

The Church

In our discussion of Jesus' Paschal Mystery we saw how God arranged that the fruits of His saving work be applied to individual believers through their participation in those very events. Our celebration of the Paschal Mystery at Mass is salvific because a participation in divine life is made available to us through it. The celebration of the Paschal Mystery takes place in the "Liturgy" of the Church, a biblical term which literally means "a public work." This "work" on behalf of the people is what the Church does, the Church celebrates the liturgy and the liturgy is celebrated in the Church, and this is one of the reasons why the Church is essential for salvation. (CCC 846)

The Church's two-fold mission is outlined in our Lord's "Great Commission" at the end of Matthew's Gospel. St. Matthew records the last words of Jesus before He ascended to the Father: "Go make disciples... baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20) In response, the Apostles made disciples by baptizing and teaching. The Church, which Jesus established upon them, makes divine life available to people through the Sacraments and celebration of the Paschal Mystery, and she teaches what Jesus taught. She is the "Dispenser of the Mystery" (Ephesians 3:10) and "Guardian of the Deposit" (1 Timothy 6:20)

But what is the Church? "Church" is another biblical term which literally means "a gathering" and comes from a word that means "to call out." The Council Fathers drew these images together by recounting that "the Father... determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ." (CCC 759) And so, while it is true that we use the word "church" to describe the building in which the people of God gather to pray and celebrate the liturgy, "Church" in the more proper sense, refers to the people who "gather" in the building, the people who make up God's family, or, to use another biblical phrase, the Church is "the Kingdom of God" on Earth (Mark 1:15).

An important passage for understanding the Church comes from one of the few places in the Bible where we actually find the word. After asking His disciples what people are saying about Him, Jesus asks them, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon answers for them, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." After praising his answer, Jesus gives him a new name, which in the Bible usually includes new responsibilities. "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church." (Matthew 16:15-18) The name is a play on words because in the original language Peter means "rock". Jesus intends to build His Church not on a literal "rock," but rather on Peter, the first Pope.

Ironically, and perhaps tragically, in a few short verses, Simon gets another new name. “Rocky” quickly becomes “Satan” as Jesus chastises him for trying to obstruct God’s plans, “Get behind me, Satan!” (Matthew 16:23) What caused Simon’s rapid and precipitous demotion? After establishing the Church upon Peter, Jesus tells the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and be killed. This was obviously not good news for them, and Peter, perhaps exercising his new responsibilities, intervenes, or at least attempts to, “God forbid, Lord!”

What is striking here, aside from the sheer force of Jesus’ words, is the transition of His mission. We know that Jesus was destined to suffer and die, the apostles perhaps did not. Jesus chose them, lived with them, taught them, empowered them and sent them out. They grew to love Him, and gradually came to understand that He was more than just a great prophet and teacher. His question to them about His identity was perhaps a kind of “final exam,” they now knew what they had been wondering about, namely that He was indeed the Messiah and the Son of God.

Their “passing of the test” meant that this part of Jesus’ mission was complete, His Church was established and His work would continue, through them, after He was gone. Jesus established the Church on the Apostles to continue His work. It was an important part of His plan to do so. His expectation was that they, and their successors, our bishops, would continue that work. They have, up to our present day.

Many struggle with the claim that the Catholic Church is the Church that Jesus established, that it is not just one denomination among many, and that His desire is for everyone to be members of it. Their struggle is understandable in light of the scandal that often plagues the Church. But in His own words, “(He) did not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (Mark 2:17) The Church is, for better or for worse, full of sinners, and we sinners who are members of it, are particularly grateful that He still wants us around, but well aware that our shortcomings can be a serious obstacle for those outside. Fortunately, the Church is a visible and invisible reality, what you see is not all you get. It is populated by sinners... and saints, but it has been endowed with the fullness of the means of salvation, and is the place in which we encounter the One whose presence makes it holy. There is the story of a young man came to hear the bishop speak, but declined his invitation to return to the practice of his Faith, “I’m not a big fan of organized religion,” he said, to which the bishop replied, “Oh, then you will love my Church, there does not seem to be any organization in it at all!”

Today everyone seems to have plenty of really good reasons not to go to church, or to be members of the Church, but what about the much greater reasons why we do, or should? We have already seen that Jesus established the Church for our sake, to

decline His invitation to share in its life, would logically put someone in a difficult position with regard, not only to their eternal destiny, but also in regard to the peace, joy and happiness that He wants us to enjoy now. But what about those two titles of the Church mentioned at the beginning of our discussion?

The Church is the “Dispenser of the Mystery,” a biblical phrase, from an older translation of the Letter to the Ephesians, which refers to the Church’s responsibility to dispense divine life, or Sanctifying Grace, through the Sacraments. We have already seen the importance of the Eucharist in our discussion of the Paschal Mystery, but Jesus also insisted on the necessity of Baptism (Mark 16:16, John 3:5). And for those of us who have sinned gravely, or mortally, the restoration made possible through the Sacrament of Reconciliation would be much more difficult to obtain outside of the Church (1John 5:16) If you have been away from the Church, or have not recently taken advantage of the forgiveness and peace available in Confession, it is time to find the nearest confessional. He waits for you there.

The Church is the “Guardian of the Deposit,” another biblical phrase taken from the First Letter to Timothy, and a reference to the “Deposit of Faith,” the content of our Lord’s teaching, entrusted to the Church through the Apostles, and to their successors. St. Paul, realizing that his time was running short, and anxious that what he had received from the Lord could be lost, exhorted his chosen successor in the closing words of that letter, “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you!” (in the older translations, “Guard the Deposit!”) We recall our Lord’s last words before ascending to the Father, and presume that He thought them rather important, “Go make disciples... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”. The Church teaches all that He commanded, because the Church, like St. Paul, guards, teaches, and entrusts to others, what she has received from Him. Church teaching is the teaching of Christ.

To learn what the Church teaches, and conform your life to it, is the historically demonstrated surest path to happiness in this life and the next. God revealed His life and plan to us because He who made us, knows what we need in order to live according to the purpose for which He made us. Joining us for this series is an important step, but don’t let it be the only step. If you have not already done so, make a commitment to meet the Lord in His Word, the Bible, and consider the Catechism which is nothing more than the Church’s authoritative interpretation of the Bible.

If the fullness of the revealed truths and of the means of salvation have been entrusted to the Church that Jesus founded, is it possible for a non-Catholic to be saved? Yes, but it is just more difficult... and understandably so. Those who achieve salvation

outside of the visible boundaries of the Church, will find out eventually that they were members of it, whether they knew it or not. St. Augustine provides a principle that is very helpful in this regard. “God has bound salvation to the Sacrament of Baptism, but He Himself is not bound by His sacraments.” (CCC 1257) God has told us that Baptism is necessary for salvation. The Sacraments are the only means that we know of that deliver the divine life that “saves” us, and so we insist. But at the same time, we recognize that God can save people in any way that He wants. And so, “those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.” (CCC 847)

Salvation outside the visible boundaries of the Church is possible, it is just much more difficult. It is God’s desire that we be members of the Church, and help as many people as possible to join us, because it is in the Church that He has made all the helps to our salvation readily available. If you have been away, I invite you to come home. If you know someone who has been away, please consider inviting them back. If you know someone who has never been a member, pray for them, and ask God how He might want you to help them to find their place in His family, the Church. “Go make disciples!” It’s what we do.