

# WHAT IS THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

FR STEPHEN WANG



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by  
Fr Stephen Wang

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## **Some important questions**

Many people are puzzled by the idea of the Church. They may believe in God, and have faith in Jesus, and study the bible, and pray, and try to lead good lives. But they don't understand why we need a Church. It seems unnecessary. It seems like something that gets in the way of our relationship with God. And the Catholic Church, above all, can be a source of confusion or even of scandal. It is a large institution with a complicated history that insists on making great claims for itself. To many people these claims seem absurd. They ask themselves: "What has the Catholic Church got to do with Jesus Christ? What has this Church got to do with me and with my personal faith?"

This pamphlet will look at some of the claims that the Catholic Church makes, and show why the Catholic Church is so important for our lives as Christians. It does not explain every Catholic teaching; it just tries to answer some of the basic questions that people have about the Church. It shows that the Church is a gift from God, founded by Jesus Christ himself; that Jesus continues to teach us through his Church; that Jesus is present with us through his Church, especially in the sacraments, and

above all in the sacrament of the Eucharist; and that the Catholic Church has a special place in history because it contains the fullness of all the gifts that Christ wants to give to the world.

## **Why do we need the Church?**

### **Jesus Christ founded his Church**

We can't talk about the Church without talking about God, and about his plans for us. Two thousand years ago God sent his only Son to us so that we could find peace with him and with each other, and share in his divine life. Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, who was born in Bethlehem, is the eternal Son of God. He became a human being like us, while remaining truly and completely divine. He came into the world that had been created through him. He lived among us, he taught and healed and forgave, he suffered and died and was raised to life again. Jesus Christ is the way of God; he is the truth about God and about ourselves; he is God's own life lived among us. He is the beginning and end of all our deepest longings and hopes, and of all the other things that we never dared to hope for. This is the mystery of Incarnation: Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human; he is God with us.

Many people wonder what it would have been like to know Jesus two thousand years ago, to walk with him, follow him, listen to him, touch him - God himself living

with us. What is incredible is that we can be this close to him, as close as his first followers were. He did not leave us alone. Through the Church all the good things that he revealed to those who knew him are still given to us today. Through the Church Jesus Christ is still present in the world right now, God truly with us, just as surely and completely as he was two thousand years ago.

The mystery of the Church only makes sense because of the mystery of the Incarnation. We are creatures of flesh and blood, and God chose to reveal himself through the flesh and blood of Jesus. God respects the fact that we are physical beings, instead of trying to bypass it. He doesn't pretend we're spirits or angels. He uses visible, material things - people, places, objects - to tell us about deeper spiritual things.

God continues to use human beings to be the sign of his presence in the world, the means by which we can be united with him and with each other. Jesus did not leave an idea or a plan or a book or a letter about himself. He left a group of people, his Church, who would be his life and his body. This Church was united, visibly united - it was not just a hidden unity of feeling or hope. This Church was catholic, that is, universal - it was the means by which *all* people would come to know him. He chose twelve apostles to make disciples of all nations. He told them to hand on all that they had received from him, to hand on his revelation. He promised that he would give

his Holy Spirit to the apostles - the Spirit of God; God's power and truth, God himself. He sent them out with this Spirit to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom - to baptize and to teach, to forgive sins and to unite all people. This Spirit would guide them and lead them into all truth.

The apostles and their successors would be continuing witnesses to Christ. They would speak in his name; whoever listened to them would be listening to Christ, whoever rejected them would be rejecting Christ. In this way the whole Church, led by the apostles, would be the continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the world. The Church spread out from Jerusalem; it lived, prayed, suffered, thought and wrote; it handed on the living Word of God that had been given to it.

### **The Catholic Church today**

There is a danger of idealising this early Church, of pretending that there were trouble-free apostolic days when the Church didn't have any problems or disagreements. But the Church has always had problems. Its members have *always* fought and argued. Right from the start there have been times when the disagreements have become so bad that some people have left the Church and set themselves against it.

The staggering fact is that these arguments and splits have never stopped the Church being the one Church that

Christ founded. He didn't form the Church and make promises to it only to see it destroyed or broken apart. Even though different people have left it, it has always remained visible and united: the Church that Jesus Christ founded, the Church that he guides.

The life of this Church can be traced continuously through the last two thousand years of history right down to the Roman Catholic Church today. The same fullness of life and truth that was given to the apostles is still given to the Catholic Church today. This is the most important claim that the Catholic Church makes about itself. Christ's life and truth are not limited by the Catholic Church, but in it they are most clearly found and guaranteed. The Church that he founded continues to be his living presence in the world, to be the one body that he has formed - teaching in his name, forgiving in his name, giving new life in his name, uniting in his name.

### **Change and development in the Church**

But the Catholic Church has obviously changed so much over the centuries, and many people find it difficult to see how this can be the *same* Church that Jesus founded. Are Catholics being a bit naïve? Why don't they just admit that this is a different faith and a different Church?

It must be said that many things *have* changed in the Catholic Church since the time of the first apostles: its members, its size, its customs, its languages, its devotions,

its culture. Of course the Catholic Church has changed in many superficial ways, of course it looks different. Two thousand years is a long time in which things can happen, some of them stranger than others. Some of these changes are superficial, some are very deep.

The deeper changes are less distracting but more important. The Catholic Church says that its faith has never changed, yet it speaks about its faith in new ways; its beliefs have developed. These developments are the result of the Church having a deeper and deeper understanding of its one unchanging faith, and expressing it in new ways. We would expect this of a living Church, one which doesn't remain stuck in the past, one which is the living presence of Christ in the world.

The love of the Church for Christ is constant, but this love deepens with time and experience. Over the years the Church has realised the enormous and sometimes painful implications of this love. In their daily lives individual Catholics try to live out their faith in fuller and more realistic ways. They constantly struggle simply to remain faithful, and this faithfulness changes lives and helps the whole Church to remain faithful.

The important developments that have taken place in the Catholic Church are not signs of failure or faithlessness (even though Catholics *have* failed and been faithless). These developments are the inevitable results of keeping faith in difficult, challenging and changing

situations. They are not embarrassing compromises, but vital signs of the renewing power of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. At each moment the Church has to work out how to live and communicate its one, unchanging love - Jesus Christ. At this level, the deepest level of what the Church is and what it is doing, the Church has not changed one bit. Nothing can be added to the revelation that Jesus gave to his apostles, nothing can be taken away.

Through all the changes, the heart of being a Catholic now is exactly the same as it was in 40AD. The Catholic Church today, in a direct and historical and visible line, is the same Church as the Church of the first apostles. Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be forever. Christian lives of prayer and love and sacrifice, lived in the faith of the Church, are at heart the same now as they always have been.

### **The problem of sin**

Many people are sympathetic to the theory of the Catholic Church, but they are put off by the people who actually belong to it. They know from experience or from history that the Catholic Church is full of sinners; and they are shocked and sometimes scandalised that bad people come to church and pray and call themselves Catholics. Isn't this hypocritical? Does it not prove that the Catholic Church is not all it claims to be?

Catholics do not believe that the Church is faultless. In every generation, including our own, individual Catholics have done terrible wrongs, by themselves and in the name of the Church. This fact should sadden us, as all sin should sadden us, but it shouldn't surprise us. God could have formed a pure Church; he could have miraculously ensured that all Catholics acted perfectly, or excluded all sinners from his Church. But he didn't. He chose to build his holy Church out of sinful human beings, out of men and women who had betrayed and disowned him, out of people he knew would fail to believe and love him.

This is yet another consequence of the Incarnation. God is not a magician; he hasn't pulled a beautiful Church out of a hat and forgotten about human beings. He uses them, despite their faults, and transforms them in the process. He sent his Son into the heart of the world, and he uses the broken hearts of men and women to be his Church.

Bad Catholics are not being hypocritical by staying in the Church. Catholics realise that they can be sinful and this is why they stay in the Church - they need the grace and forgiveness given through the Church to help them change.

This doesn't excuse the turning away from God and from each other that we call sin. Sin is always wrong, and God always wants us to turn from sin and turn to him. But it does mean that sin has no power over God's plans.

Despite the cruelty, unfaithfulness and hypocrisy of individuals in every generation, the Catholic Church has always remained faithful to Christ, because Christ has always remained faithful to it. The Church always needs to be purified and renewed, but it is still always holy because of the holiness of Christ. This is the wonder of the Church, that God chose to show the glory of Jesus Christ through sinful human beings, so that his power and strength could be seen working through human weakness.

### **Holiness and the saints**

After spending so much time thinking about sin, it's important to think about holiness. The Catholic Church is a Church of sinners because it is a Church *for* sinners, a Church to make us saints. Christ wants us to share his own life, to love perfectly in union with him, and to be his witnesses in the world - he wants us to be holy.

The end of holiness is to see God face to face in heaven, to be wrapped up in his joy and happiness forever in the company of all the angels and saints. The beginning of holiness is our present life of faith: trying to persevere in doing God's will, trying to hope, to love and to start again when we fail. Without Christ all these efforts would be difficult and ultimately futile. With Christ, in faith, our good thoughts, words and actions, however small, are given an infinite value. Our prayers, joys and sufferings become his, and his wisdom, power, holiness and freedom become ours.

The Church has many beginners; it also has many saints. The saints are not those people who have arrived at the end, but those who have seen what the beginning is really about. They are not a strange group of people different from ourselves; they are who we could be, who we should be. Every Catholic, simply by being a member of the Church, shares in the invaluable gifts of faith and hope and love. All these gifts reflect the one gift of being united with Christ in the Church. The saints are those people who have realised what this means, not just in their minds but in their hearts and their whole lives. They help us to see the essential holiness of the Church - the life of Christ in the Church - the source of their own holiness.

No two saints are alike, because each one reflects a different aspect of Christ's love in his or her own particular way. But they all have something in common: they love God with all their strength; they care for others more than for themselves; they forgive when they are wronged; they give all that they have to give; they fight against evil and injustice; they patiently accept the sufferings that God sends them - happy to share in the suffering of Christ; they try never to do anything that they know to be wrong; they believe what the Church teaches; they pray unceasingly, because they know that prayer is the life of God in them; they offer all that they have to God for his praise and glory. Everything is done in union with Christ and with the whole Church.

The saints long to be in heaven, because they know that heaven is, ultimately, what life is about. They know that God has promised us so much more than happiness in this life. But they also long to start living heaven on earth, to bring Christ's love and truth to the world. The saints, those who care most about heaven, are also those who care most about this world, because they can get on with God's work without worrying about themselves. Their hope for the future does not distract them from loving God in the nitty-gritty of the present.

The saints continue to do God's work after death - he uses them in heaven as he used them on earth. We pray to the saints and to the holy angels, we ask them to pray for us, because death is not a barrier but a bridge for those who love one another in Christ. We especially ask them to pray for the holy souls in purgatory, those people who have died but who are still being prepared for heaven. These people are already with God, yet they need our prayers to help them through the wonderful but painful process of learning to love and to forgive perfectly.

This is the whole Church, the Church of heaven, purgatory and earth, the body of those who are united with Jesus Christ.

## **How does Christ teach us through the Church today?**

### **The New Testament and the Church**

The Church gives us Christ's life in many ways. One way is by teaching. When we think of the teaching of Jesus, the first thing we usually think of is the Bible, and especially the New Testament. We look to the New Testament to discover what Jesus said and did; we look to it for Christian truth and moral guidance. But it's important to understand where the New Testament comes from, and why we need the Church if we are going to trust the Bible.

The first Christians, gathered around the apostles and their disciples, learnt and lived their faith in the Church. They were united with Christ and with each other. These Christians did not have a New Testament. The only holy scriptures they had were those that we call the Old Testament which they inherited from the Jews. The Church's knowledge of Jesus Christ was not written down but was handed on in its traditions and teaching and worship.

As time passed the many spoken accounts of the life and teaching of Christ were written down - sometimes in

short records, sometimes in letters, eventually in longer accounts called gospels. Some of the writings that were written by about the end of the first century soon came to be regarded as scripture, and were read throughout the Church together with the Old Testament. This happened because the Church, under the authority of the apostles and their successors, accepted them and recognised that they were inspired by God.

There were doubts, however, about which writings should be included in this collection. These doubts went on for many generations. Eventually, throughout the fourth century, various Councils of bishops of the Church decided which Christian writings were inspired and authoritative. The ‘books’ included in this list form what we now call the New Testament, which together with the Jewish scriptures makes up the whole Bible. The Catholic Church has kept to this list since the end of the fourth century, even though some Christian groups have rejected certain books at different stages since then. This same Church has constantly been defending and interpreting the Bible and helping people to understand it more fully.

The vital questions are not ‘Do we trust the Bible? Is it true?’ but ‘Do we trust this Church? Is it Christ’s Church?’ The New Testament is only as important as the Church that it describes, as the Church that lived and wrote and collected it, as the Church that today still reads and interprets it. The New Testament is the book of the

Church, written by the apostles of the Church and their companions under the inspiration of God's Spirit. We will only love and trust the New Testament fully if we love and trust the Church. We will only really trust that Christ guides this Church of the past if we trust the Church in that past and in every age, including our own.

It's not obvious that the Bible we have is important. Many other books speak about God. Many other books, some as old as the writings of the New Testament, speak about Jesus. For many centuries Christians have believed that the Bible was inspired by God because the Catholic Church taught this, because it was the book of the Church. It would be strange to believe in the Bible without believing in the Church that wrote it and approved it and has been nourished by it throughout the centuries.

### **Christian teaching**

Jesus did not leave us alone. Catholics believe that he continues to love and teach and unite his people through the Catholic Church. Many Christian communities are aware of the different ways in which we come to know him - through the Bible, through the lives of Christian men and women, through the inspiration of God in our hearts and minds, through the teaching of Christian leaders. But we are given even more than this. The Catholic Church claims that it can speak the truth, in Jesus' name. It speaks and teaches with authority, and

says that people have a duty to listen to it. It makes claims on all people, as Jesus did, and not only on those who are attracted or attached to it.

Jesus *spoke* with authority and *taught* his followers: words are important, truth is important. It matters what we believe. It matters what we say about God and what he says to us. If we're careless about words and throw ourselves idealistically into living and loving we're likely to come unstuck. Our living and loving will probably become distorted or exhausted no matter how selfless we try to be. We need to hear God's living and guiding voice today, the *same* voice that Jesus' disciples heard. It's not enough to trust our feelings about what is right. It's not even enough to trust the Bible - we can fool ourselves too easily and twist its meanings to suit ourselves. God knows this only too well, and he has given us a way of hearing his living, teaching voice today, through the teaching of the Catholic Church.

### **Truth and reason**

The Catholic Church teaches. This doesn't conflict with the fact that people have a duty as well as a desire to think and reason. We must honour God by using our God-given minds and hearts properly, and we must be satisfied that something is not unreasonable or prejudiced. One of the important functions of our reason, however, is to know its own limitations, to know when it needs to listen

and pause and wonder. If we have been touched in some small way by Christ we will stop at nothing to discover who he is and how we can know him. Driven by this touch of mystery and wonder we will expect the truth about God to be greater than our expectations, to be challenging, shocking, frightening, awe-inspiring - not to be unreasonable, but to be beyond reason, to be more than our minds can grasp.

This is why Catholics believe what the Church teaches - they want to trust what God has told us about himself, to *trust* him, rather than just what they happen to think or understand unaided. Catholics are not stupidly submissive, but they are aware of what they can and what they cannot find out by themselves. They trust their Church because they trust Christ, and because through it they hear his living voice. Catholics know that the Church's teaching will not always be easy to accept, because the truth about God is sometimes discomfoting. Faced with God's beauty and kindness we become aware of our own sinfulness, and this is painful and humiliating. We become aware of the demands that he makes on us as well as the wonderful things that he gives us.

If we follow the teaching of the Church we are bound to follow all God's commandments, and not just those that we happen to agree with; we have to accept the Church's whole faith and not just those beliefs that we find attractive or comprehensible or 'relevant'; we have to

do things that we would rather avoid; we have to make sacrifices; we have to stand up to injustice and oppression in the world when we'd rather not; we have to stop pretending that we are already good and get on with the difficult business of actually trying to be good. But the comforts and rewards of listening to the Church far outweigh the difficulties. Nothing could be more precious than God's own life, his voice, his kindness - given to us through the Church.

### **The Pope and the Bishops**

Many different people are responsible for teaching in the Catholic Church - not least parents and school teachers. One clear way that we hear God's voice throughout the whole Church today - teaching, challenging, correcting, encouraging - is through the Catholic bishops who are united with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. Christ chose twelve apostles and sent them out with authority to baptize, teach, forgive and unite all people. This great plan for the world did not die when these first apostles died. Their successors have the same authority as themselves; they continue to be Christ's apostles.

The Catholic bishops united with the Pope are the apostles' successors. They are responsible for preaching and teaching, celebrating the sacraments, and uniting and governing the Church. Despite their different traditions, which enrich the variety and expression of Christian life,

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