

Did the Catholic Church “apostacize” in the early centuries of Christianity?

Some people contend that the Catholic Church “apostacized”, or turned away from the true Christian faith, somewhere in the first three or four centuries of Christianity. They often give the reign of the Roman Emperor, Constantine as the date for this event. Their reasons are varied, but this assertion is often used as a foundation from which to reject not only the Church, but its teachings and doctrines as well.

In a way, this shouldn't surprise us. If the Catholic Church teaches that it is the one true church, founded by Jesus Himself upon the Apostles, and that all Christians must belong to this church, then if you are not in fact a member of this church, you had better have a pretty good reason why!

I've read several of these “great apostasy” claims and all of them sadden me. They are invariably filled with error, misrepresentations, poor research at best, and sometimes outright lies. For instance, some claim that we worship Mary, but of course we don't [highly honor her yes, worship no!]. Others claim that the Pope couldn't possibly be infallible, that he is human and susceptible to sin. But they misunderstand the Catholic doctrine of infallibility, which I touch on briefly below. Some condemn the Church's reliance on Sacred Tradition and hold to the unscriptural notion that we should follow the Bible alone, rejecting the idea of a single authoritative church left to us by Jesus. They claim Jesus condemned “traditions of men” in Mark 7:9. But again, they misunderstand exactly what Sacred Tradition is, and how different it is from “traditions of men”. They overlook passages like 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and others where St Paul commands us to “stand firm and hold to the traditions you were taught by us, whether by word of mouth or by letter”. We could go on, but apart from answering every single doctrinal challenge to the Catholic Church individually [and we could certainly do that, but not in such limited space] how do we lay these claims to rest?

For starters, in 2000 years, the Catholic Church has never once contradicted itself in it's infallibly/officially defined doctrinal teachings on faith and morals. That is literally unheard of if this church is just another human institution. But it is not that. It is a divine institution. Yes, filled with weak, sinful human beings, but remember, the promise of infallibility [see my earlier article on this at www.TheShyCatholic.com] in faith and morals does not mean the Pope will be without personal sin. It is a gift or charism of the Holy Spirit that will protect him from teaching error in faith and morals when he does this in his official office as Pope.

We also have to remember that Jesus did not come to first write a Book [though he absolutely wanted the Bible written, and in fact inspired it], He came to found His Church. And the church Jesus founded is without question the Catholic Church. This is just an unarguable fact of history. Every bishop, priest and deacon can trace his ordination in a valid, unbroken line back to one of the apostles. But the question still remains: did this church eventually fall into apostasy as some suggest?

So to answer these claims, let us first turn to Jesus Himself. And His words leave no room for doubt. In Matthew 7:24-25, Jesus gives the parable of the wise builder who built his house on rock, and whose house would never fall, no matter what storms would come. Now fast-forward a few chapters to Matt 16:16-19 where Jesus then says, “thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

Wow! This is one of the most powerful, and Catholic, verses in all the Bible! Now recall that St. Paul calls the church “the household of God” [1 Timothy 3:15 and others]. So in Matthew 16, we have

Jesus, the wisest of builders, building His house, His church, on rock, and promising that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. I don't think it gets much clearer than that. How could this church that Jesus Himself founded ever possibly fall with a promise like that? Certainly there will be saints and sinners in this church, even wolves in sheep's clothing. But the Church Jesus founded, the "Body of Christ" itself, will be preserved and weather any storm.

And building on this foundation, we turn to St Paul in 1 Tim 3:15 where he confirms that the church is "the pillar and foundation of truth". Jesus then proclaims that "he who hears you hears Me" (Luke 10:16). If this is the case, how could such a church fall away from the truth, as some would like to believe? Such a happening would be directly contrary to Scripture!

Then Jesus promises that he will be with them "always, until the end of the age" [Matthew 28:20]. And in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, He further promises that, "the Father... will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... and he will declare to you the things that are to come." Again, the emphasis on truth, but now guarded by the Holy Spirit. And Jesus makes this promise to the Apostles, who are called the foundation of the Church: "the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone" (Ephesians 2:20, Revelation 21:14).

So to summarize, the Catholic Church is built on rock by Jesus Himself, it will never fall, it is the pillar and foundation of truth, and it will be guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth. This is why we can be certain that the Catholic Church will never fall into apostasy.

But just in case you still doubted, let us look briefly at the testimony from the writings of the early Church. One thing that rings out clearly is that the Church Jesus founded is "Apostolic"— that it's bishops, priests and deacons have succeeded in an unbroken line right from the Apostles themselves. And according to the Early Church Fathers, this "apostolicity" is the hallmark of the true church. This is a stunner if you attend a church without validly ordained bishops and priests, which is essentially all Christian denominations, apart from the Catholic Church and her separated brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox rites. For example, in 110AD, St Ignatius, the martyred Bishop of Antioch (and disciple of St John the Apostle), would write that, apart from bishops, priests and deacons, "there is nothing that can be called a Church"!

The hallowed St Cyprian, martyred Bishop of Carthage, would echo this, writing around 250AD that, "It is on him [Peter] that He [Jesus] builds the church... If a man... deserts the Chair of Peter upon whom the church was built, has he still confidence that he is in the church?"

And finally, the great Catholic Bishop, **St. Augustine** (≈ 400 AD), respected by many Protestants as well, would write that if the "succession of bishops is to be considered... we number them from Peter, to whom, as representing the whole Church, the Lord said: "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18). For, to Peter succeeded Linus, Linus... to Anastasius". St Augustine then lists every one of the Popes, starting with Peter, right up to Anastasius, who was Pope at the time he wrote this, both confirming the importance of Peter's office and emphasizing the critical role of Apostolic in confirming the true church founded by Jesus.

For the sake of true Christian unity, let us gently and charitably share these truths about the Church that Jesus Himself founded with our separated brothers and sisters in Christ.