

FOREWORD

WHEN our Lord Jesus Christ questioned the Apostles regarding the opinions of the people about His identity, they replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:14-19).

The history of the Catholic Church reflects the fulfillment of the prophecy made by Jesus that He would build upon the foundation of Peter a new Israel, that is, the Church. The building of the new Israel on Peter is a direct development of Jesus' own role in the mystery of the Kingdom of God. The teaching of Jesus reveals that it is God the Father who introduces His Kingdom into history and intangibly brings it to fruition among human beings through His power, and who will perfect it in His own good time.

"The gates of the netherworld"—that is, death's realm—here signify the power or force of evil responsible first for physical death and then for the far greater disaster of spiritual death. The new People of God will be enabled to overcome both forms of death to achieve their entrance into the glory of the final Kingdom.

In using the words "My church" Jesus was speaking of the society of people who were to join together in His name and serve God as He had commanded them to do. Peter himself would eventually die, as must all human beings, but the Church of Christ was destined to last "until the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus Christ is the irreplaceable foundation of His Church (1 Corinthians 3:11). Precisely for that reason He foresaw the necessity of joining indissolubly to Himself a visible rock whereby it would be recognized that to belong to the Church of Peter is to belong to Christ Himself.

Jesus promised that death, which overcomes all else, would be powerless against the Church that He founded, because as its founder He had made it immortal. The gift of immortality naturally includes the further gift of indefectibility, and indefectibility implies infallibility, for to be in error while making the claim of teaching in the name of God is to be conquered by error.

In the words of the Second Vatican Council:

This is the unique Church of Christ that in the Creed we avow as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. After His Resurrection our Savior handed the Church over to Peter to be shepherded, commissioning him and the other Apostles to propagate and govern it. And it was this Church that He erected for all ages as "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15) (*Constitution on the Church*, no. 8).

It is of the essence of the Church to be both human and Divine, visible and yet endowed with invisible resources, eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it. The Church is all these things in such a way that in it the human is directed and subordinated to the Divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 2).

It is my sincere hope that these pages dealing with the highlights of the history of the Catholic Church will help Catholics to appreciate to the greatest extent possible the gift of faith that God has given to them.

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(30-476)

PREVIEW

In imitation of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Christians of the early Church strove to achieve the highest degree of holiness.

In the first century that goal was frequently attained, in good part owing to the fact that conversions were often effected by those who had actually lived with Jesus or witnessed His miracles and listened to His sermons. Furthermore, the feeling persisted in those days that the Parousia or Second Coming of Christ was imminent, and the thought of the end of the world served as a powerful impetus to sanctity.

As the years and centuries passed, however, the original fervor tended to wane. Fortunately the era of monasticism appeared and counteracted the pernicious influence of paganism.

DURING the first three centuries of the existence of the Church, the life of the Christians was one of intense spirituality as they were forced to confront the seductions of a pagan world and benefited from the graces merited by the blood of countless martyrs.

The early Christians were acutely aware that they were living temples of the Holy Spirit. As a result they tended to revere their bodies and to nourish the virtue of purity. They also practiced charity to an extraordinary degree, particularly by mutual hospitality, caring for the sick and the poor, and holding regular meetings for prayer and worship.

1— Signs of Holiness

Extraordinary Signs

In instituting the Church our Blessed Lord's design was that the holiness of its members would be a beacon of light to all human beings and lead them to glorify the Father. And from its

earliest days the radiant sanctity of the Church shined upon the world by extraordinary signs and by the holiness of the Christian life.

Many of these extraordinary signs of holiness were recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Peter cured a cripple (Acts 3:1-10). Stephen, the first martyr of the Church, was full of grace and power as he worked great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8). Philip cured many paralyzed and performed exorcisms (Acts 8:7). St. Paul cured a lame man, lame from birth, who had never walked (Acts 13:9-12). St. Peter restored the young boy Eutychus to life (Acts 20:9-12). St. Paul cured a man of face cloths or aprons that had touched St. Paul (Acts 19:11-12). St. Paul cured a man of a fever (Acts 28:8).

Moreover, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians those holy people in the early Church who exercised charisms or miraculous powers who exercised them in the first Christian assemblies.

Ordinary Signs

In addition to these extraordinary signs, there were many ordinary signs in the everyday lives of the faithful which were shown in various devotions and places.

From the very beginning the Mother of God was given special honor in the Church. Images of our Lady were found in the catacombs dating back to the second century. Her intercessory powers were recognized by the fact that as many basilicas were dedicated to her.

The angels were also venerated by the Church. The devotion to the martyrs can be traced back as far as the first century. Mass was celebrated over the tombs of the martyrs in the catacombs, and later on the custom developed of placing the martyrs in the altars of churches.

Pilgrimages to the Holy Land and to the tombs of the martyrs, as well as devotional processions became common in the fourth and fifth centuries.