

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

(By the RIGHT REVEREND MONSIGNOR POWER, V.F., for the N.Z. Tablet.)

(22) THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IS APOSTOLIC.

It was upon the Apostles that Christ founded His Church; it was to them that He gave the right of authoritative teaching, of dispensing the mysteries of grace and reconciling sinners, and of ruling and judging. They were members of one corporate body, each and all, commissioned to carry on the Redeemer's work. They were the Church, apart from them no Christian Church existed, from them the Church expanded and developed. With them Christ would be to the end of time, and they would be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. As the Book of the Acts of the Apostles shows, they are His plenipotentiaries, directing and superintending everything that concerns the life, progress, and welfare of the Church.

Apostolicity therefore is a characteristic of the Church of Christ, and any Church that claims to be Christ's, must show that it is Apostolic in its succession, and in its rule, for only the consummation of the ages will see the end of the Apostolic office and dignity. "Teach YE all nations . . . and behold I am with YOU all days even to the consummation of the world." Though nineteen centuries have elapsed since the mandate and the promise were given, the Apostles are still carrying out Christ's work in the Church.

How are the Apostles living still? In their writings merely? No, these were merely occasional papers, written for particular purposes, and their writers rarely refer to them. If a priest who preaches three or four times a week, writes a letter or prints an essay occasionally, this letter or essay cannot be said to express his life or his work. Moreover, some of the Apostles did not write at all; and if this was the perpetual ministry that Christ gave His disciples when He commanded them to witness through all time and to the ends of the earth, it must be said that those of them who left no writings were false Apostles, and unfaithful to the trust reposed in them. They may have been witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria," but certainly not "to the uttermost parts of the earth." Those who did write the Gospels, Epistles and the other portion of the New Testament were indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit so to do, but not one of them wrote for men who were not already Christians, and not one of them intended to include all his teaching in his writings. Saint Luke states expressly that his Gospel is merely a narrative of what had been orally taught by "eye-witnesses," and here put in writing only to corroborate what his disciple had been already taught catechetically. Saint John declares that he was putting into writing only a very small portion of what his Lord had done in the sight of His disciples. And anyone reading the Epistles of Saint Paul will see at a glance that he did not intend even to summarise what he had taught to the various cities he evangelised. The scriptures of the New Testament were intended

for those only who had been taught the Christian faith by word of mouth. They are the property of the Church, first written by her leaders and addressed to her children, then collected into one Canon by herself, and circulated with her authoritative sanction as inspired corroborators of much that she had already taught. They would be a dead letter, or very often meaningless, to those who had not already received the Christian teaching, as we do not need to be reminded to-day. They are portion of the divine Tradition, to be understood and interpreted, like the oral portion, by that society which received its mission to the nations and ages from Christ. It is not through the Scriptures therefore that the Apostles may be said to live to the end of time.

They must be living therefore in some other way; and in very fact they do live and shall live, in their successors. It was not merely to the Apostles personally but to them in their official capacity as Ambassadors and Dispensers that the promise of perpetual abiding was made, for Christ knew that they would not personally live to the end of time. Therefore their office it is that must continue: they must have successors in office, and must make provision for such succession. And this precisely is what the Church, guided and guarded by the Holy Spirit, has done from the beginning; it is through the successors of the Apostles that she has preserved through the centuries the divine deposit of Faith, has kept her ministry of reconciliation and her worship undefiled, and has maintained in unity the Mystical Body of Christ. This is the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures—of the Acts of the Apostles and the writings of Saint Paul. Here we see how the Apostles not only preached and taught, but also organised the churches and set Bishops over them to rule and govern them by divine power. Saint Paul consecrated Timothy and Titus and left them in Ephesus and Crete to carry on the work he had begun there. He writes to both, instructing them on the duties of their office, and pointing out the qualifications necessary in those whom they in their turn would appoint as Bishops in charge of churches. To all so appointed he writes: "Take heed to yourselves, and to the whole flock, wherein the Holy Ghost hath placed you bishops, to rule the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood!" These are no mere delegates, appointed by the several congregations, they are rulers, appointed by Apostolic authority and invested with divine power. Thus do the Holy Scriptures teach that the Apostles made provision for Apostolic succession; thus do they teach that Apostolicity continues to be a mark of the Church.

This, then, is what the mark of Apostolicity means. Christ not only founded His Church upon the Apostles, but wished moreover that the powers of Order and Jurisdiction should be handed down by them to the

end of time. No Church can claim to be the Church of Christ, therefore, whose ministers and bishops are not able to trace their ordination, their consecration, and their jurisdiction to the Apostles. The Apostolic succession has been realised in history, but as we shall see in later chapters only in the Catholic Church. When the last Apostle was taken from this earth, there was not a single Christian Church that was not under the jurisdiction of a bishop appointed by the Apostles or their successors; and from that day down to the present, the Church is everywhere seen to be governed by bishops through whom the Apostles live. "The Church of Christ," writes T. W. Allies, "is not a paper kingdom, it cannot be printed off and disseminated by the post. But from His own person it passed to Peter and the Apostles, and from them to a perpetual succession of men, whose special work is to continue on this line by a chain never to be broken. . . . And the gift is as living and as near to Him now as when Saint Paul spoke of it as communicated by the imposition of his hands to his Disciple; nay, as it was when He Himself breathed on His Apostles together assembled, and said, 'Receive the Holy Ghost'; and will be equally living and direct from Him to the last who shall receive it to the end of time. And all this because these men who are taken up into this succession are the nerves of His Mystical Body, through which runs the supply to all the members."

After treating of the succession of doctrine and the succession of Sacraments, as he has here treated of the succession of men, he thus sums up: "Such is the summary of the whole written and unwritten teaching of the Church; such also, in few and brief words, the perpetual work of the succession of men whom we have described. Thus the three successions of men, of doctrine, and of institutions, are woven together by the Holy Spirit as three strands of a rope which cannot be broken: in the union of these three His perpetual presence dwells; and this is the spinal cord whereby He joins the Body with the Head." (*Formation of Christendom*, 2-157, etc.)

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