THE DAILY BREAD

*The Creed of the Apostles*



# The Church

*One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic*

A FORMATION BOOK BY

**Kendall Peterson**

*The Everyday Apostle*

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INTRODUCTION

# The One Thing Men Try to Keep Optional

There is a sentence a great many men say, and mean, and it sounds reasonable until you hold it up to the light. I love God, they say, I just do not need the Church to do it. They mean it as humility, or honesty, or a refusal to be hypocritical. What they are really saying, without knowing it, is that they will take the Head and leave the Body, keep Christ and set aside the thing Christ actually built. And that, it turns out, is not possible.

Acts of the Apostles taught a man to submit to the Church's authority, her Tradition and her Magisterium. But it did not stop to teach him what the Church actually is. And so even a man growing in faith can carry a thin, almost municipal picture of her: a building he attends, an institution with rules, a human organization that does some good and some harm, useful perhaps, but optional. If that is what the Church is, then the man who keeps God and drops the Church is being perfectly sensible.

Part of the trouble is that the Church is the only thing of her kind, and so a man reaches for the wrong comparisons. He pictures her as a club, or a company, or a political party, or a charity, because those are the institutions he knows, and every one of those comparisons makes her look optional, because all of them are. But she is none of those things. She is something the world has no other example of, and until a man sees what category she actually belongs to, he will keep drawing the wrong conclusion from the wrong picture.

*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her. — Ephesians 5:25-26*

But Scripture will not let the picture stay thin. It calls the Church the Body of Christ, the Bride for whom he died, the Temple of the Spirit, our Mother. These are not flattering metaphors laid over an ordinary institution. They are claims about what she is, and if they are true, then belonging to her is not optional any more than belonging to your own family is optional, and far less so. This book is about those claims. We will look at what the Church is, the four marks by which she can be known, why she cannot be set aside without setting aside Christ himself, and what your place in her actually is. The aim is that you stop seeing the Church as a thing you attend and start seeing her as the thing you belong to, and give her the love a man owes his mother.

CHAPTER ONE

# More Than an Institution

### *The Church as the Body of Christ*

Everything a man misunderstands about the Church comes from one mistake at the root: he thinks she is an organization when she is an organism. He pictures a human institution, founded long ago by religious men, that exists to promote the teachings of Jesus, the way a foundation might promote the ideas of its founder after he is gone. If that were what the Church is, she would indeed be optional, replaceable, and only as good as the people running her. But that is not what she is.

## Not an Organization, but an Organism

Scripture's central image for the Church is not a building or a corporation but a body, a living thing. Paul says it directly and repeatedly: the Church is the Body of Christ. Christ is the head, and the baptized are the members, the hands and feet and eyes, each with a part to play, all animated by one life. A body is not an association of individuals who have agreed to cooperate. It is one living reality, and its members are not volunteers but organs. You do not join a body the way you join a club. You are born into it, grafted into it, made part of a life larger than your own.

This is why the life of the Church cannot be reduced to the quality of her management, and why a man cannot evaluate her the way he would a company. An organism lives by a principle within it, a soul; and the soul of the Church, what animates the whole Body and makes it one, is the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit you were given at Baptism is the Spirit who unites you to every other member and to the Head. That is why what happens in the Church is not finally a human transaction but a sharing in one divine life. The weakest parish and the greatest cathedral are animated by the same Spirit, and so are you.

*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. — 1 Corinthians 12:27*

## The Continuation of Christ's Presence

This is why the Church is not merely an institution that serves Christ but the way Christ remains present in the world. When he ascended, he did not leave his people a memory and a set of instructions. He left them his own Body, filled with his own Spirit, so that his presence and his work continue. When the Church teaches, Christ teaches. When the Church forgives sins in the confessional, Christ forgives. When the Church offers the Eucharist, it is Christ who offers and is offered. The Church is not a middleman standing between you and Jesus. She is the very place where Jesus is found, acting, teaching, and giving himself, until the end of the age.

Men who leave the Church to seek a more direct, unmediated Jesus almost always end up with a thinner one, a Christ assembled from their own preferences and shrunk to the size of their own ideas, because they have cut themselves off from the only place his fullness is actually kept. The irony is exact: the man who drops the Church to get closer to Christ gets further from him, while the man who gives himself to the Church, sacraments and teaching and all, finds the real Christ waiting for him there, larger and stranger and more alive than the one he could have invented. Christ gave us a Body precisely so that we would not be left to our own imaginations about him.

### Why You Cannot Have the Head Without the Body

Now the reasonableness of the man who keeps God but drops the Church falls apart. He imagines he can have the Head, Christ, while declining the Body. But a head without a body is not a living thing; it is a horror. Christ has joined himself to the Church so completely that to reject her is to reject him, and to love him truly is to love her, even in her weakness and her wounds. When Saul was persecuting the Church, Christ stopped him on the road and did not ask why he was persecuting the Christians. He asked, why are you persecuting me. He so identifies with his Body that what is done to her is done to him. You cannot love the Head and despise the Body. They are one.

### One Body, Many Parts

There is a freedom in this image that a man should not miss. In a body, the members are not identical, and they are not meant to be. The eye is not the hand and the ear is not the foot, and the body needs every one of them precisely because they differ. Paul labors the point: if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? The Church is not a mass of interchangeable units all doing the same thing. She is a body of wildly different members, different gifts, different callings, different temperaments, knit into one life. This means your particular part is needed, not in spite of how it differs from the man next to you, but because of it. The Body is poorer when any member decides he has nothing to contribute and withdraws.

## CHAPTER TWO

# That They May All Be One

### *The First Mark: One*

The Creed names four marks by which the true Church can be recognized: she is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These are not boasts. They are the features Christ stamped

on his Church, and a man who knows them can tell what he is looking at. The first is unity. The Church is one, and her oneness is not an accident of history but the direct answer to the prayer Christ prayed on the night before he died.

*That they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us. — John 17:21*

## The Unity Christ Prayed For

On the night before he suffered, with everything else he might have prayed for, Jesus prayed for the unity of his followers, that they might be one as he and the Father are one. This tells you how much the oneness of the Church matters to him. It is not a bureaucratic tidiness but a reflection of the very life of God, who is himself a communion of Persons in perfect unity. The Church is meant to be, in the world, a visible sign of that divine oneness. Her unity is part of her witness; it is one of the ways the world is meant to look at her and believe.

## Unity of Faith, Worship, and Governance

The oneness of the Church is not a vague feeling of goodwill among people who disagree about everything. It is concrete, and it holds on three levels. There is one faith, the same creed professed in every land and every century, not a thousand private interpretations but one deposit held in common. There is one worship, above all the one sacrifice of the Eucharist, offered on every altar. And there is one governance, the college of bishops in union with the successor of Peter, so that the Church is not a loose federation of congregations but a single visible communion. A man can walk into a Catholic church anywhere on earth and find the same faith, the same sacraments, the same Lord.

This is a harder unity than the kind the world prefers, which asks only that everyone be nice and no one insist on anything. The Church's unity has content; it is unity in the truth, and that means it sometimes has to be defended against those who would dissolve it into mere sentiment. A man is not being divisive when he holds to the one faith against the pressure to water it down; he is guarding the very oneness Christ prayed for. The unity of the Body is not kept by agreeing to believe less. It is kept by holding, together, the whole of what was handed down.

## A Wound We Feel

This makes the divisions among Christians a genuine wound, and an honest man should feel it as one. The Church's unity is real and unbroken in the Catholic communion, but the scattering of Christians into rival bodies is a scandal that contradicts Christ's prayer

and weakens the witness he wanted his people to give. The right response is neither to pretend the divisions do not matter nor to treat all bodies as interchangeable, but to grieve the division, to pray and work for the day when all who follow Christ are visibly one, and meanwhile to hold fast to the unity that is actually there, as a gift to be guarded and not a trophy to be waved.

CHAPTER THREE

# Holy, and Full of Sinners

### *The Second Mark: Holy*

Here a man's objection is loudest, and it is worth meeting head on. How can the Church be called holy when her history is stained with the sins of her members, and when the headlines, in our own time, have been full of the worst kinds of betrayal by the very men entrusted with her? To call the Church holy can sound either naive or dishonest. It is neither, once you see what the word actually claims.

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. — 1 Peter 2:9*

## Holy in Her Source, Not in Her Members' Record

The Church is holy not because her members are sinless but because her source is God. Her holiness comes from Christ, who founded her, from the Holy Spirit, who dwells in her, from the sacraments, which truly give grace, and from the Word, which is truly God's. These are holy with the holiness of God himself, and they do not fail because the people handling them are sinners. The water of Baptism truly cleanses even when poured by an unworthy hand. The Eucharist is truly Christ even when the man at the altar is a poor example. The Church is holy because what she carries is holy, and what she carries is the very life of God.

None of this is said to minimize the sins of her members, least of all the betrayals by her priests and bishops that have scandalized the faithful and wounded the innocent. Those sins are real, and they are worse, not better, for being committed by men who stood in Christ's place. The Church's holiness does not excuse them; it condemns them, because they are a contradiction of everything she is. To say the Church is holy is not to say her members may sin without consequence. It is to say that the sin is a betrayal of her true nature and not an expression of it, and that the remedy is not to abandon the holy thing

her sinful members have profaned, but to become, yourself, one of the members who honors it.

### A Hospital, Not a Museum

It has often been said that the Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints, and the image is exact. If you find sinners in the Church, you have found exactly the people she exists for. She is not a gallery displaying the already perfect; she is the field hospital where the wounded are healed, and a hospital full of sick people is not a scandal, it is the point. The sins of her members, real and sometimes appalling, do not disprove her holiness. They prove how badly her medicine is needed, and they are a reason to bring more of the wounded in, not to walk out and leave them untreated.

### Holiness That Actually Appears

And the holiness is not only in the source; it breaks through into real lives, constantly. For all her sinful members, the Church has produced, in every generation without exception, men and women of staggering holiness, the saints, who are the proof of what her grace can do when a soul yields to it fully. They are not the exceptions that embarrass the rule; they are the rule made visible. The same Church that contains her scandals contains her saints, and the saints are the truer sign of what she is, because they are what she is for. The honest response to the sinners in the Church is not to leave but to become one of the saints.

And that response is not reserved for a spiritual elite. The saints were not a different species of human being; they were sinners who let the grace already offered in the Church do its full work in them. Every one of them started where you are, inside the same Body, with the same sacraments within reach. The Church has handed you, personally, everything that made them what they were. The gap between a scandal and a saint is not the Church's to close; it is yours, and she has given you all the means to close it. That is the most searching thing about the mark of holiness: it turns the accusation back on the accuser. The Church is as holy as her members will let her grace make them, and you are one of her members.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# For the Whole World

*The Third Mark: Catholic*

The word catholic is so familiar as a label that most men have forgotten it is a description. It comes from a Greek word meaning universal, or according to the whole. To say the Church is catholic is to make two claims at once: that she holds the whole faith, complete and undiminished, and that she is sent to the whole human race, with no border she is not meant to cross.

*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them. — Matthew 28:19*

## The Whole Faith

First, the Church is catholic because she holds the fullness of what Christ revealed, the whole deposit of faith, not a selection of it. She does not offer a trimmed-down version adjusted to the taste of the age, keeping the comfortable doctrines and quietly dropping the hard ones. She hands on all of it, the whole counsel of God, because it is not hers to edit. This is a demand as much as a boast. A catholic faith is one a man receives whole, including the parts that correct him, rather than assembling a private religion out of the pieces he happens to like.

## For Every Nation

Second, the Church is catholic because she is for everyone. Christ's last command was to make disciples of all nations, and the Church has never been the property of one people, one culture, or one century. She is at home in every land and speaks every language, binding together the rich and the poor, the ancient and the newly baptized, the scholar and the child, into one communion that crosses every border the world puts up. No one is a foreigner in the Catholic Church. A man is not asked to stop being what he is, to stop being of his own nation or trade or temperament, but to bring all of it into a family larger than any of them.

This universality is also a rebuke to a temptation every age falls into, the temptation to shrink the Church down to one's own kind. Men are forever trying to make her the chaplain of their nation, their party, their class, or their generation, and she keeps refusing, because she belongs to all of them and to none of them exclusively. The same faith that formed desert monks and medieval kings forms software engineers and tradesmen now. A man who grasps the catholicity of the Church is cured of the provincial habit of imagining his own time and place are the measure of the faith. He is joined instead to something that was old before his nation existed and will be young after it is gone.

## One Faith Across Time

There is a dimension to this that a man feels when he grasps it: the Church is catholic across time as well as space. When you profess the faith, you profess the same faith as the apostles, the martyrs, the saints of every century, your own grandparents, and the children not yet born who will one day pray the same Creed. You are not inventing your religion or joining a current movement. You are taking your place in the longest and widest communion in human history, the one family that death itself does not remove a man from. In the Catholic Church a man is never praying alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

# Built on the Rock

### *The Fourth Mark: Apostolic*

The last mark answers the question a thoughtful man eventually asks: of all the groups that claim to speak for Christ, how do I know which one actually carries his authority? The answer is apostolicity. The true Church is the one that can trace herself, in an unbroken line, back to the apostles Christ himself chose and sent, and through them to Christ.

*You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. — Matthew 16:18*

## Christ Built on Chosen Men

Christ did not write a book and leave it to be interpreted by whoever picked it up. He did something more deliberate and more personal: he chose twelve men, formed them, gave them his authority, and sent them. On one of them, Simon, he conferred a new name, Peter, the Rock, and on that rock he promised to build his Church. The faith was handed from Christ to the apostles, and from the apostles to the men they appointed to succeed them, and so down the centuries in a living chain. The Church is apostolic because she still stands on that foundation, teaching what the apostles taught and governed by their successors.

This is worth weighing against the instinct, very strong in our time, that each man should go to the Scriptures alone and decide for himself what Christianity is. That instinct sounds humble but produces chaos, and the proof is all around us: thousands of competing bodies, each confident its reading is the right one, with no way to settle the matter. Christ foresaw this and guarded against it. He did not entrust his truth to the private judgment of every reader; he entrusted it to a living body of men with his own

authority, able to say in his name what the faith is and is not. Apostolicity is the reason the Church can still, two thousand years later, speak with one voice, and the reason a man need not become his own pope.

### Why the Line Matters

This is not a matter of antiquarian pride. It is the guarantee that what you are taught is what Christ actually revealed, and not the invention of a later age or a charismatic founder. A church that began two hundred years ago, or fifty, or last decade, founded by a man with a new interpretation, cannot hand you the faith of the apostles, because it does not have it to hand. The apostolic succession is the reason a Catholic man can have confidence that the Gospel he receives is the real one, carried down to him through an unbroken line of hands laid on heads, from Peter to the bishop who confirmed him.

### The Office of Peter

At the center of this stands the office Christ gave to Peter, and it is worth a man's understanding, because it is often the hardest point for the modern mind. To Peter alone Christ said: you are Rock, and on this rock I will build my Church, and I will give you the keys of the kingdom. The keys are an image of stewardship, the authority a king gives his chief steward to govern the household in his name. Christ did not leave his Church without a visible principle of unity. He gave her Peter, and Peter has successors, the bishops of Rome, so that in every age the Church has a visible center around which her unity holds. A man does not have to find the pope impressive to receive this as a gift; it is precisely the guarantee that the Church is not left to splinter into ten thousand private verdicts about what Christ meant. There is a chair, and a steward sits in it, until the King returns.

### The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail

And notice the promise attached to the rock. Christ did not say the Church would be spared trouble, or that her members would never fail, or that her history would be clean. He said the gates of hell would not prevail against her. For two thousand years she has been attacked from without by every empire and ideology that rose against her, and wounded from within by the sins of her own, and she has buried every one of her undertakers and stands yet. This is not because her members are strong. It is because her foundation is Christ, and his promise holds. A man can give his whole life to this Church without fear that he is building on sand.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Why She Is Not Optional

### *Mother, Teacher, and the Necessity of the Church*

Now the hardest and most misunderstood teaching can be stated plainly, and rightly. The Church has always taught that she is necessary for salvation, that there is no salvation outside the Church. The sentence has been used as a club and heard as an insult, and a man needs to understand what it does and does not mean, because understood rightly it is not arrogance but the simple consequence of everything already said.

*And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. — Acts 2:47*

## What the Teaching Means

Start with what it does not mean. It does not mean that only card-carrying Catholics go to heaven, or that God is trapped by the boundaries of the visible Church. The Church teaches clearly that those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ or his Church, but who sincerely seek God and strive to do his will as they understand it, can be saved. What the teaching means is this: all salvation comes from Christ through his Body, which is the Church. Whoever is saved, is saved by the grace of Christ, which flows through his Church into the world, whether or not they can see the channel. The Church is the ordinary and God-given means of salvation, the ark he built, and no one is saved apart from her even when they are joined to her in ways only God can see.

The old image of the ark helps here. In the flood, those who were saved were saved by being in the ark Noah built; the ark did not make salvation narrow, it made it possible when the waters were rising. So it is with the Church. She is not a velvet rope God uses to keep most of humanity out. She is the vessel of rescue God launched into a drowning world, and his desire is not that few should be aboard but that all should. The teaching that there is no salvation outside the Church is, rightly heard, the most missionary sentence in the catechism. It does not say, relax, the doors are narrow. It says, the ark is here, and there are still people in the water.

## Which Is Why a Man Who Knows Cannot Walk Away

But this cuts sharply for the man who does know. If a man has come to see that the Catholic Church is the Body of Christ, founded by him, carrying his sacraments and his truth, then for that man she is not optional at all. He cannot claim the excuse of invincible ignorance, because he is not ignorant. To knowingly turn away from the fullness Christ offers in his Church, having seen it, is a different thing entirely from the

sincere searching of a man who never found it. The teaching is not a boast about who is shut out. It is an urgent word to the man who has been let in, telling him what he would be walking away from.

### Mother and Teacher

The Church herself prefers warmer names, and they are truer to how a man should regard her. She is Mother. She gave you new birth in the waters of Baptism, she feeds you with the Eucharist, she picks you up when you fall in the confessional, she will anoint you when you are dying and bury you when you are dead. A man does not treat his mother as optional, to be visited when convenient and ignored when not. And she is Teacher, carrying Christ's own authority to tell you the truth about God and about yourself, even the truths you would rather not hear, as a good mother tells a son what he needs and not only what he wants. Mother and Teacher: receive her as both, and the question of whether she is optional answers itself.

The two titles correct each other, and a man needs both held together. A man who wants only the Mother, the comfort and the belonging, without the Teacher, ends up with sentiment that asks nothing of him. A man who wants only the Teacher, the doctrine and the rules, without the Mother, ends up with a cold orthodoxy that forgets the whole thing is about being loved into life by God. The Church is both at once: she teaches because she is a mother, and a mother teaches precisely because she loves. Take her authority as the firmness of a mother who will not let her son wander into traffic, and the hard teachings stop looking like constraints and start looking like what they are, the care of someone who wants you to live.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Your Place in Her

### *The Layman Is Not a Spectator*

If the Church is the Body of Christ, then you are not a spectator in her but a member, an organ with a function, and the Body is diminished when you do not play your part. A great many Catholic men think of themselves as the audience of the Church, with the priests and religious as the real players. That is a misunderstanding that has cost the Church dearly, and correcting it is the point of this final chapter and the hinge into the mission ahead.

*And he gave… some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. — Ephesians 4:11-12*

## The Hierarchy Exists to Serve

Begin by seeing the clergy rightly. The hierarchy of the Church is not a corporate ladder with the laity on the bottom rung. Christ turned the world's idea of authority upside down: whoever would be great among you, he said, must be your servant. The bishop and the priest exist to serve the Body, to feed it with the sacraments and the Word, to equip the members for their work. The ordained are not a higher class of Christian. They are the ones given to make the holiness of everyone else possible. A priest at the altar is a servant doing for you what you cannot do for yourself, so that you can go and do what he cannot.

Seeing this rightly cures two opposite errors at once. It cures the clericalism that treats priests as the only real Catholics and reduces the layman to a donor and a spectator. And it cures the resentment that treats the clergy as a managerial class to be criticized from the pews. Both errors make the same mistake: they imagine the Church is divided into performers and audience. She is not. She is a Body in which every member has a function, the ordained to serve and equip, the laity to be equipped and sent. A man who grasps this stops asking what the Church, meaning the clergy, is doing for him, and starts asking what he, a member of the Body, is doing for the mission.

## The Layman's Mission Is the World

And here is the part most men have never been told: the layman's calling is not a second-tier Christianity for those not holy enough to be priests. It is a distinct and essential vocation, and its mission field is precisely the place the clergy mostly cannot reach. The priest's domain is the sanctuary; yours is the world, the office, the job site, the marriage, the neighborhood, the places where the Church is present only in and through men like you. You are the Church in the boardroom and at the kitchen table. The sanctification of ordinary life, the carrying of Christ into the arenas of work and family and culture, is not the clergy's job that you assist with. It is your job, your frontline, the part of the Body's work that only the laity can do.

## The Universal Call to Holiness

Underneath this lies a truth the Church stated with fresh force in the last century but which was always hers: every baptized person, without exception, is called to the heights of holiness, and not to some lesser, safer version of it. There is not one holiness for priests and monks and a diluted holiness for men with jobs and mortgages. The same

perfection is asked of all, and the path to it runs straight through the ordinary duties of a man's actual state in life. Your work, done well and offered to God, is your path. Your marriage, loved sacrificially, is your path. The patience you learn with your children, the honesty you keep in your business, the faith you refuse to hide at your job, these are not obstacles to your holiness that you squeeze prayer in around. They are the very material of it. The layman is not called to be a little bit holy. He is called to be a saint, in a suit, on a Tuesday.

### Not Audience, but Body

So stop attending the Church as if she were a performance and start inhabiting her as what she is, your own Body. Find your part and play it. Every member matters, Paul says, and the hand cannot say to the foot that it has no need of it; a Body with a dead limb is a Body that limps. The parish that is weak is usually not weak in its priests but weak in its men, who came as spectators and gave nothing. The Church does not need you as a donor and a warm body in a pew. She needs you as an organ of the living Body of Christ, doing in the world what Christ wants done and only you, in your place, can do.

## CONCLUSION

# Love Her as Your Mother

Return to the man who said he could keep God and leave the Church. We can now say gently but plainly why he is wrong. The Church is not an institution laid over the faith, optional to it. She is the Body of Christ, the place where Christ is found and acts and gives himself, one and holy and catholic and apostolic, your Mother and your Teacher. To keep the Head and drop the Body is not humility. It is to want a Christ of one's own imagining instead of the Christ who actually came and actually built something and actually remains.

None of this requires pretending the Church has no sinners, or that her human failures do not wound. It requires seeing past them to what she is. A man does not abandon his mother because she has been shamed, or because some who bear her name have betrayed her. He loves her the more fiercely, defends her when she is attacked, and gives himself to her good. That is the love a Catholic man owes the Church, and it is the love this chapter of your formation is meant to awaken.

It is worth saying plainly that this love is not naive. A man can see the Church's wounds more clearly than her critics do, grieve them more deeply, and love her still, the way a son sees his family without illusions and belongs to it anyway. In fact only the man who loves

her can bear to look squarely at her failures without either excusing them or using them as a reason to leave. Sentiment cannot survive the scandals. Love can, because love is bound to what the Church is and not merely to how her members behave.

You are a member of the Body of Christ. You have a place in her that no one else can fill and a mission in the world that the clergy cannot carry for you. The next program will send you out to live it. But a man cannot be sent on behalf of a Church he regards as optional. First he must love her as what she is. Profess it, then, the next time you say the Creed, and mean it: I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. She is your Mother. Go and give yourself to her, and through her, to the world.

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*The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic is part of The Daily Bread Library.*