

THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF ST. PAUL

OPENING PRAYER:

The apostles, an unshaking rock, built an indestructible building: through power they received from their Lord, they uprooted paganism and built the Church. O disciples of Truth, who crowned and brought up their building, and prepared and built temples of the Spirit in the souls of the faithful!

II. CHURCH ORGANIZATION

We have seen how St. Paul envisioned, in images varying from “brethren” to “Bride of Christ,” the identity of the Church. But the Church is not simply a spiritual reality, describable in terms of physical images. The Church is also, like her Lord, incarnate – the Church is a bodily, earthly reality. This was clear from the first moment after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in the upper room:

And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

- Acts 2:2-4

The Holy Spirit works in a way that is physical – here specifically visible (the appearance of the tongues of fire) and audible (the speaking in tongues). That was the case at the beginning of the Church, and it is the case today.

Our first question today, therefore, is: What is the visible structure of the Church in the writings of St. Paul? This visible structure of service, authority and obedience will show us the inner-workings of the Spirit in the Church at his time. In other words, examining how all the parts of the body of Christ work and interact will show us how the Holy Spirit, sometimes called the “Soul of the Church,” works. After this, our second question will be about the interaction of St. Paul with St. Peter, and discuss its implications today.

A. Apostles, Etc.

Whereas in the first lecture we were able to find a progression of ideas and images in St. Paul’s writings, we are not here talking about theological speculation, but rather about the actual situation of the Church, and as Catholics, we may trace some idea or metaphor to one author or another, but the actuality of the Church must trace always back to Christ and to the Holy Spirit.

This section, therefore, will discuss four topics: first, the reality of authority within the Church in the writings of St. Paul; second, images used to understand this authority; third, the concept of Apostleship; fourth, the other divisions of authority and service in the Church – bishops, priests and deacons.

Authority is a concept that is essentially alien to our times. We today obey others either because of fear (as we perhaps obey the speed limit for fear of getting a ticket) or gain (as we may obey our bosses to get a paycheck); we seldom obey, in our modern culture, because it is the right thing to do. In other words, the authority is an authority because of a threat or because of a bribe, not because it is a valid authority that should be obeyed. Not so for St. Paul. Even political authority, for him, is something that is (or can be) godly:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

- Romans 13:1-7

To be subject to authority is, for St. Paul, natural and right on the political sphere. But the same is the case with the authority within the Church. In his first letter, St. Paul makes this clear:

“But we beg you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”

- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

The faith is not, as some believe, an individual quest for the Lord, apart from all others in the Church. It is a reality that is, like all truly human realities, social. **We do not believe on our own; we believe within the Church.** Moreover, we are to respect the authority within the Church, which St. Paul refers to explicitly: those who **labor** among you, **are over** you, and **admonish** you.

The second letter to the Corinthians discusses the reason and purpose of this authority: it is not arbitrary or meant to be abused; nor is it something that someone earns; rather it is something given by Christ to certain men (what type and what they are called will be discussed later) for a particular purpose:

“For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I shall not be put to shame.”

- 2 Corinthians 10:8

“I write this while I am away from you, in order that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority which the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.”

- 2 Corinthians 13:10

The responsibility for building up the Church is basically another name for authority within the Church. That is, it is impossible for one who has been given the commission by Christ (how this commission is given is a later question) to obey Christ and fulfill their duty unless they are obeyed. The Church cannot function without obedience to Church authority. That is why Paul advises other leaders within the Church to take this authority very seriously, and to make sure others do as well. He says to Timothy, a young leader beginning his ministry:

“Command and teach these things. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.”

- 1 Timothy 4:11-12

And to Titus, more explicitly:

“Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”

- Titus 2:15

The authority of the Church and within the Church is, then, very real for St. Paul.

What **images** does St. Paul use to describe this authority? We will, again, be surprised to find just how contemporary St. Paul is with the Catholic Church, and how freely he uses (and perhaps creates) metaphors that have become common use and second nature to us today. Beginning again with his first letter, we find St. Paul describing himself in these terms:

“For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.”

- 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12

Amazingly, the most common term used today to refer to a leader within the Church (“**father**”) is the very earliest one in its history, making an appearance in the first-written book of the Bible. A similar concept, but one somewhat strange to our ears, is found again in Galatians:

“My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!”

- Galatians 4:19

Here St. Paul describes himself not as a father (which he usually does, as we will see) but as **a mother**, giving birth to a child! The father image returns in 1 Corinthians and Philemon:

“For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”

- 1 Corinthians 4:15

“I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.”

- Philemon 10

From the family image of the father taking responsibility for his children, St. Paul moves to the image of a **soldier** within an army and a **worker** in a field, two images that are found together more often than not. Moreover, we find also the image of the **shepherd** in this context:

“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

- 1 Corinthians 3:9

“Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?”

- 1 Corinthians 9:7

“Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”

- 2 Timothy 2:3

“It is the hardworking farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.”

- 2 Timothy 2:6

Finally, Paul moves from these images of labor and nature, and the image of spiritual battle, to a purely political, international image – that of the **ambassador** on behalf of God:

“So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”

- 2 Corinthians 5:20

“I, Paul, an ambassador...”

- Philemon 9

The very effort Paul puts forward in describing who he and the other leaders of the Church are shows his deep concern that they are taken seriously and, most importantly, obeyed as representatives of God.

Next we come to the question of the meaning of **Apostleship**. The Greek root of this word, *apostolos*, is derived from the verb *apostello*, “to send off,” and so an apostle is someone who is sent (the Aramaic word *shlyha* has the same derivation). Thus, one claiming to be an apostle is claiming that he was sent, in the context of the New Testament, by Jesus Christ. The importance of this group in St. Paul’s writings begins to become clear in 1 Corinthians, though the message is a complex one. The first time apostles are mentioned by name (aside from his typical greeting “Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle...”) is in the fourth chapter:

“For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-dad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the dregs of all things.”

- 1 Corinthians 4:9-13

Comparing this to what Paul says later in the same letter, we begin to have a more complete idea of what an apostle is:

“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts.”

- 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

On the one hand, apostles have the highest commission, the noblest task, the “highest gift;” on the other hand, they are “last of all,” condemned to death, fools, weak, dishonored, hungry, naked, homeless, exhausted, mocked, persecuted, the very garbage of the world! Though Paul never knew Christ during his earthly ministry before his death and resurrection, he understood perfectly his words: **“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.”** (Matthew 20:26). As usual, the all-encompassing dynamic is the good of the Church, for this is the way it must be for the Church to function:

“And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and

knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.”

- Ephesians 4:11-16

Perhaps the best way to understand the apostles' role as “great yet lowly” is in the context of the image of the building, the temple of God, which is, in Paul's words:

“...built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”

- Ephesians 2:20

The apostles are lowly because they are the foundation; they are important because all else in the Church is built upon them.

Finally, how does Paul understand the role of **Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons**? The earliest mention of another named position in the leadership of the Church is in the letter to the Philippians:

“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.”

- Philippians 1:1

It is noteworthy that, in the Scriptures and the early Church, it is bishops and deacons (*episkopoi* and *diakonoi* in Greek, respectively) are generally named together. The Greek word translated “**bishop**” literally means “overseer,” and that translated “**deacon**” means “server,” so the functions of these two positions are relatively clear already: bishops are meant to watch over their flocks while deacons are to assist them.

Paul describes the functions of bishops and deacons in the first letter to Timothy, where the topic at hand is Church administration:

“The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task.”

- 1 Timothy 3:1

This is followed by a description of the qualifications of one who would be a bishop: irreproachable, the husband of one wife (celibacy for bishops apparently being a later development), temperate, sensible, etc. Similar qualifications are given for deacons:

“Deacons, likewise, must be serious...”

- 1 Timothy 3:8

And for the **deaconesses** who served in the early Church universally, and in the Church of the East till recent times:

“The women, likewise, must be serious...”

- 1 Timothy 3:11

Finally, **priests** are mentioned, but there must be a caveat here. The root of the English word “priest” is the Greek word *presbyteros*, which is used in the following quotes where it is translated, literally, as “elder:”

“Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you.”

- 1 Timothy 4:14

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching...”

- 1 Timothy 5:17

The problem is that the English word “priest” also translates the Hebrew word *kohen* (and the Greek *hieros*) which was a priest in the sense of the one who offered sacrifices on behalf of the people in the Old Testament. The Greek word *presbyteros* simply means “old man,” and is hence translated “elder” literally, and does not imply sacrifices or liturgical worship in its own meaning. The Aramaic translates this all faithfully in the words *qashysha* (“elder”) and *kahna* (“priest”). The association between the two realities of “elders” and “priests” is something that apparently happened later in the Church, since in the letter to the Hebrews it is Christ who is alone the “High Priest,” (Greek *arch-hieros*), and in the letters of Peter we are all a “holy priesthood.” In Paul the question does not seem to come up at all.

What does occur, however, is an association between these states of leadership in the Church and its rituals, which is certainly a step in that direction. The ritual referred to is ordination, the laying on of hands:

“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands...”

- 1 Timothy 5:22

B. Paul & Peter

The final question in this segment of the course is about the relationship between St. Paul and St. Peter. This is of the highest relevance today because of ecumenical concerns: **how should other leaders in the Church relate to the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of St. Peter?**

Before this, however, we should ask another question: how did Paul view his own apostleship? We saw briefly above how he advised Timothy not to be hasty in “the laying on of hands,” that is, of ordination, and how Timothy himself was appointed in this way. But how was St. Paul appointed? Did someone “ordain” him in this sense of the word? If we look to the Acts of the Apostles, we can find hints of this during the time of his conversion, when the disciple named Ananias laid his hands on him that he may regain his sight and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). This passage is not totally applicable, of course, because this all occurred before Paul’s baptism. In any case, our concern here is mainly with the writings of St. Paul themselves. **How did Paul see himself in relation to the other leaders of the Church?** How was he an apostle but not one of the Twelve?

His first claim regarding himself is a bold one, written in a letter that is bold overall, that to the Galatians. Regarding the question of whether he was given his apostleship by someone in the Church or not, he begins his letter thus:

“Paul an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia...”

- Galatians 1:2

Paul claims here to be chosen and appointed an apostle the same way the others were: directly by Jesus Christ. This is very much in harmony with the way Matthias was picked after Judas was no longer counted among the twelve, since the choice between him and Barsabbas was made by lot, so that the Lord would show which one he wanted to take the place of Judas (Acts 1:23-26). This choice was also “neither from men nor through men,” as Paul claims, and so the reality of the apostles being chosen directly by the Lord, as opposed to bishops, who were chosen either by the apostles or by other bishops (see 1 Timothy 5:22), is brought into the foreground. **Paul’s claim here is that he is just as much an apostle as any one of the Twelve**, no more and no less. The fact that he was chosen by the Resurrected Lord and the Twelve either by the pre-Resurrection Lord or by lot makes no difference in their apostleship.

His confidence in his appointment notwithstanding, Paul still seems strained when discussing his authority as an apostle, since it was apparently doubted due to his life before meeting the risen Christ:

“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the Church of God violently and tried to destroy it.”

- Galatians 1:13

In other places he shows explicitly that there are some who doubt his apostleship:

“If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.”

- 1 Corinthians 9:2

In the same letter, there seems to be no sign of the self-confidence he showed in the letter to the Galatians:

“... and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God.”

- 1 Corinthians 15:5-9

This is not to show any contradiction in his thought: though he is the least of the apostles, and unworthy even of the name apostle, he is one, no matter who may doubt it. On the one hand, he sees his former life persecuting the Church as making him the smallest member of the Church:

“To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given...”

- Ephesians 3:8

On the other hand, he has no doubts as to his equality with any other member of the Church, even the greatest of the apostles. He says as much, twice in the same letter:

"I think that I am not in the least inferior to these superlative apostles."

- 2 Corinthians 11:5

"For I am not at all inferior to these superlative apostles, even though I am nothing."

- 2 Corinthians 12:11

As confident as he is, Paul is still quite aware of the doubts that others have about him, to the point where he twice, in different letters, needs to deny that he is lying. This first occurs in Galatians, where he explains his opening greeting to the letter and his claim to be an apostle directly chosen by Christ:

*"But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, **before God, I do not lie!**) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea; they only heard it said, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.""*

- Galatians 1:16-23

*"For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle (**I am telling the truth, I am not lying**), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth."*

- 1 Timothy 2:7

We will return to the first quote later to discuss why he eventually did go to Jerusalem and visited Cephas / Peter, of all the apostles. The point to make here is that, despite his previous persecution of the Church and the doubts of certain members of the Church in apostolic times, **Paul is indeed an apostle, equal to the Twelve**. In the tradition of the Church, in fact, St. Paul is often referred to as THE Apostle (for example, in the Fathers of the Church and in St. Thomas Aquinas).

It is the teaching of the Gospels that St. Peter was considered the head of the apostles (cf. Matthew 10:2, 16:18, etc.); to the personality of St. Paul, and especially in his situation, such leadership finds itself expressed in his writings only in subtle ways. This is especially the case because it was so important for him to show his readers that the Twelve, as coming before him in time, were not superior to him as such, and so we have the language of his "non-inferiority to the super-apostles" seen above. We will see, however, that even in the most dramatic situation, St. Paul affirms the primary authority of Peter among all the apostles, himself included.

The majority of times Paul mentions Peter occur in the letter to the Galatians. The first one significant to our question is in the second chapter:

"... I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles)..."

- Galatians 2:7

Here an equality is affirmed between Paul and Peter – in the same way that Peter was entrusted with the Gospel to the Jews, Paul was entrusted with the Gentiles, and their equality is based on the fact that the same God is working through both. This is a remarkable passage for two reasons: first, it affirms the Catholic teaching that, in regard to the agency of God and our instrumentality, we are all equally tools in his hands; but what is more interesting is that, of all the Twelve, Peter is named as having been entrusted with a commission. **Paul is here clearly acknowledging Peter's preeminence over the other eleven.**

This is in fact a re-affirmation of something Paul has already implied in his letter to the Galatians. We have already seen this passage, but now we examine Peter's role in it:

"But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and

again I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother."

- Galatians 1:16-18

Amazingly, at the very moment Paul is trying his hardest to prove his equality with all the other apostles, that is, to show that he was appointed directly by Christ just as they were, he still admits the fact, albeit with hesitation, that he had to meet Peter over all the other apostles, mentioning James only in passing. Again, **not only is Peter seen as the head of the Twelve, but now even Paul, in some way, reports to him:** he made the trip to Jerusalem, in fact, in order to visit him, and none of the others.

The most revealing passage in Galatians, and indeed in the whole Pauline corpus regarding our question, comes directly after the one quoted above. Paul, characteristically, at first casts aside the lofty reputation of those apostles who came before him, and then relates an important meeting between himself and Peter:

"And from those who were reputed to be something (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) -- those, I say, who were of repute added nothing to me; but on the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles), and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do. But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

- Galatians 2:6-15

That Peter "stood condemned" and Paul "opposed him to his face" shows, without a doubt, that Peter was (and his successor is) a human being capable of making mistakes. But the issue here is not one of teaching. In fact, we know from the Acts of the Apostles that it was Peter to whom it was first revealed that the dietary laws of the old covenant no longer applied (cf. Acts 10:13). **Peter's faith was true and unerring; it was pressure from the "party of James" that pushed him to act as if the old laws still applied, and it was this insincerity that was corrected, rightly, by Paul.**

But the main point for our question is this: Paul felt the need to correct Peter because he knew he was the head, the example towards which all others were looking. He did not correct James or any of the other apostles; he did not make an effort to convince the people who were around Peter, though they were the source of the problem. He went to Peter because Peter had the authority.

Though the understanding of the Church is that the Pope is the successor of both Peter and Paul (since they both died in Rome), this episode in the writings of Paul gives us a model to follow in our interactions with all Church authority, and especially that of the Roman Pontiff. Paul never thought he could correct Peter's faith or his teaching; on the contrary, the truth that Paul was insisting on was first revealed to Peter. **Paul's correction was regarding his personal actions, and it was done out of a concern for the whole Church,** not out of rebellion or disobedience.

The theme of obedience, with which we began this section, is also our conclusion. Paul forcefully reminded Peter that he, above all, must be obedient to the Church as to the Lord. Let his example remind us also of this same obedience.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Blessed are you, O Rome renowned, O City of Kings, handmaid of the heavenly Bridegroom! Two true preachers were settled in you as in a harbor: Peter, the head of the Apostles, and Paul, the one chosen and sent, and the builder of the churches of Christ. By their prayers may we find refuge, that mercies and compassion may be granted our souls.

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