

FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

[A WEEKLY INSTRUCTION FOR YOUNG AND OLD.]

First Article: Nature and Institution of the Church.

5. Nature.—By the word "Church" (convocation, assembly) is meant the religious society which was founded by Jesus Christ, when He said to the Apostle Simon Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her" (Matt. xvi. 16).

By these words He established a religious society, of which Peter was to be the head: a society or a spiritual state analogous to that of political societies or states, but so perfect that it may be called a model society. This society is the Church, called also "the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth." "The Church," says Pius IX., "is a real and perfect society, entirely free, enjoying the distinctive perpetual rights which were conferred upon it by its Divine Founder."

6. In a civil state or kingdom there are two orders of citizens: those who command and those who obey. The first are called the governors, the administrators; the second, the people, the subjects. Similarly also, in the Church or kingdom of Jesus Christ, there are two orders of the faithful: those who command and those who obey; or those who teach and those who are taught. The first are called the clergy—the hierarchy, the priesthood, the pastors: these are the Pope, the bishops, and priests: the second are called the faithful, the sheep or the flock. The first constitute the teaching and governing Church: the second, the Church taught and governed.

7. Every civil state has a fundamental law established from its origin: moreover, it has a form of government proper to itself, either monarchical, aristocratic, or republican. The Church has likewise her fundamental law and her form of government, established from the beginning by Christ Himself, which no human power can alter.

This fundamental law is the Gospel and tradition: that is, all that Jesus Christ has instituted and taught: His doctrine which must be believed: His morals which must be practised: and His Sacraments and Sacrifice, which must be accepted as a means of salvation.

The form of government prevailing in the Church is neither aristocratic nor republican: it is monarchical. In a monarchy there is one sovereign chief, the king: and there are subordinate chiefs or governors of provinces. In like manner in the ecclesiastical monarchy there is a supreme chief, the Pope, the Vicar of Jesus Christ: and governors, or rather, subordinate princes—the bishops in their several dioceses. We say that the Pope, or head of the Church, is the vicar or lieutenant of Jesus Christ: because Christ Himself in heaven is the chief head, properly so called, of the faithful. The Pope is appointed by Christ to govern in His name on earth.

The Church is a monarchy: but a monarchy wisely supported by a subordinate aristocracy: in other words it is the papacy, aided all over the world by the episcopacy. To understand this more clearly, let us refer to history for the origin and institution of the Church.

8. Institution of the Church.—When Jesus Christ wished to establish His Church, which He called the kingdom of heaven on earth, He gathered round Him twelve chosen disciples, to whom He gave the name of Apostles (sent). He created them at once priests and bishops, and gave them power to elect other bishops, who should be their successors in the episcopacy, and other priests subordinate to the bishops, who should succeed in the priesthood.

So far the Apostles had all been equals. They had obeyed only Jesus Christ as their head, and formed with Him the infant Church. But Christ was to leave them, and ascend into heaven: He could not remain visibly on earth and govern His Church in person: therefore He established in His place a vicar or vicergerent appointed to govern in His name the kingdom of heaven on earth. His choice fell on Simon Peter,

one of the twelve, who thus became the superior of the apostolic college and the visible head of the whole Church; Jesus Christ still remaining its invisible head, seated at the right hand of God the Father in the highest heaven.

These are the words by which Christ first promised to, and then conferred upon, St. Peter and his successors this supreme authority. Some months before His Passion, the Saviour, finding Himself alone with His Apostles in the plains of Caesarea and Philippi, asked them what they thought concerning His person, and whom they took Him to be. Peter answered, "Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God." At this reply Jesus cast on Peter a look of divine tenderness, and said to him, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona: because flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but My Father, who is in heaven. And I say to thee, that thou art Peter;* and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth it shall be bound also in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth it shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt. xvi. 16).

Another time after His resurrection the Saviour, appearing to His disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius, says to Peter, "Simon, son of John, lovest thou Me more than these?" "Yea, Lord," Peter replies: "Thou knowest that I love Thee." Then Jesus says to him, "Feed My lambs." Again He says, "Simon, son of John, lovest thou Me?" and Peter answers, "Thou knowest that I love Thee"; and Jesus again says, "Feed My lambs." A third time He asks him, "Simon, son of John, lovest thou Me?" Peter, grieved at being asked a third time, "Lovest thou?" replies, "Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee"; and Jesus says, "Feed My sheep" (John xxi. 15).

By these divine words the Church was constituted. The faithful formed the flock, the Apostles were the subordinate pastors, and Peter the supreme pastor, invested with unlimited power by Jesus Christ.

* As though He said to him, "Simon, I choose thee to be like Me, a man apart from the rest of men, above the rest, another self. By nature thou art but Simon: by grace I make thee Peter—the rock, the foundation of My Church. I, the Divine Architect of the Church, give thee solidity of a foundation-stone. It is I who am the principle of thy firmness; thou shalt be united with Me: thou shalt rest on Me, who am not only a rock but the chief foundation. My Church shall lean on Me and on thee. United, and, in a measure, identified with Me, thou shalt share My sufferings, My combats, and My triumphs. The powers of hell, in league against Me, will rise also against My Church and against thee; but they shall ever find in thee an invincible resistance. All their efforts against thee shall be in vain, and will but conduce to the triumph of the Church, whose destiny shall be a perpetual alternation of combat and victory, suffering and resurrection."

As the rock or foundation-stone marks the sovereignty, and the throne of the ecclesiastical empire given to Simon Peter and his successors in perpetuity, so the keys show the power and the attributes of this sovereignty. The keys are the symbol of supreme dominion: and in giving them to Peter, the Son of God confers upon him discretionary power, which is to be unlimited and absolute over the whole Church and over the whole world, as He explains by adding, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind shall be bound"—words without limit; by virtue of which Peter has power to bind all—will, intelligence, absolutely all; "Whatsoever thou shalt bind." Nothing is excepted.

It was God's love for man that saw what it signified accomplished. Love given demands love in return; and no one that knows its meaning can utter that name without the quickening of the heart-pulses, without the straining of the soul to God.

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