

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

The Church

The Christian Church is moving towards its third millennium. It began as a tiny movement in a secluded and far-flung province of an ancient empire. Today it is the oldest continuing human institution. In many ways it appears very different from the little flock Jesus gathered in his own lifetime, and it takes a feat of imagination to understand it as the true heir of the early Church.

The movement Jesus began was exceedingly “lightweight”. He called on his followers to refuse dominion over one another, and to dislike titles. He pointed out that they must be servants and brothers and sisters, because the basic deed of the Christian church is the emptying out of self for others, in the Spirit of Christ.

Jesus’ orders to the first disciples have been preserved for us. He told them to go out in pairs to the little villages of Palestine, calling people to change their hearts in preparation for a coming kingdom. Their mission was basically rural and very limited: it was directed only to Jews.

He himself would then visit the village, and his teaching about the nature of this kingdom would be delivered to the people in words and deeds. He spoke in parables about a kingdom whose growth would be inexorable, like yeast in flour or seeds in earth. It would be a kingdom where earthly priorities would be reversed: its lords would be the poor and lowly, and its coming would involve the passing of judgment on the world where money and power calls the shots. The complacent and highly-placed would find themselves overturned, and their power would be given to the ones they had oppressed and exploited. This was revolutionary language, but there was little sign that the speaker was gathering an army to bring it about. Despite this, in a political tinderbox like occupied Palestine, Jesus began to evoke enmity from the establishment, especially the religious establishment.

Jesus would then follow up his teaching by deeds. He healed the sick, reinstated the lepers and the deranged, reconciled outcasts from the community by eating with sinners and staying in their houses. He welcomed the homage of prostitutes and accepted tax-collectors into his company. He reached out to the afflicted, whatever their problems and whatever the day; he set the needs of healing above the complex rules for keeping the Sabbath. This further alienated the religious establishment, and the healings began to gather huge crowds, which alerted even the political sector, who were sensitive to any popular movement.

When Jesus was condemned to death and executed, the movement ought to have folded. In fact, the opposite happened. Suddenly the other-worldly qualities Jesus had called for began to seem appropriate for a movement whose leader was thought of as “seated at the right hand of God”. The overwhelming experience of this earliest

Church was that it cancelled its worldly assets and waited for the Kingdom to come. We have never forgotten this early experience of communism, and the *Acts of the Apostles* describes it three times, because of its dominant influence on the subsequent history of the Church. However, when the expected return of Jesus was delayed, the Jerusalem church ran out of earthly resources and began to starve. This was the point where Paul of Tarsus, a Jewish - Pharisee - apostle, who could easily have accepted training for the rabbinate, organised a collection from all the Churches of the world to repay Jerusalem for its gift of the Gospel to them. In this way lives were saved in Jerusalem, and the people realised that they would need strategies in the world for the survival of the Gospel and its mission. The Church was discovering what the new testament calls *koinonia*, community sharing across vast distances. Expansion makes problems for communication, which is essential for communion. The dispersal of the Gospel raised problems for keeping the faith: how would the apostles be certain that the faith adopted by people in Corinth or Rome were one with that held in Jerusalem? They needed authority, or oversight - in Greek, *episkope*, in which lies hidden our word *bishop*. What was already beginning to appear in the mind of Paul was the image of the international church as a vast mystical body, uniting thousands of people all over the world in a single communion and a single organism. Paul would only see the beginnings of this development; but the broad lines were already visible when he wrote to the peoples of Greece asking for their financial help for Jerusalem: "*They gave you your faith: now you must share your money with them.*"

People who are not Catholic often remark that it is a long way from Jesus in Capernaum to Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican; and they're absolutely right. It's a different continent, and it's nearly two millennia; and the communion established between thirteen men in the upper room, the incredible five thousand who sat down to be fed in a field in the Holy Land, have become a communion of over a billion people in every nation on the globe. It is obvious that there would be a sea-change in the character of such a body, and there is.

The Church has passed through many different experiences. Every age has been an occasion of grace, when new Christian qualities have been developed, and new Christian saints have arisen to embody the Gospel for their time. But every age has also brought its own temptations and its own dangers for the Church. In the beginning it was nearly wiped out by persecution; it thus developed the knowledge that it can never belong to the world, trust the world, or make its home in the world. Christians remembered that Jesus had told them this before he proved it by being condemned to death by the world.

Then the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, and suddenly the Church was confronted with temptations associated with power and prosperity.

At the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, the Church shone brightly in the Dark Ages, keeping the culture of the fallen empire alive amidst the barbarian invasions, by the founding of monasteries and the preservation of dioceses. But at the same time the Popes were accruing imperial titles in Rome, where even the Roman army had withdrawn; they were governing the city and acting as political leaders as well as religious ones. Stepping into the shoes of emperors is not easy for a Bishop; but the imperial pull opened the way for the Bishops of Rome to preside over all others, with the cachet of St Peter as the founding apostle as their chief credential, and the words

of Jesus to Peter at Caesarea Philippi giving divine sanction to their governance. The aura of authority around the figure of the Bishop of Rome was sometimes practically unlimited. In the persons of men like Leo the Great and Gregory the Great all humanity could see a vision of holy power which enabled them to see grace in the Church which existed nowhere else. But for lesser men this was an area of growing temptation and abuse, and it led directly to the situation of the Popes as Italian princes like the Doges of Venice and Genova, the Dukes of Milan and Tuscany, the kings of Naples and the Two Sicilies. Popes riding into battle, making military alliances, and blessing the horrors of the Crusades were often hard to respect as representatives of Jesus of Nazareth.

What do we say when the Church's defences fall, and her leaders fall prey to corruption? First, we say that the leaders of the Church are no more likely to be free from sin than the members. God knows that the people he creates are capable of sin; it is no surprise to him, and he has taken it into account. If the leadership of the Church were confined to saints without sin, it would have no leaders.

We say too that weaknesses in Christians are still the place where the mercy of God is displayed. The Church survives its members because God pardons them and pours out his grace to compensate for their failings. Jesus chose pardoned sinners, not faultless men; and there is ample proof that they did not cease to be sinners when they joined him. It isn't by *our* holiness that God saves the world, but by his. This means that the Church can call sinners to herself, and to the hope of repentance; and there is no examination for holiness before you can be admitted. Only the *desire* for holiness is required for Baptism.

The doctrine of the Church as the body of Christ is also vital. When a priest who is an unworthy priest baptises a baby, the act is not vitiated by the unworthiness of the minister, because *it isn't his act*. It is the act of the Church, and therefore it is Christ who acts, because the Church is his body. That's why Catholics should never decide which church to attend on the merits of the priest. They do not attend Church to worship the priest, but to make up the Body of Christ where they live. So we say that the merits of Christ, given to the Church, far outweigh the shortcomings of all the members.

When we think of the Church we look for four things: they are the ones mentioned in the Creed. The Church must be One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic:

- one, in that communion of heart, mind and life is demanded of it in every place and time - therefore no-one may divide Christ's Church;
- Holy, by means of its steadfast mystical unity with Jesus Christ;
- Catholic, in its self-understanding as a community that addresses the whole earth without any exception; and
- Apostolic, in its fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles and the tradition which flows from the Apostolic heritage.