

The Divinely Ordained Apostolate



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Cover art, “Communion of the Apostles,” painted in 1450 by Fra Angelico (1395 -1455).
The original can be seen at the Museo di San Marco in Florence, Italy.



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One afternoon about nineteen centuries ago, there was standing on the banks of the river Jordan a group of three men. As they talked together, the leader of the group, seeing another figure walking to and fro some distance away, eyed Him fixedly, and pointing Him out, said to his two companions, “Behold the Lamb of God.” The two companions, amazed at this striking title, walked over to the stranger, who, hearing them coming, turned and asked, “Whom seek ye?” As the full glory of His countenance shone upon them, the two men, overpowered, could only utter in awed tones, “Master, where do you live?” And, he said to them, “Come and see.”

One of the two was Andrew, a poor fisherman of Galilee, born on the banks of the lake of Genesareth. The other was John, a son of Zebedee, a son of thunder, also a fisherman, though from a wealthier family than Andrew. And He whom they addressed as Master was Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Gospel story does not tell us where He lived—it was probably in one of the huts so common on the banks of the river, or in one of the shelters formed by boughs of terebinth and palm. Nor are we told what holy intimacies passed between Him and the two, but merely that they stayed with Him all that day. Thus, it was that Jesus won His first disciples.

In the months that followed, He gained many more as He traveled along the hillsides and the valleys and the roads and towns of Palestine. He attracted some by the grace of His teaching and the glory of His works. Others, He expressly called, like when, by the lake near Capharnaum, He saw a despised tax collector sitting at his table in the tollhouse, and said to him, “Follow Me.”

Then one night, in the second year of His ministry, He was weary, and withdrew from the crowds to a mountain to pray. Tradition has it that it was the hill between Tiberias and Capharnaum, which Christians call the Mount of the Beatitudes and Arabs the Horns of Hattin. When day broke, He called around Him all His disciples, and solemnly picked out from their number twelve, whom He called Apostles.

At that time, nothing in particular distinguished these twelve in the eyes of men. They were then, as indeed they often showed themselves afterwards,

poor, ignorant, unlettered, ambitious, more concerned with the things of earth than with the things of Heaven. Yet the simple act of choosing them out from the disciples was to change the fortunes of humanity and the history of the world. ‘Those twelve rough-hewn figures are described afterwards in the Apocalypse as the foundations of the Heavenly Jerusalem, now polished into precious stones that show forth the glory of God.

For what special purpose did Christ choose the twelve? What were their functions? Here it becomes necessary to distinguish between two senses of the word “Apostle.” In the *Didache*, in the *Apocalypse*, and in the *Pastor of Hermas*, the word is applied as a title of honor to missionaries who evangelize pagan districts (just as today, we call Saint Francis Xavier the Apostle of India). But in the strict sense of the word, “Apostle” denotes three characteristics—a mission from Christ and direct communication with Him, as well as the preaching of His doctrine.

In this sense, an Apostle is one invested by Christ with the power of governing His Church, of celebrating the Eucharistic Sacrifice, of remitting sins, of teaching and baptizing (cf. Matt., 16; 19; 18,18; Luk. 22,19; 1 Cor., 11,25; John, 20,23; Matt. 29,19-20; Mark, 16,15; Luk, 24,47, etc.). We see them at this work in the *Acts* and in the *Letters*, administering sacraments, preaching the word of God, judging in all questions of Christian Doctrine, inflicting penalties where necessary, and acting as the natural administrators of ecclesiastical property. (Cf. *Acts*, 6,5; 8,14-17; 2,4; 14-36; 3,12-26; 15,22-29; 1 Cor., 5,1-8; 1 Tim., 1,20, etc.). And what is of supreme importance, they can transmit their powers to others by the imposition of hands. Such are the functions of the Apostles as described in the New Testament.

Were they all equal in power and dignity? No, one of them was singled out by Christ as leader—Saint Peter, called Cephas, the rock on which the Church was built. The proof of that is to be found in the famous texts of Matt., 16,13-19, and John, 21,15-17, the one containing the promise of primacy, the other the actual bestowal of it. This is not the place to enter into an elaborate, critical discussion of these passages. The attacks made on them by some non-Catholic scholars (such as Harnack, Resch, Holtzmann, Loisy, etc.) have not shaken their authenticity. Our MSS. and our versions, which decide authenticity, are all in favor of the texts as we have them, and when we

remember that the undivided Church before the Eastern Schism, and the Western Church down to Reformation times, accepted them as authentic, we need say no more.

Nor can any ingenuity of interpretation elude their dogmatic significance. The metaphors of foundation; keys, binding and loosing, obviously point to jurisdiction. Peter is the firm basis on which the fabric of the Church is to repose; he is to be the cause of its unshakeable solidity against the Forces of persecution, corruption, and decay— against the gates of hell. Every social edifice gets its stability from authority, and if Peter's authority is to be the very foundation stone of the Church, it means that he is, after Christ, the supreme authority, the universal ruler, with full monarchical power. The metaphor of the keys shows that nothing can be done in the Church without his approval; the metaphor of unlimited binding and loosing, to be ratified in Heaven, expresses complete universal jurisdiction—legislative, judicial, and executive. In the Text of John, Peter is given the commission to feed the lambs and the sheep of Christ, that is, to rule over the various ranks of the faithful with power that is symbolized in a shepherd ruling over his flock. That power is often used as a metaphor for royal power in ancient literature— both Pagan and Christian. Homer calls Kings the “poimenes laon,” “shepherds of the people.” Christ himself used the metaphor to describe His own power when He called Himself the Good Shepherd. These texts and many others place it beyond doubt that Christ, gave to Peter an absolute primacy of jurisdiction in the Apostolic College. He ruled the Church as a monarch, representing Christ Himself.

Yet to the other Apostles also Our Lord gave a governing authority. In Matt. 18, 18 He uses words identical to those He used to Peter in 16, 16 when He said to the Apostles. “Whatsoever you shall bind upon earth shall he bound also in Heaven.” Christ gave a solemn mission to all the Apostles, not just Peter. “As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you” (John, 20, 26), and (Matt., 28, 18): “Going therefore, teach ye all nations.” He sends them to teach with authority and to make disciples. And thus, they acted. We see them in the Acts passing laws, which they describe as binding in conscience. The history of the first Ecumenical Council, the Council of Jerusalem, shows them already exercising their powers to the fullest extent. Saint Paul, too, acting with the

authority of a recognized Apostle, made various regulations, composed differences, stamped out abuses, legislated with regard to the conduct of women in church, and laid down the duties of priests and deacons.

Accordingly, the monarchy of Peter, while, full and perfect, is nevertheless limited by an element of aristocracy, as far as it admits to the exercise of supreme power in the Church the whole body of Apostles in conjunction with its head.

Saint Peter then is not the sole teacher in the Church; he is not the only ruler. The divine commission to preach, the power to bind and loose, was not given to him alone, but to all the Apostles in conjunction with him. Nor are the other Apostles merely delegates of Peter in teaching and governing; they have authority directly from Christ Himself. The primacy of Peter is indeed supreme and complete; but though supreme, he is not alone. Side by side with him, and subordinate to him, there are other teachers and rulers. Thus while the authority of each is undisturbed, the unity of all is emphasized. Such was the constitution of the Church, dictated to the Apostles by Christ Himself.

That this constitution was to last as long as time should last is clear from the promises of Christ to be with His Church all days even to the consummation of the world. Hence, it requires no proof that, if the Church is built upon Peter's authority as an edifice is built on a rock, Peter's authority must last while the Church lasts. And as the other Apostles, no less than Peter form an essential element in the constitution of the Church, so too must their power endure. The mission of Peter and the Apostles was to persevere to the end of time; consequently, the authority of Peter and the Apostles must be handed down from generation to generation until the consummation comes.

Where is that authority today?

Who are the successors of Saint Peter and the Apostles in the modern world?

With regard to Peter's successor, the answer is abundantly clear. None but the Bishop of Rome can claim recognition as Primate of the universal Church. It is a matter of history; and history provides an uncontrovertible answer. The eternal manifestations of that primacy may vary from age to age; the essence of it remains unchanged. We do not find, indeed, in the early Church the same names, the same formulae, the same ceremonial as we find to-day. We do not

hear of Clement I. writing a *Motu Proprio*, of Linus issuing an Encyclical Letter, of Cletus sending forth a Papal Bull, we do not even find the word Pope or Pontiff, nor do we hear of a *tiara* or a *phanon*, a *sedes gestatoria* or *flabelli*. But we do hear, in unmistakable terms, of the decisions of the Bishop of Rome being final—of Rome as the touchstone of orthodoxy and the last court of appeal.

The evidence for that can be traced to Clement in the first century, through Ignatius and Irenaeus in the second, Tertullian and Cyprian in the third, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine in the fourth, till in succeeding centuries the stream of evidence swells into a river.

To trace the succession of Apostolic authority is no less simple. There is only one difficulty that may mislead the unwary reader. We meet in the New Testament the word “elder” (in Greek, *presbyter*), which nowadays is used for the priest; and the word “overseer” (in Greek, *episcopos*), which nowadays designates a bishop, But if we read carefully, we shall see that these words cannot be construed as meaning priest and bishop in our sense. They are used indiscriminately; they are applied to the same men, men whom we may call *episcopoi-presbyteroi*. Exactly what function these *episcopoi-presbyteroi* exercised in the apostolic hierarchy is still a disputed point; most likely, they are the priests. I touch on the point here merely to show that these words do not decide our question as to the successors of the Apostles.

For those successors, we must look to the men whom the Apostles themselves chose to share with them the full labors and functions of the Apostolate, and to carry on the work after their death. These men, Saint Paul calls by various names: “his fellow-workers,” “his colleagues,” “his adjutants and companions in arms,” etc.; but the name does not matter; it is to the facts we must look. They are men like Mark, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Caius of Derbe, Aristarchus of Thessalonica, Sopatros of Berea, etc. (Cf. Thess., 4, 12; Cor., 4, 17; Phil., 11-19; Tit., 1, 5-9, etc.). The pastoral letters inform us of the nature and functions of these helpers. They are teachers of the faith, rulers of the Churches. What is of supreme importance in this question is—they have jurisdiction over and power of ordaining the *episcopoi-presbyteroi*. These were the men who were

destined to carry on the work of the Apostles after their death, who were to succeed the Apostles as rulers of the Church. The Bishops of the Catholic Church today trace their authority in an unbroken line of succession to these men.

All this establishes securely the Apostolic and therefore the Divine origin of what we now call the Episcopate, as superior in power of order and of jurisdiction to the priests.

From the earliest times, too, that power was exercised on a monarchical basis; that is, the whole college of bishops did not rule over the whole Church like a cabinet over parliament, but each bishop was ruler over his particular territory. Thus, Paul was the monarchical bishop of the Churches he founded; so too was James the monarchical bishop of Jerusalem; and we find that the bishops appointed by the Apostles accepted the monarchical system as a matter of course, as for example, Saint Polycarp, who was made bishop of Smyrna by the Apostle Saint John. Moreover, Saint Ignatius writing about, the year 107 A.D., speaks of the hierarchy as we have it in our days as already a well-established and universal fact in history.

To sum up the evidence of scripture and history, Christ, in founding His Church, gave to His Apostles the divine mission of teaching the faith, administering the sacraments, and governing the faithful in all questions of faith, worship, and morality. Amongst them, He chose Peter to be their supreme head. The Apostles, in obedience to Christ, and working under Peter's directions, founded Churches, wherever they penetrated, and established over their flocks priests and deacons. The priests, charged to celebrate the Eucharist and to guide the faithful as delegates of the Apostles, are all uniform in dignity; and the Apostles retain in their own hands supreme direction over large tracts of territory. In order to perpetuate their mission, and in obedience to the will of Christ, they communicated their powers in full to some chosen disciples. When the Church had spread far and wide, the huge tracts of territory over which the Apostles or their successors ruled became too cumbrous, regional sees ceased to exist and local churches arose in their stead, with a ruler at the head of each. These successors became known later by the

definite technical name of bishops; and amongst them on the successor of Saint Peter, the Bishop of Rome, fell the mantle of Peter's supremacy. Such is, in brief, the divinely ordained Apostolate; and this sketch of it is merely a resume of the testimony of Scripture and history.

The divinely appointed rulers of the faithful, then, in matters of faith and morals, worship and discipline, are the Pope for the universal Church, and the Bishop in His diocese. As divinely appointed rulers, we are, of course, obliged to hear them. He that heareth them, heareth Christ. They have a divine right freely to preach the Gospel everywhere, to govern their flocks, wherever found, to declare for them not merely what is the true Faith of Christ, but also what is morally right and morally wrong. No human power has any right to restrain them, for God Himself has appointed them.

Let us try to realize the significance of this sublime truth. It means that in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church every generation from the time of Christ has had as its guides in the spiritual life men who no less truly than Peter or Matthew have been called by Christ to the Divine Apostolate He founded so long ago on the Horns of Hattin. That is a tremendous fact in the history of humanity as it is a tremendous fact for us today.

To illustrate even briefly what it has meant in human history is a well-nigh impossible task. The work of the episcopate is principally spiritual; it is largely hidden in the souls of men, hidden with Christ in God. In history, we can only catch glimpses of its more external results. Even here, how large the Catholic episcopate looms in the history of Europe, of civilization, and of the world?

The great bishops of the early Church who fought the first furious battles for the purity of the faith and the liberty of the Church (Athanasius, Chrysostom, Cyril, Ambrose, Augustine), the founders of scientific theology—men whose very names conjure up visions of mighty personalities, of profound intellects, of majestic eloquence, and heroic sanctity; the bishops of barbarian times, around whose humble palaces the battle for civilization raged, who handed on the culture of the ancient world to the Middle Ages and won for themselves the stately title of “*defensores civitatis*,” the bishops of the Carolingian age, Hincmar of Rheims, Gerbert of Aurillac, Lanfranc of Canterbury, who in their

episcopal schools prepared the way for the universities and heralded the great developments of scholasticism; the bishops of the glorious Middle Ages and the Renaissance, patrons of art and architecture, letters and science, charity and piety; the many heroic bishops who resisted the pseudo-reformation, some of them even unto blood; the fearless bishops of modern times, leaders in missionary activity, in moral and social reform, in works of charity, men like Lavigerie, Ketteler, Manning, Dupanloup, Mercier; Patrick, Malachy, Laurence O'Toole, Oliver Plunket, J.K.L., to mention only a few—compared to these, there is no line of men, princes, statesmen, or scientists who have meant so much to humanity even from the worldly point of view. It is only when the Recording Angel opens his book that we shall know what they have meant for the eternal destiny of souls. An old medieval German proverb sums up the history of Europe's formation by the Church—“*Es geht wohl unter dem Hirtenstab*” “It is good to be ruled by the crosier.”

Indeed, there are some dark spots on the bright canvas. There have been times when corruption has crept into the Church, when nepotism and pluralism and simony have raised their ugly heads even amongst the episcopate. There was a time when Dante could make Peter say of his barque, “*O navicella mia, com' mal sei carica!*”

There was even a time so awful that it was possible to say, in Baronius' terrifying phrase, that it almost seemed that Christ had fallen asleep again in Peter's boat or that he was carried once more in the arms of Satan.

It is no part of Catholic duty to glide over these sad facts, any more than it is anyone else's duty to gloat over them. Rare defects in the human machinery of a Divine institution need not surprise us unduly, especially when we remember that Christ Himself prepared us for the shock. After all, He did not found His Church to be a cenacle of the elect, but a worldwide institution embracing all men. He described it as a net containing good fish and bad, as a field containing cockle as well as wheat. Did He not Himself choose a Judas, *qui proditor fuit*? Saint Paul gives a similar warning when he tells us that the Church, though it is the Mystical Body of Christ, bears upon it the marks of His wounds. Truly, we carry this treasure in fragile vessels.

But the enemies of the Church have exaggerated these failings out of all proportion and have turned a blind eye to her infinitely more numerous virtues. When we consider the ages during which the Church was the ruling factor in men's lives from the cradle to the grave, when they derived from her consolation and help not only in the spiritual, but also in the bodily sphere, when learning and art and science and every work of the mind came from her, when she was, as now and always, the bulwark of the poor and the oppressed, when at every turn she fed the souls of men with beauty and with hope, when she was the *mater pulchrae dilectionis et agnitionis et, sanctae spei*—when we remember all this, the failings of a few are of no great account in comparison. They dwindle into insignificance beside the marvelous army of saints—saints in deserts and in cities, on thrones and in hovels, in cloisters and schools, in hospitals and slums; and beside the millions of the faithful who have lived quiet hidden lives in prayer and purity and the tireless service of God, men and women of every age and condition, who have been transformed into the image of Christ by obedience to the pastors of the Church, achieving a sanctity that has ever been in the Church a visible mark of her divine origin.

Nor is it likely that the Church will ever again suffer the shock of scandal on a large scale. She has learnt the lessons of the tenth century and of the Renaissance. From the time of the Council of Trent down to the recent codification of Canon Law, wise decrees have ensured fidelity to discipline, and the increasing ease of communication permits a firmer hand of government. Moreover, the Church in modern times has cast off nearly everywhere that interference of the temporal power that so often and so disastrously hindered her free spiritual activity in the past. Today no one can say that she owes her wonderful and increasing influence to the favor of princes, the support of governments or the docility of peoples. Not since the days of the persecutions has the Church been so weak in worldly power and so strong spiritually as today. Never was the moral grandeur of the Papacy so obvious. Never was the episcopate more closely and enthusiastically united to the Holy See. Never was the loyalty of the clergy and the laity more devoted and enlightened. There has seldom been such an array of brilliant figures, lay

and ecclesiastical, so fully conscious of the solemnity and dignity of the Church's mission, and so wholeheartedly devoting their lives and their talents to her service.

However, the Pope and the bishops are urged by a divine discontent. They ask for more. The great Pope now gloriously reigning,* whose courageous acts and profound encyclicals have made the Vatican more than ever the barbican of faith and the fortress of morals, has issued a call to the Catholics of the world to co-operate more closely still with the hierarchy in the work of salvation. That is what Pius XI means when he calls the laity to Catholic Action. To help the Pope and the Bishops, the successors of Peter and the Apostles, to establish the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ—surely it is an inspiring program and an irresistible call. If Saint Peter himself were to say to us, "Come and help," would we hesitate? If the Apostle John were to call us to his assistance, would we refuse? Yet, when Pius XI calls us or when our bishop calls us, it is truly an Apostle that calls. If only we can realize that, if only we can appreciate that we are called by men who are the successors of those whom Christ Himself called, surely we will rise with alacrity, as Matthew did of old in the toll-house at Capharnaum, and leaving all, follow Christ.

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* Pope Pius XI, at first publication of this booklet.



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