

XIII

THE VISIBLE CHURCH

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH

MAN'S salvation, we have seen, was bound up with the Apostles. Through them Christ's teaching and Christ's life would be given to men till the end of time. He would be with the Apostles, which means two things principally—first, in union with them we are in union with Him; second, He guarantees the teaching they give and the life they dispense to us.

This is the Church He had promised to found upon Peter. This is the Church upon which the Holy Ghost descended in the form of tongues of fire ten days later. There were eleven Apostles; and one of them, Peter, as we shall see in more detail later, was to be the shepherd who should represent here on earth the Good Shepherd who had ascended to His Father. There were a hundred and twenty disciples: "disciple" means "learner": "apostle" means one who is "sent"—sent to bear the gifts of truth and life and union.

That was the Church which was "born of the Holy Ghost and of fire" on the first Pentecost day. There would be developments in the structure—there would, for instance, be new officials subordinate to the Apostles, as the growth in the number of disciples called for increasing complexity in administration. But the main lines of the structure are established for all time—the body of disciples, the dispensers of truth and life, the one man who represented Christ as Shepherd of the Flock.

At all these levels the human beings will change, as men die and are replaced by others. But the same Christ will be in operation. The Church, united with Him, is doing in His power the things He had done for men in His body, as He wants them done now. The same Holy Ghost who indwelt Him indwells His Church.

We see Our Lord's mind upon all this most clearly if we look at what He made of Peter. The first strong hint is in the changing of his name from Simon to Peter, which means "Rock"; with the meaning of the change made clear in Matthew (xvi. 17-20)—"Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church. . . ." If you do not know the words by memory, reread the passage now.

Read too what Our Lord said to Peter at the Last Supper (Luke xxii. 28-32). We may concentrate here upon the words in which Christ makes Peter to be the shepherd of the flock (John xxi. 15-18). In three phrases Peter is told that *he* must feed the lambs and the sheep. This involves a command to the whole flock to be fed by him. But with what food?

Three times Our Lord speaks of food. To the devil tempting Him He quotes Deuteronomy: "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God": so what God speaks is food.

To His disciples urging Him to eat (John iv. 34), He says, "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me": so the divine law is food.

And to the multitude whom He had fed with five loaves and two fishes He had said (John vi. 55): "The man who eats My flesh and drinks My blood enjoys eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day": so His body and blood are food.

With truth and law and Sacrament Peter must see to it that we are fed—Peter and the men who one by one shall succeed him as shepherds till the end of time.

Yet not by their own power. After each of the commissions He gave to Peter, Our Lord added a rebuke. In Matthew xvi, He says to *Peter*, "Get thee behind Me, Satan," for Peter was urging Him not to go to Jerusalem and suffer. In Luke xxii, there is almost worse: "Before the cock crows, thou shalt deny Me thrice." And there is a strange phrase near the end of John xxi: "What is it to thee?"

Peter became a saint; many of his successors have been canonized too; many startle us by their small show of sanctity. So with bishops and priests. We rejoice in the evidently holy, we may be sad at others. But the power in which, by which, we live is never theirs. It is always Christ's. It is Christ we join when we join the Church, not the men who at any given moment direct it here upon earth. The gifts come to us through them: but always from Him.

THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC

Christ, then, had chosen that His work for the redemption of men should be carried on while the world should last—by Himself, of course, but through a society of men. He had promised Peter (Matt. xvi. 18) that He should build the Church upon him, and Peter must have been at once delighted and puzzled, wondering what this Church might be.

With the words uttered so near to Our Lord's ascension into heaven (Matt. xxviii. 19-20), the nature, purpose and structure of the Church were made clear. Peter and the other Apostles were to be its key men; till the end of time it would be apostolic. And till the end of time it would be catholic.

The glory of this last word is inexhaustible. Here we must be content to look at its bare meaning. "Catholic", we say, is from a Greek word meaning "universal". What does "universal" mean? The word contains two elements—all and one, all in one.

In His first commission to Peter, Our Lord had made clear what He meant by "one"—His Church was to be built upon the Rock. Peter was to have the keys and a power of binding and loosing which God Himself would ratify. In His final commission to the Apostles, He made clear what He meant by "all"—a threefold all: all nations, all doctrines, all ages.

When we say the Nicene Creed we call the Church "one, holy, catholic and apostolic." Rightly we speak of these as her four marks. Pause upon the marks. They mean outward showings, visible to anyone who troubles to look; they do not require the eye of faith, any rational observer can see that they are there. He may not see the importance the Catholic sees in them, but once he knows what we mean by the marks, the qualities outwardly shown; he will admit that the Church does actually show them.

For the Catholic they are immeasurably more than that—they are the outward showings of inner realities. The showing can vary from age to age, according as men respond well or ill to the gifts of Christ. But the inner reality abides changeless; Christ made His Church thus, it can never be otherwise.

The Church has the mark of catholicity, for example: as the ages have passed between her foundation and now, she has in fact taught all doctrines to nations beyond number. But in her inmost reality, she is no more catholic now than when she was founded.

When Our Lord established the Church, it consisted of one hundred and twenty Jews; it had no age at all, its teaching had not begun. And in that instant it was the *Catholic* Church. For it had been made by the universal Teacher and Lifegiver for all men. *That* is the inner reality, of which the mark began to show as early as Pentecost Day.

The mark has been more spectacularly in evidence at some times than at others; nations have joined the Church, nations

have left it. But it is always the Church through which Our Lord offers men the fullness of truth and life and union.

The inner reality is of the essence; but the outward showings are of immense importance as establishing the Church's special and unique relation to God.

As a mark, apostolicity is seen in a variety of ways, notably three. First, the Church goes back in an unbroken line to the one that came to life in our world on the first Pentecost; by the laying-on of hands every bishop, every priest, is linked with the Apostles. Second, the Church, like the Apostles, teaches and has always taught whatever Christ taught; at no point has it ever been conceived, for example, that with the progress of learning we know better than He. There has been development, but always a genuine development of what He gave. Third, the Church teaches *as* the Apostles taught, that is, with complete authority; at every age she has said what the Apostles said at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts xv.28): "It hath seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us".

Two points may be worth noting about the mark of catholicity. Every sort of nation has joined the Church, each feeling wholly at home. And every sort of man in every nation has joined it, lived in it and loved it. There is no such thing as a Catholic type. There are vast differences between centuries and civilizations and nations and individuals; the Church is able to get down below the differences to that in humanity which all men have. Of course, for she is made by the God who made men.

THE CHURCH IS ONE

The mark of unity comes naturally to the mind after a discussion of catholicity, which would indeed be pointless without it. To be catholic and not one would have no meaning at all.

The importance of unity in Our Lord's sight comes out unmistakably in a phrase He uses at the Last Supper (John xvii. 21). He had prayed for the Apostles, then for all those who through their teaching might come to accept Himself—

“That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee; that they also may be one in Us: that the world may know that Thou hast sent me.

Unity meant so much *to Him* that upon it He was prepared to stake the proof to the world of His own divinity. And it meant so much *in itself* that He could compare it to the unity within the Godhead of the first Person and the Second.

Look at the words again. The unity was to be of men in the Trinity—“that they may be one in us”: that is the inner reality. But it must be outwardly visible, that the world might see it as evidence of the inner reality of Christ: that is the mark.

Catholics, we say, are united in faith, worship and government.

In faith—the doctrines to be believed and the spiritual and moral laws to be obeyed they accept from the Church as Christ teaching and commanding.

In worship, similarly, they accept the Mass and the Sacraments as through the Church but from Christ.

The third of this trio, government, may be seen most simply in what Our Lord said, first to Peter alone (Matt. xvi. 19) then to all the Apostles together (Matt. xviii. 18): “Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven.” Within the framework of the moral, spiritual, and ritual laws actually given by Christ, the Church may make regulations to aid her members to live more fully in accord with them. Examples are her laws upon fasting before

Communion, upon mixed marriage, upon celibacy of the clergy.

Only a habit of skipping the unfamiliar can account for any lover of the Gospels finding the Church's unity unattractive. Yet to many it is plainly repulsive. They see it as regimentation, tyranny in the rulers, servility in the ruled. The worst political evil of the day has provided them with a name for it—totalitarianism.

Totalitarianism is precisely what it is not. For in the totalitarian state, everything is under the control of the State, there is no private sphere; whereas in the Church the distinction is clean-drawn between the religious sphere and the civil; and in the civil sphere the Church claims no authority over her members.

There have been occasions of real overlap, civil questions having direct religious effects; and others of genuine difference of opinion as to which authority is entitled to act. But over the long run of history, even its opponents do not find the Church much given to laying down the law in the civil sphere—in America or England, to take countries familiar to ourselves, the Pope has never told Catholics how to vote in an election.

There is a feeling that one who makes all his own decisions in religion is freer and more natural. But if a man joins, or remains in, the Church because he believes Christ founded it to give us truth and life and union with Him, then it is mere sanity to accept the doctrines and the moral laws it tells us Christ has given it, and the means of life and union. It is not as if we could discover these things for ourselves. We know them on God's revelation or not at all. We must find the teacher authorized by God to teach and accept his authority. The alternative is to go without. And freedom is not served by ignorance.

THE CHURCH IS HOLY

With the mark of holiness as with the others, we must distinguish between the outward showing—visible to anyone who cares to look and liable to grow greater or less—and the inner characteristic, visible to the eye of faith and belonging to the Church's very essence, present from the first moment of her existence and never varying.

In this profounder sense the holiness of the Church is simply the holiness of Christ. It is His Church, made by Him as the bearer of holiness to men. Every member, in contact with Him, has available to him a fount of holiness; there is no limit save our own will to receive what He has to give.

There is no growth and, of course, no diminishing. If every one of her members were in a state of grace at a given moment, the Church's holiness would be no greater; if we were all in mortal sin together, it would be no less. In other words the holiness of the Church is not the sum total of the holiness of all her members, any more than the wetness of rain is measured by the wetness of all those who have ventured out in it. If the whole population goes out and gets drenched, the rain is no wetter; if everyone stays indoors, the rain is no less wet. Rain is wet because it is rain, whether or not men expose themselves to it. The Church is holy because it is Christ living on in the world. It is the cause of the holiness of its members, but is not measured by their response.

But with the *mark*, we find ourselves looking at the effects upon the members, so far as these are outwardly visible. The Church can be seen to be holy because she teaches a holy doctrine, she offers to all the means of holiness, and the saints are there to show how immeasurably effective these means

can be. All three are vast topics. We can at least glance at them.

That she teaches a holy doctrine, we know in the fullness of its reality, by faith. But even one who has no faith, and either differs from the Church as to what constitutes holiness or even dismisses holiness as of no account in a busy world, can see one plain fact. In her teaching she always cleaves to her own standard of holiness—that the will of God is absolute. She never allows deviation from it for any reason whatsoever; worldly advantage, human weakness, she knows about these things; but she never allows them to affect her utterance of God's law.

She has had popes who made no fetish of personal holiness, but not one of them ever tried to reword the law of God to allow for the indulgence of his own temptations. And no other human quality has ever taken precedence of holiness. Her heroes are the saints: she inserts into her liturgy Masses for saints, but not for individual popes, however great, unless they too happened to be saints. And if you are tempted to smile cynically at that last word, remember that only two popes of the last four hundred years have been canonized.

Of the means of holiness as of the teaching, the same distinction must be drawn between what her members know by faith and their own experience, and what is plainly visible to anyone who cares to look.

Of this latter sort are, to pluck a few almost at random, the ways in which she aids her members to live according to the holiness she has taught them. Even one who does not believe in sacramental confession must at least admit that the Church which requires it takes the battle with sin seriously. The daily examination of conscience she urges upon us witnesses in the same direction, as do the annual or more frequent retreats that she provides.

There is no take-it-or-leave-it about the Church's condemnation of sin and urging to holiness. Consider another thing: the spiritual writings of her greatest children are read not only by her own members, but by men of all faiths. St. Augustine's *Confessions*, *The Imitation of Christ*, St. Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*, are read by Christians outside the Church as they read no books by writers of their own faith.

One more of the means, or aids, to holiness offered by the Church to her members is especially worth mention, because it is of the first practical importance and is not always realized in this particular connection. It is the example of the saints.

The abiding temptation of every Christian is to feel that the standard set by Christ is high and holy, but quite simply beyond our powers: it is splendid but impossible. The feeling is foolish, of course. The God who made men would not know so little of the beings He made as to ask the impossible of them. But knowing it foolish does not diminish its force. We feel that however it may be for others, our peculiar circumstances and difficulties make the living of Christ's life impossible for us.

Here is a special value of the saints. Men and women of our own sort, in our circumstances, beset by our difficulties, have attained high and heroic sanctity. As this comes home to us, holiness will still seem difficult, but it will no longer seem impossible. And between the difficult and the impossible there is all the difference in the world.

It may seem at once ungracious and merely silly to tell other Christian religions their business. I can simply utter my own wonder at how they get on without something equivalent to the canonization of saints. It would, I should think, be a help to a Methodist or Presbyterian, tempted as he feels

beyond his strength, to read of a Methodist storekeeper of the eighteenth century, a Presbyterian farmer's daughter of the nineteenth, who overcame the same difficulties as his or hers and became a great saint.

For the men and women canonized by the Church are of every sort, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, powerfully tempted or hardly at all, people of evil life who have repented, people who from infancy have not deviated from the love of God and neighbour. It is no exaggeration to say that the saints are as various, as catholic in that sense, as the Church itself.

Three characteristics of the mark of holiness are, as has been said, the teaching, the means, the saints. It may have been noticed that, in treating the first two, the teaching and the means, we brought in the saints; it may be wondered what is left to say of them in the third. But in all three characteristics they are used differently. In the teaching we saw them as the unchanging standard the Church sets; in the means, we saw them as witness to our weakness that holiness is possible even to us.

Now, at last, we come to them as evidence to the whole world that the teaching is true teaching and the means are effective means. For the saints are the people who have accepted wholeheartedly all that Christ, through His Church, offers them.

In other words, it is by the saints, and not by the mediocre, still less by the great sinners, that the Church is to be judged. It may seem a loading of the dice to demand that any institution be judged solely by its best members, but in this instance it is not. A medicine must be judged not by those who buy it but by those who actually take it. A Church must be judged by those who hear and obey, not by those who half-hear and disobey when obedience is difficult.

No Catholic is compelled—not by the Church, not by

Christ—to be holy. His will is solicited, aided, not forced.

In Francis Thompson's words the Church is not a machine

To pack and label men for God
And save them by the barrel-load.

Every man must make his own response. The saints have responded totally; the rest of us respond partially, timorously (afraid to lose some sin in which we especially delight), or not at all. The saints in their thousands upon thousands stand as proof that, in the Church, holiness is to be had for the willing. Every saint is certain evidence that, if you and I are not saints, the choice is wholly our own.

We have come to an end of our consideration of the marks of the Church. The point throughout has been to get at what the inner reality is which the marks outwardly show. What should be clear is that in every case the inner reality is some special way in which Christ Our Lord functions in the Church. There is in fact a deeper presence of Christ than we have yet stated. To that we must now come.

THE TEACHING OF TRUTH

On a hillside in Galilee, between the Resurrection and the Ascension, Our Lord had told the Apostles to teach all nations. They were to teach all that He had taught them, all doctrines, all laws. And He promised to be with them all days till time should end. Thus the Apostles, protected by Christ Himself in their utterance of His teaching, were to have successors, likewise protected. That was Christ's plan that men should have truth here upon earth.

It seems strange that a large section of Christians think the Apostles fulfilled their commission by writing the New

Testament, leaving behind them no successors, nor any need for successors, with the authority Our Lord had given themselves. It seems strange for one reason, that it would mean only four of the Apostles had obeyed their Master—Matthew writing a gospel, John a gospel and three brief letters, Peter two letters and Jude one. Not a written word from Thomas, for instance, so ready with his tongue—I at least would be willing to give up the great book of his greatest namesake to have one about Christ from him.

It would seem strange for another reason—that the Church Christ founded would have been a teaching Church only for a half-century or so, in all the centuries since merely a library. Circumstances change and someone must have authority to apply the teachings to the new circumstances, otherwise they would end up as frustrations rather than teachings. Even in the doctrines themselves there are depths which the believing mind can explore, with all the danger of error but all the rich possibilities of development. With every operation of the un-stagnant mind of man upon the truth, the question must arise, "What did Christ mean?"

So it has proved. There is not a word uttered by Christ which has not met a great number of diverse interpretations, some of them intelligent, some immensely attractive, but contradicting each other. How are we to know? It is not enough to have Our Lord's words; the words themselves can be only a kind of talisman without the meaning. Without a teacher, who can tell us, beyond the possibility of error, which of the various meanings is Christ's, we should have no revelation but only an ever-growing pile of conundrums.

Either there is a teacher now teaching upon earth, guaranteed by Christ as the Apostles were, or there is no possibility of knowing the truth which He saw to be so essential. Already, well before His death, He had given men authority to teach with His authority—it was to the disciples, not to

the Apostles only, that He said: "He that hears you, hears Me." That, extended to the Church He founded for all ages, is His formula to ensure that we shall receive His truth with no admixture of error. There is no other. The name for it is "Infallibility".

This, in brief, is the way of it. The successors of the Apostles are the bishops. What they are agreed in teaching as the revelation of Christ upon faith and morals—that is, upon truths to be believed and laws to be obeyed—is infallible: God sees to it that it contains no error. The agreement referred to need not be total, including every single bishop that has been or now is; individual bishops in some time or place may teach error. But what may be called a moral universality—a teaching given by the great mass of the bishops of the world—is certainly true.

This teaching by bishops is the normal way in which Our Lord's revelation reaches the Catholic. But where it is uncertain what the bishops are agreed in teaching, or where either some new problem arises calling for new clarification, or some new heresy arises calling for a more precise statement of the denied truth, there is what we may think of as a court of last resort. In the words of the Vatican Definition of 1870, the Pope "is endowed with that infallibility with which it has pleased God to endow His Church". If the Pope issues to the whole Church a solemn definition of revealed truth, then that too is certain. He that hears him, hears Christ.

Infallibility is concerned with teaching only. It is no guarantee of the Pope's holiness. As a matter of fact the Popes whose concern with holiness is less obvious have not been much given to infallible definitions. But, whether or no, the exclusion of error is not due to any human virtue; it is solely the act of God.