and morals. The Pope uses the gift of infallibility very rarely.

Pause: The Catholic Church has a hierarchical form of leadership and authority. Most, if not all Protestant churches have a democratic form of authority. In your opinion which is the better?

Action suggestion

If you are actively engaged in your parish, help one person to get involved in the activities of the church. If you are not, consider taking that step.

————— Meditation —————

Look for a moment at the whole great panorama of twenty centuries of the Church. It begins in the wounded side of Christ on Calvary, goes through the “tempering” of Pentecostal fires and comes onward like a burning flood to pass through each era... Fresh living water springs up in us and new flames are lit. By virtue of the divine power received from her Founder the Church is an institution which endures; but even more than an institution, she is a life that is passed on. She sets the seal of unity on all the children of God whom she gathers together.

(The Splendor of the Church, Henri De Lubac, S.J.)

Fr. Eamon Tobin ©
Ascension Catholic Church
Melbourne, FL
tobin2@live.com