

“WHY THE CHURCH?” PART I
Mark Hellinger | Most Precious Blood Parish
Summer Series | 2020

Intro:

- 7 talks
- 20-30 mins, questions at the end, maybe a little discussion too.
- Hope to get you thinking and provide some framework to see in a new way.

The Goal:

- Answer the question “Why the Church?”
 - To do that we need to think about:
 - What is the Church?
 - When did the Church come into being?
 - How does it work?
 - Who started it?
 - How do I live it?
 - Etc.
- The question is really a matter of great importance, but is often overlooked by all of us. People always talk about “the Church,” but often I find that people are not talking about the same thing.

The schema:

1. Intro
2. The four levels and the Marks of the “Church”
3. Life and prayer in the Church
4. The Sacraments
5. The common priesthood
6. The hierarchical priesthood
7. Summary, conclusions

Introduction: To profess belief

- Belief
 - Multiple cultural uses:
 - “well, I believe that it is going to rain today”

- “I believe that you have the wrong number”
 - “Is that so and so? Well, I believe it is”
 - Difference between a statement of opinion or a statement of faith.
 - Faith is not an expression of an opinion.
 - Faith is trust in a person.
 - These are often confused.
 - “I believe you”
 - Expression of faith...in a person. Different than a thought or opinion.
- In the Creed, we profess “belief,” which is a statement of trust/faith in what God Himself has revealed to us.
- An opinion can be neutral. Belief cannot be neutral.
 - Believing that your favorite team is going to win affects other aspects of your life, but Believing that Jesus Christ is God affects every aspect of your life. There is nothing that remains untouched by His person and His Truth.
 - Belief is a defining aspect of a person. Deepest core. That’s why religion is one of the hardest things to talk about with other people.

Part 1: A people called out, the mystery of the Church’s existence.

- Every Sunday (and every time we pray the rosary)
 - “I believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church”
 - “I believe the Holy Catholic Church.”
- What are we saying? What do we profess belief in?
 - What other institution do you profess to believe or believe in?
 - I believe in McDonalds? That doesn’t sound right...
- Starting with the word “Church”
 - Greek: “*Ekkalein*” – to “call out of”
 - A public gathering, generally religious
 - Latin: *Ecclesia* – a political assembly
 - The Church then, at its most basic level, are those who have been “called out” by Jesus and assemble.
 - Distinction between Church and church building.

- The “assembly” of the Baptized. Those who have been called and named by Jesus to new life.
 - “Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there I am in the midst of them.”
 - Saint Peter summarizes this well in his 1st Letter:

“As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

And later: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

This assembly of those called out from darkness to light is God’s people. This is the Church.

Part 2: The Church’s beginning and continuation

- Jesus did not write anything down. He called together a community of followers.
 - These people were *literally* touched by Him.
 - They knew Him.
 - The experience of His person draws them
 - His healing, his preaching, his example.
- Acts 2:42:
 - “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”
- Already after Pentecost the Church is evident.
- Further: The Church predates the writing of the New Testament.
 - The New Testament is the inspired text of the Church’s self-understanding.

- The Scripture is the Word of God, belief in Scripture, belief in Jesus, and belief in the Church are inseparable. (Reference back to the creed: Belief in the Trinity is inseparable from belief in the Church).
- The Sacred Scripture belongs to the Church as a Divine Gift of the eternal Word. A proper understanding of the meaning of Scripture is impossible apart from the community of believers.
- Various documents from the early centuries (the letters of St. Ignatius, Justin’s apology, The Apostolic Tradition, etc.) all express a very detailed account how to Church understood itself and emphasize the necessity of remaining in the communion of the Church, the followers of Jesus who knew who He was and what He taught.
 - Not Gnostics. The knowledge of who Jesus is is not hidden or secret.
- The various early Councils show us that from the very beginning it was understood that Jesus revealed Himself very specifically, and that information was handed down from the Apostles in the form of the Church. These Councils were very concerned with correcting people who came up with their own ideas about who Jesus was and what he taught.
 - This is aspect of the Church is not a burden, but a grace. None of us alone to decide who another person is, let alone who Jesus is.
 - Example of getting to know a public person: there are the people who know him or her very closely and then there are people with their own opinions.
- Ultimately, to “believe the Church” is an act of humility.
 - It requires us to realize that our understanding of the world and especially of who Jesus is is not perfect. It can be flawed. And we must always be willing to realize that Jesus has definitively revealed Himself and definitely taught His law. The Church is a gift then because it is an assurance that we always have access to the real and true Jesus despite our own flaws or the flaws of our fellow Christians.

Part 3: Membership in the Church.

- Baptism in the Trinitarian formula makes a person a member of the Church.
 - This is why we can call our protestant friends “brothers and sisters.”
 - We share in the same Baptism.

- This is also why disagreements over teachings or matters of faith are heartbreaking... Jesus prayed that all might be one as the Father and Him are one.
 - The Church in its most universal (catholic) sense is divided. But it is not supposed to be so. We are all bound together by the one baptism we profess.
- Baptism is an unremovable mark. People can “leave the Church” as far as professing the full faith handed down by the Apostles, but in a real way they cannot “leave the Church,” they cannot undo Baptism.
- When we talk about the Marks of the Church, we will talk more about what unity really means and what it looks like.
- Membership in the Catholic Church in its truest sense is brought about in Baptism. Membership in particular churches (local and parish) is mostly a legal construct (with Apostolic roots: ex. “to the Church of God that is in Corinth”)

Conclusion: Institution and Mystery

- In 2 Corinthians Paul says of the Gospel message:
 - “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”
 - Talking about human frailty. Applicable to the Church.
 - Raffaele’s Transfiguration
- We will talk later about the overwhelming evidence for the structure of the Church found in Scripture and Tradition, but my main point now is just to point out that the inability of humans to live up to the call of the Gospel does not weaken the claim that the Church makes about its divine nature and mission.
- Jesus was fully God and fully Man. There was no division and no separation between those two natures. Why would we expect anything more from His Body, His Bride?
- The institutional aspect of the Church is sometimes a huge let down. People make mistakes, let self-interest over shadow their call to holiness, etc.
- But our belief in the Church does not rest on any particular person besides Jesus Christ Himself, who promised the Christian community gathered around him that “I will be with you always.”

- No one can come to knowledge of Jesus on their own. That is not how Jesus determined His followers would come to know him. Think of Paul: He encounters the Lord and Jesus tells him to go to members of the Church in Damascus who would tell him more. Think of the very life of the Trinity: a communion of Three persons bonded in perfect love.
- The Church is not a human institution imposed on people. It is a divine institution and mystery of a God who has revealed Himself in time to specific people and continues His saving work through it. To believe in Jesus as he Himself revealed Himself to be is to believe and to be in the Church. Over the next few weeks we will dive deeper and deeper into what that means for each of us.