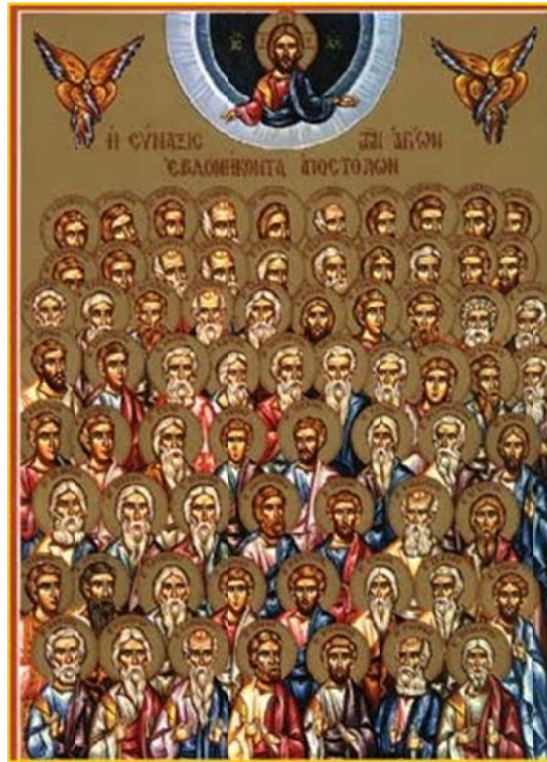


THE BASIS FOR CATHOLIC BELIEF IN

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION



“Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection.” So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this apostolic ministry from which Judas turned away to go to his own place.” Then they gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles. (Acts 1: 21-26)

Succession refers to being a legitimate heir of, or successor to, someone who held an office previously.

The legitimacy of the successor is dependent upon the authority under which the office is conferred. As an example, Ronald Reagan was the successor to Jimmy Carter in the office of President of the United States based on the legitimate authority of the Constitution of the United States. The office of President of the United States was conferred upon Ronald Reagan legitimately through the “Swearing in” or “Oath of Office” which can only be administered, as per the US Constitution, by the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Apostolic Succession in the Catholic Church refers to the legitimate spiritual, ecclesiastical and sacramental authority, power, and responsibility held by the members of the office of Bishop. This legitimate authority has been handed down from original twelve apostles, who in turn received this same authority, power and responsibility from Jesus Christ himself. The sacrament of Holy Orders confers the legitimacy of the office of Bishop while the authority of the office is that of Jesus Christ.

Gods Will

Apostolic Succession is God’s will; God’s way of ensuring that correct doctrine - which had been given to the Church by Jesus Christ - would be taught to succeeding generations.

Consider Jesus’ prayer for Christian unity in the Gospel of John;

As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth. I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:18-23)

Jesus prays to the Father that the Apostles “May be consecrated to the truth”. Consecration refers to being dedicated to a special purpose, which in this case is the preaching of the truth. Jesus prays that those who believe in him through the word (truth) of the apostles may be “one” in the same way that he and the Father are one.

Jesus goes further and states that the unity of all believers, through the truth to which the apostles are consecrated to teach, is a means by which the world is to know that God the Father has sent him. He goes further still, stating that Christian unity is a means to perfection - that we are to be “brought to perfection as one.”

It is clear that Jesus Christ was very concerned with unity among Christians and that Christian unity was in a large measure, determined by adherence to a uniform body of doctrine – the truth.

In Paul's second letter to Timothy, reference is made to correctness of doctrine across three generations of apostolic succession; Paul himself, Timothy whom Paul had taught and the faithful whom Timothy was to teach.

And what you heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well. (1 Timothy 2:2)

God's desire that Christians have unity of doctrine is manifested in apostolic succession. Apostolic Succession is God's way of ensuring that Christians remain united in the bonds of a common body of true teaching.

The Book of Acts and the First Bishop

During those days Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (there was a group of about one hundred and twenty persons in the one place). He said, "My brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David, concerning Judas, who was the guide for those who arrested Jesus. He was numbered among us and was allotted a share in this ministry. He bought a parcel of land with the wages of his iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out. This became known to everyone who lived in Jerusalem, so that the parcel of land was called in their language 'Akeldama,' that is, Field of Blood. For it is written in the Book of Psalms: 'Let his encampment become desolate, and may no one dwell in it' and 'May another take his office.' (Acts 1:15-20)

Note that the King James Bible translates "May another take his office" as "His bishopric let another take."

In the first chapter of the Book of Acts, as the leader of the Church, the Apostle Peter deals with the need to replace Judas. In doing so, Peter proclaims one of the first doctrines of Christianity, that of apostolic succession.

Peter begins by pointing out that Judas was "Numbered among us" and "Was allotted a share in this ministry" and then goes on to establish the biblical basis for the office of Apostle by quoting Psalm 109:

***Find a lying witness, an accuser to stand by his right hand,
That he may be judged and found guilty, that his plea may be in vain.
May his days be few; may another take his office.
(Psalm 109:6-8)***

Peter proposes that Judas' position be filled by a witness to Jesus Christ's ministry as follows;

Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)

And the Apostles respond as follows;

So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this apostolic ministry from which Judas turned away to go to his own place." Then they gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:23-26)

We see that the Apostles prayed to the Lord that they be shown which one of the witnesses was to succeed Judas as an Apostle ("bishopric" KJV). The Holy Spirit guided the apostles to choose Matthias, who became the first valid Bishop – an apostolic successor to the original twelve apostles.

Other "Apostles"

Although Peter requires that the one elected to succeed Judas in the office of Apostle be an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry, the New Testament is rich with references to "Apostles" who did not accompany the original twelve.

Having only heard Jesus' voice, Paul was in fact blinded when he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus and so could not have been an eyewitness to Jesus at all. In spite of this, Paul is frequently identified (and identifies himself) as a holder of the office of "Apostle".

I Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, (Romans 1:1)

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I glory in my ministry... (Romans 11:13)

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? Although I may not be an apostle for others, certainly I am for you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 9:1-2)

1 Corinthians 9:1-2 cited above is interesting in that Paul references his Bishopric as authoritative over the Corinthian Christian community while clearly stating that his office is not authoritative over other unnamed Christian communities. Paul's entire second letter to the Corinthians in fact, is not only an admonishment to the Christians in that city for their bad behavior, but of lack of respect for his authority as Bishop as well.

I have been foolish. You compelled me, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I am in no way inferior to these "superapostles," even though I am nothing. (2 Corinthians 12:11-12)

The New Testament identifies Paul's companions Silvanus and Timothy as apostles. The first letter to the Thessalonians begins with Paul identifying himself, Silvanus and Timothy by name and later identifies all three as having apostolic authority to teach, exhort and govern as follows;

...although we were able to impose our weight as apostles of Christ. (1 Thessalonians 2:7)

Paul's letter to Titus bears powerful witness to the office of Bishop and his duties to teach "sound doctrine" and "refute opponents."

...to Titus, my true child in our common faith: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our savior. For this reason I left you in Crete so that you might set right what remains to be done and appoint presbyters in every town, as I directed you, on condition that a man be blameless, married only once, with believing children who are not accused of licentiousness or rebellious. For a bishop as God's steward must be blameless, not arrogant, not irritable, not a drunkard, not aggressive, not greedy for sordid gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, temperate, just, holy, and self-controlled, holding fast to the true message as taught so that he will be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to refute opponents. (Titus 1:4-9)

The Ordination of Bishops

The suggested homily for the Mass to be celebrated at the ordination of a new Bishop contains the following text:

Consider carefully the position in the Church to which our brother is about to be raised. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was sent by the Father to redeem the human race, in turn sent twelve apostles into the world. These men were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel and gather every race and people into a single flock to be guided and governed in the way of holiness. Because this service was to continue to the end of time, the apostles selected others to help them. By the laying on of hands which confers the sacrament of orders in its fullness, the apostles passed

on the gift of the Holy Spirit which they themselves had received from Christ. In that way, by a succession of bishops unbroken from one generation to the next, the powers conferred in the beginning were handed down, and the work of the Savior lives and grows in our time.

In the person of the bishop, with his priests around him, Jesus Christ, the Lord, who became High Priest forever, is present among you. Through the ministry of the bishop, Christ himself continues to proclaim the Gospel and to confer the mysteries of faith on those who believe. Through the fatherly action of the bishop, Christ adds new members to his body. Through the bishop's wisdom and prudence, Christ guides you in your earthly pilgrimage toward eternal happiness.

After the homily, the Principal Consecrator places his hands on the head of the Bishop-Elect and prays silently. Other Bishops who are present will do the same after a moment. This laying on of hands is part of the sacrament of Holy Orders which confer the office of Bishop. The laying on of hands is an ancient ritual, clearly documented in the New Testament.

Until I arrive, attend to the reading, exhortation, and teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was conferred on you through the prophetic word with the imposition of hands of the presbyterate. (1 Timothy 4:13-14)

Paul reminds Timothy, a bishop of the Church, that he was given a gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Those who would deny the efficacy of the sacraments in general and the sacrament of Holy Orders would do well to meditate on this passage. Indeed the precedent has been set; at least once in the history of Christianity, the gift of the Holy Spirit has been conferred on one person by the laying on of hands by another person!

The book of Hebrews teaches us that the laying on of hands was one of the most elementary doctrines of the Church, something that mature Christians would have been expected to understand and have faith in.

Therefore, let us leave behind the basic teaching about Christ and advance to maturity, without laying the foundation all over again: repentance from dead works and faith in God, instruction about baptisms and laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. (Hebrews 6:1-2)

Writings of the Early Church Fathers

While outside of the Bible, the writings of the early fathers of the Church bear testimony to tradition of apostolic succession in support of scripture.

Through countryside and city [the apostles] preached, and they appointed their earliest converts, testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers. (Pope Clement 1, *Letter to the Corinthians* 42:4–5, 44:1–3 [A.D. 80])

*When I had come to Rome, I [visited] Anicetus, whose deacon was Eleutherus. And after Anicetus [died], Soter succeeded, and after him Eleutherus. In each succession and in each city there is a continuance of that which is proclaimed by the law, the prophets, and the Lord. (Hegesippus, *Memoirs*, cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4:22 [A.D. 180])*

*It is possible, then, for everyone in every church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the apostles which has been made known to us throughout the whole world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the apostles and their successors down to our own times, men who neither knew nor taught anything like what these heretics rave about. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:3:1 [A.D. 189]).*

*But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul — that church which has the tradition and the faith with which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. For with this Church, because of its superior origin, all churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world. And it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic tradition. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3:3:2 [A.D. 189])*

*[The apostles] founded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches. Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive Church, [founded] by the apostles, from which they all [spring]. In this way, all are primitive, and all are apostolic, while they are all proved to be one in unity. (Tertullian, *Demurrer Against the Heretics* 20 [A.D. 200])*

Conclusion

God's will is revealed by Jesus' prayer for unity of all Christians through the Apostle's consecration to the truth. Jesus wished that all Christians be taught and believe in a uniform body of true doctrine.

God's will is fulfilled through an unbroken line of succession from Jesus Christ, through the Apostles to the Bishops of today. It is the holder of the office of Bishop who have taught and continue to teach the uniform body of doctrine as prayed for by Christ.

The Bible gives ample evidence that the office of the "Apostle" (the "bishopric") was granted to successors to the apostles including Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, and most notably Titus in Crete.

The ordination of Timothy as Bishop uses the same basic form as sacrament of Holy Orders which ordains Bishops today – prophetic words, prayer and the imposition (laying on) of hands.

St. Paul teaches that along with faith in God and repentance from sin, the "laying on of hands" is a fundamental Christian doctrine.