

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 27, 2014

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On several occasions Our Lord Jesus summed up a parable by saying, “Many are called, but few are chosen.” There are two messages in this saying. First, more are called than we may think. And second, salvation is not by right of birth or nationality or even by card-carrying membership in the Catholic Church!

You know that the Latin word for church is *ecclesia*. It means “**that which is called out.**” From the start of the Lord’s three-year-ministry many were called out. Those so-called constitute the Church. Christ gives to His Church and her souls the application of all the saving remedies deriving from His death and resurrection. These are the sacraments, and the whole apparatus of the cure of souls as it has been inspired by the Holy Ghost. Yet the warning remains. “Many are called, but few chosen.” That means the Church is *something other* than the whole body of the redeemed. In Christ’s teaching the *ecclesia* is one thing and the *elect* is another. Being church does not automatically mean salvation.

This teaching of Our Lord runs counter to the prevalent Jewish ideas of what the Kingdom of Heaven would be like. It also runs counter to the Protestant idea. Both the ancient Jews and many protestant reformers believed membership was everything and that the covenanting church *was* the community of saints. Saint Paul went to some lengths to disabuse this idea. In his efforts to get the Corinthians to rightly understand the Lord’s teaching Paul told the famous story of the foot race. He said it is not enough to be a Christian any more than it is sufficient just to show up at the starting line of a race. (1 *Cor.* 9:24) Then Paul gives another example. It is about ancient Israel. They were all baptized in the Red Sea and ate manna in the wilderness, and drank from the spiritual rock. Yet only *a remnant* inherited the Promised Land. The situation is the same for Christians. They escape slavery to sin in the waters of baptism. They are refreshed and fortified on their pilgrimage by the Body and Blood of the Lord. But Christians yet can similarly come to grief. Paul warns, “He that thinketh himself to stand let him take heed lest he fall.”

In His parables a favorite analogy of the Lord was to describe the Church along these lines. He uses weeds growing up with the wheat, or a net cast into the sea gathering all kinds of fish. We know the Catholic Church is certainly made up of

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all kinds! We know she is reticent to judge a soul's motives in matters of conscience except in those rare cases where scandal or dissent must separate the sinner out from participating in the privileges of communion. But even excommunication is a pastoral instrument. It is intended not to punish but to wake up and restore the sinner. Yet having said all this, we also know that Christ taught there are those called, those in the Church, those in the net, who will be brought to shore and rejected as *a bad catch*.

All of this, by the way, implies as a given that the Church is *a visible institution*. When people object to the Catholic Church it is not because they have another candidate in mind for the term "visible church." It is because they do not believe in a visible church at all! Yet if the Church is not a visible institution and is made up only of souls known to God as saints, and if there is nothing clearly defined on earth, then the parables of Christ and two whole chapters of 1st Corinthians must be consigned to the cutting-room floor! The Church founded by Christ and preached by Saint Paul has good members and bad members *and you can see it*. She is the thing called, not the thing chosen.

All this means we do not rely upon our baptisms, confirmation, Mass attendance, communions, and confessions alone as the punched bus ticket to Heaven! We dare not presume that with no further effort on our part Christ Jesus will bring His work in us to completion. It is rather that we are fortified by Christ in Word and Sacrament, and therefore we accept correction, practice abstinence, mortification, silence, go on retreat, conduct special campaigns against unruly passions, and are about the constant business of fine-tuning a rule of prayer. All of this results from being in a living relationship with the Living God. When we avail ourselves of what Christ's Church has to offer, by God's mercy one day we will prove not to be the bad catch but *the prized fish* plucked from the net and safely landed at the feet of the Master Who is the great fisher of souls.