

The Visible Church

by J.H. Newman

The visible Church is a real, existing entity that is a congregation of faithful men where the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are duly ministered.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 1:22, 1 Timothy 3:15

Topics: "Church Unity", "Sacramental Theology"

Description

J.H. Newman discusses the visible Church of CHRIST as a congregation of faithful men where the pure Word of GOD is preached and the Sacraments are duly administered, reflecting the One Holy Catholic Church diffused throughout the world. The Article describes the Catholic Church as a society of the faithful, as seen in various historical references from St. Clement of Alexandria to Pope Pius II. It emphasizes the Church's unity and the ministration of the Word and Sacraments as essential characteristics.

Transcript

Art. xix.â--"The visible Church of CHRIST is a congregation of faithful men (cÂcetus fidelium), in the which the pure Word of GOD is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered, according to CHRISTÂ'S ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same."

This is not an abstract definition of a Church, but a description of the actually existing One Holy Catholic Church diffused throughout the world; as if it were read, "The Church is a certain society of the faithful," &c. This is evident from the mode of describing the Catholic Church familiar to all writers from the first stages down to the age of this Article. For instance, St. Clement of Alexandria says, "I mean by the Church, not a place, but the congregation of the elect." Origen: "The Church, the assembly of all the faithful." St. Ambrose: "One congregation, one Church." St. Isidore: "The Church is a congregation of saints, collected on a certain faith, and the best conduct of life." St. Augustin: "The Church is the people of God through all ages." Again: "The Church is the multitude which is spread over the whole earth." St. Cyril: "When we speak of the Church, we denote the most holy multitude of the pious." Theodoret: "The Apostle calls the Church the assembly of the faithful." Pope Gregory: "The Church, a multitude of the faithful collected of both sexes." Bede: "The Church is the congregation of all saints." Alcuin: "The Holy Catholic Church,--in Latin, the congregation of the faithful." Amalarius: "The Church is the people called together by the ChurchÂ's ministers." Pope Nicolas I.: "The Church, that is, the congregation of Catholics." St. Bernard: "What is the Spouse, but the congregation of the just?" Peter the Venerable: "The Church is

called a congregation, but not of all things, not of cattle, but of men, faithful, good, just. Though bad among these good, and just among the unjust, are revealed or concealed, yet it is called a Church." Hugo Victorinus: "The Holy Church, that is, the university of the faithful." Arnulphus: "The Church is called the congregation of the faithful." Albertus Magnus: "The Greek word Church means in Latin convocation; and whereas works and callings belongs to rational animals, and reason in man is inward faith, therefore it is called the congregation of the faithful." Durandus: "The Church is in one sense material, in which divers offices are celebrated; in another spiritual, which is the collection of the faithful." Alvarus: "The Church is the multitude of the faithful, or the university of Christians." Pope Pius II.: "The Church is the multitude of the faithful dispersed through all nations." [And so the Reformers, in their own way, for instance, the Confession of Augsburg. "The one Holy Church will remain for ever. Now the Church of Christ properly is the congregation of the members of Christ, that is, of saints who truly believe and obey Christ; though with this congregation many bad and hypocrites are mixed in this life, till the last judgment." vii. And the Saxon: "We say then that the visible Church in this life is an assembly of those who embrace the Gospel of Christ and rightly use the Sacraments," &c. xii.]

These illustrations of the phraseology of the Article may be multiplied in any number. And they plainly show that it is not laying down any logical definition what a Church is, but is describing, and, as it were, pointing to the Catholic Church diffused throughout the world; which, being but one, cannot possibly be mistaken, and requires no other account of it beyond this single and majestic one. The ministration of the Word and Sacraments is mentioned as a further note of it. As to the question of its limits, whether Episcopal Succession or whether intercommunion with the whole be necessary to each part of it,--these are questions, most important indeed, but of detail, and are not expressly treated of in the Articles.

This view is further illustrated by the following passage from the Homily for Whitsunday:--

"Our Saviour C

HRI^ST departing out of the world unto His FATHER, promised His Disciples to send down another COMFORTER, that should continue with them for ever, and direct them into all truth. Which thing, to be faithfully and truly performed, the Scriptures do sufficiently bear witness. Neither must we think that this COMFORTER was either promised, or else given, only to the Apostles, but also to the universal Church of CHRIST, dispersed through the whole world. For, unless the HOLY GHOST has been always present, governing and preserving the Church from the beginning, it could never have suffered so many and great brunts of affliction and persecution, with so little damage and harm as it hath.

And the words of CHRIST are most plain in this behalf, saying, that "the SPIRIT of Truth should abide with them for ever;" that "He would be with them always (He meaneth by grace, virtue, and power) even to the world's end." "Also in the prayer that He made to His FATHER a little before His death, He maketh intercession, not only for Himself and His Apostles, but indifferently for all them that should believe in Him through their words, that is, to wit, for His whole Church.

Again, St. Paul saith, "If any man have not the SPIRIT of CHRIST, the same is not His." Also, in the words following: "We have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." Hereby, then it is evident and plain to all men, that the HOLY GHOST was given, not only to the Apostles, but also to the whole body of CHRIST'S congregation, although not in like form and majesty as He came down at the feast of Pentecost. But now herein standeth the controversy,--whether all men do justly arrogate to themselves the HOLY GHOST, or no.

The Bishops of Rome have for along time made a sore challenge thereto, reasoning with themselves after this sort: 'The HOLY GHOST,' say they, 'was promised to the Church, and never forsaketh the Church. But we are the chief heads and the principal part of the Church, therefore we have the HOLY GHOST for ever: and whatsoever things we decree are undoubted verities and oracles of the HOLY GHOST.' That ye may perceive the weakness of this argument, it is needful to teach you, first, what the true Church of CHRIST is, and then to confer the Church of Rome therewith, to discern how well they agree together.

The true Church is an universal congregation or fellowship of GOD'S faithful and elect people, built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, JESUS CHRIST Himself being the head cornerstone. And it hath always three notes or marks, whereby it is known: pure and sound doctrine, the Sacraments ministered according to CHRIST'S holy institution, and the right use of ecclesiastical discipline. This description of the Church is agreeable both to the Scriptures of GOD, and also to the doctrine of the ancient Fathers, so that none may justly find fault therewith.

Now, if you will compare this with the Church of Rome, not as it was in the beginning, but as it is at present, and hath been for the space of nine hundred years and odd; you shall well perceive the state thereof to be so far wide from the nature of the Church, that nothing can be more."

This passage is quotes, not for all it contains, but in that respect in which it claims attention, viz. as far as it is an illustration of the Article. It is speaking of the one Catholic Church, not of an abstract idea of a Church which may be multiplied indefinitely in fact; and it uses the same terms of it which the Articles does of "the visible Church." It says that "the true Church is an universal congregation or fellowship of GOD'S faithful and elect people." &c., which as closely corresponds to the cœtus fidelium, or "congregation of faithful men" of the Article, as the above descriptions from Fathers or Divines do. Therefore, the cœtus fidelium spoken of in the article is not a definition, which kirk, or connexion, or other communion maybe made to fall under, but the enunciation of a fact.

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