



THE CHURCH

Christ's Faithful: Hierarchy, Laity, Consecrated Life

Texts from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

CHRIST'S FAITHFUL

"The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfil in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one." (Code of Canon Law, can 204) (871)

A threefold diversity of ministry – hierarchy, laity, consecrated life

"In the Church there is diversity of ministry but unity of mission.

- To the *apostles and their successors* Christ has entrusted the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in his name and by his power.
- But the *laity* are made to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God."
- Finally, "from both groups [hierarchy and laity] there exist Christian *faithful who are consecrated to God* in their own special manner and serve the salvific mission of the Church through the profession of the evangelical counsels." (Code of Canon Law, can 207) (873)

THE HIERARCHICAL CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH

Why the ecclesial ministry?

Christ is himself the source of ministry in the Church. He instituted the Church. He gave her authority and mission, orientation and goal:

"In order to shepherd the People of God and to increase its numbers without cease, Christ the Lord set up in his Church a variety of offices which aim at the good of the whole body. The holders of office, who are invested with a sacred power, are dedicated to promoting the interests of all who belong to the People of God... so that they may attain to salvation." (Vatican II, the Church) (874)

"How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?" (Rom 10:14-15) No one - no individual and no community - can proclaim the Gospel to himself: "Faith comes from what is heard (Rom 10:17)". No one can give himself the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel. The one sent by the Lord does not speak and act on his own authority, but by virtue of Christ's authority; not as a member of the community, but speaking to it in the name of Christ. No one can bestow grace on himself; it must be given and offered. This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorised and empowered by Christ. From him, bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty ("the sacred power") to act in *persona Christi Capitis*; deacons receive the strength to serve the people of God in the *diaconia* of liturgy, word and charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate. The ministry in which Christ's emissaries do and give by God's grace what they cannot do and give by their own powers, is called a "sacrament" by the Church's tradition. Indeed, the ministry of the Church is conferred by a special sacrament. (875)

Hierarchical ministry – its character as service, collegial, and personal

Intrinsically linked to the sacramental nature of ecclesial ministry is *its character as service*. Entirely dependent on Christ who gives mission and authority, ministers are truly "slaves of Christ", in the image of him who freely took "the form of a slave" for us... they must freely become the slaves of all. (876)

Likewise, it belongs to the sacramental nature of ecclesial ministry that it have a *collegial character*. In fact, from the beginning of his ministry, the Lord Jesus instituted the Twelve as "the seeds of the new Israel and the beginning of the sacred hierarchy". Chosen together, they were also sent out together, and their fraternal unity would be at the service of the fraternal communion of all the faithful: they would reflect and witness to the communion of the divine persons. For this reason every bishop exercises his ministry from within the episcopal college, in communion with the bishop of Rome, the successor of St. Peter and head of the college. So also priests exercise their ministry from within the presbyterium of the diocese, under the direction of their bishop. (877)

Finally, it belongs to the sacramental nature of ecclesial ministry that it have a *personal character*. Each one of Christ's ministers is called personally: "You, follow me" in order to be a personal witness within the common mission, to bear personal responsibility before him who gives the mission, acting "in his person" and for other persons: "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."; "I absolve you..." (878)

The episcopal college and its head, the Pope

When Christ instituted the Twelve, "he constituted [them] in the form of a college or permanent assembly, at the head of which he placed Peter, chosen from among them". Just as "by the Lord's institution, St. Peter and the rest of the apostles constitute a single apostolic college, so in like fashion the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are related with and united to one another" (Vat II, the Church). (880)

The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the 'rock' of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church, and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. "The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head" (Vat II, the Church). This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope. (881)

The *Pope*, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful". "For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered." (Vat II, the Church) (882)

“The college or body of bishops has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head”. As such, this college has “supreme and full authority over the universal Church; but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff”. (Vatican II, the Church) (883)

“The college of bishops exercises power over the universal Church in a solemn manner in an ecumenical council.” But “there never is an ecumenical council which is not confirmed or at least recognised as such by Peter's successor”. (Vatican II, the Church) (884)

“The individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches” (Vat II, the Church). As such, they “exercise their pastoral office over the portion of the People of God assigned to them”, assisted by priests and deacons. But, as a member of the episcopal college, each bishop shares in the concern for all the Churches. They extend it especially to the poor, to those persecuted for the faith, as well as to missionaries who are working throughout the world. (886)

The teaching office

Bishops, with priests as co-workers, have as their first task “to preach the Gospel of God to all men”, in keeping with the Lord's command. They are “heralds of faith, who draw new disciples to Christ; they are authentic teachers” of the apostolic faith “endowed with the authority of Christ”. (Vatican II, the Church) (888)

In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility. By a “supernatural sense of faith” the People of God, under the guidance of the Church's living Magisterium, “unfailingly adheres to this faith”. (Vatican II, the Church) (889)

The mission of the Magisterium is linked to the definitive nature of the covenant established by God with his people in Christ. It is this Magisterium's task to preserve God's people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error... it is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates. To fulfil this service, Christ endowed the Church's shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals. The exercise of this charism takes several forms: (890)

“The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful - who confirms his brethren in the faith - he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals... The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter's successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium”, above all in an Ecumenical Council. When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine “for belief as being divinely revealed”, and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions “must be adhered to with the obedience of faith”. This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself. (892)

Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles, teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and, in a particular way, to the bishop of Rome, pastor of the whole Church, when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a “definitive manner”, they propose in the exercise of the ordinary Magisterium a teaching that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals. To this ordinary teaching the faithful “are to adhere... with religious assent”, which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it. (Vatican II, the Church) (892)

The sanctifying office

The bishop is “the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood”, especially in the Eucharist which he offers personally or whose offering he assures through the priests, his co-workers. The Eucharist is the centre of the life of the particular Church. The bishop and priests sanctify the Church by their prayer and work, by their ministry of the word and of the sacraments. (893)

The governing office

“The bishops, as vicars and legates of Christ, govern the particular Churches assigned to them by their counsels, exhortations and example, but over and above that also by the authority and sacred power” which indeed they ought to exercise so as to edify, in the spirit of service which is that of their Master. (Vatican II, the Church) (894)

“The power which they exercise personally in the name of Christ, is proper, ordinary and immediate, although its exercise is ultimately controlled by the supreme authority of the Church” (Vatican II, the Church) But the bishops should not be thought of as vicars of the Pope. Their authority must be exercised in communion with the whole Church under the guidance of the Pope. (895)

The Good Shepherd ought to be the model and ‘form’ of the bishop's pastoral office. Conscious of his own weaknesses, “the bishop... can have compassion for those who are ignorant and erring. He should not refuse to listen to his subjects whose welfare he promotes as of his very own children... The faithful... should be closely attached to the bishop as the Church is to Jesus Christ, and as Jesus Christ is to the Father”. (cf St Ignatius of Antioch) (896)

IN BRIEF

- **“Among the Christian faithful by divine institution there exist in the Church sacred ministers, who are also called clerics in law, and other Christian faithful who are also called laity.” In both groups there are those Christian faithful who, professing the evangelical counsels, are consecrated to God and so serve the Church's saving mission. (934)**
- **To proclaim the faith and to plant his reign, Christ sends his apostles and their successors. He gives them a share in his own mission. From him they receive the power to act in his person. (935)**
- **The Lord made St. Peter the visible foundation of his Church. He entrusted the keys of the Church to him. The bishop of the Church of Rome, successor to St. Peter, is “head of the college of bishops, the Vicar of Christ and Pastor of the universal Church on earth”. (936)**
- **The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, “supreme, full, immediate and universal power in the care of souls”. (937)**
- **The Bishops, established by the Holy Spirit, succeed the apostles. They are “the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches”. (938)**

