

one

Apostolic

In the Creed, we say that we believe in “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church,” as though one of the four most important things we believe about the Church is that the Apostles are central to it.

This is no accident. The New Testament makes it clear that our Church is totally dependent on the apostles. St. Paul says that the household of God is built upon the Apostles, with Jesus as the cornerstone (Eph 2:17-21) And the author of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, describes the apostles as the twelve stones on which the kingdom of God is founded (Rev 21:9-14).

It’s very simple: we as Catholics rely on the apostles, and not just on the men who died a long time ago, but also on their successors, the bishops, who ensure that we are still part of that original community that formed around Jesus.

two

Apostles in the Gospels

The role of the bishops is particularly important in the Gospel according to Matthew.

The first several chapters of Matthew manifest that Jesus is the Divine King (1:23, 4:17). Our Lord gives the Sermon on the Mount, His main body of teaching, and when He finishes, "The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as having authority, not as their scribes." (7:28).

Now, Christ's *authority* to preach in the name of God, to forgive sins, etc., is based on His *identity* as the Son of God. Only if Jesus is who He says He is does He have any right to speak with such confidence about divine things.

So in order to prove His identity, and therefore His authority, Jesus works miracle after miracle confirming that He is truly Emmanuel, God with us.

But despite a chapter's worth of supernatural signs, the scribes and Pharisees do not respond positively with faith, but on the contrary declare that Our Lord does these things by the power of the devil (9:34).

These shepherds of Israel have abandoned their flock and worse: they have tried to lead their flock to destruction by taking them away from the Messiah. These shepherds will not do, they have rejected Jesus and the God He represents. *Therefore, Christ must appoint new leaders for His people.*

So after noting that "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (9:37), Jesus appoints the twelve apostles, the new leaders of God's covenant family (10:1-20).

Jesus gives His own divine **authority** to the twelve Apostles, to act in His name, and with His power, for it will be upon them that He will build his kingdom, and through them that Jesus will lead and teach his people until the end of time.

Since we have already seen that authority is linked with identity, Jesus shares His **identity** with the apostles as well: "He who receives you, receives me," (Mt 10:40) and in Luke, "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me." (Lk 10:16).

three

Bishops in the Early Church

When Our Lord ascended, He promised to be with them with the fullness of His authority until the end of time (Mt 28:18-20). But how could that be true if all the apostles are dead?

The answer must be that Peter and the Apostles were to have **successors** to carry on their office and role until the end of time. In fact, the first apostles were very conscious of this fact, which is why, after Judas died, the rest immediately ordained another to take his place. (Acts 1:15-26). Though one of the original apostles was dead, the remaining apostles were convinced that his office still had to be filled.

The point is that the office of the apostles was designed to perpetuate itself through successors. And who are those successors? The bishops who carry the unbroken lineage from the original twelve chosen by Our Lord.

In Acts, Paul writes letters to Timothy and Titus on how to be good bishops and how to preserve the faith handed down from the apostles.

The earliest Christian writers, people like Clement, Iranaeus, and Ignatius of Antioch, all agree that our assurance of being united to Christ comes from being united to the bishops who succeeded those original twelve. Without the bishops, we are no longer united to the apostles. And without the apostles, we are no longer united to Christ.

four

Bishops as Leaders of the Church

Every community needs legitimate leadership or it will simply descend into chaos and anarchy. The new testament word for bishop, episkopos, simply means "overseer," or "leader."

Jesus gave His apostles the right to govern in His name when He told the twelve: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven." (Mt 18:18).

Now no human leader is perfect. And some leaders are absolutely terrible. That's true in the Church as well as in any other community. But if you undermine the leadership structure of the Church, if you talk and act as though the bishops have no more right to lead the Church, or to expect our respect as members of the faithful, then you are leading the Community of the faithful into chaos and anarchy. Then you are revolting against Jesus' instructions.

five

Respect for the Office; Respect for the Person

These days, whenever someone begins a sentence with "the bishops," you can bet that what comes next isn't going to be complimentary. That should make us really worried.

The Bishops are the foundation of the Church. If they are destabilized, it will mean a destabilization for the Church.

And, maybe more importantly, if the faithful come to reject or have contempt for the bishops, it means they will cease being members of Christ's flock. Because Christ's sheep are the sheep of the Shepherds He chose. You can't belong to the Good Shepherd and not belong to the Shepherd He has anointed.

So pray for the bishops, and look for holy, faithful bishops to celebrate, and of course, they are out there, instead of constantly looking for bad bishops to condemn. Because we are an apostolic Church. Which means that we are a people who are grateful for the grace of being governed by the Successors of Christ's original apostles.