

Topic 16: The Hierarchical Constitution of the Church

The Church is a structured society where some have the mission to guide others. The assistance of the Holy Spirit to the whole Church so that it may not err in believing is also given to the magisterium so that it may faithfully and authentically teach the Word of God. The Church has always called only baptised men to the order of the priesthood; she has felt bound by the will of Christ,

who chose only men as
Apostles.

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The Church on earth is both a communion and a society structured by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, the sacraments and the charisms. It is a communion of the children of God because all are baptised and partake of the same Bread, which is Christ. It is a structured society because among the baptised there are stable relationships whereby some have the mission of guiding others. As the shepherd guides and cares for the flock, leading it to safe places where it can feed on good grass, as in the biblical image (cf. Jn 10:11-18; Ps 22), so Christ asks those He has made shepherds in the Church to do likewise.^[1] The distinction between

shepherd and flock and the dedication of the shepherd's life to the flock, like Christ who gave his life for the sheep, is a biblical image which – within its obvious limitations – can help us understand the simultaneous presence of communion and social structuring in the Church.

The very sacraments which make the Church are those which structure it so that it may be on earth the universal sacrament of salvation. Specifically, through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders, the faithful participate – in different ways – in the priestly mission of Christ. The action of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments and in the charisms gives rise to the three key conditions of the faithful in the Church throughout history: the lay faithful, the sacred ministers (who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders and form the hierarchy of the

Church: deacons, priests and bishops), and the religious.

To say that the Church has a hierarchical structure does not mean that some are higher than others. All the faithful, by Baptism, are called to the mission of bringing men and women and the world to God. This mission comes directly from God, without anyone needing the permission of another person to carry it out. However, in order to carry it out, grace is necessary, because without Christ we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5). Therefore, it is necessary for some – the hierarchy – to make Christ sacramentally present to others, so that all can carry out the evangelising mission. Service to the mission of everyone in the Church is the reason for the existence of the hierarchy. The relationship between the faithful and the hierarchy has a missionary dynamic, and is a continuation of the mission of the

Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the hierarchy in the Church is not the result of historical circumstances through which one group has prevailed over another by imposing its will.

1. The Roman Pontiff

The Pope is the bishop of Rome and successor of Saint Peter; he is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity in the Church. Christ gave the apostle Peter the task of presiding over the apostolic college and confirming his brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22:31-32). All the particular Churches are united with the Church of Rome, and all the bishops who preside over these Churches are in communion with the bishop of Rome, who presides over them in charity. The function of the latter is to serve the unity of the episcopate and thus to serve the unity of the Church. Therefore the

Pope is the head of the college of bishops and pastor of the whole Church, over which he has, by divine institution, full, supreme, immediate and universal power. This power of the Pope has an internal limit, because the Roman Pontiff is within and not above Christ's Church. He is therefore subject to divine law and natural law, as are all Christians.

Our Lord has promised that his Church will always persevere in the faith (cf. Mt 16:19), and He guarantees this fidelity by his presence, through the Holy Spirit. This property is possessed by the Church as a whole (not in each individual member). This is why the faithful as a whole do not err in adhering unfailingly to the faith guided by the living magisterium of the Church, under the guiding action of the Holy Spirit. The assistance of the Holy Spirit to the whole Church so that it does not err in believing is

also given to the magisterium so that it faithfully and authentically teaches the Word of God in the Church. In some specific cases, this assistance of the Spirit guarantees that the interventions of the magisterium do not contain error, which is why it is often said that in such cases the magisterium participates in the same infallibility that our Lord has promised to his Church. The infallibility of the magisterium “is exercised when the Roman Pontiff, in virtue of his office as the Supreme Pastor of the Church, or the College of Bishops, in union with the Pope especially when joined together in an Ecumenical Council, proclaim by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. Infallibility is also exercised when the Pope and Bishops in their ordinary Magisterium are in agreement in proposing a doctrine as definitive. Every one of the faithful must adhere to such teaching with the obedience of faith.”^[2]

The conviction of the responsibility of the Roman Pontiff's mission and the authority he enjoys in carrying it out leads Catholics to pray intensely for him. Moreover, unity with the Pope will lead them to avoid speaking negatively in public about the Roman Pontiff or undermining confidence in him, also in cases where they do not share a particular personal criterion of his. If the latter should happen, the desire to be discerning and well-formed leads Catholics to seek advice on any doubts they may have, to pray and to study in greater depth the topic in which they find some difficulty, trying to understand the reasons for this with an open mind, which may require some time and patience. If the disagreement persists, it is good to remain silent^[3] and to give at least a "religious assent of understanding and will"^[4] to his teachings.

2. The bishops, successors of the Apostles

The Church is Apostolic because Christ has built it on the Apostles, the chosen witnesses of his Resurrection and the foundation of his Church; because, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, it teaches, guards and faithfully transmits the deposit of faith received from the Apostles. It is also apostolic in its structure, since it is instructed, sanctified and governed, until Christ's return, by the Apostles and their successors, the bishops, in communion with the successor of Peter. Apostolic succession is the transmission, through the sacrament of Holy Orders, of the mission and authority of the Apostles to their successors, the bishops. The bishops do not receive all the gifts that God offered to the Apostles, but only those gifts they received in order to pass them on to the Church. Thanks to this

transmission, the Church remains in communion of faith and life with her origin, while throughout the centuries she directs her entire apostolate to the spread of the Kingdom of Christ on earth.^[5]—

The college of bishops, in communion with the Pope and never without him, also exercises supreme and full power over the Church. The bishops have received the mission to teach as authentic witnesses of the apostolic faith; to sanctify by dispensing Christ's grace in the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist; and to govern the people of God on earth.^[6]—

Christ instituted the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the mission of making Himself present to all the faithful by means of the sacraments and through the preaching of the Word of God with authority, in virtue of the

mandate received from Him. The members of the hierarchy also received the mission to guide the People of God (cf. Mt 28:18-20). The hierarchy consists of the sacred ministers: bishops, priests and deacons. The ministry of the Church has a collegial dimension, i.e. the union of the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is at the service of the communion of the faithful. Each bishop exercises his ministry as a member of the episcopal college – which succeeds the apostolic college – and in union with its head, the Pope, sharing with him and the other bishops in the care of the universal Church. Moreover, if a particular Church has been entrusted to him, he governs it in the name of Christ with the authority he has received, with ordinary, proper and immediate power, in communion with the whole Church and under the Holy Father. The ministry also has a personal

character, because each one is responsible to Christ, who has called him personally and conferred the mission on him by the sacrament of Holy Orders.

3. Participation of the presbyterate in the ministry of the bishops

The ministry in the Church is one, because the apostolic ministry is one. But by divine institution it is shared in three degrees: episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate. This unity of ministry is manifested in the internal relationship between its three degrees, which are cumulative. Indeed, they are not three classes or types of ministers, but degrees of one and the same ministry, of one and the same sacrament of Holy Orders. The person who has received the degree of episcopate does not cease to be also a priest and a deacon; the person who has received the

presbyterate does not cease to be a deacon. Moreover, this sacrament has an ecclesial unity. It is a ministry of communion because it is exercised for the sake of communion and because it is internally structured as a ministerial communion with those who have received the same sacrament in its various degrees.

In his mission in the particular Church, the bishop relies on incardinated priests, who are his principal and irreplaceable co-workers. The presbyters are invested with the identical ministerial priesthood of which the bishop possesses the fullness. They receive it through the sacrament of Holy Orders, with the imposition of the bishop's hands and the consecratory prayer. From then on, they become part of the presbyterate, a stable college made up of all the priests who, united with the bishop, share

the same pastoral mission on behalf of the people of God.

Therefore, when the bishop asks presbyters to share in his solicitude and responsibility, he does so not as something optional or suitable, but as a necessary consequence of sharing the same mission, of which he is the head and which comes from the sacrament of Holy Orders. Priests are the bishop's most direct assistants in the pastoral care of the people of God has entrusted to him. They make the bishop's solicitude present in a given place or setting, preach the Word of God and celebrate the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist.

4. Reason for access to the priesthood by men only

The Church has always called only baptised males to the order of the priesthood. In the patristic period

some sects called for a female priesthood, but already then they were condemned by Saint Irenaeus, Saint Epiphanius and Tertullian. Calling only males to the priesthood is a Church practice that has remained unchanged throughout its more than twenty centuries of mission. Moreover, there is no known teaching against it by pastors, despite the fact that the Church's mission has often been carried out in an environment where religions knew of a female priestly order.

The rationale for this decision comes from Revelation. The Church has always felt bound to the will of Christ, who chose only men as Apostles. He could have chosen for this apostolic college the most exalted creature, his Most Holy Mother, but He did not do so. And He could also have chosen some of the women who accompanied Him in his public life, and who sometimes were

more faithful and stronger than the Apostles, but He did not do so. The Apostles, in their turn, counted on the collaboration of men and women, but they felt bound to Christ's will when it came to choosing their successors in the pastoral mission, for which they chose only men. One might think that this is the fruit of the Jewish mentality, but in no case did Christ show signs of acting conditioned by cultural categories in his dealings with women, whom he valued highly, always stressing the equal dignity of men and women. In fact, his behaviour contrasted with what was customary among the Jews of the time, and so did that of the Apostles, who followed the Master here.

The possibility of women's access to the priesthood has been raised at various times. On the one hand, this opinion gains strength from the desire to correspond to cultural

situations which legitimately wish to give more importance to the role of women in society and in the family. This greater concern is the fruit of a deepening of the Gospel message, which proclaims the equal dignity of all human beings. On the other hand, this opinion views the sacramental form of the Church, with its hierarchical structure, as a merely human way of organising itself. Those who hold this opinion claim that, in drawing inspiration from contemporary culture, the Church should now incorporate women into the social structure of the priesthood. This would show a greater concern for women, already present in the New Testament, and would be useful for the Church's mission because it would be more in line with the mentality of people today.

Certainly some aspects of the Church's way of organising itself are the fruit of the creation or absorption

of forms of social organization found in the surrounding society. But others have been chosen and willed by Christ. The former are the fruit of human creativity in response to God; the latter are given by God. The former can be changed according to their usefulness for the Church's mission. The latter are not open to substantial change, because they come from Christ's specific will. Throughout history, the Church discerns which belong to the first group and which to the second. Sometimes this discernment is not an easy task, and requires patience, study, meditation on the Word of God and an openness to his plan. Both Saint Paul VI and Saint John Paul II, after having studied the topic carefully, reaffirmed that the Church does not have the power to admit women to the ministerial priesthood. In 1994, Pope John Paul II declared that this is a definitive teaching of the Church, and not subject to

revision.^[7] In the following year, pointing to the fact that pastors everywhere have always taught this down through the centuries, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated that this is a teaching which enjoys the infallibility that God has promised to his Church in its ordinary and universal magisterium.

Basic Bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 871-896.

Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 177-187, 333.

^[1] *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24:

“Evangelizers thus take on the ‘smell

of the sheep’ and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.”

[2] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 185.

[3] Cf. Instruction *Donum veritatis*, 31.

[4] Cf. Code of Canon Law, 752. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 892.

[5] Cf. *Catechism*, 861-862.

[6] Cf. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 184, 186ff.

[7] Cf. Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, 22 May 1994, 4.

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