

COURSE OUTLINE: Catholic Identity: Celebrate the Difference

Presented by Father Christopher M. Walsh

Session Three: A Catholic Understanding of the Church

Song: **The Church's One Foundation** (Samuel Stone & Samuel Wesley)

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
she is his new creation by water and the Word.
From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride;
with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth;
one holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.

Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,
she waits the consummation of peace forevermore;
till, with the vision glorious, her longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.

Reading from Sacred Scripture: Acts 4: 32-35

Moment of Quiet Reflection

The Lord's Prayer

Review and Discussion of Pre-Reading Material

- USCCB Adult Catechism, Chapter 10 & 11 allow us to begin our session on the Church
- Question #3 on page 121: How does the understanding of the Church as Body of Christ shape your faith?
- Question # 2, page 137: How is the hierarchy valuable in your growth in faith? What sources of spiritual strength do you receive from the Church's structure: parish, diocese, universal Church?
- Share any other insights you gained from reading these Chapters.

Lecture

- Let's put our conversation in context: Being Catholic means that we understand our humanity in a unique way, that we understand God in a unique way and that we understand His Church in a unique way.
- In order to understand the Church fully we have to go back to the Old Testament. As Catholics we believe that the existence of Israel, the call of the Jewish people, was a remote preparation for the Church.
- Christ founded the Church
 - Jesus is born
 - Jesus was born as the God-Man to usher in a New Covenant through the shedding of his blood for all people so that the division that existed because of sin would be ended and man would once again be whole.
 - This new Covenant is meant for all people.
 - Thus, in his public ministry – by preaching and teaching, by calling the apostles and sharing with them power – Jesus founded the Church.
- Why do we need a Church?
 - It is what the Father wanted!
 - Jesus challenged the thinking of his day – the Church does the same today. The Church continues the ministry of Jesus
- The New Testament (NT) Church
 - Which came first – the New Testament or the Church?
- The Church is One
 - It is one because its founder is one – Father, Son & Holy Spirit.
 - There was one flock and one shepherd.
 - There was a visible unity to the Church of the NT.
- The Church is Holy
 - It is also clear that the NT Church was marked by holiness.
 - Holiness means “set apart”; in particular set apart for God – for God's Kingdom. The Church is holy because of her union with God – we did nothing to earn holiness – it is a gift!
 - Part of the holiness of the early Church was that some lived as celibates for the sake of the kingdom.
 - The Church celebrated the saints.
- The Church is Catholic
 - “Catholic” means universal.
 - The NT Church did not belong to an exclusive group of people – it was for everyone and by design it was to always welcome new people.

- The Church is Apostolic
 - In his writing St Paul was very clear that the Church was built on the foundation of the apostles; that the Church was to preserve the traditions and teachings it had received and had them on to others.
 - The Church does not have the power or the ability to change this deposit of faith in order to become more “modern”. The early Church understood this – if they were going to make changes, there was a way to do it to ensure that it truly was the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - The early Church was also apostolic in that like the apostles – they continued to go out and preach and baptize and raise up new Christians.

(10 minutes– recap what has been said thus far plus 15 minutes for share and break)

- “Protestant” Understanding of the Church
 - Protestant Churches are “Sola Scriptura” (focused on Scripture alone, without Tradition). The Protestant Reformers taught that the individual believer, with the help of the Holy Spirit, is able to interpret the meaning of Sacred Scripture. This is in contrast to the Catholic Church teaching that while the Holy Spirit assists an individual to understand the Scriptures, one must also be guided by the Tradition of our Church, which includes the writings of saints and scholars and official teachings of the Church through Popes and Councils.
 - Where does Sola Scriptura lead? On the practical level, while Protestants reject Tradition, in fact they do develop a tradition of sorts as well: their pastor, the founders of their denomination with their writings, the scholars and theologians of their brand of Christianity. In the end, each individual gets to decide what a text of Scripture means, what is true, what is the plan of God (each person is “The Pope” in a way). With this thinking, it is no wonder that there are more than 30,000 denominations.
- The Church Christ founded subsists fully in the Catholic Church: Creed (what we believe), Sacraments (how we celebrate), Bishops (apostolic succession and foundation), Charity
- The Church exists beyond this world as well in the Communion of Saints: we are the Church Militant (still fighting the fight, day by day by day); we are united with the Church Suffering (those who have died and whose souls are being purified in heaven) as well as the Church Triumphant (the souls who now share in victory with the Lord).

Discussion Questions

- What insights have you gained that will be useful in your own faith life? For use in the classroom?
- How can the Church (at the level of your parish or our Archdiocese) “market” itself better so that all people can better understand our Church?
- What do you need clarified regarding the Church?

Closing Comments and Prayer

Carlo Carretto was an Italian Catholic writer. After returning to Italy after spending many years as a monk with the Bedouin in the Sahara, he wrote this at the end of his book, *I Sought and I Found*:

How much I must criticize you, my church and yet how much I love you!
You have made me suffer more than anyone and yet I owe you more than I owe anyone. I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence. You have given me much scandal and yet you alone have made me understand holiness. Never in the world have I seen anything more obscurantist, more compromised, more false, yet never have I touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful. Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face – and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your sure arms! No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you. Then too – where should I go? To build another church? But I cannot build another church without the same defects, for they are my own defects. And again, if I were to build another church, it would be my church, not Christ's church. No. I am old enough. I know better!

- Our Queen Mother: We strive for the faith of Mary; she taught the apostles how to receive the Holy Spirit as they prepared for Pentecost and she can teach us as well. She is the model Christian who allowed God to work in her life in ways that she did not yet understand or appreciate.
- Closing Prayer: The Memorare

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection,
implored thy help, or sought thine intercession was left unaided.
Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother;
to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions,
but in thy mercy hear and answer me.
Amen.