



## Apostolic Church

The second of a series of columns on the "Marks" of the Church

At Sunday Mass we profess our faith in the four "marks" of the Church: "one, holy, catholic, and *apostolic*." The last is the foundation on which the others rest. For apostolicity answers the fundamental question religious faith invites: on whose *authority* do you believe as you do?

This is precisely the question the apostles themselves faced when they first began to proclaim Jesus as Savior. Perceiving Peter and John to be "uneducated, common men," the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem demanded to know who had *authorized* them to broadcast the astonishing and unsettling message of the Resurrection. "By what power or by what name do you do this?" they asked. "[I]n the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean," Peter replied.

That made sense, for Peter and John were recognizable "companions of Jesus" from the time he began to preach and heal in Galilee, and they claimed to be "witnesses who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." He had called them to follow him, and follow him they did. They accepted his authority over them. Better than anyone else, they knew what Jesus said; they knew what Jesus did. Aside from the Virgin Mary, his chosen Apostles enjoyed an authoritative proximity to Jesus of Nazareth which no others could ever equal.

But the gift of this nearness was not meant to

be kept for themselves. In the words of the First Letter of St. John, "That which . . . *we* have heard, which *we* have seen with *our* eyes, which *we* have looked upon and touched with *our* hands . . . *we* proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with *us* . . ." It is the Church's unbroken reception of *this* direct, lived experience in word and sacrament that makes its fellowship forever "apostolic."

For to *these* chosen men Jesus entrusted the fullness of his authority "in heaven and on earth." "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations," he told them, "baptizing them" and "teaching them to observe all that *I* have commanded *you*."

Into this original Apostolic dialogue Jesus wills to draw his disciples of every time and place. For "by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments [and] walk in the same way in which he walked." But the surety that we truly have *his* commandments 2000 years later can only be ours if we accept the Spirit-guided Apostolic authority which hands them down to us in the Church today. Assured access to the "way in which he walked" can be had only through our living link with the witnesses who walked it with him—the Apostles. For to them Jesus entrusted the Holy Spirit to "remind you of *all* that I have told you."

In addition to this power to bind and loose moral behavior ("Whose sins *you* shall forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins *you* shall retain, they are retained"), Jesus also gave the Apostles *sacramental* authority over his Church. "Do this in remembrance of me," he commanded them. In his name they were to baptize, to forgive sins, to anoint the sick,

and to hand over to others what he handed over to them: the bread of his Body to eat and the wine of his Blood to drink.

Down the centuries the Spirit has never failed to remind the Church of what Jesus told Peter at the Last Supper: “Simon, Simon, . . . Satan demanded to . . . sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for *you* that *your* faith may not fail; and when *you* have turned again, strengthen your brethren.” In the very hour that he instituted the priesthood and the Eucharist, Jesus entrusted specifically to Peter the *authority* to fortify the Church’s sacramental unity against the Devil’s divisive assaults upon the One Bread and One Body. At the express intention of Jesus Peter’s apostolic authority to strengthen his brethren undergirds the holy center of catholic unity.

“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you,” St. Peter writes in his First Letter. The “marks of the Church” help us to do this. Under the *apostolic* authority of the pope and bishops Christian sacramental *holiness* flows from and builds up the *catholic unity* of the Body of Christ so that the world may believe the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.