

What does it mean to be Catholic? In today's Gospel, our Lord Jesus essentially answers this question in the context of his declaration to St. Peter: "And so I say to *you, you are Peter*, and upon this rock I will build *my church*, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

In today's Gospel we're given the indisputable historical fact that our Lord Jesus Christ founded a Church—*one Church, that He explicitly established upon St. Peter, a fisherman from Galilee*. Notice the clear language of our Savior: He didn't establish multiple churches or different denominations, He established *one Church* upon St. Peter to continue His mission of redemption until the end of time. This one Church *is* the Universal Church, historically centered in Rome, and which traces Her foundation all the way back to Christ Himself almost 2,000 years ago, in the mysterious event which is recorded in today's Gospel from Matthew.

And the “Universal Church” is more commonly known as the *Catholic Church*, for the word “Catholic” means “universal” (it comes from the Greek *katholikos*) and this term was first used by St. Ignatius of Antioch in his letter to the Smyrneans around 110 AD when referring to the one true Church founded by Christ Himself upon St. Peter and the Apostles. The term “Catholic” is used to describe Christ’s Church given that it encompasses peoples of every nation, race, language, ethnicity, era, and background and so this Universal Church is open to *all* people without exception, and our Lord Jesus demonstrated this in His public ministry! The universality of the Church also applies to the content of the Church’s faith, which has been continuously proclaimed and passed down to successive generations since the time of Christ almost 2,000 years ago. Just think about that for a second: we belong to a very *ancient* religion—a very *ancient* faith.

And so to answer the question I posed at the beginning: to be Catholic simply means to enjoy an intimate and personal relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ *in and through* His Church. In other words, our Lord Jesus is *inseparable* from His Catholic Church. Our Lord even

identifies Himself with the Church when He tells His disciples in Luke 10:16: “Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.” So our Lord Jesus is *one* with His Church, the Body of Christ, which is a visible community of disciples that is known and identifiable.

We encounter Christ *in and through* His Church: *primarily* through the Church’s sacraments, her liturgical worship, her ordained ministers and members, and Her sacred teachings on faith and morals, which are promulgated by the Magisterium, the official teaching authority of the Church established by Christ in today’s Gospel and comprised of the Pope and the college of bishops, who are the successors of St. Peter and the Apostles respectively.

Just as God established a hierarchical, institutional authority in the Old Testament to lead, govern, and sanctify His Chosen People, the Israelites (evidence of which we just heard in the First Reading today from Isaiah), so also in the *New Testament*, God gives us the Church as a gift to help us to stay united with Him so that we may grow in holiness and ultimately join Him in Heaven forever. The Church as our Mother

teaches us, guides us, leads us, helps us, heals us, sanctifies us, and She does all of this, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, by giving us the gift of Jesus, Who is Her Divine Founder and Head.

Now just as our Lord Jesus is both human and divine, so also His Church is both human and divine. The Church is Divine primarily in Her mission and identity, given that She was founded by God Himself and instructed to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth until the end of time. The Church is human in Her leaders and members, who are obviously imperfect, weak, and inclined to sin. All of us are imperfect sinners in a need of a Savior and this is the *whole point of the Church*—to bring the salvation of Christ to a fallen and sinful world—to bring sinners into Her fold so that we may be sanctified and redeemed.

Yet in the Church's human dimension, we see the goodness and beauty of God's plan, which is always to lovingly include human beings in the divine work of salvation. This is wholly consistent with how God operates in salvation history—He always invites human beings to freely cooperate with His divine plans so that love may flourish and human sanctification and salvation may be achieved.

Now even though our Lord Jesus established His Church upon St. Peter and the Apostles, our Savior Himself is the divine Foundation, Center, and Head of the Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ. This is *extremely important* for us to understand as Catholics and disciples of Jesus. Our Lord wants to give us a deep, mature, and strong faith that is rooted in *Him* and in the mission and identity of His Church.

Brothers and sisters, nothing pains me more than to hear people say, “I left the Catholic Church because of the priest sex abuse scandals.” Trust me, *nobody* is angrier about the evil crimes committed by a despicable minority of priests and bishops than me. *Nobody* in this church is more outraged about these crimes and cover-ups than me.

Yet brothers and sisters, we should *never abandon Jesus because of Judas*. We should never allow the sins and crimes of others to destroy our Catholic faith and rip us away from Jesus and His Church. *The Truth is the Truth*, regardless of what anyone else says or does! To be honest, the main reason I’m Catholic is because it’s *objectively true* and it is the *fullness of Truth*! And so there is no sin, crime, evil, or

scandal (past, present, or future) that could ever falsify or invalidate the eternal and saving truths of our Catholic faith!

Brothers and sisters, I will repeatedly shout this from the rooftops until I'm blue in the face: as Catholics and disciples of *Christ*, we're not called to root our entire faith in the fallible and sinful human leaders of the Church—*rather we're called to root our entire Catholic faith in our Lord Jesus* and in the *mission and identity of His Catholic Church*. Do not root your Catholic faith *in me or any one pope, bishop, priest, deacon, or layperson*. The Catholic faith is not about Fr. Isaac or any other cleric—my sacred duty as a priest is to be a bridge for you and lead you to Christ our Savior so that you may be happy with Him now and forever in Heaven.

So as we prepare to worship and receive our Lord Himself, truly present in the Most Holy Eucharist, may we thank Him for the great gift of His Church, our Mother and His Bride, and ask Him for the grace to love her, purify her, renew her, strengthen her, and be faithful to her so that She may carry out the divine mission entrusted to Her by Jesus Himself *through St. Peter*, the fallible fisherman from Galilee whose

life would change forever when he courageously confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.