

Catechism of the Council of Trent

Pius V



OVERVIEW

The Roman Catholic Church called the Council of Trent in 1545 in response to criticisms by Martin Luther and other religious reformers. The council continued its work over the next two decades and eventually clarified all doctrines that had been challenged by the Protestants. These findings were set down in the famous *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, which was published in 1566. The first part of the text of Article IX, on the Catholic Church, follows.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why is the accurate definition of the word “*Ecclesia*” (church) so important?
 - Why might this concern with accurate definitions of terms have contributed to the division of the Protestant Church?
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ARTICLE IX.

"I BELIEVE THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH."

It will not be difficult to estimate the care with which the pastor should explain this ninth Article to the faithful, if we attend to the following important considerations: that, as S. Augustine observes, the prophets spoke more plainly and explicitly of the Church than of Christ, foreseeing that on this a much greater number may err and be deceived, than on the mystery of the incarnation: after ages were to behold wicked men, who, imitative as the ape, that would fain pass for one of the human species, arrogate to themselves exclusively the name of Catholic, and, with effrontery as unblushing as it is impious, assert that with them alone is to be found the Catholic Church—Secondly, that he, whose mind is deeply impressed with this truth, will experience little difficulty in avoiding the awful danger of heresy; for a person is not to be called a heretic so soon as he errs in matters of faith: then only is he to be so called, when, in defiance of the authority of the Church, he maintains impious opinions, with unyielding pertinacity. As, therefore, so long as he holds what this Article proposes to be believed, no man can be infected with the contagion of heresy; the pastor should use every diligence, that the faithful, knowing this mystery, and prepared against the wiles of Satan, persevere in the true faith.

But this Article hinges upon the preceding one, for, having already established that the Holy Ghost is the source and giver of all holiness, we here confess our belief in the Church which he has endowed with sanctity.

As the word Ecclesia (church) which is borrowed from the Greek, has been applied, since the preaching of the Gospel, to sacred things, it becomes necessary to explain its meaning. The word Ecclesia (church) means a calling forth; but writers afterwards used it to signify a council or assembly. Nor does it matter whether the word is used in reference to the professors of a true or a false religion: in the Acts of the Apostles it is said of the people of Ephesus, that, when the town-clerk had appeased a tumultuous assemblage, he said: "and if you inquire after any other matter, it may be decided in a lawful assembly" (Ecclesia): The Ephesians, who were worshippers of Diana, are thus called by the Apostle, "a lawful assembly" (Ecclesia): Nor are the Gentiles only, who know not God, called a church or assembly, (Ecclesia): the councils of wicked and impious men are also, sometimes, called by the same name: "I have hated the assembly (Ecclesiam) of the malignant," says the Psalmist, "and with the wicked I will not sit." However, in ordinary Scripture-phrases, the word was afterwards used to designate the Christian commonwealth only, and the assemblies of the faithful; that is of those who were called by faith to the light of truth, and the knowledge of God; who, forsaking the darkness of ignorance and error, worship the living and true God in piety and holiness, and serve him from their whole hearts. In a word, "the Church," says S. Augustine, "consists of the faithful dispersed throughout the world."

Under the word "Church" are comprehended no unimportant mysteries, for, in this "calling forth," which the word Ecclesia (church) signifies, we at once recognize the benignity and splendour of divine grace, and understand that the Church is very unlike all other commonwealths: they rest on human reason and human prudence; this, on the wisdom and councils of God; for he called us by the interior inspiration of the Holy Ghost, who, through the ministry and labour of his pastors, and preachers, penetrates into the hearts of men.

Moreover, from this calling we shall better understand the end which the Christian should propose to himself, that is, the knowledge and possession of things eternal, when we reflect why the faithful, living under the law, were of old, called a synagogue, that is, a congregation: as S. Augustine observes, "they were so called, because, like cattle which usually go together, they looked only to terrestrial and transitory things;" and hence the Christian people are called a church, not a synagogue, because, despising terrestrial and transitory things, they aspired only to things heavenly and eternal.

Many other names, replete with mysteries, are employed, by an easy deflection from their original meaning, to designate the Christian commonwealth: by the Apostle it is called "the House and Edifice of God," when writing to Timothy, he says, "If I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth." It is called a house because it consists, as it were, of one family, governed by one Father, and enjoying a community of all spiritual goods. It is also called the flock of Christ, of which

he is "the door and the shepherd." It is called the spouse of Christ: "I have espoused you to one husband," says the Apostle to the Corinthians, "that I may present you a chaste virgin to Christ:" and writing to the Ephesians, he says: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ, also, loved the Church, and delivered himself up for it:" and, also, speaking of marriage, he says: "This is a great sacrament, but I speak in Christ and in the Church." Finally, the Church is called the body of Christ, as may be seen in the epistles of St. Paul to the Ephesians, and Colossians: appellations each of which has considerable influence in exciting the faithful to prove themselves worthy the boundless clemency and goodness of God, who chose them to be his people.

Having explained these things, it will be necessary to enumerate the several component parts of the Church, and point out their difference, in order that the faithful may the better comprehend the nature, properties, gifts, and graces of the Church, the object of God's special predilection; and unceasingly offer to the divine majesty the homage of their grateful praise. The Church consists principally of two parts, the one called the Church triumphant, the other, the Church militant. The Church triumphant is that most glorious and happy assemblage of blessed spirits, and of those souls who have triumphed over the world, the flesh, and the devil, and, now exempt from the troubles of this life, are blessed with the fruition of everlasting bliss. The Church militant is the society of all the faithful still dwelling on earth, and is called militant, because it wages eternal war with those implacable enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil. We are not, however, hence to infer that there are two Churches: they are two constituent parts of one Church; one part gone before, and now in the possession of its heavenly country; the other, following every day, until, at length, united to its invisible head, it shall repose in the fruition of endless felicity.

The Church militant is composed of two classes of persons, the good and the bad, both professing the same faith and partaking of the same sacraments; yet differing in their manner of life and morality. The good are those who are linked together not only by the profession of the same faith, and the participation of the same sacraments; but also by the spirit of grace, and the bond of charity: of whom St. Paul says: "The Lord knoweth who are his." Who they are that compose this class we, also, may remotely conjecture; pronounce with certainty we cannot. Of this part of his Church, therefore, our Lord does not speak, when he refers us to the Church, and commands us to hear and to obey her: unknown as is that portion of the Church, how ascertain with certainty, whose decision to recur to, whose authority to obey? The Church, therefore, as the Sacred Scriptures, and the writings of the holy men who are gone before us, testify, includes within her fold the good and the bad: and this interpretation is sustained by the Apostle, when he says: "There is one body and one spirit." Thus understood, the Church is known, and is compared to a city built on a mountain, and seen from every side. As all must yield obedience to her authority, it is necessary that she may be known by all.

That the Church is composed of the good and the bad we learn from many parables contained in the Gospel: thus, the kingdom of heaven, that is, the Church militant, is compared to a net cast into the sea, to a field in which tares were sown with the good grain, to a threshing floor on which the grain is mixed up with the chaff, and, also, to ten virgins, five of whom were wise, and five foolish; and, long before, we trace a figure and striking resemblance of the Church in the ark of Noah, which contained not only clean, but also unclean animals. But, although the Catholic faith uniformly and truly teaches that the good and the bad belong to the Church, yet the same faith declares that the condition of both is very different: the wicked are contained in the Church, as the chaff is mingled with the grain on the threshing floor, or as dead members, sometimes, remain attached to a living body.

Hence, there are but three classes of persons excluded from her pale, infidels, heretics and schismatics, and excommunicated persons; infidels, because they never belonged to, and never knew the Church, and were never made partakers of any of her sacraments; heretics and schismatics, because they have separated from the Church, and belong to her, only as deserters belong to the army from which they have deserted. It is not, however, to be denied, that they are still subject to the jurisdiction of the Church, inasmuch as they are liable to have judgment passed on their opinions, to be visited with spiritual punishments, and denounced with anathema. Finally, excommunicated persons, because excluded by her sentence from the number of her children, belong not to her communion until restored by repentance. But with regard to the rest; however wicked and flagitious, it is certain that they still belong to the Church; and of this the faithful are frequently to be reminded, in order to be convinced that, were even the lives of her ministers debased by crime, they are still within her pale, and, therefore, lose no part of the power, with which her ministry invests them.

But portions of the Universal Church are, also, usually called a Church, as when the Apostle mentions the Church at Corinth, at Galatia, at Laodicea, at Thessalonica. The private houses of the faithful, he, also, calls Churches: the Church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila he commands to be saluted: and in another place, he says: "Aquila and Priscilla, with their domestic Church, salute you much." Writing to Philemon, he makes use of the same word, in the same sense. Sometimes, also, the word Church is used to signify the prelates and pastors of the Church: "If he will not hear thee," says our Lord, "tell it to the Church." Here the word Church means the authorities of the Church. The place in which the faithful assemble to hear the word of God, or for other religious purposes is, also, called a Church; but, in this Article, the word is specially used to signify the good and the bad, the governing and the governed.

The distinctive marks of this Church are also to be made known to the faithful, that thus they may be enabled to estimate the extent of the blessing, conferred by God on those who have had the happiness to be born and

educated within her pale. The first mark of the true Church is described in the Creed of the Fathers, and consists in unity: "My dove is one, my beautiful one is one." So vast a multitude, scattered far and wide, is called one, for the reasons mentioned by St. Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism." This Church has, also, but one ruler and one governor, the invisible one, Christ, whom the Eternal Father "hath made head over all the Church, which is his body;" the visible one, him, who, as legitimate successor of Peter the prince of the Apostles, fills the apostolic chair.

That this visible head is necessary to establish and preserve unity in the Church is the unanimous accord of the Fathers; and on this, the sentiments of St. Jerome, in his work against Jovinian, are as clearly conceived as they are happily expressed: "One," says he, "is chosen, that, by the appointment of a head, all occasion of schism may be removed;" and to Damascus, "Let envy cease, let the pride of Roman ambition be humbled: I speak to the successor of the fisherman, and to the disciple of the cross. Following no chief but Christ, I am united in communion with your Holiness, that is, with the chair of Peter. I know that on that rock is built the Church. Whoever will eat the lamb outside this house is profane: whoever is not in the ark of Noah shall perish in the flood." The same doctrine was, long before, established by S. S. Irenæus, and Cyprian: the latter, speaking of the unity of the Church, observes: "The Lord said to Peter, 'I say to thee Peter! thou art Peter: and upon this rock I will build my Church:' he builds his Church on one; and although, after his resurrection, he gave equal power to all his Apostles, saying, 'As the Father hath sent me, I also send you. Receive ye the Holy Ghost;' yet, to display unity, he disposed, by his own authority, the origin of this unity, which had its beginning with one, &c." Again, Optatus of Milevis says: "It cannot be ascribed to ignorance on your part, knowing, as you do, that the episcopal chair, in which, as head of all the Apostles, Peter sat, was, first, fixed by him in the city of Rome; that in him alone may be preserved the unity of the Church; and that the other Apostles may not claim each a chair for himself; so that, now, he, who erects another, in opposition to this single chair, is a schismatic and a prevaricator." In the next place, S. Basil has these words: "Peter is made the foundation, because he says: 'Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God:' and hears in reply that he is a rock; but although a rock, he is not such a rock as Christ, for in himself Christ is, truly, an immovable rock, but Peter, only by virtue of that rock; for God bestows his dignities on others: He is a priest, and he makes priests; a rock, and he makes a rock: what belongs to himself, he bestows on his servants." Lastly, S. Ambrose says: "Should any one object, that the Church is content with one head and one spouse, Jesus Christ, and requires no other; the answer is obvious; for, as we deem Christ not only the author of all the Sacraments, but, also, their invisible minister; (he it is who baptises, he it is who absolves, although men are appointed by him the external ministers of the sacraments) so has he placed over his Church, which he governs by his invisible spirit, a man to be his vicar, and the minister of his

power: a visible Church requires a visible head, and, therefore, does the Saviour appoint Peter head and pastor of all the faithful, when, in the most ample terms, he commits to his care the feeding of all his sheep; desiring that he, who was to succeed him, should be invested with the very same power of ruling and governing the entire Church."

The Apostle, moreover, writing to the Corinthians, tells them, that there is but one and the same Spirit who imparts grace to the faithful, as the soul communicates life to the members of the body. Exhorting the Ephesians to preserve this unity, he says, "Be careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." As the human body consists of many members, animated by one soul, which gives sight to the eyes, hearing to the ears, and to the other senses, the power of discharging their respective functions; so, the mystical body of Christ, which is the Church, is composed of many faithful. The hope, to which we are called, is, also, one, as the Apostle tells us in the same place: we all hope for the same consummation, eternal life. Finally, the faith, which all are bound to believe and to profess, is one: "Let there be no schisms amongst you;" and baptism, which is the seal of our solemn initiation into the Christian faith, is, also, one.

Another distinctive mark of the Church is holiness, as we learn from these words of the prince of the apostles: "You are a chosen generation, a holy nation." The Church is called holy, because she is consecrated and dedicated to God; as other things, such as vessels, vestments, altars, when appropriated and dedicated to the worship of God, although material, are called holy; and, in the same sense, the first-born, who were dedicated to the Most High God, were, also, called holy.

It should not be deemed matter of surprise, that the Church, although numbering amongst her children many sinners, is called holy; for as those who profess any art, although they should depart from its rules, are called artists; so the faithful, although offending in many things, and violating the engagements, to the observance of which they had solemnly pledged themselves, are called holy, because they are made the people of God, and are consecrated to Christ, by baptism and faith. Hence, S. Paul calls the Corinthians sanctified and holy, although it is certain that amongst them there were some, whom he severely rebuked as carnal, and, also, charged with grosser crimes. She is, also, to be called holy, because, as the body, she is united to her head, Christ Jesus, the fountain of all holiness, from whom flow the graces of the Holy Spirit, and the riches of the divine bounty S. Augustine interpreting these words of the prophet: "Preserve my soul because I am holy," thus admirably expresses himself: "Let the body of Christ boldly say, let also, that one man, exclaiming from the ends of the earth, boldly say, with Christ his head, and under Christ his head; I am holy: for he received the grace of holiness, the grace of baptism and of remission of sins:" and a little after: "If all Christians and all the faithful, having been baptized in Christ, have put him on, according to these words of the Apostle: 'as many of you as have been

baptized in Christ, have put on Christ:’ if they are made members of his body, and yet say they are not holy, they do an injury to their head, whose members are holy." Moreover, the Church alone has the legitimate worship of sacrifice, and the salutary use of the sacraments, by which, as the efficacious instruments of divine grace, God establishes us in true holiness; so that to possess true holiness we must belong to this Church. The Church, therefore, it is clear, is holy, and holy, because she is the body of Christ, by whom she is sanctified, and in whose blood she is washed.

The third mark of the Church is, that she is Catholic, that is, universal; and justly is she called Catholic, because, as S. Augustine says: "She is diffused by the splendour of one faith from the rising to the setting sun." Unlike republics of human institution, or the conventicles of heretics, she is not circumscribed within the limits of any one kingdom, nor confined to the members of any one society of men; but embraces, within the amplitude of her love, all mankind, whether barbarians or Scythians, slaves or freemen, male or female. Therefore it is written, "Thou hast redeemed us to God in thy blood, out of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and hast made us to our God, a kingdom." Speaking of the Church, David says: "Ask of me, and I will give thee the Gentiles for thy inheritance, and the utmost parts of the earth for thy possession:" and also, "I will be mindful of Rahab and of Babylon knowing me:" and "*This* man and *that* man is born in her:" To this Church, "built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets," belong all the faithful who have existed from Adam to the present day, or who shall exist, in the profession of the true faith, to the end of time; all of whom are founded and raised upon the one corner stone, Christ, who made both one, and announced peace to them that are near, and to them that are afar. She is, also, called universal, because all who desire eternal salvation must cling to and embrace her, like those who entered the ark, to escape perishing in the flood. This, therefore, is to be taught as a most just criterion, to distinguish the true from a false Church.