

What is Apostolic Succession and why is it important?

By Graham Osborne

Many people don't realize that for roughly the first 1500 years of Christianity, virtually all Christians were Catholic. Apart from the unfortunate Eastern Orthodox schism, and the rise and fall of various heresies through out the centuries, the Catholic Church was relatively unified, and the various Christian denominations we see today by the thousands were simply nonexistent.

A defining feature of this Church was its apostolicity. Every Catholic Pope, Bishop, Priest and Deacon, from the earliest centuries of the Church to the present day, can trace, their ordination back in an unbroken line to one of the Apostles. That is absolutely remarkable if you think about it. Pope Francis, your Bishop, your Priest/pastor – all of them – can trace their ordination back in an unbroken line of Bishops to one of the original Apostles. Awesome! The Church's term for this continuity is Apostolic Succession.

When Jesus was on earth, he founded a single Church, not multiple different denominations as we have today. He built this Church upon Peter and the Apostles [cf Eph 2:19-20, Rev 21:14], and being the wisest of builders [cf Mt 7], promised that His Church would never fall – that the gates of hell would not prevail against it [cf Mt 16].

He then left us a clear blueprint of this hierarchy, or "holy order", that He instituted in the pages of the New Testament. For example, we can clearly see this apostolic succession being instituted in places like Acts 1:16-26 where we see Peter as the authoritative first Pope calling for the filling of Judas's vacant office of Apostle: "His office let another take'... to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside". In Acts 14:23 we see St Paul and St. Barnabas appointing "presbyters [the Greek root for the English word, "priest"] for them in each church". Similarly, in 1 Titus 1:5, we see St Paul writing to the Bishop, Titus: "I left you in Crete so that you might appoint presbyters in every town, as I directed you" [similarly, see 1 Tim 3:1-7 and 1 Tim 4:14-16 as well].

Apostolic succession serves a dual purpose in the Church. Not only does it help pass on this hierarchy that Jesus and the Apostles established, it also provides the vehicle by which the truths of the Faith that Jesus and the Apostles left to the Church are passed on – but in a living way, accomplished in, and protected from error by, the Holy Spirit.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: "In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching authority." Indeed, "the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time." This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit... perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she [the Catholic Church] herself is, all that she believes" [CCC 77-78].

But still, many deny this apostolicity, and literally every week, new denominations are popping up around the world, with no connection to this apostolic continuity whatsoever.

Perhaps one of the best responses to this situation is to go back in time to the early Christian Church. What was it like? Was it “apostolic”? Do we actually see evidence of this “apostolic succession”? Unequivocally yes! We have the writings of dozens of Early Church Fathers, many of them taught by either Apostles or disciples of Apostles, and they repeatedly confirm this point of the necessity of apostolicity, often emphasizing that the Apostles ordained men to succeed them in their office specifically in order to preserve what they had taught.

For example, around 80 AD, St Clement of Rome [ordained by St Peter, and the 4th Pope] would write: “Our Apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be contention over the Bishop’s office. So, for this cause... they appointed the above mentioned men, and afterwards gave them a permanent character, so that, as they died, other approved men should succeed to their ministry... Preaching, accordingly, throughout the country and the cities, they appointed their first-fruits, after testing them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should believe.”

In 110 AD, St. Ignatius, martyred Bishop of Antioch and disciple of St John would write that, “Apart from the bishop, let no one perform any of the functions that pertain to the Church. Let that Eucharist be held valid which is offered by the bishop or by one to whom the bishop has committed this charge. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful to baptize or give communion without the consent of the bishop. On the other hand, whatever has his approval is pleasing to God.”

Around 190 AD, St. Irenaeus [taught by St Polycarp, who was taught by St John] would write: “(We do this)... by indicating that tradition derived from the Apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also (by pointing out) the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those (faithful men) who exist everywhere.”

When various heretical groups or sects would split off from the Church, one of the first lines of defense would be to challenge them to list their order of Bishops and trace them back in an unbroken line to an Apostle.

For example, around 200 AD, Tertullian writes: “But if there be any heresies... let them then make known the origins of their Churches; let them unfold the roll of their Bishops so coming down in succession from the beginning, that their first Bishop had for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the Apostles, or of Apostolic men, so he were one that continued steadfast with the Apostles. For in this manner do the Apostolic Churches

reckon their origin: as the Church of Smyrna recounts that Polycarp was placed there by John; as that of Rome does that Clement was in like manner ordained by Peter. Just so can the rest also show those, whom being appointed by the Apostles to the Episcopate, *they have as transmitters the Apostolic seed.*”

Similarly, St. Irenaeus [again, a disciple of St John] would write that, “*It is within the power of all, therefore, in every church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about (III:3:1).*”

And finally, my absolute favorite quote on this matter comes from St Ignatius of Antioch [a disciple of St John] around 100 A.D.: “In the same way all should respect the deacons as they would Jesus Christ, just as they respect the bishop as representing the Father and the priests as the council of God and the college of the Apostles. Apart from these there is *nothing that can be called a Church.*”

Incredible! If you are in a denomination that does not have Bishops, Priests and Deacons that can trace their ordination and teachings back to one of the Apostles, these great early Christians would not even recognize you.

I think St Irenaeus captures our current situation succinctly when he writes, “it is necessary to obey the presbyters [Greek root for the English word, “priest”] who are in the Church – those who, also have shown, possess the succession from the Apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father. But (it is also necessary) to *hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever.*”

Is your denomination Apostolic? It should be. The Early Church was!