

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
July 19, 2020

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Our Lord Jesus summed up several of His parables by saying “Many are called, but few are chosen.” Christ’s summary gives us two messages: first, more are called than we may think. And second, salvation is not by right of birth or nationality or card-carrying membership in the Catholic Church.

You know the Latin word for church is *ecclesia*: “that which is called out.” From the beginning of the Lord’s three-year-ministry *many* were called out. And Christ gave His Church and her souls all the saving remedies deriving from His death and resurrection. These are the sacraments. In Christ’s Church the whole apparatus of the cure of souls is guided and inspired by the Holy Ghost. Yet the warning remains. “Many are called, but few chosen.” It is clear that 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 the protestant reformers believed membership was everything. 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 his famous story describing a foot race. It is not enough just to show up at the starting line! (*1 Corinthians 9:24*) That is also true for Christians. Then St Paul gave another example, this one about ancient Israel. They were all baptized in the Red Sea and ate manna in the wilderness, and drank from the spiritual rock. (Those events pre-figured Baptism and Eucharist.) Yet *only a remnant* of the Hebrews inherited the Promised Land! Paul’s point is about Christians. They are refreshed and fortified on their pilgrimage by the Body and Blood of the Lord. But Christians can still come to grief. St Paul tells us to recognize the possibility. “He that thinketh himself to stand let him take heed lest he fall.”

St Paul was picking up on the teaching of His Master. Our Lord’s parables often described the Church along these lines. He uses weeds growing up with the wheat, or a net cast into the sea and gathering all kinds of fish. (The parable of the man cast out of the wedding feast also comes to mind.) We know the Catholic Church is

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certainly made up of all kinds! We also 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 full communion. But even excommunication is a pastoral instrument and not a punishment. It is intended to wake up and restore a sinner. Yet having said all this, we also know that the Lord Jesus taught there are those called and in the Church, who, like some fish in the net, will be brought to shore and rejected *as a bad catch*.

By the way, all of this implies the Church is *a visible institution*. When some people object to the Catholic Church and her claims 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! But if that were the case, and the Church is made up of souls known only 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 and them*. The Church is the thing called, not the thing chosen.

All this means we do not rely upon our baptism, 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. Rather, as we are fortified by Christ in Word and Sacrament, we accept correction, practice abstinence, mortification, silence, go on retreats, conduct special campaigns against unruly passions, and are about the constant business of fine-tuning a rule of prayer. These are marks of our being in a living relationship with a Loving God. And then one day, by God's mercy, 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.