

Homily Notes
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Sunday, July 31, 2011

Apostolic Succession

What is Apostolic Succession? Apostolic Succession refers to the unbroken line of bishops that go all the way back to the Apostles. After the resurrection the 11 faithful apostles chose Mathias as the successor of Judas. And, we know that St. Paul was an apostle, yet he was not one of the original 12, so we see that the office held by apostles was passed on and expanded.

St. Paul told Timothy "[W]hat you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). In this passage he refers to the first three generations of apostolic succession—his own generation, Timothy's generation, and the generation Timothy will teach.

Why do we need successors to the apostles (the bishops) if we have the scriptures? Why not just use the Scriptures? Evil people and heretics are very adept at using scripture to justify their false positions. JNB Kelly, a protestant historian, said it this way, "the identity of the oral tradition with the original revelation is guaranteed by the unbroken succession of bishops in the great sees going back lineally to the apostles. . . . [A]n additional safeguard is supplied by the Holy Spirit, for the message committed was to the Church, and the Church is the home of the Spirit. Indeed, the Church's bishops are . . . Spirit-endowed men who have been vouchsafed 'an infallible charism of truth'" (Early Christian Doctrines).

Kelly continues...Thus on the basis of experience the Fathers could be "profoundly convinced of the futility of arguing with heretics merely on the basis of Scripture. The skill and success with which they twisted its plain meaning made it impossible to reach any decisive conclusion in that field" (ibid., 41).

We still experience this today. Everybody thinks they have the authentic interpretation of Sacred Scripture, yet there is no agreement as to what is true Christian Doctrine.

Pope Clement I (80 A.D)

"Through countryside and city [the apostles] preached, and they appointed their earliest converts, testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers. Nor was this a novelty, for bishops and deacons had been written about a long time earlier. . . . Our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have already been mentioned and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry" (Letter to the Corinthians 42:4-5, 44:1-3 [A.D. 80]).

Irenaeus

"It is possible, then, for everyone in every church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the apostles which has been made known to us throughout the whole world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the apostles and their successors down to our own times, men who neither knew nor taught anything like what these heretics rave about" (Against Heresies 3:3:1 [A.D. 189]).

"[I]t is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the infallible charism of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father. But [it is also incumbent] to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever, either as heretics of perverse minds, or as schismatics puffed up and self-pleasing, or again as hypocrites, acting thus for the sake of lucre and vainglory. For all these have fallen from the truth" (Irenaeus, Heresies 4:26:2).

"But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul—that church which has the tradition and the faith with which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. For with this Church, because of its superior origin, all churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world. And it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition" (ibid., 3:3:2).

Tertullian

"[The apostles] founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches. Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive Church, [founded] by the apostles, from which they all [spring]. In this way, all are primitive, and all are apostolic, while they are all proved to be one in unity" (Demurrer Against the Heretics 20 [A.D. 200]).

Cyprian of Carthage

"[T]he Church is one, and as she is one, cannot be both within and without. For if she is with [the heretic] Novatian, she was not with [Pope] Cornelius. But if she was with Cornelius, who succeeded the bishop [of Rome], Fabian, by lawful ordination, and whom, beside the honor of the priesthood the Lord glorified also with martyrdom, Novatian is not in the Church; nor can he be reckoned as a bishop, who, succeeding to no one, and despising the evangelical and apostolic tradition, sprang from himself. For he who has not been ordained in the Church can neither have nor hold to the Church in any way" (Letters 69[75]:3 [A.D. 253]).

