

# THE CHURCH: *the People of God*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 737 – 741, 811 – 962)

## A. The Holy Spirit

- *"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord the giver of Life ... He has spoken through the prophets. We believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church..."*

The Creed, from which these lines are taken, proposes only three articles of faith from which all the others hang.

1. "We believe in one God - the Father, the Almighty..."
2. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ..."
3. "We believe in the Holy Spirit..."

The passages that follow these statements are simply explanations of what they mean. The article on the Holy Spirit is the broadest ranging, covering baptism, absolution, the resurrection, the promise of paradise and, perhaps surprisingly, the authority of the Church. In the English translation of the Creed we say *"We believe in One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic Church"* which suggests that we put the same level of faith in the Church as we invest in God. This is because of a less-than-perfect translation. The Latin original is more precise: it says, *"We believe One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic Church"*. This is clearer: we profess that we believe what the Church teaches.

How can we say this of a Church that is full of members who are all capable of the most appalling crimes and sins? How can we dare to trust what any human being has to say concerning God? Who is to say that such people are not having us on when they teach us about Christ or the Law of God? Or that they are simply mistaken: well meaning but wrong? This is the question the Archbishop of Canterbury raises in his Millennium Message - it is the ancient problem of authority: who can be trusted to teach truthfully about God and salvation? At the Reformation, the reformers said, categorically, NO ONE. No priest or bishop has a direct line to God so none can be trusted. Instead, God speaks to each individual Christian through the medium of prayer and the Scriptures. This seems to make sense until you think carefully: if absolutely no one can be trusted to teach truthfully about God, then this applies to everyone - including those who teach it! In other words, Martin Luther, for instance, taught that you couldn't trust any preacher/priest/Pope etc. and that you could only trust the Bible: if he's right, then we can't even trust the teachings of Martin Luther!

This position doesn't work because those who teach it have to teach that even what they say is prone to error and mistake.

SO - did Christ intend that his followers go through life, trying to follow him but always unsure if they were doing the right thing, believing what he really taught, OR did he understand that we would need constant guidance from an authoritative source? From the first century, Christians have believed the latter: the Church God founded is the instrument he uses to carry on teaching with authority. In order to ensure that the Church preserves the truth, even though filled with sinful people, God fills the Church with his Holy Spirit – this is the miracle of Pentecost: the coming of the Spirit on the apostles turned a group of individuals into the Church. It is the presence of the Spirit which preserves the Church from teaching error as if it were truth, and so in the Creed, the text on the Church appears in the third article, the Holy Spirit, and so is not just dependant on it, but is an explanation of it. "We put our faith in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God" - a fine thought, but what does it mean specifically? How do we trust him? Is it just a matter of personal prayer and the inner voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in my heart?

From the time of St. Paul, the Church has said that God deals with his whole people, and he addresses them, in the Holy Spirit as a Body - the Body gathered to his only Son: we call this Body 'the Church'. The Church is more than just a collection of individuals - it is the mystical Body of the Son of God: it is filled with the Holy Spirit through the sacraments. For this reason, St. Paul speaks of the Church as a "mystery" of God (especially in his Letter to the Ephesians). The Holy Spirit teaches and guides us through the visible Church: personal private inspiration as well as the inner voice of prayer are essential elements of this, but we need to remember *the Spirit who speaks to us in personal prayer is the same and identical Spirit who speaks to the whole universal Church through the Sacred Scriptures and through the solemn teaching office of the Church - the bishops of the Church united under the leadership & guidance of the Holy Father, the successor of St. Peter.* If there is any contradiction between what we feel we are led to do by the Spirit and what the Church has already solemnly defined in its moral or dogmatic teaching, then we should go back and ask if it was in all truth the voice of the Holy Spirit we heard. Why do this? Because of the third article of the Creed - we believe absolutely that when the Catholic Church, through the bishops in union with the Holy Father, proclaims with a single voice the nature of the faith of Jesus Christ, then what we hear is directly inspired by the Holy Spirit and because the Spirit will never present error as truth, we know that whatever the Church declares under the inspiration of the Spirit must be truthful and binding on us all.

This doesn't mean that everything said by the Pope or by our bishop is inspired by the Holy Spirit any more than I can be absolutely certain that the things which occur to me have originated in God: if the Pope was to try to predict the weather, God would not be bound to ensure that that weather took place! Popes, bishops, priests and the lay faithful have all sinned and are in need of salvation through Christ. Those who make up the Magisterium (the Pope, and the bishops) are all fallible human beings who can make mistakes. Nevertheless, in spite of this weakness in them, *we can be certain that when the official teaching office of the Church (the 'Magisterium'), which resides in the bishops united under the Pope, teaches on a matter of faith or morals which concerns the whole Church, then they are protected by the direct*

*inspiration of the Holy Spirit from teaching error as if it was truth.* We must remember that they are still human beings - they are not immune from error themselves: it is Christ, the Truth itself, who teaches only the truth, BUT we believe that Christ stands by his promise to be with us until the end of time and to protect his Body from teaching error as truth. If this were not the case, then you could be sure of the truth of nothing of what is told you about Jesus, about his faith or about the Father.

1. As Catholics, we only trust as infallible what God has revealed about himself. What man is capable of revealing about God without the direct intervention of God is neither interesting nor trustworthy.
2. God reveals himself through the human mediation of Christ: both in the historical person of Jesus, and in the mystical Body of Christ, through history - the Church.
3. In the Church, Christ's Body, the Holy Spirit is active in ways occasionally dramatic (see the Acts of the Apostles) but often quiet and not obviously miraculous (see the sacraments). The Holy Spirit is called "the Soul" of the Church because as the soul gives life to a human body, so the presence of the Spirit gives Christ's life to Christ's mystical Body, the Church (hence the Creed's assertion that the Spirit is "*the Lord, the giver of Life*"). This, though apparently easy to accept, is often rejected by non-Catholics: it means that the Church is not just human. The Church is also divine: the Body of Christ, the residence of the Holy Spirit, called together by God, united by God, sustained by God, renewed by God and finally, in the Magisterium, taught by God. This is why Catholics put such great store by the teaching not just of Christ and the apostles, but also of their successors - the Pope and bishops.
4. God has founded and nourished the Church to be the means through which to continue revealing his nature and salvation to the world. He accomplishes this through the Holy Spirit which has been poured out on the Church and who has taken residence deep in the souls of those joined by the Spirit to Christ in Baptism. The Church is the 'Spirit-animated' community, and through it, the Holy Spirit continues to bring Christ into the world to continue his saving mission. Through the Holy Spirit, the Church is also the guardian of that "deposit of faith", ensuring not only that it is proclaimed to the world, but that it is preserved from corrupt interpretation or error. This is all the theology of St. Paul who, when writing to Timothy, urges him to remain true to the message of faith which St. Paul handed to him - where is that to be found? Or (in St. Paul's words) what is the "*pillar and foundation of truth*"? He answers definitively and without hesitation "*the Church of the living God*" (1 Tim. 3:15).
5. What God has revealed through human ministry is still God's revelation, even though human beings proclaim it. He is its author and therefore it is to be trusted implicitly through an act of faith. If this seems a lot to ask of the disciple, remember that we already accept the same thing with regard to the Scriptures: they are God's words, communicated to us through human agents (St. Paul, the four Evangelists, the Prophets etc.)

## **B. The members of the Church - Christ's Body.**

By tradition, we divide the members of the Church into three groups. It is very important for us to remember that the Church is a great deal bigger than the group of people we can see. Whenever we speak about the Church, we need to remember that all three parts of the Church are involved, not merely the visible ones!

### ***B.1. The Church Militant: the Church on earth.***

This group involves the total membership of God's Church who live today. Entry, and therefore membership of the Church is achieved through Baptism into Christ himself through immersion into or the pouring of water in the name of the Trinity - *"I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."* This we can demonstrate has been the unchanging practise of the Catholic Church since the end of the first century, and we must assume that it goes back further, to the practise of the Apostles (one of whom, St. John, lived until about 90 A.D. anyway!). In the last 400 years or so, a number of communities which separated themselves from the Catholic Church have attempted to administer Baptism in new ways: some have rejected water in favour of other liquids while others, such as Unitarians who reject the idea of the Trinity, insist on baptising in the name of Jesus Christ alone. The Church has always held firm to the belief that Christ's words *"Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* (Mt. 28:19) are to be kept to as the essential formula of Baptism. As a result, the Catholic Church does not recognise the Baptism of anyone who is immersed or washed in the name of Jesus alone.

On the other side, however, the Church recognises as valid all Baptisms which are performed with flowing water (by pouring or immersion), whether done by clergy or not, whether done by Catholics or not, and even whether done by Christians or not (provided the intention in Baptism was what the Church understands by Baptism). Thus, membership of the Church includes properly baptised Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals etc.

These Christians are members - but not full members of the Church: full membership of the Church is a matter of believing the fullness of the faith of Christ (i.e., all the essential elements of the teaching Christ gave to the apostles) and of being fully incorporated into the visible community of those disciples who hold that faith. This fullness is found in the Catholic Church alone, which includes those Orthodox communities who accept the authority of the Holy Father, the Bishop of Rome. The communion which a confirmed and practising Catholic has with another Catholic is complete, and enjoys agreement on every important matter of faith: it is also at one with the faith Jesus Christ taught - and therefore we receive the sacrament of that communion in faith together: the sacrament of Holy Communion at Mass. Other non Catholic Christians share with us a number, if not many, of the core teachings of Christ: but since there is not yet full agreement between us, there is not full communion with one another in matters of faith - and therefore we can not share with them the sacrament of that full communion: the Blessed Sacrament at Mass. Nonetheless, they are members of Christ's Church, although not in a complete way, and the closer they come to us in sharing the dogmas of the faith, the closer they are to the full teaching of Christ, as revealed through the life and teaching of Christ, the

contents of sacred scripture and the on-going teaching of Christ through the Magisterium.

The Church Militant means all baptised Christians on earth. The Catholic Church today numbers some 1 billion human beings, one sixth of the world's population: they are your family. There are three essential states in the Church Militant - the Lay Faithful, the Hierarchy (ordained) and the Consecrated (religious life).

### **B.1.a. - The Lay Faithful**

- *Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, (1964), ch.2 "The People of God".*
- *Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, Christifideles Laici, (1987).*
- *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, cc 897-913.*

This term includes all those not in Holy Orders and not belonging to a religious state approved by the Church (C.C.C. 897) - that means the vast majority of Catholic Christian people. By Baptism, the Lay Faithful share fundamentally in the life of God by being incorporated into Christ. They are thus a "messianic people" (*Lumen Gentium 9*), filled with the Holy Spirit because they belong to the Spirit-filled body - Christ. They therefore are marked with the seal of God, claimed as his own and adopted by the Father as sons and daughters. Most people live out the lay state in the vocation of marriage, but we should not forget the long and holy tradition in the Church of voluntary celibacy (those who do not seek ordination, or entry into a monastery or convent but want to live their lives as single people out of the choice not to marry).

The laity possess a unique vocation, entrusted to them by Christ, which only they can fulfil and which may never be taken from them by the other vocations of the Church. This is to seek to become holy by "*engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will*" (*Lumen Gentium 31, C.C.C. 898*). They are entrusted with the mission of taking the Gospel into the secular world and through their work and life in the world, to re-make & re-fashion it according to the will and Law of God as revealed in Christ, the Sacred Scriptures and the teaching of the Church (the Holy Spirit). They are strengthened for this mission by the sacraments (esp. Confirmation and the Mass), instructed by the living Word of God in the Scriptures and the Church's teaching. Without their active involvement in converting the world, the work of the clergy is severely limited: this is why evangelisation is entrusted not to the clergy but to the entire People of God (C.C.C 905, also *Christifideles Laici*).

All that Christ is, they share in, in a particular way, through their Baptism:

1. Christ is Priest: the Lay Faithful are priest-like through the sacrifices they offer for the salvation of the world. These come in many forms - prayer, parenthood, and their work for the good of the Church - if they are offered & accomplished in the Holy Spirit. (C.C.C 901-2)
2. Christ is Prophet: the Lay Faithful are prophetic not in foreseeing the future but in true prophesy - proclaiming the will of God in our present age. This

means by proclaiming Christ in the fullness of his teaching and drawing all peoples to him. (C.C.C. 904-5)

3. Christ is King: the Lay Faithful enjoy the royal freedom of the children of God from sin - if they are willing to co-operate with the work of God within them. As Kings, the Lay Faithful are promised liberation from the chains of sin & evil. They are Kings by promoting true justice and proclaiming the freedom of the moral law of God. (C.C.C. 908-9)

### **B.1.b The Hierarchy**

- See Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, (1964), ch.3 "The Church is hierarchical".
- See the Catechism of the Catholic Church, cc 874-896

The threefold ordained ministry of the Church (namely bishop, priest & deacon) was instituted by Christ himself as the primary means through which he would continue to shepherd, instruct and sanctify his flock (C.C.C. 1536, 1554). They receive a sacred power through which Christ acts in them: the ordained minister

- *"does not speak & 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 ... From Him, they receive the mission and faculty ("the sacred power") to act in persona Christi Capitis (i.e., in the person of Christ the Head). ... Christ's emissaries do and give by God's grace what they cannot do & give by their own powers."* (C.C.C. 875)

The bishops, united to the Holy Father continue to teach the faith to all nations in direct succession to the apostolic college established by Christ (*Lumen Gentium* 22). What they proclaim as a single body under the leadership of Peter (the Pope) is according to Christ himself, the words and message of the Son of God. Christ instructed his disciples *"Whoever hears you hears me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me"* (Lk 10:16). When the Magisterium of the Church speaks, Christ tells us that it is God who is speaking. Together, the Pope and bishops teach, govern and sanctify the Church (C.C.C. 1558). Around them, assisting them in the fulfilment of their ministry, they have gathered the other two sacred orders - priesthood and the diaconate.

- *These three orders of ordained ministry within the Church will be dealt with in their own section of the course, entitled "Holy Orders".*

### **B.1.c. - The Consecrated Life**

All Christians are called to live their lives according to the *evangelical counsels*, i.e., poverty, chastity and obedience - according to their state (C.C.C. 915). For the majority of Christians, chastity is lived out in the married state, meaning absolute fidelity to husband or wife. For the celibate, chastity is lived in the single state. However, all are called to chastity. The same is true of poverty and obedience. What

makes the consecrated religious life different is the solemn profession of these basic & universal Christian precepts in a permanent way according to a specific way of life recognised by the Church (*C.C.C. 916*). In other words, the religious orders, congregations and institutes of men and women live them out more radically than others. All of them live chastity in the celibate state, but the other two vows are lived out in different ways. Franciscans, for instance place particular emphasis on poverty, Dominicans are similar. St. Ignatius instructed Jesuits to live the counsel of obedience so strongly that at the Reformation they were compared to a regiment of soldiers - God's storm troopers!

All communities of nuns, sisters, monks and brothers are characterised by their consecration to these three evangelical counsels, and they differ according to the manner in which they are lived out.

- Religious life: monasteries, convents, communities of men or women living together under a rule (Benedictine, Dominican, Augustinian etc.), consecrated for life to the evangelical counsels. (*C.C.C. 925-33*)
- Eremitical life: the way of the hermit. This style of Christian life was very popular in the early Church. Since the Reformation, hermits became very few in number but now are on the increase. (*C.C.C. 920-1*)
- Consecrated Virgins: Again popular in the early Church. The tradition of women consecrated to virginity yet living ordinary working lives was seen as deviant by many reformers of the sixteenth century, and was therefore never encouraged in the protestant communities. In the Catholic Church, this vocation slowly died out - although the reason was lack of incoming numbers, rather than deliberate policy. At the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s the order of Consecrated Virgins was revived by the request of the bishops. Currently there are seven consecrated virgins in the Diocese of Plymouth. (*C.C.C. 922-4*)

## ***B.2. The Church Suffering - the Holy Souls in Purgatory***

This is not the doctrine of God's blood lust, or pound of flesh. It is the simple demand of the nature of love. As well as being deeply embedded in Sacred Scripture, the doctrine of the process of cleansing is logically necessary and consistent with the nature of love itself. To put it simply, purgatory is that process where what has begun on earth is brought to completion by God after death. Without it, only the souls of those who had attained absolute perfection before their death could inherit the Kingdom.

God's love is, above all, honest: it respects the desires of the one who is loved, and it recognises the state of each soul as it approaches him. His love burns with a searing intensity - this is why the members of the highest order of angels, the seraphim, are called 'The burning ones' because they stand beside the throne of God and burn with his fire. Purgatory, the cleansing of our souls by the fire of God, is far from a punishment - it is to be touched by the burning love of the Almighty, which burns

away all that is not worthy of the soul he loves so absolutely. Purgatory is the completion of being perfected, not the punishment for not having achieved it yet.

We believe that because of the bond between us forged through Baptism, death is a separation but not complete alienation. We are still joined to the souls of the dead because we are united with them in our union with Christ. Just as we can pray for the living by virtue of joining ourselves with Christ's prayer for them, so too we pray for the dead, and because it is Christ's prayer we are joining in with, that prayer is effective. The greatest prayer we can offer for the dead is, therefore, the prayer of the Church that is most fully Christ's prayer – this is the great prayer of the Mass, at which Christ offers himself for the salvation of the world. In addition to this, although of lesser value because all things take second place to the sacrifice of the cross, the Church teaches that we can offer our own prayer, voluntary penance and indulgences for the dead - all these are a share (if a lesser share) in the single work Christ is doing for the salvation of all people. As Christ is at work in them, completing their purification so that they may enter paradise, so too our prayer takes a part in that work of purification: what Christ does, we take a share in - that is the essential effect of baptism.

At the Reformation, the effectiveness of prayer for the dead was denied by the reforming communities. They argued

1. That if we can intercede for the dead, then it means that Christ's intercession for the dead is not enough. BUT that is not what we are saying: we maintain that the bond of baptism is so profound, as witnessed by St. Paul in his letters, that he chooses to involve us in his work by incorporating us into him. What he does, he invites us to do with him. He is more than capable of doing this work on his own - but like any good older brother, rejoices to involve the younger ones even when they are hardly able to do anything.
2. That prayer for the dead was not an original part of the faith but crept in much later when the Church was already corrupted. This is simply not so: the catacombs of ancient Rome, where the Church buried the relics of the earliest martyrs including St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Agnes, St. Cecilia and St. Ignatius of Antioch, contain numerous inscriptions in the walls beside the graves. They vary greatly, but certain phrases are common - often, beside a grave will be carved a name, some reference to their martyr's death and then the words "pray for me", or a simpler message like "Salanus, lying here, asks for prayer." There can be no doubt that just as all Jews were accustomed to praying for the dead in the time of Christ, so were the very first Christians.
3. That prayer for the dead was not a feature of Sacred Scripture and therefore contrary to the will of God - but only after they made sure the Scriptures did not refer to praying for the dead by removed from the canon of Sacred Scripture all references to it, especially in the second Book of Maccabees.

Prayer for the salvation of the dead, especially having the sacrifice of the Mass said for them, is the best way we can share in Christ's work of bringing salvation to the world

- See C.C.C. 958 for a helpful summary of the Church's teaching.

### ***B.3. The Church Triumphant - the Communion of Saints in Heaven***

The unity of the members of the Church on earth is only a foretaste. The full union which man is called to with God is in heaven, and it is here that the Church exists in its fullest state of glory. The saints, gathered around their King, Christ, and their Queen Mother, Mary, are the completion of the Church on earth. For this reason, there are two essential things we can say about them:

1. Because of Baptism, we are profoundly united with them. They are different from us in that they are perfected and live in the presence of the Father - but there is still that essential unity between us, forged in Christ. For this reason, the Church looks on the saints as our elder brothers and sisters, whose concern for us is no less real for being beyond the grave - yet their ability to assist us in our pilgrimage towards paradise is increased since they now have the ear of the Son, and offer their prayer to the Father in perfect unity with him. Their prayer is powerful: read *Revelation 6:9-7:17*, where the prayers of the saints, under God's altar in heaven stay God's hand until the Church on earth, which is suffering persecution, should be given the seal of God's protection.
2. We honour the saints with our prayers. (Let's be very clear - ***Catholics do not worship the saints***). This is for two reasons. Our prayers to them often take the form of specific requests. To offer these to the saints in the belief that they have the ability in Christ to answer them is no more than to take seriously the doctrine that the saints have a brotherly care for the Church on earth. Secondly, we pray to them as a sign of the honour we give them: we honour them not apart from God, and nor does this honour detract from God. They are to be honoured for the simple reason that God has already honoured them, and for the Christian, what God has done is the model for us to imitate. In honouring and praising their achievements we are in truth doing no more than recognising the victory God has achieved through them. To praise the saints is another way of honouring God, just as to praise a superb painting is another way of giving praise to the artist. First among the saints is Mary, the Mother of God: she is too significant to be dealt with here, and has a session of her own!

C.C.C. 954-962