

Apostolic Succession

Many Catholics take it for granted that the Roman Church is the one and true church of Jesus Christ. Catholic bishops are ordained by those who were bishops before them, and so on, all the way back to the apostolic church. This “apostolic succession” reassures them that their religion is true.

Therefore they do not see the need to verify that their beliefs are biblical. For them, “The Church teaches” is the ultimate authority and the end of all controversy. Indeed, they consider it impossible to check their bishops’ teaching since the task of “authentic interpretation” of God’s Word is entrusted only to the magisterium and not to ordinary believers.

But if it were impossible for Christ’s disciples to ascertain whether their leaders are faithful ministers of God or not, why did the Lord warn us about false teachers? “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Mt 7:15). Christ’s admonition implies that ordinary disciples can know and identify fake teachers. He even tells us how to do it: “You will know them by their fruits” - a teacher is recognized by his teaching.

It would have been convenient if we could rest our mind by simply checking the ordination certificate of our bishop. But alas, the Bible warns us that there are many false teachers *within* the churches of Christ. The apostle Paul warned the elders of the church of Ephesus: “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29, 30).

Some wolves enter from outside the church; others arise from among the respected ministers within the church. “Also from among yourselves” - that is, from among the elders of the church who were properly ordained and recognized are true bishops – some of them were imposters! Their “apostolic succession” is no safeguard the church; it simply makes their deceit even more difficult to expose.

Every teacher and every system must be measured by the gospel – Is the teaching in agreement with the apostolic message? If yes, the teacher is genuine; if not, he is not a faithful messenger of God, irrespective of his credentials, reputation and popularity. The apostle Paul instructs the disciples in the churches in Galatia how to test the teachers who came in among them: “...there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:7-9).

Were they teaching the same gospel originally preached by the apostle Paul? No, they had distorted the message, therefore they were false teachers. Even if the apostle himself had to change his mind and begin teaching a different gospel, they should reject him also. Christians should reject anybody, whoever he may be, even an angel from heaven, if the message disagrees with the faith already given to the church! The gospel is one and unchangeable; the gospel is the ultimate standard. “As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”

It is irrelevant whether the predecessors of the modern Catholic bishops were true and faithful ministers of God. What matters is what *they* are teaching *today*. Do the contemporary Catholic leaders uphold the original apostolic message? Is it possible that over so many centuries their message has drifted from the original truth?

Do not shut your eyes by simply assuming that they cannot be mistaken. Your eternal destiny is at stake. Are you willing to compare Catholicism with the apostolic gospel recorded in the inspired Scriptures? Are you willing to go where the Word of God leads you?