

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday (C)

2<sup>nd</sup> March 2025

'Nicene Creed VII: The Mystery of the Church' (CCC 748–870)

Eccl.us 27: *the test of a man is in his conversation.*

Ps 91: *...to proclaim Your love in the morning*

1Cor 15: *death is swallowed up in victory.*

Lk 6: 39–45: *a man's words flow out of what fills his heart.*

The Gospel for our last 'ordinary Sunday' before Lent — and therefore our last excerpt from St Luke in the semi-continuous sequence for 'Year C' — is from Lk 6, a collection of sayings of Jesus, a bit like an abridged 'Sermon on the Mount.' Jesus speaks about the idiocy of *'the blind following the blind'*; He speaks about the *disciple needing his Teacher*; He speaks about *fraternal correction*, its pitfalls when done with hypocrisy, and its blessings when done with humility. All these images of Our Lord's teaching point to the Christian need to be social, i.e. in *community*, when looking to follow the Lord's own Way; it's not a solitary existence; it's not just a cerebral or even solely spiritual existence; it's sacramental, it's ecclesial, it's togetherness in faith.

Our Lord does not work His will in some sort of a vacuum: His preaching as the Son-of-God-made-man is set in the context of the People of God — Jesus is reforming

that People from the Israel of the Old Covenant to the Israel of the New Covenant, the Church. *The Church herself* is our theme from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed for the next three weeks' homilies: "*I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.*" The Church is the product of God's relationship with the world; the Church is the fruit of Jesus's life-giving encounter with humanity. We cannot imagine what Jesus came to achieve here in the world without the Church. The Church is the very response of man to God, and was prepared for by God, long before Christ. The *Catechism* says this:

**759** "The eternal Father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life," to which he calls all men in his Son. "The Father ... determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ." This "family of God" is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history, in keeping with the Father's plan. In fact, "already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvellous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and the old Alliance. Established in this last age of the world and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time."

More succinctly, there is a saying from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, "*The world was created for the sake of the Church*"; in

other words, the plan of God, since before the beginning of time, was that man should be called together as a ‘People of God.’ The very word ‘church’ in its Greek original, *ἐκκλησία*, means a gathering, an assembly, a *calling-together*. So, the Church is not a by-product, an optional extra, to Christian faith. We cannot believe in God and in Our Lord Jesus and in the Holy Spirit, and not also believe in who and what the Church is, and is for: the Church is ‘called together’ by God’s Word. Christ made this very clear as He established *structures* for His people even within those years of His earthly ministry. He chose 12 apostles, echoing the number of Jacob’s sons, heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. And He chose a leader, prince of the apostles, St Peter, to be their rock, their focus of unity, their anchor-point. These were not meaningless choices: Jesus clearly intended to give a structure to the People He would entrust with His message. He wanted the Church to go out into the world with the Good News; He wanted them to have the apostles and their successors as leaders; He wanted them to have the Successor of St Peter as the

Rock, the focus of unity in the Church. That is what we have — the Catholic Church is in every sense *one and the same community that Our Lord founded* in His earthly ministry, in His Resurrection appearances, and in His great gift of the Holy Spirit sent at Pentecost.

As He prepared to ascend, Jesus said to His apostles: “*Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News. Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*” This is Jesus’s great command, to build up the Church in faith and baptism. Baptism is at the same time baptism into Christ, *and baptism into the Church* ... As baptized Christians we are made one with Christ our God in Baptism; and at the same time we are made one with the family of the saints, and sinners, who make up the Church. Baptism doesn’t do one *or* the other; *it does both*. And that’s why we can’t have a Christian faith that doesn’t acknowledge, love, and live the Church. The life of the Church is, for the most part, the very way the Lord reaches out constantly to others, and to offer them the divine

forgiveness, healing, and life, that they need. That means us. That means that it is our responsibility, through our Baptism, to be at all times — every day — ambassadors for Christ; holy ambassadors for Jesus the Lord. St Teresa of Avila put it poetically like this:

Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours.  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are  
his body. Christ has no body now but yours.

That is the Mystery of the Church, that we do His very work on earth, we are the Body of Christ.

Now, in the Creed we profess this visible Church of God to be “*one, holy, Catholic and apostolic.*” What do these attributes mean — these ‘marks of the Church’?

She is **one** because she receives her unity from God Himself. There can be *no more than one true Church*, since God is one. Sadly sometimes people break away from the Church to establish their own community varying in one way or another from the true Church. This is a sad consequence of human sin, but it totally goes against the faith. If there is need of reform — *and there always is, ecclesia semper reformanda*

— then that can only be done legitimately from within the Church herself; as has often been done. It can never be right deliberately to break apart the Body of Christ into fragments, sects, denominations.

The Church is **holy** because she receives her life from the Holy One, God Himself, and from the Holy Son of God, Our Lord Jesus. He is supremely holy, and He has given to the Church the opportunity to make her members increasingly more holy and close to God. The Second Vatican Council, in its solemn decree on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, taught very clearly about the ‘universal call to holiness.’ It is the vocation of every member of the Church to strive for holiness, for perfection in union with Christ. That does not preclude the fact, clearly evident, that the Church is made up of sinners — *sinner trying to be saints*. For even so, the Church herself, as Bride of Christ, and Body of Christ, has a real and indefectible holiness: she is always the carrier of holy faith, the bearer of the holy Christ to the world and to the future.

The Church is **Catholic** because she is universal. She teaches one and the same faith in all her parts. Wherever you find the Church, whilst there can be legitimate diversity of outward practice (for example, the multiplicity of ‘rites’: Latin

rite, Syro-Malabar rite, Ukrainian rite *etc.*), you find the faith — the doctrine, the teaching — to be one and the same. The word ‘*Catholic*’ has been used to describe the Church since the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century (in the letters of St Ignatius of Antioch, written when under arrest and *en route* to his martyrdom in Rome). It means “*according to the whole,*” i.e. in every place the faith of each local church is the same; and the same one Church is intended for all people, all races, nations, cultures and languages. All people are called to their human fulfilment in and through this one Catholic Church.

And, finally, the Church is **apostolic** because she is in perfect continuity with the apostles. There can be no severing of the Church from its roots in the community of apostles founded directly by the Lord Jesus. On one level, there has to be an unbroken ‘apostolic succession’ of bishops from the apostles’ day to our own — those ordained bishops today are ordained by those validly ordained by Catholic bishops going back in a continuous line. And, additionally, the Catholic Church does, and has to, teach and celebrate only what is given her by the Lord, derived immediately from what was received by the apostles, and inspired by the Spirit, in continuity and in keeping with the Lord’s own gift of His life to His Church. Our

heavenly patron, St John Henry Newman, made great strides in explaining how the Church’s tradition and doctrine unfolds within apostolic continuity, in his famous ‘*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine.*’ He reasoned that the Church was a dynamic being, and that its organic development was to be expected: development brings out *the fullness of the original idea, not obscuring it.* But there needs to be an infallible authority to distinguish the true developments from the false — only the Catholic Church seemed truly to provide that authority in historical continuity. In fact, this was the work he was writing when, mid-volume, he chose to convert to the Catholic Church, as if it were the sudden realisation, after decades of study and reflection, that only Catholicism inherited in its fullness the *apostolic* Church.

Let’s end for today with words from today’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading. As St Paul travelled, preached, and suffered so much, *to build up the Church* in those first decades, so he insisted that the Church has to be a *divine* and not a human institution: “*Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.*”