

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

The Church

To be a Catholic, it's fundamental to recognise the Church as Christ's movement in the world. It is therefore *not* to be understood merely as a human institution - though it is that too - but as a body whose head is Christ himself, and whose mind is the Holy Spirit.

People who reduce all things to earthly facts will never believe this about the Church. For them, it is an interesting shooting-gallery full of human foibles, or a rogues' gallery full of hypocrisy, or a transparent piece of pompous charlatanism.

Indeed, if the Church were not willed by God, it might be all of those things.

What Did Jesus Want To Leave Us?

Did Jesus want the Church as we know it? He was the most influential of religionists. To the perplexity of Protestants, who seek for all truth in the Scriptures, he chose to write nothing at all. When he knowingly approached his death, he did not even write a will. Everything was entrusted to his disciples - even though he knew they did not understand his dying, and could not accompany him; even though they had consistently missed the point of his teaching. We are told that he did this, praying that God would guide them by the Holy Spirit, which could only happen after his own death (*Unless I go, the Holy Spirit will not come to you*). This shows us that he believed his community would be guided by the Spirit after his death, as he had guided it himself up to that point. In the Fourth Gospel he tells them to *remain in him, just as he remains in his Father*, which shows that he found their continuing unity and fidelity vital for the finishing of his work: the Church must remain *one*.

Then he calls his followers to carry the cross with him, and to follow him in sacrificial love: this will make them *holy*: he prays the Father to *consecrate them in the truth*. His words conferring on the faithful apostles, and particularly Peter, the power to lock and unlock the Kingdom of Heaven for future generations, shows that the mystery of salvation was to pass into the hands of his ministers. The authority of the apostles, then, is to be preserved in the Church: it is to be *apostolic*.

Then, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, he commissions them to *go into the whole world* with the Gospel: the Church must be *catholic* - directed to the whole world.

As a country rabbi wandering from village to village with a few followers, Jesus was operating on a very small scale. After the Resurrection, the first scene we are given is of the Pentecostal arrival of the Holy Spirit, who sends the apostles out to speak all the languages of the world; the symbol of this transfigured mission is Paul, known as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Already the need to be *one* meant that there were vital issues of communication, with apostolic authority stretching forth across two continents. The need to learn how they would become a vast international movement was clear. Already the little flock of Jesus was growing into something massively different.

When people look at an institution like the Papacy, with its vast history, they wonder how Jesus would look at it. Did Jesus, for instance, envisage the Vatican? Surely not! That would mean turning him into a human being with weird powers of prediction, and this he was not. The Vatican is one of the things human beings have developed, as (under the aegis of the Holy Spirit) they try to be faithful to Christ on behalf of a billion Catholics. Did Jesus envisage the Papal diplomatic channels, with ambassadorial representatives in 180 countries? Of course not; but *Go out to the whole world, proclaim the good news and you will bear witness before kings and governors* could have few more effective ways of fulfilment. That this means the Vatican works as a court, and that the Pope has a small private army, is unfortunate; but we know from experience for example that the Pope needs protecting in St Peter's Square, because there are people who want to shoot him (and who do shoot him). That there is a Papal throne, raised among the high places of the earth, does not mean that the Pope is proud or vainglorious; the life and death of John Paul II display the truth that living in a large palace doesn't prevent you from humility or blind you to the needs of the poor.

The history of the Church is a fascinating one in which there have been saints and sinners at every stage. To the eyes of faith this presents no problems. We know that every one of us contributes to the Church's treasure of holiness and its burden of sinfulness. The amazing thing is precisely that the Church survives the scandal of its sinners, and keeps producing saints in every generation. We don't put this down to a few strategically-placed strokes of luck, but to the providence of God. The Church is not at the mercy of its human members, but upheld by its Head, who is Christ, and by the Holy Spirit who dwells within it and within every member of it. It isn't a contradiction for liars to love the truth, or for sinners to love holiness, any more than it is impossible for people who can't sing to love music. The Lord came to call sinners, and the Church must do the same; the Lord came to speak the ultimate truth, and the Church must have the power to do the same.

We think of the Church *continuing the Incarnation* - that is, the Word's becoming flesh. When the Church consecrates the bread and wine, Jesus is *enfleshed* in the world; when the Church teaches solemnly, the Word of God *speaks* in human words. Jesus promised: *I am with you always, until the end of time*; that could hardly be true if the man who taught his disciples so firmly and authoritatively were replaced by a confused sub-committee pooling their best ideas. Nor is the living Lord to be replaced by any book of rules. We are in relationship with him, risen from the dead, and our obedience is to him. However, we trust the Church because he trusted it, and listen with profound respect to the teaching that comes to us from it. We do not put our faith in the Church - but in Christ. In his name we believe what the Church wants us to receive, because he left us this community to keep us at one with him.

The Church isn't a collection of bishops and priests with an agenda of their own. It is the whole body of Christ, in which every member is indispensable: and who are called to be members? *All who live* - because the church is Catholic. As long as there are people struggling to find their way to God outside the Church, it falls short of its destiny. When the Gospel has been *effectively* spoken to the whole world, the Church will have fulfilled its calling, all humanity will have made its decision, and the world will be ready for judgment. Until then, the Church is a sign of future realities, struggling like all others to fulfil her calling: to be another Christ for every generation.

RCIA meets on Monday evening in the Church Hall from 7 to 8 30 pm.