

Nothing More Beautiful

Year III, Session 4

“The Church We Believe in is Apostolic”

Catechetical Reflection

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In this final session of NMB for year 3, we reflect upon the Church's apostolic nature. The Church we believe in is apostolic. This characteristic, or "mark", of the Church stems from the very nature of Christian faith.

Recall from the first session this year what was said about the meaning of "believing in". Christian faith is a believing "into" God, i.e., a complete surrender of the person into the hands of God, into the divine mystery. This surrender is twofold.

First of all it is a surrender to the person of Christ. He is the Son of God sent to save us. By raising his Son from the dead our heavenly Father confirmed that his plan to save the world has been fulfilled in Christ, whom he has appointed judge of the living and the dead (cf. Acts 17:31). By faith we entrust our entire lives to him, who alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Second, Christian faith is assent to a message. Jesus is the Word made Flesh. He has come to share with the world what he has received from the Father. He comes, in other words, to teach us. By his words and deeds (cf. Dei Verbum, 2) he reveals to us the truth about God and ourselves. In virtue of being the Word of God, he is the fullness of revelation. All that the Father wills to communicate to the world is contained in the Word that took flesh in Jesus. This is why the Church teaches that there will be no further public revelation given to the world (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 66). All that is necessary to be taught for the sake of our salvation has been spoken in Jesus Christ.

Therefore Christian faith, together with being a surrender to the person of Jesus, is also a complete assent of our intellect and will to his message. Christian faith has a content. We believe as true and necessary for salvation what Jesus has taught us.

This content of our faith is apostolic because Jesus entrusted his message to the apostles to be handed on in the Church. Prior to his death he said to the apostles, "I have made known to you all I have heard from my Father." (John 15:15) After his resurrection he commanded them to go and teach people to observe all that he had commanded. (Cf. Matt 28:20) The apostles were the privileged eyewitnesses to the resurrection and could therefore confirm that Jesus, who had

risen from the dead, was the same Jesus who had been born of Mary and who died on the Cross. The gift of the Holy Spirit, bestowed at Pentecost, gave them the gifts of boldness and understanding necessary to do what Jesus commanded them to do.

As the apostles went forth through the known world proclaiming the Gospel, those who accepted the message and were baptized formed Christian communities around each apostle. The new Christians wanted always to be faithful to the teaching of Christ, and knew that this meant being obedient to the teaching they received from the apostle. In other words, the apostle was the touchstone of fidelity. After all, he was handing on not his own words but the teaching of Jesus Christ. Thus we read in the Acts of the Apostles that the first Christians were united through fidelity to the apostolic teaching, the breaking of bread (Eucharist) and the prayers (cf Acts 2:42).

Those who succeed to the role of the apostle in the local Church are the Bishops. Acting in communion with one another and with the Pope, the Bishops, "holding to the truth, hand on the catholic and apostolic faith." (Eucharistic Prayer I). Throughout history the Church has grown in its understanding and appropriation of the faith as it is led by the Holy Spirit into the fullness of truth revealed by Christ. In every age the Pope and Bishops, as successors of the apostles, clarify and define doctrine in order to keep the Church faithful to its apostolic faith.

So the Church is apostolic by reason of the nature of Christian faith. At the same time there is another important dimension to this fourth mark of the Church. The Church is apostolic in virtue of the fact that she is "sent". The apostle is one who is sent to announce the good news of Christ. I have already spoken of this mission as it is lived by the successors to the apostles. Bishops, as well as priests and deacons who share the sacrament of Holy Orders, serve the communion of the Church by holding and teaching the apostolic deposit of faith. The lay faithful also have an apostolate proper to them. They are sent into the world to transform it from within by the power of the Gospel. This means that they are to bring the teachings of Christ and his Church to bear upon all aspects of their lives, whether in the family, at work or in school, or in the various ways they engage in community life for the sake of the common good. Our two witnesses this evening gave a beautiful testimony as to how fidelity to the apostolic faith of the Church has shaped their own discernment as individuals and a couple, and how they strive to bring that faith to bear upon their family life and other engagements. There are many areas of life today in urgent need of the light and hope that only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can give: threats to the dignity of human life, pressures on families, the needs of our young people, the perplexing world of bioethics, policies that shape our country and the way we live together, the negative impacts of globalization and so on. These and many other areas of life can be transformed by the power of the Gospel. To these areas our lay faithful are sent as agents of mercy and hope.

I conclude with just two questions for your reflection. They are foundational for our life as Christians and arise from the apostolic nature of the Church. First, are you seeking to grow in

your knowledge of the faith? Second, how might the Lord be calling you to embrace your call to the apostolate in the concrete circumstances of your life?

The Church we believe in is apostolic. May the Lord keep us always faithful to the teaching and mission we have received from the apostles.

+Richard W. Smith
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