

Summer 2017 – Different, Yet Related: The Catholic Church © Rev. Seth Jones

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

For the next several weeks, we will be examining different movements and denominations in the Christian tradition. This year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and it seems like a good time to review where we have come from and who we are relative to our shared past with the whole Christian tradition.

Throughout Easter, we looked at the idea of Bearing Witness and this series is sort of an expansion of that theme. We will look at the denominations historically. My goal is to present all these movements in the best possible light. This will require leaving a lot out, of course. I am very much aware that the Congregational church, and ours in particular, is a safe space for refugees from other traditions, and for good reasons. But just as we would hope others outside of the Congregational tradition would speak the best of us in terms of the ideals we uphold, I will attempt to speak to the ideals of each tradition.

The season of Pentecost, the season we are currently in, is the season of the Holy Spirit, and I think one of the most gracious ways to see other movements, traditions, and denominations in the Christian church is as an expression of the Holy Spirit for a particular time, or sensibility, or commitment to an ideal. Our individual soul is attracted to the expression of the Holy Spirit in that particular place and way.

Therefore, I ask you to open yourselves to the curiosity of the Spirit, to allow your questions to increase rather than decrease, and to see in this time of exploration an opportunity to see ourselves as different, yet related, to the entire expression of Christian faith throughout the world.

We will be moving historically through these denominations and traditions. Two of our Sundays are called “Heresy Sundays”, where we will look at wayward movements within the larger Christian world. I would just say here that I use the word ‘Heresy’ somewhat tongue-in-cheek. The entire Protestant movement is based on what was once considered heresy.

We as Congregationalists are from a separatist, heretical movement, which spawned other heretical movements, in the eyes of the more traditionally oriented faith. When heretics gain power, they determine who the new heretics are, and Congregationalists were no different.

When we speak of heresy, we are speaking about authority. Where does the authority lie in the movement or denomination? Once we get into the Protestant movement, the question becomes one of understanding the nature of that authority and what it means for worship, theology, outreach, and spiritual disciplines in the church.

The first tradition we will look at is the Catholic Church. The best way to think of the history of the Catholic Church is to understand it as a consolidation of many churches under one creed. The very early Christian church – from Jesus' death @ 33AD to about 300 AD – was a loose, highly connected, far-reaching network. After a vision of a Cross in the sky, Roman Emperor Constantine had his soldiers paint the symbol on their shields.

When he became victorious, Constantine declared the previously persecuted and troublesome Christian faith the religion of the realm. The Christian church of the time was roiling through all sorts of disagreements about the nature of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. So Constantine called the Nicene Council in 325AD to settle some of these debates. Having a religion of the empire required some agreement and consistency from one place to another, and as a result of that Council, we have the Nicene Creed. This is also what we could legitimately call the birth of the Catholic Church, though Catholic tradition teaches that the Council of Nicea is merely a ratification of what already existed from the time of the very early church.

The Catholic Church understands their authority to come two streams, which are considered to be God directed and empowered by Jesus Christ alone. The first stream is Scripture. Every aspect of the Catholic Church – structure, worship, theology, outreach, spiritual disciplines – is referenced back to Scripture.

If you were to take a look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church, you would see every part of the very large document referenced to a particular verse in Scripture.

The existence of the Catholic Church itself is referenced in our reading this morning. When Jesus gives Peter the keys to the church, this is the beginning of the Catholic Church. This is why the Pope is also called the Successor to the Prince of the Apostles who sits on the throne of Peter. It is also why every Pope must trace their lineage back to Peter. And this leads us directly into the second stream of authority in the Catholic Church.

Tradition runs parallel to Scripture in its understanding of theology and the world and is considered to be the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Catholic Church, interpretation of God's work and word occurs directly from what is called *the magisterium*. The magisterium is the teachings of the church which come down from declarations by the Popes, generally known as 'encyclicals', from the Curia, which is the gathering of cardinals who are the decision makers for the church, from the history of theologians like

Augustine, Abelard, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Hans us Von Balthasar, and the catechetical teachings of priests and monks to their flocks. Tradition has as much authority as Scripture, but cannot contradict Scripture. Likewise, Scripture will never contradict the Tradition.

So Scripture and Tradition inform everything in the Catholic tradition. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says,

*"Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal."<sup>40</sup> Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own "always, to the close of the age".<sup>41</sup>*

## **. . . two distinct modes of transmission**

**81** *"Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit."*<sup>42</sup>

*"And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching."*<sup>43</sup>

**82** *As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, "does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence." (Catechism of the Catholic Church: Pt 1, Sect 1, Chap 2, Art 2.2.80-82.*

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p1s1c2a2.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s1c2a2.htm))

Here is one way to think of this: The Word of God – Scripture – never changes. The realm of the Holy Spirit – Tradition – changes according to times and the state of the world. Both require interpretation.

## **WORSHIP**

At the center of all Catholic worship is the Eucharist, which is also called The Mass. 'Mass' is a derivation from the Latin words for being sent into the world, the benediction at the completion of the Eucharist.

In a Catholic Church, there are 'rites' of worship which lead to the Eucharist. These are set patterns of worship that are defined according to a particular region's tradition – so the Traditional Latin Rite/Mass would come out of the European and Roman tradition. There is an Eastern Rite which mirrors what happens in many Eastern bloc countries. There is a Modern Rite, which is post-Vatican 2 (also, known as the Second Vatican Council), which was a huge overhaul of both liturgy and theology which was hosted and

called by Pope John 23 in 1962 and closed by Paul VI in 1965. The point is, a Catholic can walk into any church in the world and partake in the Eucharist, communion, and even if they can't speak the language, they would know what is happening based on the Rite of worship.

In the Catholic faith, the Eucharist, the bread and the wine, is transubstantiated into the real, present, and eternal body and blood of Jesus Christ. A person is literally ingesting God's grace. The elements of communion are an objective reality that are not affected in any way by what you or I believe about them. It is literally the body and blood of Jesus Christ on the table. This is why it is such a big deal to be of clean heart, soul and mind when you partake. The pure element of Christ must meet the purified soul of the believer. To do otherwise is profane and sacrilegious.

While we celebrate two sacraments – baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Catholic Church recognizes 7 sacraments – *Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), the Eucharist, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony*. As you can hear, you are covered from birth to death in terms of sacraments.

## THEOLOGY

The theology of the Catholic Church is vast, as you can imagine. Essentially, the theology of the church covers 2000 years of history and includes, with no exaggeration, some of the very greatest thinkers in history. I am not going to really try to summarize the theology of the church. But let me put it this way: to understand Catholic theology, we must always begin with worship and the eucharist and then move outwards from there. Contrary to Protestant perceptions of Catholic theology, the Catholic Church holds a broad and wide spectrum of understandings.

If the magisterium interprets tradition and Scripture, the interpretation of the interpretation is wide open to the entire flock of the church. As a result, mystics, rigorous rationalists, traditionalists, reformers, contemporary thinkers and experimentalists all have a seat at the table.

The only qualification with what I said is that, if any of those wish to publish something, they must have the blessing of the bishop and the church, an *imprimatur*, if it is going to go into the world as a reflection on Catholic thought, history, and theology.

## OUTREACH

While it would be a bit naïve to suggest Catholicism was the only expression of Christianity until the Protestant Reformation, we can say that the Catholic Church was the primary expression of Christian faith in the world until around 1100AD, or until 1450, depending on the interpretation of history that you read. I tell you this because outreach and mission, and the maintenance of missions and established churches was the work of the Catholic Church. Our modern conceptions of hospitals, universities, schools are all derived from what the Catholic Church began. Before the Puritans arrived in America, Catholic missionaries were already present across the continent. Today, Catholic aid agencies represent one of the largest non-governmental organizations in the world.

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The Catholic Church has always had a great leeway for non-clergy expressions of the faith. Within the confines of Tradition and Scripture and the hierarchy of the church, prayers, devotionals, visionary experiences were and are allowed to flourish for the sake of the greater faith of the population of the church. The veneration of Mother Mary and the saints is recognized by the church, but it is not essential to the practice of the faith. In other words, a Catholic does not *have to* pray to the Virgin Mary or a particular saint, but they can, and they do. The way I have been told to think of these practices is to think of it in the same way you think about relatives who have died. Sometimes, when we pray, we talk with those relatives and we may ask them to pray for us, especially if it is something we do not feel comfortable bringing directly to God. Sometimes, we ask a friend to pray for us when we feel we can't. It is a good way to

think of it. Veneration is not worship. Having intermediaries who can pray for you to God is not a denial of our direct connection to God through Christ.

## STRUCTURE

There may be no more bureaucratic and rigid structure in the world than the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. This is because the Catholic Church understands itself to be the presence of God in the world. The Church is the presence of God in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, which brings Christ to the people through the celebration of the Eucharist and the grace then imparted to neighbor and enemy alike. This is a top-down operation that comes from heaven to earth which demands and requires management and mediation. This is what the Holy Roman Catholic Church does, according to its understanding of itself -mediate, manage, and manifest God's grace to and in the world. The Pope oversees the earthly church in its universal sense. The Curia, or cabinet of Cardinals, disseminates the will of the Holy Church by the authority of the Pope, to the nations. The bishops bring the will of the church to the priests and the priest brings this message directly to the people of the local church. In this sense, the Pope is the mediator of the will of God on earth, and each position beneath the Pope mirrors this mediation.

All this comes from Peter receiving the keys of the kingdom from Jesus Christ himself.

I am certain our Catholic brothers and sisters would be horrified at my simplifications here. But I hope I have communicated to you, in as clear and non-judgmental a way as possible some of the ideals of the Catholic tradition. We owe much to them, both in terms of theological understandings and in terms of all that we have left in our separation from that tradition.

Next week, we will consider the Orthodox tradition, which shares much with the Catholic tradition.

Amen.