

SOME REFLECTIONS ON APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. +

INTRODUCTION

Each time we recite the Nicene Creed, we repeat:

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

So, prove it!

In fact, apostolic succession is a very concrete proof of our belief in these and all of the statements of faith contained in the Nicene Creed.

MINISTRY

When we begin to speak about apostolic succession, it is perhaps a good idea to begin by looking at ministry in the context of the whole Church.

The early Church Fathers have consistently taught that the New Testament model of ministry in the Church includes the People, the Bishops, the Presbyters (Priests) and the Deacons. Regarding those in the ordained ministry, the Preface to the Ordinal in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer states:

It is evident unto all men, diligently reading Holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostles' time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church, – Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. Which Offices were evermore had in such reverend estimation, that no man might presume to execute any of them, except he were first called, tried, examined, and known to have such qualities as are requisite for the same; and also by public Prayer, with Imposition of Hands, were approved and admitted thereunto by lawful Authority. (*BCP 1928, p. 529*)

This is not an optional observation. It is in fact an statement of doctrine and discipline for all Anglicans. Even with the revision of the Book of Common Prayer in 1979, we find:

The Holy Scriptures and ancient Christian writers make it clear that from the apostles' time, there have been different ministries within the Church. In particular, since the time of the New Testament, three distinct orders of ordained ministers have been characteristic of Christ's holy catholic Church. First, there is the order of bishops who carry on the apostolic work of leading, supervising, and uniting the Church. Secondly, associated with them are the presbyters, or ordained elders, in subsequent times generally known as priests. Together with the bishops, they take part in the governance of the Church, in the carrying out of its missionary and pastoral work, and in the preaching of the Word of God and administering his holy Sacraments. Thirdly, there are deacons who assist bishops and priests in all of this work. It is also a special responsibility of deacons to minister in Christ's name to the poor, the sick, the suffering, and the helpless.

The persons who are chosen and recognized by the Church as Being called by God to the ordained ministry are admitted to these sacred orders by solemn prayer and the laying on of episcopal hands. (*BCP 1979, p. 510*)

Each of the ministries of the Church, lay and clerical, has its specific characteristics and charisms.

The ministry of the People is to represent Christ and His Church; to bear witness to Him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world, and to take their place in the life, worship and ministry of the Church.

The ministry of the Bishop is to represent Christ and His Church, particularly as apostle, chief priest and pastor; to guard the faith, unity and discipline of the whole Church, to proclaim the Word of God; to act in Christ's name for the reconciliation of the world and the building up of the Church; and to ordain others to continue Christ's ministry.

The ministry of the Presbyter (Priest) is to represent Christ and His Church, particularly as pastor to the People; to share with the Bishop in the overseeing of the Church; to proclaim the Gospel; to administer the sacraments and to bless and declare pardon in the name of God.

The ministry of the Deacon is to represent Christ and His Church, particularly as a servant of those in need; and to assist the Bishop and the Priest in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

It is important to remember that all Christians are to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray, and give, for the spread of the Kingdom of God. All of this is to be done in the context of enabling us to continue in the apostolic tradition and the historic Apostolic Succession.

This, then, is the answer to our question. How do we prove our faith in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church? Apostolic Succession.

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

So, what exactly is this “historic Apostolic Succession”?

In the early days of the Church, there was a very real problem in identifying the true Church and the true teachings and doctrines of Jesus Christ. The early Church did not have seminaries. They did not have catechisms. They did not even have the Holy Bible as we know it today. Insofar as we know, Jesus Christ did not actually write a single word of Scripture, nor did He explicitly instruct anyone else to do so. One might say that the New Testament itself is an Apostolic Tradition. It is based upon the tradition of Jesus Christ’s own oral teachings before his death and resurrection. While he did not instruct the Apostles to write Holy Scripture, He did instruct them to teach. In those days, all learning was passed on by tradition, by the spoken word. It is a simple historical fact that the Holy Bible did not exist as a whole until 397 A.D. when the Third Council of Carthage proclaimed it formally. The Church was preaching and teaching the Word nine years before any of the New Testament was written, and sixty-seven years before it was completed.

So how did the early Church identify its teachers? How did the early Church identify the true teachings of Jesus Christ? They actually came up with a rather simple, but elegant, method. Even in the early days of the Church, the faithful would trace the apostolic succession of those claiming to represent the true Church.

Those of us who grew up in a mostly rural environment are already somewhat familiar with the method that the early Church used. Growing up, after the initial “hellos” were over and done with, the most common question next heard was, “Who ya kin to?” Then those involved would be able to embark upon the wonderful process of learning who each other was and learning their relationship to each other.

Those of the early Church did essentially the same thing. They would ask someone presenting themselves as a new teacher who their teacher was. If the new teacher could identify one of the apostles as their teacher, then the Church could be reasonably certain that the new teacher was, in fact, teaching the things that Jesus Christ taught. Why? Because they learned them from the people that Jesus Christ Himself had taught.

Thus it began. Even in the earliest days of the Church, teachers and others were identified with, and by, their own teachers. This is beginning of “apostolic succession”.

Apostolic succession is the line of bishops stretching back to the apostles. All over the world, all validly consecrated bishops are part of a lineage that goes back to the time of the apostles, something that is not possible in the Protestant denominations, many of which do not even recognize the office of Bishop. We need to clarify here. There are many ministries and many ministers in God’s Church. God blesses His faithful people in many ways. However, nothing else compares to the Apostolic pastoral and teaching ministry of the Church, entrusted by Christ Himself to the Apostles, except the Apostles’ own continuation of their ministry through the Church’s Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. When we pronounce our belief in the “apostolic” Church, we are pronouncing our belief in our Apostolic faith and Apostolic ministry. This is not an invention of the Early Church Fathers at Nicaea. It is the standard given by the Holy Ghost on Pentecost. As it states in the Acts of the Apostles:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine
And fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.
(Acts 2:42)

This apostolicity, this relationship of the Church today to the Early Church, rests on its conformity to the teachings of the apostles which we know as the apostolic tradition and which is to be guarded, maintained and perpetuated by bishops in the historic apostolic succession. For this reason, each and every bishop of the Church can, and must, trace his succession back to the apostles.

The bishops of the Church are to safeguard her unity, doctrine, worship and discipline. It is their responsibility, or that of their delegates, to shepherd and administer the Church until the Jesus Christ returns for His people. In order to ensure that the Apostles’ teachings would continue beyond their deaths, Paul told Timothy:

“And the things which thou hast heard of me by many
witnesses, the same commend to faithful men, who shall
be fit to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

In this one verse, Paul refers to the first three generations of Apostolic Succession, his own generation, Timothy’s generation and the generation which Timothy will teach.

The early Church regularly appealed to Apostolic Succession as a test for whether correct doctrine was being taught. Again, they did not even have recourse to the same Holy Bible which we have. Even in those instances when Scripture was used, heretics and other false teachers would place their own, sometimes bizarre, interpretations on the Scripture. Clearly, true faith and the doctrine of the Church also had to be measured by another benchmark as well.

The early Church historian, J. N. D. Kelly, himself a Protestant, writes:

[W]here in practice was [the] apostolic testimony or tradition to be found? ... The most obvious answer was that the apostles had committed it orally to the Church, where it had been handed down from generation to generation ... Unlike the alleged secret tradition of the Gnostics, it was entirely public and open, having been entrusted by the apostles to their successors, and by these in turn to those who followed them, and was visible in the Church for all who cared to look for it. (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 37)

He also writes that:

[A]n additional safeguard is supplied by the Holy Spirit, for the message committed was to the Church, and the Church is the home of the Spirit. Indeed the Church's bishops are ... Spirit-endowed men who have been vouchsafed "an infallible charism of truth". (*ibid.*)

He further writes that on the basis of experience, the Fathers could be:

profoundly convinced of the futility of arguing with heretics merely on the basis of Scripture. The skill and success with which they twisted its plain meaning made it impossible to reach any decisive conclusion in that field. (*ibid.*, 41)

ORDINATION

So, how do we identify these pastors and shepherds today?

In our church and in all of the liturgical churches throughout the world those who are called by God to be ministers in are identified and set apart for His Church by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Today we identify these Orders as Deacon, Presbyter (Priest) and Bishop. The proper prayers and the laying on of hands by a bishop accomplishes ordination into any of these orders.

In Acts 6:1-6, we find the earliest example of an ordination on record.

¹ And in those days, the number of the disciples increasing, there arose a murmuring of the Greeks against the Hebrews, for that their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.

² Then the twelve, calling together the multitude of the disciples, said: It is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³ Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy

Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

⁴But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word. ⁵And the saying was liked by all the multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip and Prochorus and Nicanor, and Timon and Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch.

⁶These they set before the apostles: and they praying, imposed hands upon them.

In this passage, we already have the historical authority and pattern for the essential elements of an ordination service. We have the election by the people, prayer, and the laying on of apostolic hands. These same elements form the basis for ordinations even today.

1. The presentation of the candidate(s) to the bishop, this being the last step in the process of their election by the Church.
2. Prayer for those about to be ordained or consecrated, that they may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit for their ministry.
3. The laying on of hands of three bishops (preferred for an Episcopal consecration), of a bishop in the ordination of presbyters (priests) and deacons.

It is important to take note and to remember, however, that while the Bishop is laying hands on the ordinand as the agent of the ordination, it is, in fact, the work of the Holy Spirit which effects the ordination. Ordination is indeed, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

AUGUSTINE AND CYPRIAN

As time passed and the Church grew, two main schools of thought regarding apostolic succession developed. We have already referred to both of these schools indirectly.

The Western Church, following the teachings and observations of Augustine, developed a four-fold criterion in order to determine the validity of the consecration of a bishop in the historic apostolic succession. Three of these criteria are external, while the fourth is internal. These four criteria are:

- ✓ **Form:** The consecration must be done in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy in order to be valid. This is to emphasize the connection of the ordination to the community.
- ✓ **Matter:** There must be an actual laying on of hands by a bishop during the liturgy. Prayer is not sufficient in and of itself.
- ✓ **Minister:** The one who performs the consecration must be a validly consecrated bishop within the apostolic succession.

- ✓ **Intention:** The intent of the laying on of hands and the prayer within the liturgy must be to ordain or consecrate the person to hold orders.

According to Western thought and tradition, if these criteria are met in a consecration, the bishop is within the historic Apostolic Succession.

The Eastern Church follows Cyprian's views on Apostolic Succession. This view places emphasis more on the "corporate" nature of the Church and the empowerment by the Church of her bishops. Bishops throughout the world, and throughout time, are valid because of their membership and participation in the Mystical Body of Christ. Separation from the Body of Christ, or the Church, makes it impossible for a bishop to exercise the office of bishop. Bishops have their authority, their responsibility and their special charism only insofar as they participate in and express the will of Christ's holy Church. This faithful participation in the Body of Christ is what unites bishops and the Church today with the Apostles and the Early Church.

SUMMARY

Apostolic Succession is no less than our heritage of faith, handed down from those first Twelve Apostles to each and every bishop who has been called to serve us today. It is the glue which holds the one holy catholic and apostolic Church together. Not just throughout all of the world, but throughout all of time as well.

Apostolic Succession ensures that the Holy Church will always have shepherds for the faithful who will guard the faith, unity and discipline of the Church. It guarantees that there will be shepherds who will accept responsibility for the care and well-being of the faithful until Jesus Christ returns to claim his bride, the Church.

We have seen how Apostolic Succession is a very real and very physical expression of our relationship to the Church. As we saw earlier, we cannot have a valid ordination without the physical act of the laying on of hands. With the laying on of hands, the ordination becomes a physical as well as spiritual act.

My particular line of apostolic succession has its roots in the Russian Orthodox Church as well as in the Roman Catholic Church. Saint Andrew the Apostle is the first person in that line of apostolic succession.

Saint Andrew the Apostle is known as the "Apostle to the Scythians". Today, the area he traveled to is known as Russia and Eastern Europe. He is the apostle who first brought the good news of Jesus Christ to that part of the world. I consider myself most fortunate and greatly blessed to possess a first class relic of Saint Andrew. Looking at this relic is, for me, just as concrete an example of the historic apostolic succession as there could possibly be. It is a constant reminder to me of the great privilege it is to serve as a Bishop in Christ's Church. It is also a reminder of my responsibilities and duties as

Bishop. It is a reminder of the great gift which has been protected, cherished, and handed down to me by all those who have gone before me. It is a reminder of his laying hands, down through all who have laid hands on each other until my consecrator laid hands on me at my consecration as Bishop. It is a constant reminder that I am connected to all of Jesus Christ's Church, past and present, by that wondrous gift of the Holy Spirit which is both physical and spiritual. It also reminds me that I must be willing, even as Saint Andrew was willing, to lay down my life for God's holy Church, His holy People.

This is our duty, our responsibility, our great joy!

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. +



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