

Why is the Catholic Church the One True Church, and What Does That Mean?

By Jim Penrice

We'll begin with the premise that Jesus founded only one Church, which is clearly shown in the Gospels. Jesus wills that all believers be one, not divided into many factions:

“And now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are.... As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one.” (John 17:11, 18-23)

Disrupting this unity and causing division among believers is contrary to the will of Christ. Paul warned the Corinthians about such divisions:

I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. For it has been reported to me about you, my

brothers, by Chloe's people, that there are rivalries among you. I mean that each of you is saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided? (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

Because Christ wants all believers to be one, he founded one Church to which he wants all to belong.

In founding this one Church, Jesus distinguished between those who hold conflicting human interpretations of who he is, and those to whom God reveals the truth, and who pass along divine revelation rather than human interpretation. From Matthew 16:17-19:

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." [This is human interpretation, and grasps part of the truth, but not all.]

He said to [the Apostles—from the Greek *apostolos*, meaning one who is sent with the full authority of the one who sent 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, [i.e., this is not human interpretation] but my heavenly Father. [Rather, it is divine revelation.]

Because Simon Peter has proven to be an instrument capable of receiving divine revelation and passing it on instead of human interpretation, Jesus continues:

And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, [singular, not plural—“that they be one”] and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to 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.”

Peter will bind and loose as a divinely chosen instrument—not of his own human whim, for Jesus established earlier in this passage the limits of human reason and interpretation. Rather, Jesus is establishing Peter as his instrument on earth. He later commissions the rest of the Apostles as his instrument by sending his very presence into them:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And when he had said this he breathed on them and said to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (John 20:21-23)

Since only God can forgive sins, Jesus has established Peter and the Apostles as his instruments on earth, the one body through whom he will teach, govern and sanctify, through whom all his grace will flow to those on earth.

Early in the life of the Church Peter demonstrates that he truly is the instrument of divine instruction, during the circumcision controversy in Acts 15. Here this uneducated fisherman overturns a 1500 year-old law given by God through Moses—and everyone accepts the teaching, even if it clashes with their interpretation, because they understand that Jesus speaks through his instrument, Peter:

“After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, ‘My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.’... The whole assembly fell silent.” (Acts 15:7, 12)

Jesus promised he would always work through Peter and the Apostles and their successors until the end of time...

“Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:20)

...and so we are obligated to listen to them and obey.

“You should know how to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth.” (1 Timothy 3:15)

The Decree on Ecumenism from the Second Vatican Council said this:

“The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communities present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but they differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided. Certainly, such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature.”

Joan of Arc put it this way:

“About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they are just one thing, and we shouldn’t complicate the matter.”

From this we can draw the following conclusions:

Jesus Christ is the only Savior, the only one who can reconcile all humanity to God the Father. (If he is not, he went through Good Friday for nothing. To accept that there are other ways to the Father would be to call Jesus a fool for submitting to death on the cross.)

He established one Church to be his presence on earth—through which he himself governs, teaches, sends his grace and saves.

This one Church—Jesus' instrument on earth—subsists in the one Church he established upon Peter and the Apostles, what is called today the Catholic Church. It is in this Church which Jesus wills that all shall be one.

We are not one. Believers are divided among many denominations. This is opposed to the will of Christ as expressed in John 17 and the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1. We are called to continually work towards the unity Christ wills by inviting all people into the fullness of communion in his Church.

In the meantime, while the fullness of what Jesus wills for all people is found only in full communion with his one Church, elements of his truth and grace can be found elsewhere—in other Christian denominations, in other religions which seek true goodness, and in the hearts of non-believers who seek true goodness. Anyone seeking true goodness is actually seeking Christ—however they may name it—and Christ can ensure they eventually find him and enjoy full communion with him.

But the fullness of that communion, and the fullest way to live on this earth, subsists in communion with the Catholic Church.

Why enjoy partial life in Jesus during our earthly life when we can have his fullness?!