



THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH II

From the beginning of Our Lord's public life, He spoke of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. He selected certain men, banded them together, instructed them, and formed them into the nucleus of a Church. He commanded them to call other men and women into this society. He demanded that they preach His doctrine and administer His Sacraments to the whole world; and, in order to insure His society against hazards of anarchy, He provided it with authority—an authority that was centered in the Apostles, but especially in St. Peter: "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 to the kingdom of heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind upon earth, it shall also be bound in heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, it shall be loosed also in heaven" (Matt. 16:18---I used the Douay-Rheims translation here). The sign of membership would consist in faith and baptism: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

These facts prove that Christ established a Church, which was to be a congregation of men and women joined together in the profession of a common faith and by the reception of His Sacraments under the authority of St. Peter and his successors.

It is also evident that Christ established but ONE Church. In appointing St. Peter as head, He said "My Church" – not MY Churches. He pointed to the ideal of absolute unity: "There shall be but one fold and one shepherd" (John 10:16). He prayed for unity: "That they shall all be one as Thou Father in me and I in Thee" (John 17:21). He warned against the disasters of disunity in that Church: "If a house be divided against itself that house cannot stand" (Mark 3:25). His parables dealing with the nature of the Church stressed its essential oneness. Paul, who knew the mind of Christ so well, described the ideal of unity in the memorable words: "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

The facts of the Gospel which recount the history of the Church's establishment by Christ prove that He founded a Church and that this Church was according to His design, to be one – not many. A person who wished to belong to the one Church Christ established must search for it. Every sign post (mark) should be scrutinized. We should not be careless in this important matter because the Church of Jesus Christ is important. He demanded that we respect it when He said, "He that heareth you, heareth Me; he that despises you, despises Me" (Luke 10:16). In stressing the necessity of His Church, Our Lord warned people against ignoring it: "If he will not hear the Church, let him be to thee as a heathen and a publican" (Matt. 18:17).

An investigation into the true Church of Christ demands that we plunge into the problem of the many Christian Churches in order to inspect their lineage, distill their claims, and test their credentials until we finally discover the one which bears evidence that it is the Church which Christ established. When we find it, we are obliged to accept it and to join our forces with it by professing its faith, by receiving its Sacraments, and by uniting ourselves to it under the spiritual authority instituted by Christ. The task is not an easy one. It demands a cool, rational, factual, and intellectually honest approach. We can look at the problem from two main ways: the one, by way of history; the other by way of the nature of the Church.

The historical approach considers the Church from the viewpoint of time. A simple question is asked: which Christian Church can trace its lineage back to the days of Christ? In the second approach existing Churches are compared to the Church as Christ founded it. The question is asked: which Church possesses the essential characteristics which marked the Church that Christ established.

The historical approach is the easiest way in which to begin our search for the one true Church established by Christ. It clearly points to the fact that the Catholic Church of our day stretches back in unbroken succession to the days of Christ. The long list of the heads of the Catholic Church, known as the Popes, can be traced directly back to St. Peter, who was given his office by Christ. Other Christian Churches cannot point to a similar direct ancestry from Christ. At the most, they claim an indirect ancestry which comes through the Catholic Church by declaring themselves to be branches of the historic Church of Christ. More next week.