



## **The One True Church (Part IV) by Joe Sixpack**

Last week, we began looking at the four marks of the Church; that is, that she is one. Today we will continue with the second mark, stating that the Church is holy. Before we do, however, we need to define the origin of the Church a little more deeply.

Have you ever wondered why the Catholic Church refers to herself as the Mystical Body of Christ? It comes from Sacred Scripture. St. Paul refers to the Church as the Body of Christ repeatedly (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12), but in order to understand why he does so, as well as its significance, we need to focus on Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-6).

St. Paul, who prior to his conversion was called Saul, was a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians. At the time of his conversion, Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians when Jesus appeared to him in his glorified state. "Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:3-5).

This encounter with Jesus apparently formed St. Paul's theology on the Church. Paul saw the Church was a divine institution, with Jesus as its head and we as its members. Indeed, Paul saw that Jesus Christ and His Church are one and the same. Notice that Jesus did not ask "Why do you persecute My followers?" or "Why do you persecute My Church?" He asked, "Why do you persecute *Me*?"

Jesus had ascended into heaven a long time before St. Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, so Paul could not have been persecuting Jesus. The persecution was of His followers. But that isn't what Jesus says. Christ's words are clearly indicative that to persecute His followers is to persecute Him. This is why St. Paul taught that we are members of the Body of Christ—the Church—and He is its head. Paul understood that Jesus and His Church are one.

Since Jesus and His Church are one, and since Jesus is God—the second Person of the Trinity—then the Catholic Church is a living, breathing divine body. For a body to live, it must have a soul. The soul of the Church is the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. This is why we can say that a true mark of the Catholic Church is that she is holy.

The Church teaches holy doctrine and gives her members the means of living holy lives, thus producing saints in every age (Eph. 5:25-27). The founders of other churches—Luther, Calvin,

Zwingli, Wesley—were but men, and in no way remarkable for heroic virtue. Our Founder is Jesus Christ, God Himself, the author and very definition of virtue.

The Catholic Church is holy, because of her intimate union with Christ as His Bride (Eph. 5:23-32) and His Mystical Body (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22; 4:12; 5:30). Catholics are a “chosen people” because they are branches of the true Vine, Jesus Christ (Jn. 15:5). Although people outside her fold may, through invincible ignorance, be members of the Church in desire, and thus share in her divine life, their churches are “cast forth as a branch and withers” (Jn. 15:6).

Yes, a mark of the Church is holiness, but does that mean we are all holy, or that the leaders of the Church on the various levels are holy? No, not necessarily. We are certainly all called to holiness, but we are humans who often “fail the test”.

For more than a decade now the Church has been ridden with scandals. Perhaps the biggest one has been the priest child abuse scandal. Many, both in and out of the Catholic Church, have pointed to that scandal and claimed loudly that this is proof that the Church is not holy. That is simply not true, and nobody demonstrates this better than St. Francis of Assisi.

St. Francis once came into a town to preach on its streets. He quickly learned that the people were not attending Holy Mass in the town’s only parish church. When he asked them why, they dragged the parish priest out before him...along with his paramour and three illegitimate children. While they berated the unfaithful priest, St. Francis quietly got down on his knees before the priest. He stayed in that position until the crowd grew silent. Then, barely above a whisper, St. Francis said, “Whether he is good for his own soul I do not know, *but my soul needs him.*”

St. Francis understood that the priest could be steeped in mortal sin, but it was only through him that the saint could receive the sacraments—as Jesus had established. As we will learn in future columns, Jesus established the sacraments so we can become holy, and He gave as the only avenue for administering these sacraments a priesthood. A priest may condemn his own soul to hell, but you and I cannot get to heaven without him, because Jesus gives us the necessary sanctifying grace through the sacraments administered by the priest.

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus gave us all a command: “You, therefore, must be *perfect*, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). Wow!

Notice that Jesus didn’t say we must strive for perfection. He said we *must* become *perfect*—as perfect as God Himself. How perfect is the Father? He is *infinitely perfect*. So how do we obey this command from God? We obey this command by living *all the truths of the Catholic faith*, and by receiving the sacraments often...especially by going to Confession and then to Communion when we know we are free of mortal sin.

Jesus, who understands us better than we understand ourselves because He created us, would never command us to do something impossible. He commanded us to be perfect; that is, holy...a saint. Yes, all of us. And he gave us the Church, her sacraments, and her holy priesthood for that purpose.

Resolve today to make a good examination of conscience and go to confession this week, after having made up your mind to obey Christ’s command to be perfect. You’ll be a lot happier and sleep much better. I promise.

Next week we will continue to look at the marks of the Church so you can know What We Believe...Why We Believe It.

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