

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

What About The Church?

The Church is a perennial source of scandal. It bears the name “Christian” and is full of people who exhibit sure signs of unholiness. Did Jesus want it to exist? If so, how far does it shape up to what Jesus wanted it to be?

When we talked about divine knowledge (that God knows all there is to know) we thought that this knowing, like God’s being, must be qualitatively different from human knowledge. Human beings accumulate loads of facts. God *knows* in a way that relates to the divine plan for all things, and is a kind of global knowledge.

Jesus of Nazareth knew as we know. When we imagine what sort of movement he wanted to start, we have to measure his human thoughts according to the mind he had, as a first-century Jew. It’s impossible to imagine what he would have said had he been an eighteenth-century Spaniard or a twenty-first-century American.

Further, we don’t have to try to imagine that, because Jesus entrusted his movement to the Holy Spirit who would come to his followers after he had gone to the Father.

So the next question is: what does Christ in glory require of his Church, under the aegis of the Holy Spirit?

We can look at some of the places where Jesus tells his followers how to be together. The following all come from Mark’s Gospel:

- *Come after me, and I will make you fishers of people.*
- *I came to call, not the upright, but sinners.*
- *Anyone who does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother.*
- He instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff: no bread, no haversack, no coppers for their purses. They were to wear sandals but he said, *Don’t take a spare tunic.* And he said: *If you enter a house anywhere, stay there until you leave the district. And if any place does not welcome you and people refuse to listen to you, as you walk away shake of the dust under your feet as evidence to them.*
- *If anyone wants to be first he must make himself last of all and servant of all.*
- *Anyone who is not against us is for us.*
- *Anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.*
- *Among the Gentiles their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen amongst you. For the Son of Man himself came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

- *You will be handed over to Sanhedrins, beaten in synagogues: you will be brought before governors and kings for my sake, as evidence for them: for first the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations. Do not worry about what to say: say whatever is given you when the time comes; because it is not you who will be speaking, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and the father his child; children will come forward against their parents and have them put to death. You will be universally hated on account of my name, but anyone who stands firm to the end will be saved.*
- *Go out to the whole world: proclaim the Gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

A Few Questions

1 Jesus sent his disciples to the lost sheep of Israel, and told them not to go to any Gentile territory. He saw his mission only in Jewish terms. Discuss!

2 People often point out that the Vatican is full of priceless artworks and gilded ceilings, and that this is an inappropriate place for the Church to own or live in. Is it? What would you do with the Vatican if you were Pope Benedict (or his successor?)

3 If necessary, the Pope can govern with immense firmness, and priests promise obedience at their ordination. Anglicans have a much looser form of authority, with an immense variety of belief and practice. Methodist ministers have to submit to the agreement of hosts of local committees. Presbyterians are governed by their congregations. Congregationalists can hire or fire their ministers. Baptists can separate and form a new church if they quarrel with the one they're in. Quakers have no formal leaders at all.

What sort of human authority does the Church need, to guide it through the shoals of our times and to keep it together as the Body of Christ?

4 Catholicism values a close system of inheritance which leads back to the Twelve (the *Apostolic Succession*). The Church hands on Holy Orders through this succession, bishop to bishop, and the Church enshrines not only the Scriptures but large bodies of tradition. For Protestants, what isn't in the Scriptures is harmful and to be discarded.

How far should we be governed by what previous generations have believed?

5 The true Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

How do we cope if this is not true in a particular time and place?

6 We used to say that "the Church" and "the Roman Catholic Church" were interchangeable terms. We no longer do. How would you see the real boundaries of the Church of Christ? Can you imagine a "church" which is, in the words of the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, made of those "whose faith is known to God alone"?

