

The Early Centuries

As the Church moves from the pages of the New Testament and on into the succeeding centuries of her history, it is helpful to trace her growth and development in terms of specific categories. We shall look first at a category important for all Christian people: *doctrine*. Did she maintain the truth of God as given by Christ and His apostles? Second, what about *worship*? Is there a discernible way in which the people of God have offered a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to Him? Third, we will consider Church *government*. What sort of polity did the Church practice?

1. **Doctrine**: Not only did the Church begin under the teaching of the apostles, but she was also instructed to "stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2Th 2:15). The apostle Paul insisted that those matters delivered by him and his fellow apostles, both in person and in the writings that would come to be called the New Testament, be adhered to carefully. Thus, he followed such appropriate warnings as "in the name of Jesus Christ . . . withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (2Th 3:6). The doctrines taught by Christ and His disciples are to be safeguarded by "the Church, the pillar and support of the truth" (1Ti 3:15) and are not open for renegotiation.

Midway through the first century, a dispute had arisen in Antioch over adherence to Old Testament laws. The matter could not be settled there; outside help was needed. The leaders of the Antiochian Church, the community which had earlier dispatched Paul and Barnabas as missionaries, brought the matter to Jerusalem for consideration by the apostles and elders there. The matter was discussed, debated, and a written decision was forthcoming.

It was James, the brother of the Lord and the first bishop of Jerusalem, who put forth the solution to the problem. This settlement, agreed to by all concerned at what is known as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35), set the pattern for the use of Church councils in the centuries ahead to settle doctrinal and moral issues that arose. Thus, throughout the history of the Church we find scores of such councils, and on various levels, to settle matters of dispute and to deal with those who do not adhere to the Apostolic faith.

The first three hundred years of Christian history were marked by the appearance of certain heresies or false teachings such as secret philosophic schemes for the elite (Gnosticism), dazzling prophetic aberrations (Montanism), and grave errors regarding the three Persons of the Trinity (Sabellianism).

Then, in the early fourth century, a heresy with potential for Church-wide disruption appeared, propagated by one Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt. He denied the eternality of the Son of God, claiming contrary to the apostles' doctrine that the Son was a created being who came into existence at a point in time and thus was not truly God. This deadly error struck the Church like a cancer. Turmoil spread almost everywhere. The first Church-wide, or Ecumenical, Council met in Nicea in AD 325 to address this issue. Some 318 bishops, along with many priests, deacons, and laymen rejected the new teaching of Arius and his associates, upholding the apostles' doctrine of Christ, affirming the eternality of the Son and His consubstantiality with the Father. Their proclamation of the Apostolic teaching concerning Christ included a creed, which, with the additions concerning the Holy Spirit made in 381 at the Council of Constantinople, forms the document we today call the Nicene Creed.

Between the years 325 and 787, seven such Church-wide conclaves were held, all dealing first and foremost with some specific challenge to the Apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ. These councils, meeting in the cities of Nicea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople, are known as the Seven Ecumenical Councils.

For the first thousand years of Christian history, the entire Church, save for the heretics, embraced and defended the New Testament Apostolic faith. There was no consequential division. And this one faith, preserved through all trials, attacks and tests, this Apostolic doctrine, was called "the Orthodox Faith".

2. **Worship:** Doctrinal purity was tenaciously maintained. But true Christianity is far more than adherence to a set of correct beliefs alone. The life of the Church is centrally expressed in her worship, adoration of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was Jesus Himself Who told the woman at the well, "the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (Jn 4:23).

At the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the communion service, when He took bread and wine, gave a blessing, and said to His disciples, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me" and "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you: (Lk 22:19, 21). From the New Testament we know the Church participated in communion at least each Lord's Day (Acts 20:7, 11). From such first and second century sources as the *Didache*, the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, and St. Justin Martyr, we are assured the Eucharist is the very center of Christian worship from the Apostolic era on.

And just as the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets were read in the Temple worship

and the synagogue in Israel, so the Church also immediately gave high priority to the public reading of the Scripture and to preaching in her worship, along with the Eucharistic meal.

Even before the middle of the first century, Christian worship was known by the term *liturgy* which literally means "the common work" or "the work of the people." The early liturgy of the Church's worship was composed of two essential parts, (1) the liturgy of the word, including hymns, Scripture reading, and preaching and (2) the liturgy of the faithful, composed of intercessory prayers, the kiss of peace, and the Eucharist. From virtually the beginning, Christian worship has had a definable shape or form which continues to this day.

Modern Christians advocating freedom from liturgy in worship are usually shocked to learn that spontaneity was never the practice in the ancient Church! A basic pattern or shape of Christian worship was observed from the start. And as the Church grew and matured, liturgy matured as well. Hymns, Scripture readings, and prayers were intertwined in the basic foundation. A clear, purposeful procession through the year, marking and joining in word, song, and praise the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, and sanctifying crucial aspects of Christian life and experience, was forthcoming. The Christian life was lived in reality in the worship of the Church. Far from being routine, the worship of the historic Church participated in the unfolding drama of the richness and mystery of the Gospel itself!

Further, specific landmarks in our salvation and walk with Christ were celebrated and sanctified. Baptism and the anointing with oil, or chrismation, were there from the start. Marriage, healing, confession of sin, and ordination to the ministry of the Gospel are other early rites in the Church. On each of these occasions Christians understood, in a great mystery, grace and power from God were being given according to the individual need of each person. The Church saw these events as holy moments in her life and called them mysteries or sacraments.

3. **Government:** No one seriously questions whether the apostles of Christ led the Church at her beginning. they had been given the commission to preach the Gospel (Mt 28:19,20) and the authority to forgive or retain sins (Jn 20:23). Theirs was by no means a preaching-only mission! They built the Church itself under Christ's headship. To govern it, three definite and permanent offices, as taught in the New Testament, were in evidence.

a. The office of bishop. The apostles themselves were the first bishops in the Church. Even before Pentecost, after Judas had turned traitor, Peter declared in

applying Psalm 108:8, "Let his bishopric another take: (Acts 1:20). The word "bishopric" refers, of course, to the office of bishop and its use indicates the apostles themselves are bishops. Some have mistakenly argued the office of bishop was a later invention. Quite to the contrary, the apostles were themselves bishops, and they appointed bishops to succeed them to oversee the Church in each locality.

Occasionally, the objection is still heard that the office of bishop and presbyter were originally identical. The terms are used interchangeably in the new Testament while the apostles were present, the bishop being the presiding elder in a local church. But after the apostles' deaths, the offices of bishop and presbyter soon became distinct throughout the Church. Ignatius of Antioch, consecrated bishop by AD 70 in the Church from which Paul and Barnabas had been sent out, writes just after the turn of the century that bishops appointed by the apostles, surrounded by their presbyters, were everywhere in the Church.

b. The office of presbyter. Elders or presbyters are mentioned very early in the life of the Church in Acts and the Epistles. It is evident that in each place a Christian community developed, elders were appointed by the apostles to pastor the people.

As time passed, presbyters were referred to in the short form of the word as "prests," then as "priests," in full view of the fact that the Old Covenant priesthood had been fulfilled in Christ and that the Church is corporately a priesthood of believers. The priest was not understood as an intermediary between God and the people nor as a dispenser of grace. It was the role of the priest to be the presence of Christ in that Christian community. And in the very capacity of being the presence of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, the priest was to safeguard the flock of God.

c. The office of deacon. The third order or office in the government of the New Testament Church was the deacon. At first the apostles fulfilled this office themselves. But with the rapid growth of the Church, seven initial deacons were selected (Acts 6:1-7) to help carry the responsibility of service to those in need. It was one of these deacons, Stephen, who became the first martyr of the Church.

Through the centuries, the deacons have not only served the material needs of the Church, but have held a key role in the liturgical life of the Church as well. Often called "the eyes and ears of the bishop," many deacons have become priests and ultimately entered the episcopal office.

The authority of the bishop, presbyter, and deacon was not anciently understood as being apart from the people but always from among the people. In turn the people of God were called to submit to those who ruled over them (Heb 13:17), and they were also called to give their agreement to the direction of the leaders for the Church. On a

number of occasions in history, that "Amen" was not forthcoming, and the bishops of the Church took note and changed course. Later in history, many Church leaders departed from the ancient model and usurped authority for themselves. In the minds of some this brought the ancient model into question. But the problem was not in the model but in the deviation from it.

It should also be mentioned that it was out of the ministry and life of the apostles that the people of God, the laity, were established in the Church. Far from being a herd of observers, the laity are vital in the effectiveness of the Church. They are the recipients and active users of the gifts and grace of the Spirit. Each of the laity has a role in the life and function of the Church. Each is to supply something to the whole (1 Co 12:7). And it is the responsibility of the bishops, the priests, and the deacons to be sure that this is a reality for the laity.

The worship of the Church at the close of its first 1000 years had substantially the same shape from place to place. The doctrine was the same. The whole Church confessed one creed, the same in every place, and had weathered many attacks. The government of the Church was recognizably one everywhere. And this One Church was the Orthodox Church.