

THE SOURCE OF TRUTH AND UNITY IN THE CHURCH - PART II

Introduction

Truth is not determined by what you or I believe or by our opinion. Any theory or opinion is just that until it is backed up by objective evidence. Then, it becomes fact or truth. The ultimate source of all truth is God and His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The proximate source of all truth, according to the early Church Fathers, is the Church that Jesus established upon Peter and the other Apostles under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit. The following are presented in chronological order simply to show the consistency of faith and teaching over a period of some 400 years from the beginning of the Church. May these voices of the past speak to open hearts, Catholic and Protestant alike, so that errors can be corrected and a thirst for unity can be rekindled within the Church to the glory of Jesus Christ, her founder and head.

The Early Church Fathers

Our Apostles, for our sakes, received the gospel from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent from God. Christ, then, is from God, and the Apostles from Christ. Both, therefore, came in due order from the will of God. Having, therefore, received his instructions and being fully assured through the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, they went forth with confidence in the Word of God and with full assurance of the Holy Spirit, preaching the gospel that the Kingdom of God was about to come. And so, as they preached in the country and in the towns, they appointed their firstfruits (having proved them by the Spirit) to be bishops and deacons [overseers and ministers] of those who would believe.

Our Apostles knew, also, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the dignity of the bishop's office. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid and, after a time, made provision that, on their death, other approved men should succeed to their ministry.

--Clement of Rome (c. 95), *Epistle to the Corinthians*, 40-42, 44

Avoid divisions as the beginning of evils. All of you follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as the Apostles, and respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no man perform anything pertaining to the Church without the bishop.... Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as, wherever Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church.

--St. Ignatius (c. 112), *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, 8

Papias makes no claim to be a hearer and eyewitness of the holy Apostles but to have received the contents of the faith from those who were known to them. He tells us this in his own words, "I shall not hesitate to set down for you, along with my interpretations, all things that I learned from the elders with care and recorded with care, being well assured of their truth...I took pleasure, not in those who record strange precepts but in those who relate such precepts as were given to the faith from the Lord and are derived from the truth itself.

"Besides, if ever any man came who had been a follower of the elders, I would inquire about the

sayings of the elders; what Andrew said, or Peter, or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples; and what Ariston says, and John the Elder, who are disciples of the Lord. For, I did not consider that I got so much profit from the contents of books as from the utterances of a living and abiding voice."

Concerning Mark, the writer of the Gospel, he says, "The Elder used to say this also: Mark became an interpreter of Peter and wrote down accurately, but not in order, as much as he remembered, or as he (Peter) related, of the sayings and doings of Christ. He was not a hearer or follower of the Lord, but afterwards, as I said, of Peter, who adapted his teachings to the needs of the moment and did not make an ordered exposition of the sayings of the Lord. So, Mark made no mistake when he thus wrote down some things as he remembered them, or as he (Peter) related them; for, he made it his special care to omit nothing of what he heard and to make no false statement therein." This is what Papias relates concerning Mark.

Now, concerning Matthew, it is stated, "So then, Matthew recorded the oracles or prophetic discourses in the Hebrew tongue, and each interpreted them to the best of his ability."

--Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (c. 130), *Expositions of the Oracle of the Lord*, Eusebius, H.E. III. 39

The Church of Corinth remained in the right doctrine down to the episcopate of Primus at Corinth...After arriving in Rome, I made a succession down to Anicetus. To Anicetus succeeded Soter, who was followed by Eleutherus. In every succession and in every city, things are ordered according to the preaching of the Law, the Prophets, and the Lord.

--Hegesippus (c. 175), in Eusebius, H.E. IV.22,2

The Church, although dispersed throughout the whole world even to the ends of the earth, has received from the Apostles and from their disciples the faith in one God.

As I said before, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it as if she occupied but one house. She likewise believes these things just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart; and, harmoniously she proclaims them and hands them down, as if she possessed one mouth. For, while the languages of the world are diverse, nevertheless, the authority of the tradition is one and the same.

Neither do the churches among the Germans believe otherwise or have another tradition, nor do those among the Ibernians, nor among the Celts, nor away in the East, nor in Egypt, nor in Libya, nor in those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But, just as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere and enlightens all men who desire a knowledge of truth.

Nor will any of the rulers in the churches, whatever his power of eloquence, teach otherwise, for, no one is above the teacher; nor will he who is weak in speaking detract from the tradition. For, the faith is one and the same and cannot be amplified by one who is able to say much about it, nor diminished by one who can say but little.

--St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, (c. 180) *Against Heresies I, X: 1 & 2*

Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his gospel while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.

--St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, (c. 180) *Against Heresies, III, I. I* Eusebius. H.E. v. 8

When they [the heretics] are refuted from the Scriptures, they accuse the Scriptures themselves, as if there were something amiss with them and they carried no authority.

Yet, when we appeal again to that tradition that is derived from the Apostles and which is safeguarded in the churches through the succession of presbyters, they then are adversaries of tradition, claiming to be wiser not only than the presbyters but even than the Apostles and to have discovered the truth undefiled...Thus, it happens that they now agree neither with the Scriptures nor with tradition...

Those who wish to discern the truth may observe the apostolic tradition made manifest in every church throughout the world. We can enumerate those who were appointed bishops in the churches by the Apostles, and their successors down to our own day, who never taught and never knew absurdities such as these men produce. If the Apostles had known hidden mysteries which they taught the perfect in private and in secret, they would rather have committed them to those to whom they entrusted the churches. For, they wished those men to be perfect and unblameable whom they left as their successors and to whom they handed over their own office of authority.

We confound all those who, in any way, whether for self-pleasing, or vainglory, or blindness, or evil-mindedness, hold unauthorized meetings. This we do by pointing to the apostolic tradition and the faith that is preached to men, which has come down to us through the succession of bishops, the tradition and creed of the greatest, the most ancient church, the church known to all men which was founded and set up at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul. With this church, because of its position of leadership and authority, must needs agree every church, that is, the faithful everywhere. In her, the apostolic tradition has always been preserved by the faithful from all parts.

The blessed Apostles, after founding and building up the Church, handed over to Linus the office of bishop. Paul mentions this Linus in his epistle to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:21). He was succeeded by Anacletus, after whom in the third place after the Apostles, Clement was appointed to the bishopric. He not only saw the blessed Apostles but also conferred with them, and had their preaching ringing in his ears and their tradition before his eyes. In this, he was not alone; for, many still survived who had been taught by the Apostles.

Now, when Clement was bishop, there arose no small dissension among the brethren in Corinth, and the Church in Rome sent a most weighty letter to the Corinthians urging them to reconciliation, renewing their faith and telling them again of the tradition which he had lately received from the Apostles...

Euarestus succeeded this Clement, Alexander followed Euarestus; then Sixtus was appointed, the sixth after the Apostles. After him came Telesphorus, who had a glorious martyrdom. Then, Hyginus, Pius, Anicetus, and Soter; and now, in the twelfth place from the Apostles, Eleutherus occupies the see. In the same order and succession, the apostolic tradition in the Church and the preaching of the truth has come down to our time...

And then, Polycarp, besides being instructed by the Apostles and acquainted with many who had seen the Lord, was also appointed by the Apostles for Asia as bishop of the church in Smyrna. Even I saw him in my early youth; he remained with us a long time and, at a great age, suffered a martyrdom full of glory and renown and departed this life, having taught always the things that he had learned from the Apostles, which the Church hands down, which alone are true. There testify to these things all the churches throughout Asia and the successors of Polycarp down to this day.

Polycarp converted many of the before-mentioned heretics to the Church of God, declaring that he had received this one and only truth from the Apostles, the truth that has been handed down by the Church.

Since, therefore, there are so many proofs, there is now no need to seek among others the truth that can easily obtain from the Church. The Apostles have lodged all that there is of the truth with her, as with a rich bank, holding back nothing. And so, anyone who wishes can draw from her the draught of life. This is the gateway of life; all the rest are thieves and robbers...

Therefore, we ought to obey only those presbyters who are in the Church, who have their succession from the Apostles, as we have shown; who, with their succession in the episcopate, have received the sure gift of the truth according to the pleasure of the Father. The rest, who stand aloof from the primitive succession and assemble in any place whatever, we must regard with suspicion, either as heretics and evil-minded, or as schismatics, puffed up and complacent, or again as hypocrites, acting thus for the sake of gain and vainglory. All these have fallen from the truth.

--St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, (c. 180), *Against Heresies*, III, 2-4, IV, 26, 2

The Apostles first bore witness to the faith in Christ Jesus throughout Judea; they founded churches there, and then went out into the world and preached to the nations the same doctrine of the same faith. They likewise founded churches in every city, from which the other churches thereafter derived their shoot of faith and the seeds of doctrine--yea, and are still deriving them, in order to become churches. It is through this that these churches are themselves apostolic, in that they are the offspring of apostolic churches.

Every kind of thing must be classified in accordance with its origin. And so, the churches, many and great as they may be, are really the one Primitive Church issuing from the Apostles, which is their source. So, all are primitive and all are Apostolic, while all are one. This unity is proved by the peace they share, by their title of brotherhood, by their contract of hospitality; these privileges have but one ground, the one tradition of the same revelation.

It is, therefore, on this ground that we put forward our ruling, namely, that, if Jesus Christ sent

out the Apostles to preach, no others are to be accepted as preachers but those whom Christ appointed since "no other knows the Father except the Son and he to whom the Son has revealed him." And, the Son seems not to have revealed him to any but the Apostles whom he sent to preach--assuredly to preach what he revealed to them. What they preached, that is, what Christ revealed to them, this, on my ruling, ought to be established solely through these same churches which the Apostles themselves founded by preaching to them as well as by the living voice, as the phrase is, as by their Epistles afterwards. If this be so, it follows that all doctrine that accords with these apostolic churches, the sources and originals of the faith, must be reckoned as the truth, since it preserves without doubt what the churches received from the Apostles, the Apostles from Christ, and Christ from God....We are in communion with the apostolic churches; there is no difference of doctrine; this is the testimony of the truth.

But, if any of these [heresies] are bold enough to insert themselves into the Apostolic age, in order to seem to have been handed down from the Apostles because they existed under the Apostles, we can say: Let them, then, produce the origins of their churches; let them unroll the list of their bishops, an unbroken succession from the beginning, so that that first bishop has as his precursor and the source of his authority one of the Apostles or one of the apostolic men who, though not an Apostle, continued with the Apostles. This is how the apostolic churches report their origins; thus, the Church of the Smyrnaeans relates that Polycarp was appointed by John, the Church of Rome that Clement heads was ordained by Peter....

--Tertullian (160-240), *Concerning the Prescript of the Heretics*, 20, 21, & 32

The third book of the gospel is that according to Luke. Luke, the physician, when, after the Ascension of Christ, Paul had taken him to himself as traveling companion, wrote in his own name what he had been told [or in order], although he had not himself seen the Lord in the flesh. He set down the events as far as he could ascertain them and began his story with the birth of John. The fourth gospel is that of John, one of the disciples.

Moreover, the Acts of all the Apostles are included in one book. Luke addressed them to the most excellent Theophilus because the several events took place when he was present; and he makes this plain by the omission of the passion of Peter and of the journey of Paul when he left Rome for Spain.

For the Epistles of Paul, he wrote to not more than seven churches in this order: the first to the Corinthians, the second to the Ephesians, the third to the Philippians, the fourth to the Colossians, the fifth to the Galatians, the sixth to the Thessalonians, the seventh to the Romans...

He wrote, besides these, one to Philemon, one to Titus, and two to Timothy. These were written in personal affection, but they have been hallowed by being held in honor by the Catholic Church for the regulation of church discipline...There are many others that cannot be received into the Catholic Church.

The Epistle of Jude, indeed, and two bearing the name of John, are accepted in the Catholic Church...We receive also the Apocalypse of John.

--The Moratorian Canon, probably the 8th. century. The Greek original probably dates from the end of the second century.

It can be easily proved to the mind of faith by a brief statement of the truth. The Lord says to Peter, "I say to you that you are Peter, etc." (Matthew 16:18 & 19) [Again, after his resurrection, he says to him, "Feed my sheep."] He builds his church upon one man, and, though he gives to all the Apostles an equal power and says, "As my Father sent me, etc." (John 20:21-23), yet he has ordained by his authority the source of unity beginning from one man.

Certainly, the other Apostles were what Peter was, endued with an equal fellowship both of honor and of favor; but, the beginning was made from unity, that the Church of Christ may be shown to be one. To this one Church the Holy Spirit points in the Song of Songs, in the person of our Lord, saying, "My dove, my spotless one, is but one; she is the only one of her mother, elect of her that bore her." (Canticle 6:9). He that holds not this unity of the Church, does he think that he holds the faith? He that strives against and resists the Church, is he confident that he is in the Church? For, the blessed apostle Paul also teaches the same thing and sets forth the sacrament of unity, saying, "There is one body, etc." (Ephesians 4:4 & 5).

The Church, flooded with the light of the Lord, extends her rays over all the globe: yet, it is one light that is diffused everywhere, and the unity of the body is not broken up. She stretches forth her branches over the whole earth in rich abundance; she spreads far and wide the bounty of her onward flowing streams; yet, there is but one head, one source, one mother, abounding in the increase of her fruitfulness. Of her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, and we are quickened from her breath.

The spouse of Christ cannot be made an adulteress; she is undefiled and chaste. She it is who preserves us for God, who enrolls into the Kingdom the sons she has borne. Whoever stands aloof from the Church and is joined to an adulteress is cut off from the promises given to the Church; he or she that leaves the Church of Christ does not attain to Christ's rewards. He or she is an alien, an outcast, an enemy. He or she cannot have God for his or her Father who does not have the Church for his or her mother. If anyone was able to escape outside of Noah's ark, then he or she also escapes who is outside the doors of the Church...He or she that rends or divides the Church of Christ cannot possess the clothing of Christ...

--Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, (248-258), *On the Unity of the Church, 4-6*

Our Lord, whose precepts and admonitions we are bound to observe, ordered the high office of bishop, and the system of his Church, when he speaks in the Gospel and says to Peter, "You are Peter, etc." (Matthew 16:18 & 19)...Since then, age has followed age, and bishop has followed bishop in succession, and the office of the episcopate and the system of the Church has been handed down, so that the Church is founded on the bishops, and every act of the Church is directed by these same presiding officers. Since this has been established by divine ordinance, I am astonished that certain persons have been rash and bold enough to choose to write to me in such a manner as to send their letter in the Church's name, when the Church consists of the bishops, the clergy, and all the faithful...

--Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, *Epistle 33, 1*

In this place (John 6:67-69), "Lord, to whom shall we go? etc.", Peter, upon whom the Church had to be built, speaks as representing the Church for our instruction. For, although the proud and arrogant multitude of those who refuse to obey may leave, still, the Church never departs from Christ, and the Church is made up of the people united to their priest and the flock that cleaves to its shepherd. Hence, you should know that the bishop is in the Church and the Church in the bishop and that, if anyone is not with the bishop, he is not in the Church. Know also that they vainly beguile themselves who, not being at peace with the priests of God, approach by stealth and trust by underhanded means to enter into communion with certain persons; whereas, the Church is one and may not be rent or sundered but should assuredly be bound together and united by the glue of the priests who are in harmony one with another.

--Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, *Epistle 56, 7*

Continue in the profession of that religion that was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter, as it has been preserved by faithful tradition; and which is now professed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic holiness. According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe the one deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity.

We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but, as for the others, since, in our judgment, they are foolish madmen, we decree that they will be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and we shall not presume to give to their gatherings the name of churches.

--Theodosius I (379-395), *On Catholics and Heretics (380)*

A man cannot have salvation except in the Catholic Church. Outside the Catholic Church, he can have everything except salvation. He can have honor, he can have Sacraments, he can sing alleluia, he can answer Amen, he can possess the gospel, he can have and preach faith in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, but never except in the Catholic Church will he be able to find salvation.

--St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, (c. 418)

I have, therefore, continually given the greatest pains and diligence to inquiring, from the greatest number of men outstanding in holiness and in doctrine, how I can secure a kind of fixed and, as it were, general and guiding principle for distinguishing the true Catholic Faith from the degraded falsehoods of heresy. The answer that I receive is always to this effect: that, if I wish, or indeed, if anyone wishes, to detect the deceits of heretics that arise and to avoid their snares and to keep healthy and sound in a healthy faith, we ought, with the Lord's help, to fortify our faith in a twofold manner: firstly, by the authority of God's Law, then by the tradition of the Catholic Church.

Here, it may be, someone will ask, "Since the canon of Scripture is complete and is in itself abundantly sufficient, what need is there to join to it the interpretation of the Church?" The answer is that, because of the very depth of Scriptures, all men do not place one identical interpretation upon it. The statements of the same writer are explained by different men in different

ways, so much so that it seems almost possible to extract from it as many opinions as there are men...Therefore, because of the intricacies of error, which is so multiform, there is a great need for the laying down of a rule for the exposition of the Prophets and Apostles in accordance with the standard of the interpretation of the Church Catholic.

Now, in the Catholic Church itself, we take the greatest care to hold **THAT WHICH HAS BEEN BELIEVED EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS, AND BY ALL.**

This is truly and properly "Catholic", as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which comprehends everything almost universally. We shall hold to this rule if we follow universality [i.e. ecumenicity], antiquity, and consent. We shall follow universality if we acknowledge the one Faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations and opinions of all, or certainly nearly all, bishops and doctors (teachers) alike.

What, then, will the Catholic Christian do if a small part of the Church has cut itself off from communion of the universal Faith? The answer is sure. He or she will prefer the healthiness of the whole body to the morbid and corrupt link.

But, what if some novel contagion tries to infect the whole Church and not merely a tiny part of it? Then, he or she will take care to cleave to antiquity, which cannot now be led astray by the deceit of novelty.

What if, in antiquity itself, two or three men, or it may be a city, or even a whole province be detected in error? Then, he or she will take the greatest care to prefer the decrees of the ancient General Councils, if there are such, to the irresponsible ignorance of a few men.

But, what if some error arises regarding which nothing of this sort is to be found? Then, he or she must do his or her best to compare the opinions of the Fathers and inquire into their meaning, provided always that, though they belong to diverse times and places, they yet continued in the faith and communion of the one Catholic Church; and let them be teachers approved and outstanding. Whatever he or she shall find to have been held, approved, and taught, not by one or two only but by all equally and with one consent, openly, frequently, and persistently, let him or her take this as to be held without the slightest hesitation.

--St. Vincent of Lerins (434), *The Vincentian Canon*

Keep that which is committed. What is committed? It is that which has been entrusted to you, not that which you have invented; what you have received, not what you have devised; not a matter of ingenuity, but of doctrine; not of private acquisition, but of public interpretation; a matter brought to you, not created by you; a matter you are not the author of, but the keeper of; not the teacher, but the learner; not the leader, but the follower.

Guard this deposit. Preserve the talent of the Catholic Church unviolated and unimpaired. What has been entrusted to you may remain with you and may be handed down by you. You received gold; hand it down as gold.

The question may be asked, "If this is right, then is no progress of religion possible within the

Church of Christ? To be sure, there has to be progress...But, it must be progress in the proper sense of the word, and not a change in faith. Progress means that each thing grows within itself, whereas change implies that one thing is transformed into another...

The growth of religion in the soul should be like the growth of the body which, in the course of years, develops and unfolds, yet remains the same as it was. The course of years always completes in adults the parts and forms with which the wisdom of the Creator has previously imbued infants...

In the same way, the dogma of the Christian religion ought to follow these laws of progress so that it may be consolidated in the course of years, developed in the sequence of time, and sublimated by age--yet remain uncorrupted and unimpaired, complete and perfect in all the properties of its parts and all its essentials so that it does not allow of any change, or any less of its specific character, or any variation in its inherent form.

--St. Vincent of Lerins (C 445), *A Commentary for the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith against the Profane Novelties of All Heresies, chapter 22*

We are convinced that the only defense for us and for our Empire is in the favor of the God of heaven: and, in order to deserve this favor, it is our first care to support the Christian Faith on its venerable religion. Therefore, inasmuch as the pre-eminence of the Apostolic See is assured by the merit of St. Peter, the first of its bishops, by the leading position of the City of Rome, and also by the authority of the holy Synod, let not presumption strive to attempt anything contrary to the authority of that See. For, the peace of the churches will only then be everywhere preserved when the whole body acknowledges its ruler. Hitherto, this has been observed without violation. Nothing shall be attempted contrary to the ancient custom without the authority of the venerable pope of the Eternal City. Whatsoever the authority of the Apostolic See has enacted, or shall enact, let that be held as law for all.

--The Edict of Valerian III (445)

--compiled by Patrick J. Hession