

SHEPHERDS OF THE FOLD OF CHRIST

CHRYSOSTOM O'BRIEN, O.P.



THENCE SACERDOS MAGNUS! So often have American Catholics thus saluted, in recent years, newly elevated shepherd-bishops, that much attention is being focused upon an ever growing ecclesiastical hierarchy within their country. For Catholic Americans, the consecration of newly appointed bishops is a sign of the growth and vitality of their Church. The installation of the chief shepherd of a diocese becomes a cause of great joy and spiritual pride. The recent ceremonies attendant upon the consecration and installation of the new Archbishop of Washington, the Most Reverend Patrick Aloysius O'Boyle, give singular witness to this fact. St. Ignatius of Antioch, seventeen centuries ago, voiced the Catholic's reverence for his bishop. The saint has put it well: "We must look upon the bishop as we would Christ Himself." The bishop thus symbolizes the reign of Christ in His Church. He rules in the place of Christ.

Non-Catholics seem to measure their estimation of the bishop's office in the words of the secular press, printed with each consecration: a rehearsal of the pageantry of picturesque, centuries-old ceremonies, a thing of beauty, buried in the past. The bigoted conjure up bishops as a crafty, purple-clad band of tyrants, plotting to bring all under their domination. This is the false sense given the word, hierarchy, by those who frantically cry out that the Church is a threat to our American way of life. For the sake of fairness, however, the word ought to be allowed to speak for itself. What does it signify? For the Church, it signifies sacred rule, or power in sacred things. Since hierarchy seems inevitably to suggest the Catholic Church, it would be well to learn just what connotation the Catholic attaches to the word. For him, it connotes the Pope united with the Bishops in a special category of government, based upon the power and authority vested in the office of Pope and Bishop. To speak of hierarchical constitution, then, simply indicates the special rôle of the hierarchy in the make-up of the Church. A closer investigation of its nature and origin will clarify this statement.

DIVINE INSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH

First we look upon the Church as a whole; then, we may analyze any of its parts. Like other religious bodies, the Church is a society; but, unique among religious societies, the Church was established by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as a perfect society. Because of her divine origin, Holy Church is the best authority for any of her claims. In the solemn declaration of the Vatican Council the Church speaks: "The Eternal Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, in order that He might perpetuate the saving work of redemption, willed to establish the Holy Church. . . ."¹

The Church is a society, established as such by Christ. To understand the implication of this, the Dominican Order can be a helpful illustration. St. Dominic was a man with a goal in life, the fortification of Catholic Truth against the heretics. To carry out his purpose he gathered together a group of men, and gave them a definite form of life, comprising the three vows of religion, the solemn recitation of the Divine Office, monastic observances, and in a special way zealous application to the study of sacred doctrine. With this background his disciples were to defend Christian Truth by preaching and teaching all under the direction and guidance of superiors. The result of his efforts was a society, the Order of Friars Preachers—a society because it was an organization of men united in a mutual method of realizing a common aim.

Similarly, Christ had a goal, for in the Nicene Creed it is stated that "He came down from heaven for us men and our salvation." For this He died on the Cross. To continue the effects of His redeeming act, He founded His Church. He declared His intention of doing so when He said: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church." Note the words, "My Church," the institution whose purpose was the same as that of Christ's Incarnation and Redemption. He went further than the mere foundation of a society, for He indicated the way to further the goal of His creation. He gave to the Church His own teachings as the key to human life: the Sacraments as the supports men would need, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, as the continuation of the Sacrifice of Calvary and the common social act proper to His Church. Truly, then, the Church is undoubtedly a divinely established society.

CHRIST ESTABLISHED THE HIERARCHY

Because Christ set up the Church with all the accoutrements of a real society, the government of that society, the hierarchy, must

¹ Conc. Vat. sess. iv.—Denz. 1821.

necessarily have come from Christ. Government is indispensable to any society, for, inasmuch as it is a combination of many men following a particular course of action ordained to a particular goal, some coordination of their efforts is required. Without power, direction, or authority no society is complete, nor is it likely to achieve any purpose. It is a matter of experience that the lack of directive force in a society, be it a political party, religious order, or boys' club, renders it as impotent as a radio without electricity.

This element of authority was not overlooked by Christ, Son of God, Infinite Wisdom, in the founding of His Church. An examination of this fact will serve to clarify the meaning of the hierarchical constitution of the Church. In considering the measures taken by Christ to establish His Church as a real society, we have seen that He gave it the truths of Faith, the sources of grace, the Sacraments and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. For these to be operative a certain control over them is essential. Thus it is that Christ did not give power over these things in an indefinite way. Rather He selected a few as His special ministers, the Apostles. To them He intrusted the Faith, saying: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."² Thus the Apostles were to have power to preach Christ's truth, and to govern the faithful in a life in conformity with this Faith. It was the Apostles whom He commissioned to baptize all creatures. To them, too, He gave the power to forgive sins, to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, to administer all the Sacraments; the office of preaching and teaching the mysteries of the Faith; of guiding others in the path of Christian life.

THE APOSTLES—INSTRUMENTS OF CHRIST

To forgive sins; to change bread and wine into Christ's own Body and Blood; to guard and spread truths which are beyond all human reason—can men have such powers as these? Of themselves, no. Only the power of the Son of God Himself is sufficient for such sublime works. Christ, when conferring these privileges on the Apostles, was promising them a share in His own power. They were to be His instruments—tools acting their own rôle but having the Name and power of Christ Himself as the source of their activity. In this awe-inspiring sense did Christ say to His chosen ones: "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." Then He breathed upon them and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are

² St. Matth. xxviii, 19-20.

retained."³ In a similar sense He said to them: "All power is given to Me in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, make disciples of all nations."⁴

There were, however, twelve Apostles. Christ also foresaw that in a few years there would be many successors to whom the Apostles were to communicate this power. The number of those sharing in the Apostolic office, then, demanded that among them there should be a head, a guide, a bond of union. As a result He endowed Peter with certain preeminence as the one supreme Head over the Apostles. It was upon him that Christ built the Church. He prayed for the strengthening of Peter's faith, so that he in turn might be a help to the others. Peter was commissioned by the Master to feed His lambs, to feed His sheep, and so was constituted the supreme shepherd. It is noteworthy that, on Pentecost, Peter preached the first sermon and baptized the first converts. Clearly then, Jesus Christ invested the Church with a sacred power, a share in His own Power, which he intrusted to the Apostles but in a determined order among them.

THE HIERARCHY TO ENDURE

This power of the Church was not to perish with the Apostles. To believe so is absurd. Immediately before His Ascension, Christ told the Apostles to go forth to all nations, teaching, sanctifying, governing. He added: "And behold, I am with you all days even unto the consummation of the world."⁵ Certainly the Apostles themselves were not to be immortal. It is only reasonable to hold that Christ intended their power to be transmitted to others with whom He would always remain. The idea of limiting the Church's power to the life span of the Apostles is incompatible with the very reason why Christ conferred it. St. Thomas notes that, according to St. Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians, this power was given "for the building up of the Church."⁶ Since the maintenance of the Church will be necessary until the end of time, Christ gave the Apostles this power in such a way that they would pass it on to others.

Obviously, the best testimony that Christ intended the sacred power to endure in the Church is the witness of the Apostles themselves. Without their example no other argument would be of any value. Surely, they knew Christ's will in the matter. Significantly, the Acts of the Apostles speaks of their ordaining deacons to assist them.

³ St. John xx, 21.

⁴ St. Matth. xxviii, 20.

⁵ St. Matth. xxviii, 20.

⁶ *Contra Gentiles*, Bk. IV, ch. 74.

St. Paul makes frequent references in his epistles to the bishops whom he consecrated and placed over the churches he had founded in all parts of the Mediterranean world. To Titus, bishop of Crete, and to Timothy, bishop of Ephesus, he addressed special epistles instructing them in the exercise of their ministry. Furthermore the Apostle of the Gentiles wanted the faithful to realize that these pastors really possessed the sanctifying and governing power given by Christ Himself; that they exercised their office in the name of Christ. This accounts for his words to the Corinthians: "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ and the dispensers of the mysteries of God."⁷

What St. Paul writes of his own activity in this respect was paralleled by the other Apostles, according to Tradition. Peter at Antioch appointed Evodius as his successor, who in turn was succeeded by the famous St. Ignatius. St. John the Evangelist consecrated St. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. From this evidence the Apostles undoubtedly understood what power Christ had bestowed upon them, and that he meant it to be passed on by them.

EFFECT OF CHRIST'S ACTION

This transmission of their power to their successors by the Apostles explains in some measure the marvelous growth and vigor of the Church in such a short time. Given by Christ for the very well-being and life of the Church, it was bound to be effective. In the very first century there stood out to confuse the pagan world, a Church, united in faith and in worship, whose members led a life that was a silent rebuke to pagan corruption. So much did it indict their enemies that they sought to destroy it, but the martyrs' blood was the seed of new converts. The vigor of the Church was only to be explained by the power of Christ Himself—a power which He had given to His ministers. This sanctifying power was the source of the martyrs' courage. The authority of the Church was the guardian of the unity of faith and worship. It was the distinctive force leading the faithful in a life modelled on that of Christ.

Christ's work of establishing the Church was not to be thwarted, for to His ministers He had given this threefold power to teach, sanctify, and govern. Surviving, even thriving, upon the pagan persecutions, the Church grew in numbers as its popes and bishops exercised their power to preach and to teach. Through the grace of Christ, administered by them, the very world, so old in its corruption, began a new and wholesome life. Always, in spite of the storm of errors that

⁷ 1 Cor. iv, 1.

arose within the Church itself in its early history, the one Faith of Christ was preserved, for the shepherds of the flock of Christ were watchful guardians. Though attacked by every form of adversity, the Church retained and expanded its life, because its Founder had given it direction, power, and government to safeguard its well-being in the life He had intended for it.

The story of the Church's youth is the story of her whole life. She weathered the storms of heresies, which attempted to crush every phase of Catholic truth. She survived the ravages of the barbarian invasions, indeed she absorbed and Christianized them, and so founded medieval civilization. If the Church were ever to perish, she certainly would have been overwhelmed in those times when all ancient civilization went crashing down. She did not perish. She will not. History has repeated itself over and over; the Church has time and again beaten off the same attacks, yet still lives on, growing ever younger, ever vibrant. Her life is divine and the guardians of the power bestowed by Christ have ever protected and nourished it.

In the light of these considerations, what this hierarchical constitution is to the Church can now be readily understood. It is the government of the Church resident in the Pope and Bishops united to him. It means more than mere government, however, for, coming from the divine Founder, it is therefore a sacred rule. It refers to the Shepherds of the Flock of Christ invested with the power to sanctify, to preach, to teach, and to direct the flock. It is that element of the Church's nature fashioned to safeguard its very life—its unity in Faith, its realization of its very purpose, the salvation of all men. Including the forgiveness of sins, the transmission of grace through the Sacraments, the preaching and guardianship of the mysteries of Faith, it is truly Christ's own power, entrusted to His chosen instruments. Realizing all this, the words of St. Ignatius unfold their true import: "We must look upon the bishop as we would upon Christ Himself."

We can comprehend, too, more accurately the full meaning of Archbishop O'Boyle's installation. He comes to Washington to exercise his authority in the sacred government of the Church. Certainly his duty is an important one, weighted with responsibility. To him *Dominicana* offers its prayerful wishes that his rule will be blessed with abundant fruit for the sanctification of the faithful and the "building up of the Church of Christ."

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