

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

CHAPTER 9:

THE CHURCH

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

This course is a revised translation of the work "I Fondamenti del Cristianesimo" written by Rev. Piero Ottaviano and Didaskaleion.

The course is divided into units with a logical sequence. Therefore we suggest you to read them following their progressive order.

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9 THE CHURCH: THE COMMUNITY OF CHRISTIANS

In this section we shall see:

1. How the Church was born
2. Its self-imposed organization: hierarchy
3. Laity
4. (*Appendix*) The appointment of bishops in the West.

Christians call "(visible) Church" the group of Jesus' disciples, namely all people who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the spokesman of God.

9.1 THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

CHURCH

Greek: ἐκκλησία (*ekklesía*) = convocation / meeting / call / assembly

CALL

- **Who is calling?** *God is calling, through Jesus*
- **Who's being called?** *All men and women are called*
- **Why?** *So that everybody can accept to live as God's children in a deliberate way*

THE CHURCH IS MADE UP OF PEOPLE ACCEPTING THIS CALL

The New Testament describes the Church as being the effect of two acts:

- God's call (According to Christianity, God is always the first to take the initiative);
- man's positive answer

a) God's call

By proclaiming himself the Son of God, Jesus - the Risen - reveals that God is father - not only His Father, but also Father of all other men - (Eph. 4, 6).

Paul calls this reality "The mystery of God": God has destined all men to be His family, and calls them up (*ekklesia* = assembly, summoning) to be in his House, for they are His children. This "mystery" was revealed by Jesus.

Essential documentation:

*By reading this, you will be able to understand my insight on the mystery of Christ. (Such mystery) was not made known to men of other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. **This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.***

(Eph. 3:4-6)

(Jesus said) "I am the good shepherd and I know my (sheep) and my (sheep) know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for my sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen: I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd"
(John 10:14-16)

So, everyone is called to be a member of God's family, although only the Christians know this from Jesus' revelation.

b) Man's positive answer

The one who has been evangelized and agrees to become a disciple of Jesus is to be counted in the Christian community, i.e., the Church (cp. various passages throughout "Acts").

Jesus is both founder and head of such community (Eph. 1:22). The apostles are the chiefs as chosen by Jesus (Matt. 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6,12:16; John 13:18 and 15:16).

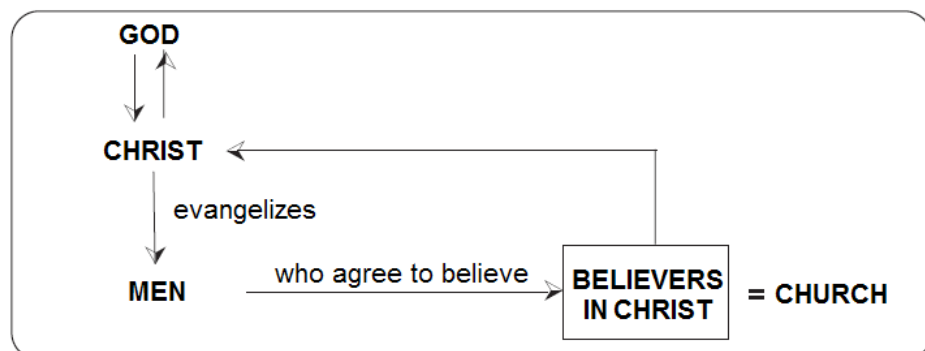
Those who - trusting the apostles' preaching - explicitly engage themselves to accept Jesus as the only Master of their life are members of the Church.

The sign of their becoming members of the Church is baptism.

Essential documentation:

Jesus said to the apostles: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel (good news) to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, whoever does not believe will be condemned"
(Mark 16:15-16)

And Jesus came to them (= the apostles) and said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all peoples (the pagans), baptizing them (literally: immersing) them in(to) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And now I will be with you always to the very completion of time" (Matt. 28:16-20)



9.2 THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

Every community should have at least a minimum organization.

Also the Church has given itself one, by appointing some *chiefs* (hierarchy, or clergy) and establishing some structures (buildings called *churches*). Such organization has been developing over centuries. We shall therefore briefly draw a historic outline of it.

a) Original organization

In the 1st Century the Christian communities, which had soon spread in the main cities of the Roman empire, needed an organization ensuring:

- Support to each member's faith: meetings for education, prayer, Eucharist... (Acts 2:41-47)
- proselytism to non-Christians (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16);
- mutual help and support during the Jewish and Roman persecutions;
- control against any possible straying from Jesus' spirit or teachings (John 16:12-15; Acts 15; 1 Cor. 1:5-8 and 1:11:12; Gal. 1-3; 1 Tim. 1:3-7 and so on).

Since the number of believers was increasing, the apostles had to *choose in every city some people fit to be chiefs*, who ought to:

- perpetuate their - and Jesus' - presence within the Church (John 20:21; Matt. 28:20; Luke 10:16);
- organize the Gospel's preaching (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Gal. 1:11-12; 1 Cor. 1:17)
- welcome in their community all those who believed (Christian initiation) (Matt. 28:19);
- welcome any further expression of faith within the fundamental phases of life (the other sacraments) (John 20:23; 1 Cor. 11:24-25);

The **sign** characterizing the appointment of the chiefs was (and still is) imposition of hands on the chosen chief's head; at that time this was performed by an apostle, whereas today it is up to bishops. Such ritual is called **ordination** (cp. Acts 6:8 and 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14 and 5:22).

When the apostles were not available (some had meanwhile passed away) the choice had to be made in very different ways, depending on local situations (see appendix).

However, the imposition of hands made by a bishop has always been the main requirement for getting authority and testify direct connection with Jesus (apostolic succession).

At the end of the 1st century, the distinction of functions within the groups of chiefs (hierarchy) was already clearly defined.

- the community's chief is the **bishop** (Greek: *episcopos* = foreman), who is regarded as the apostles' successor, the centre of the communion of Christians, a sign of Jesus' presence in the community; he is supported by:
 - **presbyters** (= elders, hence the word priests), as far as the spiritual guiding of the community is concerned;

- **deacons** (= servants) (Acts 6) and **deaconesses** (Romans 16:1) as regards the actual organization (charity, assistance, administrations of the community's wealth). Please compare the testimony of Ignatius of Antioch (died around A.D. 107)

b) Between the 2nd and the 5th Century

Between the 2nd and the 5th Century, the subdivision of Christian communities was organized following the arrangement of the Roman Empire's administrative subdivisions (Province and Diocese).

The bishop is the chief of the local community, aided by priests and deacons.

- The importance of the Bishop is strictly tied to the importance of his city. The most important Bishop in a region thus acquires control over nearby ones. According to the importance of the Church, the bishop receives the title of **Patriarch, Metropolitan (Archbishop), Bishop**.
- Each metropolitan Church has several **Suffragan Bishops** (= who apply for the election of the Metropolitan); in turn, the Patriarchy is formed by many metropolitan churches, the most important among which is the very patriarchal see.

The organizational structure of the 5th century church has substantially remained unchanged to this day.

c) The present situation of the Church (according to Catholics)

- Today the Church is zoned into dioceses, whose chief is a bishop, the apostles' successor, the visible sign of the presence of Jesus, whom he gets his authority from. As a rule, in the West he is appointed by the bishop of Rome, namely the Pope. Among bishops there is a hierarchy: Patriarch - Archbishop - Bishop.
- The bishops make up the College of Bishops, whose chief is the Bishop of Rome, being Peter's successor. The College of Bishops, when gathered together with the Pope, makes up the ecumenical council. The group of bishops of a region or a nation makes up an Episcopal Conference.
- The bishop is aided by priests, deacons and minor ministers. Both priest and deacons are appointed by bishops, with the consent - at least indirect - of the Christian people. Such call is preceded by a period of training.
- Lesser pastoral activities are entrusted to *instituted ministers*.

9.3 LAITY WITHIN THE CHURCH

9.3.1 WHO IS A LAY PERSON?

"Lay" is a word being used with at least two different meanings, which we should make clear:

1. Lay is an adjective used in compound (layman) as a noun (*Greek: laos= people*). Before Christianity, it would merely indicate the citizen, or member of the people, having no hierarchic degree. Christianity adapted this word to indicate any member belonging to the Church but not to its hierarchy.
2. The same word was in turn recently "captured" by politicians and also used otherwise with the meaning of "non-Christian". (cp. lay forces in opposition to Catholic forces).

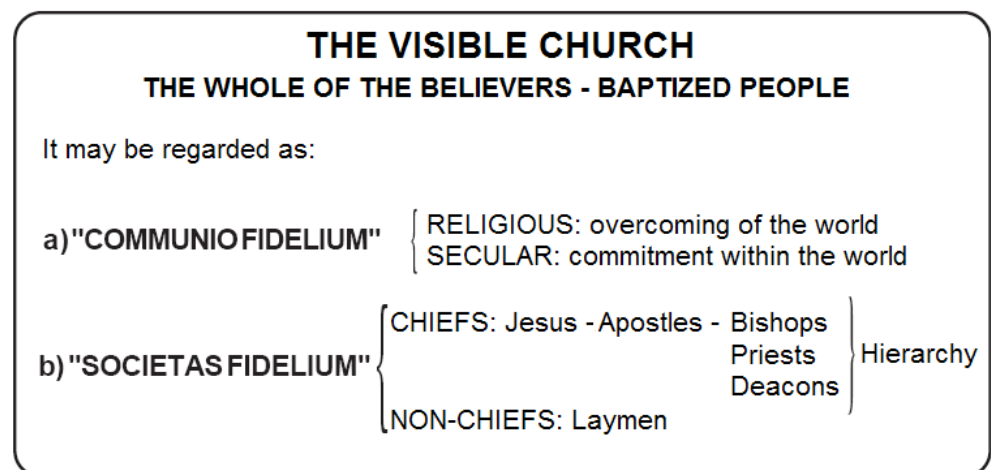
We will use it in the Christian sense. Therefore, ***we will be calling "lay" all people who are part of the Church without actually being entrusted with any task within the hierarchy.***

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the lay can be a religious or a secular. Here we'll deal about secular lays, which are by far the majority of Christians. Religious lays were discussed in Chapter 8.

9.3.2 FUNCTIONS OF A SECULAR LAY WITHIN THE CHURCH

We should repeat here what we already said in the previous chapter regarding the secular's prophetic, sacerdotal and royal functions.

Considering all the data we have so far acquired as for the structure of the Church, we can thus sum up:



9.4 APPENDIX: HOW BISHOPS ARE APPOINTED IN WESTERN COUNTRIES

Customs have not always been constant and uniform; however, we can trace out the following evolutionary pattern:

- a) In the early (3rd - 5th) centuries any *head of a family* living in the diocese was eligible to become a bishop (cp. the case of St. Ambrose in Milan)
- b) As bishops began to acquire political importance (starting from the times of Constantine, namely, from the 4th century) and theirs became also a honorific title, some controversies and divisions started arising among Christians regarding the appointment of bishops. In order to stop this, the appointment of bishops was entrusted to the clergy.
- c) Subsequently (5th - 6th century), in order to avoid disputes caused by ambitions to power, only
 - the "clerical constables" (*canonics*)
 - or the members of some *influential family*

were declared eligible to appoint bishops. See for instance what happened as for the bishop of Rome, who was - and still is - appointed by the clergy's constables of Rome (the *Cardinals*), although cardinals are actually scattered all over the world).

- d) In various places and on various occasions (6th - 11th century) also *princes* and *kings* started interfering with the appointment of bishops - eventually, even the *Emperor* of the Holy Roman Empire.
 - either out of self-imposed interference (starting from the principle that "*Cuius regio eius et religio*" (Kings would also hold the religious power);
 - or upon the faithfuls' request, whenever no agreement was reached as for the eligible men;
 - or upon request of the appointed bishop himself wishing to receive more authority and power, or simply wanting to get rid of his other competitors.

As a result, the highest political authority - the Emperor - eventually started installing - or confirming - in office bishops (*investiture*) to his liking. Very often, along with spiritual power, emperors would give the bishops political powers as well (thus appointing Prince-bishops or Marquis-bishops, or Dukes or Counts).

This kind of appointment was quite well tolerated by the Christian people, on the basis that also political authorities come from God (Rom. 13).

However, such system caused serious inconvenience:

1. It was not by religious criteria that bishops were appointed, but political, or military ones;
2. Some bishops would live at the Emperor's Court while their dioceses remained spiritually abandoned;
3. Bishops had no proper theological education. They were more of medieval squires than pastors.

All this eventually led to spiritual and moral decay within the clergy and the Christian laity alike.

- e) In the 11th century the monastic movement, particularly the Cluniac one, tried to react and tackled this inconvenience by appealing to the "Libertas Ecclesiae". Such opposition was led by Hildebrand of Soane, a monk of Cluny who became pope in A.D. 1073 by name of *Gregory VII*. He wanted to free the Western Church from the tutelage and oppression of emperors, kings and princes, so that the pastors (bishops and priests) would be again up to their task. This is the reason why he started his struggle against investitures, which ended in A.D. 1122 with the Treaty of Worms: from then on Western bishops should have to be elected by the bishop of Rome (this feat has actually caused the Christian people to believe that the Pope be the head of the universal Church).
- f) The fight for investitures had some sort of a backfire in A.D. 1200, but was definitely over by the time of Innocent III (Lateran Council IV A.D. 1215).
- g) At the end of the 14th Century such temporal interference fired back again, but, this time, it so happened by papal permission (various concordats), meant to win "more possessions" to some churches or to the papal states. Therefore, various forms of regalism (Gallicanism and Josephism) began to arise and persisted until the French Revolution (end of the 18th Century).
- h) In the 1800-1900's many concordats were stipulated between the states and the Holy See, which still allowed state interference as for the election of bishops (requiring at least the State's approval of the would-be bishop, or the right to choose from three nominations). Some states would even interfere with the election of the bishop of Rome. In A.D. 1904, as finest achievement, Austria put a veto on the election of Cardinal Rampolla to be pope, which lead to the appointment of Pius X. Pius X, however, by decree eliminated (hopefully forever) any kind of state interference as for the pope's election.
- i) The Vatican Council II urged the Catholic heads of state (by then only Spain and Portugal were left) to spontaneously give up their rights and privileges as regards the appointment of bishops and promised on oath that these would never be granted again (as per decree nr. 20 "Ufficio Pastorale dei Vescovi" of Oct. 28th, 1965).

Today, there are pressures for bishops to be elected directly by Christians (as once customary). However, since it is no longer clear who is Christian and who is not (what does it take to be a Christian? Is having been baptized in one's infancy enough?), this seems hardly feasible for the time being.

- A similar evolution took place as regards the methods for choosing the priests to be ordained. In time the custom prevailed to entrust both bishops and their collaborators with full control on the priests' education and appointment. On many occasions, however, the Christians were called to express their consent (applause) or their opposition, if any, to the ordination.