

The Catholic Church

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(Editor's Note: These Apologetic leaflets were issued by the Bellarmine Society of Oxford University. We are proud to reproduce this further selection here in the hope that many more souls will benefit by their wisdom.)

1) AUTHORITY.

WHY DOES THE CATHOLIC CHURCH CLAIM TO TEACH AND TO COMMAND WITH AUTHORITY?

1.

BECAUSE Jesus Christ, her Head and Founder, taught and commanded with authority.

"He taught as one having power" (Matthew 7:29). "You have heard that it was said to them of old... But I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21 and following verses).

He ranks His claims as supreme. "He that loves father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37).

2.

BECAUSE He invested His Apostles and their successors with this same authority.

"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." (John 20:20.) "He that hears you, hears Me; and he that despises you despises Me" (Luke 10:16; and see Matthew 10:40, and Matthew 18:18).

This authority was to continue, as it was given without restriction of time, place, or people.

"All power is given to Me in heaven and in earth. "Going therefore teach ye all nations... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world." (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15.)

The Apostles understood Christ in this sense. Thus, the council of Jerusalem settled disputes with divine authority: "It has seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us to lay no further burden on you." (Acts 15:24-28).

St Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "We also give thanks to God... because that when you had received of us the word of the hearing of God, you received it not as the word of men, but (as it is indeed) the word of God." (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Again, St Paul tells the Corinthians that he is empowered "to bring into captivity every understanding unto the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

St John declares: "He that knows God, hears us. He that is not of God, hears us not." (1 John 4:6).

3.

BECAUSE a supreme, living authority alone can declare with certainty the revelation brought by Christ.

There are two possible alternatives to this authority.

A.

The Bible.

But this itself needs an interpreter. By private interpretation, men have derived from it different and even contradictory doctrines.

Further, if the Bible is to be the guarantee of truth, who is to guarantee the Bible? The Bible is not one book, but a selection made from numerous documents known to the early Church. The collection we receive as the inspired word of God was not definitely fixed before the fourth century A.D., and, when fixed, it was fixed by authority.

B.

Personal Infallibility, i.e., the Holy Ghost in every man, guiding him unerringly in his interpretation of the Scriptures.

But again, the contradictory interpretations made by individuals left to themselves show that God has not in fact chosen this course. Truth is not self-contradictory.

But some may say: "I choose the religion that suits me best."

To this, we reply: "Some things are not matters of personal taste. Different medicines, it is true, cure different diseases, but it is the doctor, and not the patient, who decides which medicine suits best. Christ, the Physician, prescribes for all men religion taught with His authority."

4.

BECAUSE Christianity is meant for all mankind.

Do away with a teaching authority, and men are left to their own personal investigations. But how many would be able to find the truth in this way? A very few learned, upright men might arrive at it after years of study, perhaps when life was nearly over. Yet God's Truth is meant, not for the few, but for the many; not for the learned only, but for the laborer and the hard-working man who has no time for study. Our Lord said: "To the poor the Gospel is preached" (Luke 7:22).

God's Truth is not meant as the reward of a life-long search. It is meant to give us clear guidance and strength in all our difficulties at every stage of life.

CONCLUSION.

In short, because the Catholic Church is Christ's supreme representative, because her bishops are the successors of the Apostles, because she is one and the same as the Early Church, because some supreme and unerring authority is needed and she alone can provide this authority, because Christ came to save all, and instituted the Church to carry on His work, therefore the Catholic Church claims to teach and to command with authority.

2) HOW TO JOIN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

Can ANYONE join the Catholic Church?

Yes. God's Church is open to all. God wishes all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). Christ died for all and He wishes all to come to a knowledge of the truth, and so His Church is for all. It is not the Church of any particular nation or class. God welcomes all, rich or poor, learned or ignorant, young or old. God loves all His children and wishes them all to be Catholics. Christ said to His Apostles, the first Catholic Bishops: "Go and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

Is it hard to become a Catholic?

Not if you are humble and ready to learn. "Unless you be converted and become as little children," says Our Lord, "you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 18:3). You must, therefore, pray, i.e., talk to God and ask Him to show you the way into His Church. Make arrangements to have a chat with some Catholic priest or, at least, take the first step by attending some service at a Catholic place of worship. If you have a Catholic friend, he will be glad to help you in this matter. In most Catholic churches, you can buy cheap books and pamphlets explaining the faith. At any rate, do not be afraid of difficulties and obstacles. Perhaps you show great determination when you want to gain happiness in this world: you should be just as determined in your efforts to make sure of your happiness in the next world. If you love God, you will never rest till you find Him.

If you go to see a Priest, will you be free to do what you think best?

Yes; most certainly. No priest will ever receive a person into the Church unless that person sincerely desires to be a Catholic. You may ask what questions you like about the Catholic Faith and about God and your own soul, and the priest will tell you what you must do to serve God and save your soul. You are acting rightly when you make these enquiries. But he will not take any steps to make you a Catholic unless you ask definitely to be instructed.

How can one become a Catholic?

If you ask to be instructed in the Faith, the priest will probably give you a little book of Questions and Answers about the Catholic Religion (the Catechism). He may ask you to read this for yourself and he will arrange a course of simple instructions for you. In some places, there are regular courses for converts. In others, there are specially trained "catechists" to relieve the priests, who are often overworked. These instructions may last six months, or even longer, until all necessary points of doctrine have been made clear. If the priest is then satisfied that you accept the Catholic Church as the true and only Church of Christ, that you desire to be a Catholic from the right motives, and that you are ready to fulfill all your duties as a Catholic, he will apply to the Bishop for permission to receive you. Once you become a Catholic, since you have attained the source of truth, no further

search is necessary. All you have to do is to hold it and act in accord with it. You must persevere until death; for Our Lord says: "He that perseveres to the end, he shall be saved" (Mark 13:13).

Must a man be very learned and saintly in order to become a Catholic?

No; great learning is not required. Even the simplest child, unable to reason out things for itself, can know enough to become a Catholic. Indeed, "Whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a child (i.e., spiritually docile and submissive to authorized teachers) shall not enter therein" (Mark 10:15). Moreover, even the greatest sinners can become Catholics if they are resolved to try to reform their lives and to be sorry for their sins. St Augustine of Hippo was once a great sinner but he became a Catholic and, later on, a great saint. Our Lord says: "I come to call not the just but the sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13). All that is needed, then, is a good will, courage and a humble heart. It is God who gives the grace to believe in His revelation without doubting, which grace is called the gift of Faith; and He will give you all the strength you need to be faithful until death. What others have done, you can do.

Conclusion.

There can be only one true Church representing the One God on earth, and that must be the Church founded by Christ, the Son of God. He called Peter the "Rock" and said He would build His Church on that "Rock." St Peter was the first Pope or Head of the Church, and from that day until now the true Church of Christ always obeys the Pope, and will do so until the end of the world; for he is the Head of the Church. This Church is sometimes called the 'Roman Catholic Church' because the Pope is the Bishop of Rome. It is God's Church and hence cannot teach falsehood. Other religions were made by men, are based on human reason, and so are liable to error.

If you wish to secure your salvation, take refuge in the Church of God, which teaches the true religion, i.e., the true way of serving God. To seek for truth entails trouble and, perhaps, trials of various kinds; but if you do so in order to please God, He will reward you by giving you peace of heart in this life and eternal happiness in the next. If you obey the Catholic Church, you are obeying Jesus Christ, who said to His Church: "He that hears you hears Me and he that despises you despises Me" (Luke 10:16).

3) THE POPE IS INFALLIBLE.

WHAT PAPAL INFALLIBILITY IS NOT:

Papal infallibility does not mean:

- (I.) That the Pope cannot sin.
- (II.) That he knows everything.
- (III.) That he can make a New Revelation.
- (IV.) That he is necessarily inspired by God to speak or to write.

WHAT PAPAL INFALLIBILITY IS:

Papal infallibility simply means that the Pope is prevented by the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of Truth, from falling into error when:

- (I) in virtue of his supreme authority as shepherd and teacher of all Christians (i.e., in his public capacity as head of the Church and successor of St. Peter),

(II) he defines a doctrine of faith or of morals (i.e., declares it to be part of the Christian Revelation),

(III) and, therefore, such doctrine is to be held explicitly by the whole Church henceforward.

SUCH INFALLIBILITY IS ONLY TO BE EXPECTED:

Christ came on earth to preach a true doctrine (John 18:37), which should last for all time (Matthew 28:19-20). This doctrine He worked unceasingly to spread, and died to uphold. One would expect that, being all-wise, all-foreseeing, and all-powerful, He would have taken means to prevent those to whom He committed the continuation of His work from ever corrupting His doctrine by falling into error. In view of His plainly expressed purpose one can only suppose that if, He had not established some such means for safeguarding His Truth, He would have been neither all-wise, nor all-foreseeing, nor all-powerful.

I. — INFALLIBILITY CONFERRED ON ST. PETER.

N.B. — The following proofs are meant to be viewed as one complete whole, not as so many distinct arguments.

(i) Luke 22:31-32. Infallibility Promised.

"The Lord said: Simon, Simon, behold Satan has desired to have You (i.e., the Apostles) that he may sift You as wheat: But I have prayed for Thee (i.e., Simon) that Thy faith fail not: and Thou, being once converted, confirm Thy brethren."

{We keep the old English to reflect the distinctions made in the Biblical Greek.}

Peter is here given the task of confirming the faith of his brethren. Moreover, Christ Himself guarantees that Peter as Confirmer of the faith of his brethren, shall not err; for Christ has prayed for that very intention. Though it was Christ "as Man" who prayed, yet as Christ's Humanity is inseparable from His Divinity, His prayer was the prayer of the Man-God, made in accordance with His knowledge of God's absolute Will, and on that account effective of its purpose. But if Peter could err in this task, he would not confirm the faith of his brethren, but lead them astray. Christ's prayer would then be made void, which is impossible.

(ii) Matthew 16:18. Infallibility Promised.

"You are Peter (Cepha) and upon this rock (Cepha) I will build My Church, and the gates (i.e., the power) of hell shall not prevail against it."

Christ, then, made St. Peter the rock upon which His Church was to be built, and promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Now the primary purpose of the Church is to propagate the doctrine of Christ. If, then, Peter could teach a doctrine that is not of Christ, the rock would fail in its purpose, the whole edifice would totter and the gates of hell would have prevailed. But this cannot be; therefore, Peter cannot err in his teaching.

(iii) John 21:15-17. Infallibility Bestowed.

Here St. Peter is given the commission: "Feed My lambs. Feed My sheep," and made shepherd of the whole flock of Christ.

All commentators agree that the words "Feed my lambs," etc., mean "Teach the flock." This duty in the shepherd implies in the flock a corresponding obligation to accept his teaching. Can we suppose

that Christ can impose an obligation to accept the teaching of one who is fallible, who can lead it astray with false doctrine?

II. — ST. PETER'S INFALLIBILITY HANDED ON TO SUCCESSORS.

Christ meant His Church to last for all time (Matthew 24:14; and 28:19-20). Hell shall not prevail against it; and He promised that the Spirit of Truth would remain with His Church for ever (John 14:16-17), yet Christ knew, too, that Peter was soon to die, and that after his death there would be an ever-increasing need for one who should be the 'rock', 'the confirmer of the brethren,' the 'shepherd of the whole flock' in the senses explained above. He did not therefore, in making Peter infallible, regard him as a mortal man, soon to die, but as the holder of an office, i.e., one whose privileges were to live on in his successors to the end of time.

III. — THESE INFALLIBLE SUCCESSORS ARE THE POPES.

Inexhaustible evidence might be adduced in proof of this statement, from the early Christian writers in both East and West, the Decrees of the first General Councils, the claims of the Popes themselves from the very beginning, the belief of all pre-reformation Europe, and even the appeals of early heretics to the Popes' decisions. We must, however, here content ourselves with a very inadequate selection: —

(1)

The Popes recognized as the successors of St. Peter.

At the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), the assembled bishops of the whole Christian world declared after reading a letter of Pope Leo: "So do we all believe; Peter has spoken through Leo."

(2)

The Popes recognized as possessing the infallibility conferred on St. Peter.

St. Irenaeus (who through his master, St. Polycarp, the disciple of St. John, was acquainted with the teaching of the Apostles themselves) says that in order to distinguish truth from falsehood it is sufficient to find out what is held by the Church (i.e., the Bishop) of Rome, since "all other Churches must agree with her because of her greater authority." (Contra Haereses, iii. chapter 3).

The Council of Florence (1438-1445), probably the most representative ever held, and accepted by both East and West, says: "Full power has been given to him (i.e., the Pope) by Our Lord Jesus Christ, through Blessed Peter, of feeding; ruling and governing the whole Church."

(3)

Today the Pope alone claims such infallibility.

Therefore unless that claim is justified, the infallibility instituted by Christ has disappeared, and Christ must be said to have failed in His purpose.

4) CONTINUITY.

THE PROBLEM: -

The claim is frequently made that there is religious continuity between the Anglican Church as by law established and the Church that existed in this country previous to the sixteenth century, i.e., that the two Churches are one and the same institution, that there was no break. {The Oxford

writers are referring to the British Anglican Church, as is only natural for scholars from that country. In our land, this denomination is generally known as the Episcopalian Church.}

The force and value of this claim will be at once apparent if we state (i) what does not, (ii) what does, constitute "religious continuity."

I. — WHAT "RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY" IS NOT.

As an illustration let us suppose Mr. A. goes to Mr. B's house, batters Mr. B. on the head, throws him and his family into the street and establishes himself and his friends on Mr. B's premises. No one would call Mr. A. either the same person as, or a lineal descendant of, Mr. B., merely because he continues to occupy Mr. B's house, not even if Mr. A. were to go so far as to call himself Mr. B. or Mr. A.-B. and to wear Mr. B's top hat and watch chain.

In exactly the same way, you cannot call the Anglican Church today the same as, or the direct descendant of, the Church in pre-Elizabethan England merely because the Anglican Church occupies the old ecclesiastical buildings, adopts many of the emblems of the Old Church and retains many of its ecclesiastical titles and a semblance at least of its rites.

II. — WHAT CONSTITUTES REAL RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY.

The Anglican Church is one and the same as the Church in pre-Elizabethan England only if three essential conditions are fulfilled.

(1). Both Churches Must Have the Same Worship.

The differences between the worship of the pre-reformation Church and that of the Anglican Church are many. To prove that there is no religious continuity on this essential point, it will be sufficient to give one, which forms the Fundamental Difference in worship. Previous to the "reformation" the central point of worship of the Church in England was, as it always has been in the Catholic Church elsewhere, the Sacrifice of the Mass. The "Reformers" declared the Mass to be idolatry, abolished it from their ritual and made the saying or hearing of Mass a capital offence. Ever since Elizabeth's reign, all Anglican clergymen have solemnly subscribed to an Article which declares "The Sacrifices of Masses" to be "blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits." The Anglican claim to continuity fails, therefore, in the most essential point of worship.

(2). Both Churches Must Profess the Same Faith in its Entirety.

In pre-reformation times the Church in England accepted and clearly professed its belief in the principle of external religious authority, in the Real Objective Presence (of Christ in the Eucharist), in the Mass as a Sacrifice, in the doctrine of Transubstantiation, in Purgatory, in Seven Sacraments, in the cultus of Our Lady and the Intercession of Saints — to mention only a few points of doctrine — all of which were and still are accepted by the whole Catholic Church. These doctrines were rejected and are still officially rejected by the Anglican Church. Therefore, in the essential point of Faith, there is no continuity between the two Churches.

(3) Both Churches Must Acknowledge and Obey the Same Authority.

In any organized and disciplined Society, e.g., the State, what is it that makes it one and the same during a given period, say, of 200 years? It is not the population, for this is constantly changing and generation succeeds generation. Not is it the land, the geographical features — since the territory may be added to or diminished while the State remains the same. A State can be said to remain one

and the same only as long as the people continue to live under the same lawfully constituted authority. The United States were once part of the British Empire. In 1776, they revolted, repudiated British rule, and set up a new and independent government. No one would contend that the U.S.A. after the revolution was the same State as it was before. A new and quite distinct State had been brought into existence.

Now the Church is an organized and disciplined society. From the first introduction of Christianity into England down to 1534 (when Henry's Acts, establishing Royal instead of Papal Supremacy, were passed), English Christians acknowledged and obeyed the Pope as Supreme Head of the Church, as Christ's Vicar on earth, and, through the Pope, were in organic unity with the whole of Catholic Christendom. This is an historical fact, frankly admitted by the greatest non-Catholic writers on the later Middle Ages. Does the Anglican Church now acknowledge and obey this authority? No. In the sixteenth century a religious revolution — not 'reformation' — took place. The authority of the Pope was rejected. In his place, the reigning sovereign was declared to be Supreme Head or Governor of the Church — and thus a new, independent Church ('The Anglican Church') came into existence, differing from the old in essential points of faith, worship, and discipline.

CONSEQUENCES.

The Anglican Church is a creation of the sixteenth century and a distinct institution from the pre-Elizabethan Church in England.

The Anglican Church, a new creation, cannot be the Church of Christ — otherwise where was the Church of Christ during the first 16 centuries? Jesus Christ was God. Therefore, what He promised He fulfilled. He promised that His Church would exist, one and free from error, till the end of time: "Behold, I am with you all days" (Matthew 28:20) and "the spirit of truth... will teach you all truth" (John 16:13).

Are the essential conditions of religious continuity fulfilled anywhere in England today? Yes — but only in the various Catholic churches. They alone have exactly the same worship, the same Faith and obey the same Papal authority as in pre-reformation times.

The Catholic Church is the Church of Christ, and History vindicates her claim.

5) THE MIRACLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

During the last two thousand years the civilized world has passed through many phases profoundly disturbing the course of history — Roman Empire, Barbarian Invasions, Feudalism and the Middle Ages, Nationalism, and Imperialism, while the international rivalries of our time show that the greatest nations feel insecure about their very existence. Nations have risen and disappeared, split into smaller ones or merged into greater ones, but not one has come through more than one such phase without being radically changed. One society alone has survived the stress and strain of those two thousand years and emerged a stronger spiritual and civilizing force than ever, in spite of persecution at the hands of powerful States, from the first century of the Roman Empire to modern times. That society is the Catholic Church.

I — A RAPID SURVEY.

(1)

The Spread of the Church.

The Catholic Church was founded by Christ around a nucleus of twelve very ordinary men of the working class. On Pentecost Day, a few weeks after His death, three thousand became Christians after hearing a speech by a fisherman called Peter. In the first three centuries, the Church spread rapidly in spite of repeated fanatical and systematic attempts to crush her out of existence. By the year 313 Christianity was officially recognized as the predominant religion of the Roman Empire. Today the Church numbers 331,000, 000 (cf. Whitaker's Almanac of 1945), including over 50,000,000 in English-speaking countries. [In 2011, there were approximately 1.3 billion Catholics in the world.]

(2)

The Stability of the Church.

This steady growth of the Church throughout the ages would not have been possible but for her extraordinary stability. Her very existence has been imperiled by forces from within as well as from without, but she has always triumphed over them. Persecution, heresy, and schism have at different periods caused a temporary setback in the growth of the Church; she has suffered the loss of whole countries at a time. The Barbarian and Mohammedan invasions of Christendom, the savagery of the tenth century, the divisions of the fourteenth century, and the paganism accompanying the Renaissance, grievously afflicted and even disfigured the Church in many ways, but could not shake her unconquerable stability.

(3)

The Church's World-Wide Unity.

One element in the Church's stability is her vital unity. Never has that unity been more clearly visible throughout the world than it is in the Church as we see her to-day, a vast, supra-national society, comprising men of all nations, races, and languages, of every variety and degree of culture and civilization. The exaggerated nationalism that is rampant in most countries nowadays has not severed the unity of Catholics the world over. They remain united in belief in the doctrine Christ entrusted to His Church, and united in loyalty to the Pope as His representative on earth. This spiritual allegiance in no way conflicts with the loyalty of Catholics to their own country.

II — THE WORK OF THE CHURCH.

The work of the Church is to preserve and teach the doctrine of Christ and to help men to carry it out in practice. Countless religious bodies have been formed since the time of Christ, especially since the Reformation. They have claimed that the Church has perverted the teaching of Christ and that they have discovered His real meaning. But sooner or later, they have all become conscious of doubts and uncertainties even on fundamental issues, and begun to modify or discard their beliefs. To this day the Catholic Church alone can give the lead that men are looking for, conscious as she is of the authority she has received to safeguard the whole truth of Christian doctrine and morality.

(1)

Doctrine.

The teaching of the Catholic Church has exerted a powerful attraction on the minds and hearts of men of all nations throughout the ages. The main factor in this attraction is the fullness of her teaching about God and the central place that Christ holds in her belief and worship. Nowhere outside the Church is God so nobly and vividly brought before the minds of men in all His

goodness, mercy, and justice, in His wonderful providence and wisdom, and in His almighty power. Moreover, the Church has preserved true knowledge of, and belief in, Christ as God made man for our redemption. Christ is the true life of the Church; He is the centre of all her belief and worship. In the administration of the Sacraments and in the teaching of Christ's doctrine, the Church is carrying out the wishes of Christ Himself, who left her to take His place on earth and perpetuate His work till the day of judgment.

(2)

Morality.

Here again the Catholic Church speaks as one having authority. For instance, Christian teaching concerning sex, marriage, divorce, birth-prevention, abortion, and sterilization, is today clearly and authoritatively maintained in the Catholic Church and there alone. Similarly the counsels of Christ, especially the voluntary practice of poverty, chastity, and obedience (i.e. the renunciation of ownership, of the joys of married life and personal independence, to be more free for closer union with God and more wholehearted service of others), are far more vigorously upheld in the Church than in any other religious body.

(3)

Holiness.

It is not surprising then that the Church is distinguished by an abundance of genuine holiness of life, shown in self-sacrificing love for God and man. The Church honors thousands of martyrs in every century who have followed their Master's example to the death rather than renounce their faith. The annals of the Catholic clergy are rich in outstanding examples of holiness and devotion to the flock of Christ. The religious orders are so many immense families of Catholic men and women freely following a life of close fidelity to the counsels of Christ, and contributing generously, by prayer and apostolic work, to the spiritual and bodily well-being of their fellow-men.

(4)

Works of Charity.

The Catholic Church has always been the home of great Christian works of charity, and in all ages, thousands of her members, whether in religious orders or living in the world, have devoted themselves to the service of men for the love of God. The amount of work done by Catholics and Catholic institutions for the poor, the sick, the aged and dying, lepers, deaf and dumb, orphans, mental deficient and the insane, in every country of the world, is incalculable. Education for all classes owed everything to the monastic schools in the "Dark Ages" and in the Middle Ages. In more recent centuries, it has been deeply indebted to the great educational orders, such as Jesuits, Christian Brothers, and Salesians, as well as numerous congregations of women whose convents provide a cultured Christian atmosphere for the education of girls.

This leaflet cannot have given a completely adequate account of the miracle of the Catholic Church, but perhaps it will have done something to show that the Church's extraordinary vitality is a proof of her divine origin and divine protection. Truly, it was in no boastful spirit, but with the consciousness of Christ's promise — "Behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world" — that the First Vatican Council could say:

"The Catholic Church, by reason of her wonderful expansion throughout the world, her standard of holiness and the good of every kind she unfailingly inspires, on account of her world-wide unity and unshakable stability, constitutes in herself a strong and ever-fresh motive for belief in her — a living testimony to her divine mission which cannot be contested."
