

## Lecture II

### Chapter Three A Church With Authority

It is central to Catholic belief that Jesus is the founder of the Church. However, unlike other religious founders Jesus is not credited with giving instructions concerning any form of organization, authority structure, rituals, feast days etc. that would carry on after His death. Contrast this to Moses, the founder of Israel. The entire set of laws in the Torah (the Law), including detailed instructions concerning feast days, rituals, sacrifices, priesthood etc., are attributed to him, based on his revelatory experience of God. Mohammed, the founder of Islam, also left detailed laws and regulations in the Koran based on his revelatory experience. The same can be said of Joseph Smith founder of the Mormons.

Unlike these other founders, as far as we know, Jesus wrote nothing and expressed no need to create a new religious community, probably because He understood Himself as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. While often critical of some forms of Jewish legalism, Jesus was a faithful Jew and said that His mission was to the “lost sheep of Israel”. The Gospels do not recount Jesus as having a mission to the Gentiles.

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God which people could enter by opening themselves to the power of God who would transform their minds and hearts so that they would be one with their Father. Indeed, according to the Gospel accounts, *the* central message of Jesus concerned the Kingdom of God, not the formation of an organized church. And any and all attempts to simply equate the Church with the Kingdom, fall short. St. Augustine said something to the effect that “God has many people the Church does not have, and the Church has many people that God does not have”.

While the concept of “church” is found often in the writing of Paul, “church” is not a concept stressed in the Gospels. In fact, the word church appears only twice in the four Gospels, both times in Matthew and scholars debate whether these references actually came from the mouth of Jesus or were later additions by the author of Matthew to address local church concerns near the end of the first century.

Scholars also note that with the possible exception of the twelve apostles, Jesus did not intentionally gather a group of followers about Himself during His lifetime. The Gospels do note that, like John the Baptist and the Pharisees, Jesus did have disciples. References to disciples often include the Twelve and others, sometimes also referred to by the term apostles, who followed Jesus from time to time throughout His ministry. However, there is no indication that when Jesus spoke to the crowds that these people went away and began little “Jesus communities” in the towns. It is true that the apostles were sent to baptize, but this was probably a baptism like that of John the Baptist, a baptism of personal “repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1:4) in preparation for the

immanent and final coming of God to His people. There is no evidence that the apostles founded communities of those they may have baptized during the lifetime of Jesus.

Therefore, the calling of “The Twelve” is not seen as the beginning of an organizational structure. It is more likely a symbolic number pointing to the beginnings of a new or perhaps renewed twelve tribes Israel. In Matthew and Luke, the Twelve are seen not as administrators, but as judges in the OT sense, sitting on twelve thrones and judging (leading) the renewed twelve tribes of Israel in the final Kingdom (Mt.19:28, Lk. 22:30). As followers of Jesus, the Twelve are not portrayed as playing any central role or function in the ministry of Jesus. In fact, of the twelve apostles mentioned in the Gospels only Peter, Andrew, James and John appear as frequent companions of Jesus. And after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Andrew is only mentioned once (in Acts) as one of those in the upper room after the resurrection/ ascension, while James is martyred in the early 40’s.

Church Organization in the First Century -- While there is no separate “Christian Church” in these early years, the early Jerusalem community did have a distinct group of leaders and these leaders did have a distinct message, thus were sown the seeds of structure and doctrine. The most prominent leaders (pillars) of this community were Peter, John and James, the Brother of Jesus. Of these, only Peter and John were members of the original Twelve. And when Peter began his missionary work (Antioch and then to Rome?), it was James, the Brother of the Lord who took over the primary leadership role of the Church in Jerusalem. While it seemed important to replace Judas with Matthias, after his selection in Acts 1, Matthias never mentioned again.

As mentioned above, for many years, probably until the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the early followers of Jesus continued to see themselves as part of the Jewish community. They kept the Sabbath, went to the Temple, etc. and were admired by their fellow Jews. And as we shall see, many of them (especially the community in Jerusalem) thought that all followers of Jesus must be Jews or in the case of Gentile converts, become Jews. At this early date the followers of Jesus were probably best described as a Jewish sect, like the Essenes of the Dead Sea community.

However, by the end of the first century we can say that, through the efforts of Paul and others, a specific Christian Church and local churches did exist and various offices of authority were in evidence. However, exactly how the Church structure came about is unclear. What does seem clear is that Church structure, organization and practice were somewhat different within local churches. For example, the community that gave birth to Matthew’s Gospel (the only Gospel to use the word church) seems to favor structure, while the Johannine community felt less need of official leaders as all members of the community were seen as guided by the Spirit. Given these differences, nevertheless, the early Christian communities kept communion (*koinonia*) with each other expressed in brotherly love and essential beliefs.

What we can say with certainty is that, by definition, the organization of Christian

community (Church) had its foundation in Jesus, not as a result of a specific blueprint of church organization set out by Jesus, but out of a natural, sociological necessity. As Raymond Brown put it: “The great anomaly of Christianity is that only through institution can the message of a non-institutional Jesus be preserved” (*The Church the Apostles Left Behind* p. 145).

The Development of Church Authority and Structure in NT Documents -- For many centuries there was a popular Catholic tradition that the offices of Church authority and structure had begun with Jesus appointing the apostles and they in turn passed on their offices in orderly succession throughout the ages. However, the actual history of the development of authority and structure is less clear and certainly more complex than this ancient popular tradition.

Scholars note that there is no indication that the original twelve apostles functioned in any way as bishops in the traditional sense. As mentioned above, we know very little about most of the original Twelve and only Peter and John seem to have had leadership functions in the early Christian community. The beginnings of church structure are mostly attributed to Paul, who was not one of the Twelve and received his “mandate” through a direct revelatory experience with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus.

The NT writings that are most specific about church structure are the so-called “Deutero-Pauline” epistles -- I and II Timothy and Titus (the Pastorals), Ephesians and Colossians. Most scholars (90%) agree that the Pastorals were not written by Paul and there is general agreement that Paul did not write Ephesians (80%) or Colossians (60%). However, most would agree that the authors of these Letters either knew Paul or wrote from within the Pauline heritage.

Perhaps, the reason there was little early concern for organization was due to the early expectation of the followers of Jesus that He would soon return, probably within their lifetimes, to establish the Kingdom in its final form (Mk.9., 1Cor: 7). Like John the Baptist many felt the “Day of the Lord” was imminent. Given this expectation, the gospel message was not put into written form until the second half of the first century. Prior to that time, the oral message about Jesus was still available from Paul and actual eyewitnesses who had known and followed Jesus in His ministry. Thus a formal written word was not seen as necessary as long as these early eyewitness were alive and that, in any event, the Second Coming was imminent.

In the interim, however, some need for organization and an ordering of various functions within the new communities of converts did arise over time, especially in those mainly Gentile communities established by the missionary efforts of Paul and his companions. Paul had to address the issue of church unity in congregations which exhibited great diversity among its members. In First Corinthians, Paul states that while the Spirit has made the church one like a body - the Body of Christ - the members of the body may have different gifts (charisms), but they form a unity and no member has greater dignity than another based on their specific gift. In Chapter 12:27-30 sums up his argument:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Note that Paul speaks of “church”, but there is no mention of the presbyter-bishops or deacons that will appear later in the Pastorals, written some 30 to 40 years after First Corinthians. Administrators are mentioned, but here the ability to lead is seen as a gift of the Spirit, rather than as an office passed on by other administrators. Therefore, for Paul it is the Spirit who organizes the community.

The formal authority structure of the Church developed over time in response to the needs of a community that now began to realize that it would have a history after the death of Paul and the apostles and a longer history than many had envisioned relative to the final Second Coming of Jesus. Thus, the need to keep the Christian message free from error in order to preserve the unity of the Church finally demanded that three things be established: 1) an orderly, established structure of authority, (2) an authoritative set of writings that preserved the apostolic witness and (3) some type of a creed.

The first model for an organized ministry probably existed early in the Jerusalem church and was based on the synagogue tradition of elders or “presbyters” (Greek for elder). Elders were selected not just from those who were older, but from those who possessed wisdom. However, the role of some Christian elders may have gone beyond the synagogue model and so that some elders were also designated by the title *episkopos* or overseer (later bishop) - a title that only appears five times in the entire NT. This title and the roles they played may have been adopted from the Essene communities. Modeled on the example of Jesus and teaching of Jesus, (Lk 22:26), these early ministries were dedicated to service, not domination or power. Rather than using the Greek work *arche* (office) which connotes power, the NT writings used the Greek word, *diakonia*, which means service.

After 65 AD, as reflected in the Pastoral Letters, Church structures became more standardized, but not yet universal. Ideally, presbyter-bishops were to be appointed in every locality. They were primarily to be teachers and protect the community from false teachings. While James 5:14 reports presbyters as having a special role in anointing the sick, there is no evidence in the Pastorals that these presbyters-bishops were in charge of the eucharist or baptism. Interestingly, there is no explicit NT evidence that the Apostles ever presided at the eucharist or that there was any chain of “ordination” from Apostles to those who did preside at the eucharist. Deacons were also appointed (some women?), but their roles were not specific.

The difficulties of having the Spirit organize a community became obvious over time, when irreconcilable differences appeared with both sides claiming “guidance by the

Spirit.” This was especially in evidence in the Johannine community as recorded in the Letters of John. The tension between the recognition that all members of the Church are equal in dignity because of their baptism and the need for guidance, organization and correct doctrine is still with the Church. In any event, the old charismatic “offices” of apostle, prophet, teachers, etc. as mentioned in First Corinthians gradually gave way to appointed ministries. Exactly how the early ministers were appointed is not entirely clear. The ancient synagogue custom of laying on of hands was no doubt retained in some communities.

#### The Development of Church Authority and Structure in Early Non-Canonical Documents.

An important non-canonical document that witnessed to the practices of the early Church is a catechetical manual written around 100 AD called the *Didache* (literally “The Teaching”). It contained, among other things, liturgical instructions and disciplinary matters relating to the clergy. For example, while it encourages Christians to appoint their own bishops, at the same time it indicates that the system of elders was still common, though not universal, and that the charismatic “offices” of teacher and prophet were still important elements in many Christian communities. Given all of this, it nevertheless seems clear that at the end of the first century there was no sharp distinction between laity and clergy, the entire Church was referred to as a royal priesthood.

The “tradition”, mentioned earlier, that the development of offices of authority was an orderly process initiated by Jesus was given early expression around the year 90 AD in “The Letter from the Church in Rome to the Church in Corinth” known to us now as *I Clement*. This was a letter sent to the Church in Corinth by St. Clement, then bishop of Rome, to settle a dispute over authority in the Church. In brief, it describes an orderly succession of authority coming from God, through Jesus to the Apostles, including Paul, and then through the Apostles to the appointed bishops and presbyters. This picture is probably more of a defense of a system newly in place, than an accurate historical account of what had developed historically, as we have seen.

However, by the year 110 AD, the letters of Bishop Ignatius of Antioch attest to a development in which each local church had only one *episkopos* or bishop and that only the bishop or his appointees (presbyters) were to preside at the eucharist or baptize. With Ignatius the two-fold ministry - presbyter-bishop and deacon - develops into a three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon. Exactly how this “development” came about is lost to history. In any event, Ignatius exhorts Christians to “do nothing without the bishop”, because he takes the place of Christ. It is well to note that at this time the “local church” was just that, a parish, not a diocese in the modern sense. While it seems that presiding at the Eucharist was restricted to the bishop at this early date, it was not until 1208 that Pope Innocent III made an official declaration that ordination to the priesthood was necessary to preside at the eucharist.

That the Bishop of Rome would play a central place in the authority structure of the Church was due in part to the influence of St. Irenaeus. In his famous work *Against Heresies* written around 185 AD, Irenaeus argues, against the Gnostics, that there is no

secret Christian doctrine apart from the rule of faith handed down from the apostles through a continuous succession of bishops. He further states that the bishops of Rome are in direct succession from Peter and Paul - "When the Blessed Apostles (Peter and Paul) had founded and built up the Church, then handed over the ministry of the Episcopate to Linus" (*Adversus Hereses*, III, 3,3.) Thus, after Peter, Linus (66-78) has been recorded as the first bishop of Rome. Linus still heads many lists of popes today even though most scholars agree that this early list from Irenaeus of Lyons citing Linus is a second-century forgery. Most church historians date the "monarchical episcopate" as coming into existence with either St. Pius I (142-55) or St. Anicetus (155-66).

Another insight into the early establishment of the office of bishop is found in a third century letter from St. Hippolytus entitled the *Apostolic Tradition*. Hippolytus states that the powers of the bishops come from the powers given the apostles by Jesus and that those who later come to share in this apostolic power must be ordained by those who already shared it (other bishops). The new bishop may be selected by the people, but another bishop must lay hands upon him. The bishop is to proclaim the Word of God, forgive sins, preside over the Eucharist and supervise presbyters and deacons.

Hippolytus also relates that a *presbyter* or priest is ordained by the bishop with other priests laying hand upon him. It is not a primary function of the priest to preside at the Eucharist, but with permission he may do so in place of the bishop. Deacons were ordained by the bishop alone and were ordained to be of service to the bishop.

Many scholars argue that the fact that Rome became the central Church in Christendom was not due to any known direct intention of Peter, but rather, in great part, to the Christian tradition that Peter and Paul had been martyred in Rome and were buried there, plus the fact that Rome was the imperial city and thus played a central role in the empire.

As Christianity spread, the Churches also had a need to communicate with each other. One obvious solution was to gather in assemblies (synods) to discuss common concerns. The first such synod took place in Asia somewhere between 160 and 175 AD. For many reasons (including the claim of apostolic foundation), the Churches in Rome, Alexandria and Antioch began to take leadership roles. Slowly Rome took prominence and finally in the 5th century Pope Leo I would claim supreme and universal authority for the Bishop of Rome.

As we have noted, it is possible to make the case that the authority structure of the Church developed more out of sociological necessity and chance, than by design - either divine or human. However, Catholics believe that in some mysterious way the Spirit promised by Jesus breaths through the Church and through all its successes and failures, all its strengths and weakness and all its sins and sanctity, the authority structure has served as a necessary instrument to maintain unity in the Church. Through its popes and bishops the Canon of Scriptures was determined, Creeds were established and the fundamental message of Jesus was communicated throughout the world. How the authority structure in the Church will function in the future is open to development, as

Pope John Paul II made clear in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. History relates that when we have remained open to the Spirit, great things have happened.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Constantine Favors the Christians and Inaugurates a New Era of Church History**

The relationship of the Church to the State has taken many forms, from persecution to total State support, to dominance of the Church over the State. Perhaps taking a cue from the ancient Persians, Rome had traditionally taken a fairly tolerant view of the many religions which it encountered while building its empire. It even incorporated many of the “foreign gods” into its own community of gods. The key to any withdrawal from a policy of religious toleration was not so much the stuff of theological disagreement, but rather a judgment as to whether or not any religion or religious group was seen as a threat to the power and authority of the Roman State. In a way theology was involved, in a practical rather than a theoretical way, because failure to acknowledge the Roman gods was often seen as a threat to the State. Roman success was often viewed as at least partially dependent on the favor of the gods. Of course, when the emperor began to be hailed as divine, failure to acknowledge his divinity was unpatriotic, to say the least.

The Era of Persecutions - Early in Christian history, Rome viewed Christians as a Jewish sect and cast a wary eye on them based on the civil unrest that Jews had precipitated under Roman rule. However, once separated from their Jewish roots and expelled from the synagogues, Rome saw Christians as another Eastern cult with strange, secret practices and rumors of cannibalism, human sacrifice and incest.

In this developing atmosphere, the first persecution of Christians was by Nero and took place in 64 AD. Christians were not persecuted for their religious belief, but used by Nero as a handy scapegoat for the great fire in Rome which was probably set by Nero himself. This persecution was short lived, but for nearly two centuries after Nero, Roman mobs and sometimes Roman authorities were to launch intermittent persecutions of Christians. Emperors who persecuted Christians included Domitian (81-95), Trajan (98-117), Antoninus Pius (138-161), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Septimius Severus (193-211), Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-260), Diocletian (284-305) and Galerius (305-311).

In many cases Roman authorities were reluctant to persecute Christians, but were responding to local citizens who declared Christians as immoral. Christians were even called “atheists” because of their failure to honor the gods of the empire. Actually, the Romans did not care what gods people worshipped as long as the gods of the empire were worshipped too. As the Romans saw it, the gods of Rome had protected them and made them a great nation. Therefore, not to honor them might bring retribution -- failure in war, bad harvests, etc.. However, the Christians believed in only one God and would not offer the prescribed sacrifices to the gods of the nation. The Jews had escaped punishment for their failure to worship the gods because they were respected as an

ancient religion by the Romans. As such, they were even excused from military service and some taxes.

These persecutions produced two important types of Christians -- martyrs and apologists. The word martyr came from the Greek *martyrein* - to "bear witness" and came to designate those Christians who had born witness to their faith by shedding their blood rather than renouncing their faith in times of persecution.

Because the faith was being attacked not only physically, but also intellectually there arose the great apologists - the word apologist comes from the Greek *apologia*, meaning "justification". The apologists produced writings which were intended to repudiate erroneous ideas about Christians and to give a defense of Christian beliefs within the parameters of Hellenistic/Roman intellectual culture. Among the most famous of these early apologists were Tertullian and Justin Martyr. Their writings were often addressed to the emperors who either never read them or dismissed them, but these writings did have a significant effect on later Christian theology.

Many scholars see the writings of the apologists as the beginning of a Hellenizing trend in Christianity that was not without its problems. There was a shift from an emphasis of following Jesus by a life of loving service to others, to a more theoretical emphasis on the nature of revealed truths -- a shift from living and doing, to a formulation of doctrine and dogma. For some, what one believed was more important than how one lived.

Besides martyrs and apologists, the persecutions also produced apostates (defectors), those Christians who denied their faith in the face of persecution. Some Christian communities welcomed back apostates, while others followed rigorist theologians who taught that apostasy was an unforgivable sin - the sin against the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:32) - and apostates could not be reconciled with the Church. The disagreement over the fate of apostates finally caused a schism in Northern Africa call Donatism, named after it originator Donatus. The Donatist schism continued on until the Moslem conquests in the 7th century.

The final persecution of Galerius ended with a decree in 311 permitting Christians to openly gather for worship and instruction. This was followed by another short persecution under Maximinus Daia, but was ended by the history making intervention and subsequent reign of Constantine.

Constantine Adopts Christianity as the Religion of the Empire - Upon the death of his father in 306, Constantine was crowned Emperor of the West by his troops in the city of York in modern England. For a time, Rome had been using a system of three co-emperors, of which Constantine's father was one. Once crowned, however, Constantine began to consolidate his power in the western part of the empire and then went on to challenge his brother-in-law and co-emperor Maxentius, who had taken Rome as his seat of power. It was in the circumstances of Constantine's successful military challenge to Maxentius that Christian history took a momentous turn.

As the story goes - (actually there are two stories, one by Lactantius and a later one by Eusebius) - in the year 312, on the night before he battled Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine, according to Lactantius, had a vision of Christ who instructed him to place the Greek letters *chi* (ch) and *rho* (r) on the shields of his soldiers (to us they look like a P placed over an X). In Eusebius' account a cross was seen in the sky by the entire army and a command from heaven said "in this (sign) conquer". In any event Constantine won the battle at the Milvian Bridge and attributed his victory to the Christian God and thus went on to change the history of Christianity forever.

While Constantine did not actually accept Christian baptism until he was on his deathbed in 337, nevertheless in 313 he met with his remaining co-emperor, Licinius, and issued a letter to all provincial governors granting religious freedom to the entire empire, including freedom of worship for Christians. The letter also mandated the return of all confiscated Christian property and thus recognized the Christian Church as a legal entity in the empire able to own and dispose of property. History has named this document the Edict of Milan, even though it was not technically an edict, nor was it issued from Milan.

Constantine quickly made other reforms. In 315 crucifixion was outlawed and in 321 Sunday was declared a legal festival and the Church was allowed to accept gifts of property and money passed on through wills. Constantine did not immediately suppress the various pagan religions and upheld the parts of the State religion with himself as Supreme Pontiff. However, as time went on he put restrictions on paganism and began to give lavish support of the Christian Church.

Concerned about the unity of the Roman empire and the problems that rival religions pose, Constantine decided to use Christianity as the one religion to give unity to the empire. Thus Constantine began to give strong support to Christians. Constantine gave important visible support to Christianity by building many large basilicas to house public worship. He built a large basilica over the spot which tradition held to be the burial place of St. Peter. Another basilica was erected over the supposed tomb of Jesus. He gave the Lateran Palace to the Bishop of Rome which he occupied until the 14th century. He also made Sunday a day of civil rest and modified Roman law to reflect Christian values.

Importantly for the evolution of the social position and civil functions of the clergy, Constantine elevated the Christian clergy to a special social class that was free from certain taxes, military service and forced labor. He also gave the bishops civil authority. This began the process of building a social gap between clergy and laity that reached its height in the Middle Ages and continues today.

Because of this official support, the upper classes began to enter the Church in large numbers. It was now socially acceptable, even socially advantageous to become a Christian. No longer was the Church to be identified with the lower classes and slaves.

While the support of the emperor had obvious advantages, it was also problematic.

Constantine set a precedent that was to endure for centuries - the direct role of a civil leader in Church affairs, even matters of doctrine. Christians now witnessed the emperor (not yet even a baptized Christian) entering into the Donatist controversy. He favored the orthodox stance of the bishops against Donatists, but he did so by direct intervention and used the power of the State to enforce the legal condemnation of the Donatist.

Since Constantine had thrown in his lot with Christianity as a strategy to unite his empire, any disunity in the ranks of Christians was seen as a direct threat to the empire, thus theology and politics became closely linked. Then in 324, just when Constantine became the sole emperor, a major theological dispute surfaced that threatened the unity of Christianity.

An Alexanderian presbyter named Arius asserted, against his bishop Alexander, that while the Son of God was indeed created before all time and exceeded all other creatures in perfection, he was nevertheless a creature. Athanasius responded that if Jesus was not divine, salvation could not have taken place. As a strict monotheist, Arius responded that both the Father and the Son could not be “unoriginated”, because there is only one God. Therefore, for Arius, the Son could not be divine.

This teaching created a furor within the Eastern Church and a serious spiritual split in the Church seemed to be a real possibility. Responding to this theological crisis, Constantine tried to mediate the dispute and when that failed, in 325 he took the dramatic and historic step of calling for the first Ecumenical Council of the Church to be held at Nicea, located in modern-day Turkey.

The significant theological outcome of the Council was the Nicene Creed, which was later affirmed and modified by the Council of Constantinople in 381. This Creed began with a traditional baptismal formula and added two important assertions about the Son: “that is, (the Son is) from the substance of the Father” and that the Son is “very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father”. Thus the Son is divine - equal in status with the Father

As in the dispute with Donatism, we again have the unusual situation of a non-baptized (pagan) emperor calling together over two hundred bishops of the Church to resolve a difficult theological question. Constantine not only convened, but also gave the opening speech, presided over the Council and entered into its disputes. He controlled the proceedings through a bishop he appointed and *he did not even invite the bishop of Rome.*

At the end of the Council, he made the Council resolutions into the law of the land and concluded the Council with a banquet celebrating his 20th anniversary as emperor. For centuries afterward, emperors followed the precedent set by Constantine and took the initiative in calling Ecumenical Councils. The rocky road of Church/State relationships had begun.