

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 24, 2014

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Some years ago a friend sent reflections on a recently concluded Lambeth Conference. (This is a convocation of Anglican bishop held every ten years since the late 1860s.) Among the statements was one from the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams. He asserted of his own Church of England, "We are the Catholic Church." It all reminded me of that moment in 1895 when Pope Leo XIII, after reading an Anglican document, took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and said to his secretary, "They use the word 'catholic', but *they don't mean what we mean by catholic!*"

Hardly a month goes by that some Anglican province or bishop or parish comes out with a strident but tired assertion claiming to be part of "the one true church." The masthead statement goes something like this: "We are a Traditional, Scriptural, Church, and NOT a new church, but are part of the same church set forth by Jesus the Christ, nurtured and continued by the Apostles, and ever kept alive by God the Holy Spirit."

All this sounds good. But it begs a question. "It is 'traditional' according to whom? Scriptural according to whom. Who decides? The problem is that "the same Church set forth by Jesus the Christ" was and is self-evidently in communion with Peter. So how is it possible to be part of the one true Church and not be in communion with Peter's successors?

Why is Peter so important? Because *without Peter it is less than Christianity*. The word "catholic" comes from two Greek words, **kata holos**. It means "according to wholeness." To be catholic means to be committed to the whole revelation of God in Christ. You have to include Peter or explain him away. Every once in a while it is good to remind Catholics that Peter is there for a reason. Today's gospel gives us that occasion.

Our Lord Jesus came to earth to bestow upon us a final revelation of God. It would be incredible that after His final Ascension into Heaven the Lord simply left everything to chance! Yes, indeed, Christ promised and sent the Holy Spirit to guide and guard and lead the Church into all truth. But how are we to know? Don't

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we deserve the truth? What guarantee is there that Christ's Church would not stray from the straight path?

The answer is the unity of the Church was secured against error by a fact we all recognize. *One man has one voice*. If the Church is one, because Christ is One, the voice of the Church must continue to be that of one particular man whose voice could be identified with the sentiments of Christ Himself.

As much as this seems to make sense, it would all be speculation if we were not able to *identify* this particular man. But he is there already in the pages of the New Testament and indeed *before* the written New Testament. There is one apostle whose name occurs some sixty times in the four gospels (the *õrunner upö* is mentioned twenty-five times). This same apostle is invariably the spokesman for the apostolic college, and who always takes the initiative in a crisis, and who alone is set apart by Our Lord Himself as holding a unique position.

But then what about later, after the Lord's Ascension into Heaven and the Day of Pentecost? It is then that this same man, Simon Peter, figures prominently. The first twelve chapters of *The Acts of the Apostles* have been described as *õThe Acts of Peter.ö* Everywhere he is seen taking the lead, everywhere the hero, appealed to, or challenged to explain or change his view. He is first to speak at the Council of Jerusalem. His name is already regarded as a Christian watchword in faraway Corinth.

Today's gospel forms just one part of the evidence for the primacy of Peter in Christ's Church. The Lord says, *õThou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church.ö* We cannot imagine St Matthew inserting this passage into his gospel account if the fact were not already recognized by the Church. The evangelist was not dropping a bomb! He wasn't *inventing* or *promoting* Peter. The gospel was stating what everyone already knew to be true.

St Luke records a similar remembrance of Peter. In Chapter 22 the Lord says to Peter, *õI have prayed for thee that thy strength fail not.ö This is the only record we have of Our Lord Jesus offering prayer for an individual*. And then Jesus added, *õWhen thou hast returned, be a support to thy brethren.ö* It is a special relationship

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conferred upon Peter in the Lord's provision for His apostles and His Church. Not to recognize this is to make shipwreck not only of the Church but also of the Holy Scriptures.

So if people are looking for a church they will find many. But if they are looking for The Church they will find one. *Only one contains the successor of Peter.*