



## Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time A August 23, 2020

- ◆ **The Papacy and Papal Infallibility**
- ◆ **The Most Distinctive Feature of Catholicism**
- ◆ **Surprised By Truth (of Catholicism) - 11 stories**

In today's Gospel, Jesus says to Peter: *"You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 16:18-19).

When it comes to Catholic belief about the papacy, the above words are foundational.

Sometimes, I ask small groups what for them is the *most distinctive dimension* of Catholic beliefs and practices. For many people, it is the Mass. Some say Confession, and still others, Catholic devotion to Mary and the saints.

Episcopalians and Lutherans celebrate the Eucharist every weekend and I am nearly certain that both churches believe that Jesus is present in the bread and wine. The Greek Orthodox Church shares our devotion to Mary and the saints, and has seven sacraments. The biggest and only real stumbling block to our union with the Orthodox branch of Christianity is the papacy. Only the Roman Catholic Church believes that the primacy that Peter held amongst the Apostles was intended to be passed on to his successors.

Just as it took several centuries to establish that the New Testament was made up of 27 books and not 25 or 30, and just as it took the Church equally long to determine that there are seven and not ten sacraments, so also it took centuries for the Church to conclude that the successors of Peter were intended by Christ to hold primacy amongst all the bishops of the world. Just as we

believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding the Church in the selection of the books that now make up the New Testament, so we believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding the historical development that gradually led the Church to accept the primacy of the Bishop of Rome amongst his fellow bishops.

As Catholics, we reason that as Christ decided that the Apostles and the early church needed one person to be her leader and head, then surely the Church that was much larger in number after the Apostles would need someone to be her leader and head, someone who would maintain her unity and have the final say when disputes arose. Common sense and experience tell us that someone had to take the place of Peter as the leader and *visible* head of the Church. There is ample evidence from early church documents to show that that "someone" was recognized as the Bishop of Rome and so was each one of his successors. Implied in Jesus' desire for his Church to continue is his desire for her to have an office or ministry that would be the visible center of her unity. It is in this context that Catholics believe that the office of Peter, now exercised by his successors, is of *divine* origin.

While there is much that we Catholics can learn from our Protestant brothers and sisters, I think it is fair to say that the biggest inherent weakness in Protestantism is the lack of a central authority where the buck stops, which is the reason why there are hundreds of Protestant denominations today.

When we listen to the stories of Protestant ministers who have come home to Rome (watch "The Journey Home" on EWTN channel 169, Monday evenings at 8:00pm), we find that the authority issue is central. When doctrinal or pastoral disputes arise, who has to authority to give a final answer?

## Gift of Infallibility

The gift of infallibility was given to the Church when Jesus promised to be with her at all times until the end of the world (Mt 28:20), and when he promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead the Church into the fullness of the truth

(Jn 16:13). It would be pointless for Jesus to give his Church an infallible Bible if he did not also give her infallible teachers to protect her from errors when interpreting the Bible and teaching the core beliefs of the Church. The gift of infallibility which Christ gave to his Church is often misunderstood. It does not mean that popes cannot sin; obviously they can. It does not mean that they cannot err when speaking about non-Church matters. It does not mean that they cannot err in Church matters when writing a book as a private member of the Church. The gift of infallibility only comes into play when the Pope is speaking *ex cathedra* (“from the chair”), that is, as universal shepherd in matters of faith and morals. The College of Bishops, when speaking as a body in union with the Pope, can also teach infallibly about matters of faith and morals. The Pope uses the gift of infallibility very rarely.

We can also say that the Church at large is infallible. In the fifth century in Constantinople, Bishop Nestorius started to preach that Mary was not *Theotokos* (Greek for “Mother of God”) but only the mother of the *human* Jesus. The lay faithful virtually revolted against their bishop’s heretical teaching. When the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius and declared Mary the Mother of God, believers took to the streets enthusiastically chanting, “Theotokos! Theotokos!”

**The Magisterium.** Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit enables the bishops in union with the pope to recognize God’s Revelation. The Magisterium is a living source of discernment for our Church family. When it comes to the *protection* and *interpretation* of Divine Revelation and the life of the Church, the role of the Magisterium (bishops’ teaching in union with the Pope) is that of watchdog of orthodoxy (right belief). Down through the ages, great theological battles had taken place concerning Church beliefs and practices. Sooner or later, it became the role of the Magisterium to step in and proclaim what theological opinions, pastoral practices or devotions are faithful or unfaithful to Sacred

Tradition. (Hence the saying: *Roma locuta est, causa finita est*, or *Rome has spoken, the case is closed*.) A recent example of this is the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood. After much debate, the then Pope John Paul II firmly affirmed that the Church had no authority to ordain women to the priesthood. Since the beginning of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, Christianity has been divided into hundreds of new churches due, by and large, to differing interpretations of the Scripture. One of the inherent strengths of Catholicism is the ministry of the Pope which works with the Magisterium to protect the unity of our faith. Having a Bible without the Magisterium is akin to having a Constitution without the Supreme Court.

## Surprised By Truth (of Catholicism)

*Surprised By Truth* is the title of a popular book which contains eleven conversion stories. Each story is dramatic in that nearly all of the converts were raised to believe that Catholicism was a false form of Christianity. As each story unfolds, one wonders what is going to take for each person to discover the truth of Catholicism. Each convert gives biblical and historical reasons for his/her conversion to Catholicism.

For me, the main weakness of the book is that there is only one female story.

In recent years, Scott Hahn and his wife, Kimberly, are two of the best known converts to Catholicism. They tell their conversion in the book *Rome Sweet Home*. The following is the Foreword written by Scott Hahn to *Surprised By Truth*.

*The practice of telling the story of one’s conversion has been around as long as Christianity has. Since Paul’s testimony in Galatians 2 (cf. Acts 9:1-9) of his experience with Christ on the Road to Damascus, to Augustine’s Confessions, to our own day, thousands have recounted their journey to Christ and his Church. Yet we seem always to be asking for more. “So, what made you decide to become Catholic?” is a question I never tire of asking. And from every convert I hear a different story.*

*None of the conversion testimonies you’re about to read is like another. These people come from different backgrounds. They’re scholars, pastors, teachers,*

preachers, and writers. They have different personalities. They followed different roads to Rome. Yet the title of this book, *Surprised By Truth*, sums up every one of these stories, because each relates the earnest quests of persons seeking the whole truth about Christ, and each describes the surprise discovery that the truth of Christ - the Scripture, history, and logic - lies in the Catholic Church.

When C. S. Lewis wrote of his personal passage from atheism to Christianity, the title, *Surprised by Joy*, reflected his emotion at finding himself a Christian. As he mentions in the preface to that book, he wrote his conversion testimony partly in response to the frequent experience of people asking him his reasons for converting. They'd listen and then say, "What! Have you felt that too? I always thought I was the only one!" As I read this book you now hold, I kept having the same sense of "What! You too?"

I've often thought of my own journey to Rome as a mystery story, a horror story, and a love story. Sometimes being surprised by truth is initially being horrified by truth. The Catholic Church has the truth? The fullness of the truth? Confronting this fact is a gut-wrenching agony for staunch, bible-based Evangelical Protestants who've thought and taught, largely because of misunderstandings and prejudice, that Catholics are not even Christians. And beyond the interior struggles are the external obstacles: career derailment, loss of salary, benefits, pension, and financial security; alienation from family, friends, and colleagues. Conversion to Catholicism means hardship, sacrifice, and often loneliness. It means following Jesus all the way to the Cross.

And for what? Once someone snidely remarked to Steve Wood that he became Catholic "for the money."

"No, not for the money," Steve replied. "But I did do it for the riches."

We converts have been made so rich. We have been given wealth beyond our wildest dreams! What words can express the sense of the child who, after passing through a series of orphanages and foster homes, finds himself standing in the doorway of an unfamiliar mansion staring into the loving faces of long-forgotten family members? He is reintroduced to his Father, Almighty God, and to Mary, his mother and queen, who is standing, arms outstretched in welcome, next to his elder brother, King Jesus—in the midst of that glorious

company of angelic and saintly siblings who stretch forth from heaven to earth and under the earth. Can you imagine a holier homecoming or a more royal reunion? Few joys surpass the ones related here by these former theological step-children who have finally come home.

The anguish endured is not worth comparing to the riches gained: the Holy Eucharist, the pope, the magisterium, the sacraments, Mary, the saints - the splendor of Christ mirrored in his Church. "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8).

Then the horror turns to surprise, and surprise turns to delight, and bliss, and fire, and a desire to share all this with others. Loneliness fades away as one discovers more and more people who have also been surprised by truth.

While reading each of these incredible journeys, I laughed, cried, grunted affirmations, and basically relived my own journey into the Catholic Church. I heard echoes of my own struggles in their words. I relived the anguish I experienced on that lonely and sometimes frightening path of conversion, and I relived the deep, abiding joy of coming home.

But enough. Read these stories. They're prayerful, heavy-on-doctrine, evangelical, scriptural witnesses of people who discovered that what they had once thought was the most "unbiblical" church is really the Church of the Bible.

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You can order *Surprised By Truth* on Amazon, or if you need help ordering, contact Teresa at the parish office: 321-254-1595 ext. 3050 or [tromano@ascensioncatholicsch.org](mailto:tromano@ascensioncatholicsch.org).

If interested in finding out more about our RCIA process, contact Laura Dodson at the parish office: 321-254-1595 ext. 3067 or [ldodson@ascensioncatholicsch.org](mailto:ldodson@ascensioncatholicsch.org).

Have a blessed week,

