

# THE PLACE OF THE APOSTLES IN THE CHURCH

BY

Hieromonk AUGUSTINE ROBERTS

---

1. The question of the hierarchy in the Church, especially the problem of the apostolic succession, is one which traverses her whole history. The necessity of the apostolic succession was rejected by several of the 16th cent. reformers along with the doctrine of the primacy of the Pope of Rome and these two aspects of the question have become sharper in the discussions between different «Churches» since the promulgation of papal infallibility, 1870, and the publication of the papal bull, «*Apostolicae curae*», against the validity of Anglican ordinations, 1896. The whole problem is one of the central points in ecumenical discussions and a vast number of books have been written on the subject in the last eighty years, for the most part polemical or apologetical. It seems to us however that this most important problem is nearly always treated in a false perspective, especially when the question of the place of the apostle Peter in the Church is raised.

The best modern work is certainly that of Oscar Cullmann, «Peter, Disciple, Apostle and Martyr», Deiaschaux et Niestlé, Neuchatel, for it treats the subject in its integrity. He gives an exegesis of the petrine texts of the New Testament and upholds the important place of Peter and the other apostles in the ministry of our Lord and in the apostolic age and draws the conclusion that the apostles, being unique, did not have any successors. He stops short there and gives the impression that the life, the history of the Church is cut off from the apostles by their disappearance from the earth, the Church's task being to continue to teach the faith of the apostles—which we all believe—but without any continuity or living communion between ourselves and them except through the link of their work and their book, the New Testament, which is opened to our understanding by the same Holy Spirit who inspired them to write it. His book is a remarkable one coming from a Protestant believer but it seems to us that the ecclesiological dimension of the problem is simply lacking in it.

There are many books and articles written by Orthodox theologians on this question but nearly all of them are in Greek or Russian and are not available to most Western readers. Most Protestants reject

the Orthodox doctrine of the hierarchy in the Church and many Roman and Anglican believers think that the Orthodox doctrine of orders is the same as that of the Roman Church, even though Orthodox reject the doctrine of the Papacy.

Perhaps a clear statement of the Orthodox belief about the place of the Apostles in the Church and their successors free from all polemics but pointing out the weaknesses of the Roman, Protestant and Anglican positions from the Orthodox point of view would be useful in throwing new light upon the whole question. Our aim therefore is to give the Orthodox position based upon the Gospels and the first part of the Acts of the Apostles and to draw certain conclusions from this material based upon the whole Orthodox Tradition from the time of the Apostles down to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

2. When reading the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles we are struck by the preeminent place given in them to Saint Peter. He is, beyond any doubt, the spokesman of the apostolic band chosen by our Lord. His name comes first in the apostolic list given in the synoptics and the Acts (Mt. 10:1-5, Mk 3:13ff, Lk 6:13ff, Acts 1:12ff). He speaks in the name of all on many occasions and recognises our Lord as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi (notice also Jn 6:67-69, where he says that our Lord alone has «the words of life»). It is he who wishes to walk on the waters to meet his Master, he who strikes the high-priest's servant with a sword in the garden, he who follows his Master into the court-yard of the high-priest's house (but see the details of the story as recorded by the Fourth Gospel, Jn 18:15), he who swims to meet the risen Christ on the lake side. It is he who is called «Satan» by his Master and for whom the Master prays especially in order that Satan may not overcome him, he who denies his Master, and he who is specially tested by Christ before His ascension. ~~His character is at once weak and strong. He is impetuous and, before the coming of the Holy Spirit, unstable. Yet he is, incontestably, the first of the twelve apostles and it is to him and to him alone that our Lord addresses the words which have caused so much ink to flow, «thou art Peter...».~~

Those who try to diminish in any way the role of Saint Peter in

---

1. In order not to overburden our text with a multitude of references we have ~~appended an analytical list of the texts which speak of the apostles in the Gospels and the first chapters of the Acts. For the same reason we give only one citation from the Fathers.~~

the Gospels are wrong. The Gospels and the Acts speak quite clearly about his place as the first of the apostles. But those who exaggerate his role in the name of an ecclesiastical organisation which did not exist at the time of the apostles are equally wrong. Neither of these errors is evangelical.

3. There is another apostle whose role amongst the twelve whilst being different from that of Saint Peter is not less important. We speak of the «beloved disciple» identified with Saint John and the author of the Fourth Gospel<sup>1</sup>.

It is the beloved disciple who is nearest to his Master in the upper room and who learns the name of the traitor, it is he who is identified with the «other disciple» who knew the high-priest, who entered into the court-yard of the high-priest's house, «at the same time as Jesus», and who introduced Peter there. It is to him that our Lord confided the care of His mother, it is he who «saw and believed» at the empty tomb, he who recognised the Master on the lake side after the resurrection, he who receives the mysterious commandment to «tarry till I come», and he who is the «witness of these things».

It is quite a false exegesis which speaks so much of the place of Peter in the apostolic band without ever speaking of the less clear, more mysterious and interior role of John the beloved disciple. It is quite certainly unevangelical.

4. It is important to notice how the names of Peter and John are linked in the gospels. Saint Luke says that they were the two disciples sent to prepare the upper room for the Passover. Peter asks John who is to betray the Christ. They run together to the sepulchre on Easter morning. It is John who tells Peter, «it is the Master», when they are on the lake after the resurrection. They go together to the Temple and heal the lame man (notice the text, «Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. «Acts 3:4). They confront the chiefs of the Jews together (Acts 3 and 4), and they are sent together to confirm the work of Philipp in Samaria.

5. We must also notice the place given to John's brother, James. He, with John and Peter, is chosen by our Lord to witness the resur-

---

1. Without entering into this problem here we reject all the theories which attribute this gospel to another hand than that of Saint John. We believe that the internal evidence and the whole tradition of the Church show them to be wrong. This question has no direct bearing upon the present study.

rection of Jairus daughter, the transfiguration on the mountain and the agony in the garden. James is also venerated as the first martyr of the apostolic band. (Acts 12:1).

6. Several of the apostles are mentioned in couples: Peter and his brother Andrew, John and his brother James, Philipp and Andrew, and in groups: Peter, James and John, Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee and the others (see analysis). Thomas and Judas Iscariot have important roles as do Andrew, Philipp, Mathew and James the son of Alpheus, and any concordance or bible with marginal references quickly shows the number of times the apostles are mentioned together. Our Lord gave great importance to their private instruction.

7. It is therefore entirely false to wish to isolate one of the apostles from the others—and almost all the books which speak of the place of Saint Peter in the Church do this. The importance which they themselves gave to the number of the twelve «witnesses of His resurrection» is shown by their choice of a disciple «who has companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us...», Acts 1:21-22. Nor must we isolate the apostolic group from the seventy disciples and the women who ministered unto Jesus or from Saint Paul, the Apostle chosen «out of time». The New Testament is a stranger to all such isolations. It makes a clear distinction between the different roles played by different people but it never separates them one from the other. Even Judas' betrayal has meaning only within the whole story.

We have given only the slightest sketch of the gospel teaching about the apostles, yet even this shows how completely deformed and lopsided the whole question of the place of Peter in the Church has become in the controversy between Western Christians.

8. What legitimate conclusions can we draw from the Gospel evidence about the place of the apostles in the Church as the foundation and the source of her true faith?

a) We believe with Professor Cullmann that the apostles are unique and irreplaceable. They have no «successors» in the meaning given to this word by Roman and some Anglican theologians. It is absolutely clear in the New Testament that the twelve and the twelve alone are the foundation of the Church, the Christ Himself being the chief corner stone: «... the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in

all.», Eph 1:22-23. «Ye... are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone...», Eph 2:20. The apostles are the unshakable foundation of the Church until the end of this present era and Peter is the first amongst them. They cannot be replaced and have no successors. This is the clear teaching of the New Testament (see I Cor 12:28, Gal 1:17 where Saint Paul recognises those who were «apostles before me», Eph 2:19-22, 3:5, 4:11, 2Pet 3:2, Jude 17, Rev 18:20, 21:10-14).

b) It is however equally clear that the apostles chose others for the ministry of the Gospel and gave them special power to teach and to watch over the Christian communities (see the Epistles to Timothy and many other texts). This is so clear that it seems strange that we need to insist on it. We shall not here speak of the role of the bishop in the Early Church and the New Testament for many, many books have been written about it and the question is, seemingly, exhausted. We do not think that it is by this method that we shall ever convince those who do not believe. Only a new «total» approach to the subject can serve any good purpose. The purely «ecclesiastical» aspect of the question, in the narrow sense of that word a kind of clerical professionalism which reigns in the Roman Church is a deformation of true vision of the Church and our Protestant brethren are quite right in rejecting it. This needs to be said once for all.

c) Closely linked to this latter remark and in casting another glance at the texts cited at the end of section a), it is important to notice and to take seriously the gifts of the Spirit given to the Church, especially for it is particularly underlined, the gift of prophecy (see espec. Eph 2:20). We must frankly recognise that we have largely neglected this aspect of the life of the Church in its relation to the hierarchy. These two things have become largely separated and indeed we now consider prophecy as an almost reprehensible gift. Those of us who have a hierarchical order must take our Protestant brethren seriously when they speak to us about it. The true meaning of the hierarchy can only be taught in its relationship to the gift of prophecy and the other gifts of the Spirit. The hierarchy considered as an organ of organisation, order, teaching and a sacramentalism which excludes the other gifts to reign as absolute master in the Church, as is often the case to-day, is certainly not the true Orthodox Faith. The apostles were prophets as Saint Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost shows. To isolate the ecclesiastical

power of the bishop and the priest from the other gifts and charismas is not more evangelical than it is to deny this power.

But to come to the central question in this matter, how is the apostolic power and faith transmitted to us in the Church to-day?

It goes without saying that they are given to us in the Church by the presence of the Holy Spirit who teaches us «all things» and by the reading of the word. Almost all Christians agree about this. Yet, as we said at the beginning, the ecclesiological dimension seems to be totally lacking if we say only this. In this vision of things there is a vertical line—the presence of the Holy spirit—and a kind of historic succession, a horizontal line—the presence of the Gospel, but the community, the «body», is lacking. This vision is essentially individualist and the necessity of a body, a living organism, a society, a Church, is very hard to justify. If there is only this one can very easily remain at home and be one's own church. Salvation concerns only God and I.

In the New Testament perspective the Church is an organism and not a monad. She has twelve doors and twelve foundations stones (Rev.). She is a multitude who sing and praise together and the twelve apostles are seated upon twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes, according to the Gospel. The communion of the saints is a reality of the life of the Church and not just a pious image. It is a dimension of life in God and the Church on earth, visible, has simply no meaning if she is not the same thing as the Church in heaven, invisible. The apostles and all those who have gone before us are not absent, inexistent, but really alive.

d. «God is not the God of the dead, but of the living». This saying of our Lord holds the key, we believe, to the errors of our Roman, Protestant and Anglican brethren in their doctrines of the place of the apostles in the Church and in their doctrines of their successors.

The apostles are alive in the Church to-day. They are really present in her life and it is from them that we draw the apostolic faith.

We may say to our Protestant brethren that the apostles taught the true faith to men and that we must continue to teach this faith. But they also ordained certain men to watch over the Church. This is the indisputable teaching of the apostles themselves. Only the apostles and those who received this power from the apostles ordained men in this way, according to the New Testament. This power given by the apostles does not however make apostles of those whom they ordained

and it is therefore strictly false to speak of their «S u c c e s s o r s». They had no «successors» for only those who disappear have need of them. But this does not attenuate the fact that these directly ordained men ordained others in their turn and that this chain extends from apostolic times to our own day without a break from bishop to bishop. It is therefore strictly necessary to speak of an apostolic s u c c e s s i o n.

We may say to our Anglican brethren that this apostolic succession has however no meaning at all outside the apostolic faith. The mere fact that one has apostolic succession proves nothing for the Arians and many other heretics had it also. Of what use is a historical apostolical succession if we teach heresy? True orders cannot be separated from true apostolic faith. As an isolated fact orders prove nothing. A mechanical succession is no guarantee of true faith.

If our Roman brethren say that one of the apostles has a seat and a direct successor on earth then we must insist that they reply to the question, if they wish to be evangelical, «Where then are the seats and the direct successors of the other eleven apostles?». For even if we recognise the primacy of Saint Peter in the Roman sense—which we do not, whilst fully recognising his primacy within the apostolic band—only a foolish man would deny the existence of eleven other apostles. If the «successor» of Saint Peter is present in the office of the bishop of Rome where, in exactly the same sense, are the successors of the eleven? To reply that the bishops in general are their successors in the same sense is obviously a very weak argument for they are more than eleven. Only a tragic blinding of evangelical vision can account for the deformation of the Roman Church in this matter.

e. The historic succession comes from the apostles to us in the framework of the teaching of the apostolic faith from generation to generation of bishops, each bishop in his Church being the visible representative upon earth of the whole apostolic college, «Where the bishop is, there is the Church», according to the word of the Tradition. He does not replace the apostles or even one of them, he represents them all and witnesses to their teaching. This is the horizontal line of succession, its earthly dimension, the guarantee of true belief. But this succession is not just historical. It is present directly to-day by the abiding presence of the apostles in the Church. The twelve are living members of the Church to-day and her foundation stones. The office of the bishop witnesses to this apostolic presence which is the invisible reality rendered visible in the apostolic power

wielded by the bishop. It is evident that this power has meaning only within the setting of the apostolic faith. A bishop who teaches false doctrine is no true bishop even though his historic succession is undisputable. This presence of the apostles in the Church to-day is the vertical line, the heavenly dimension of succession. To suppress one or the other of these dimensions is to render the Church on earth another thing than the Church in heaven and, in the last analysis, this makes her perfectly useless on earth.

These two lines or dimensions are quite distinct but also quite inseparable, the horizontal line having unbroken continuity because it is touched at each moment by the vertical. The small college of bishops who ordain another bishop perform an act which derives certainly from the Christ Himself, but through the apostles. He gave them power to loose and to bind and to teach and this power is still theirs in the Church to-day. We are the apostolic Church or we are no Church at all. The bishops are not apostles but their representatives. This needs to be said and repeated just as we need to repeat that each local Church or, to use our present terminology, each diocese, is the whole Church and has within it the whole apostolic presence and faith as all the local Churches together are the whole Church and are the visible of the invisible Church whose only foundation stones are the apostles. This is the ecclesiological dimension which seems to be totally lacking in the Protestant vision of the Church's life and which has been utterly deformed by the Roman doctrine of the papacy. We say this in no polemical spirit but because it is most grave matter. Our Protestant brethren are quite right when they reject the Roman conception of orders and perhaps our Anglican brethren would do well to consider, in the context of their discussions with their Protestant brethren, whether their conception of orders is not too Roman.

f. We may illustrate the presence of the apostles in the Church to-day by the following analogy: A being of only two dimensions would be incapable of jumping or of raising an arm. A world of three dimensions would be inconceivable for such a being, and we humans would be quite invisible to it, yet we could touch it's world at all points without any difficulty because whilst surpassing such a world our own contains it within itself. In the same way the angels and the saints are invisible to us and belong to another dimension of being, but they can touch our world at all points and be really present within it though in another way than we are.



Christ chose only twelve apostles amongst His disciples. These apostles are still living beings in the Church of the Living God. Nicholas Cabasilas wrote of Peter: «What then, will one say, the pope is not in any way the successor of Peter? He is but only as a bishop... For Peter is an apostle and the chief of the apostles, but the pope is neither an apostle (for the apostles did not ordain other apostles but pastors and teachers) nor the chief of the apostles. Peter is the Teacher of the universe, the pope is the bishop of Rome»<sup>1</sup> and we believe that this doctrine faithfully continues the apostolic tradition within the Orthodox Church. It is the Orthodox and not the Roman Church which teaches the true place of Peter in the Church. Never does she isolate him from the other apostles or talk of him outside the whole apostolic college. We believe in the real, living presence of the apostles in the Church to-day and this is the only source of our doctrine of orders. Viewed in this perspective the office of the bishop is essential to the life of the Church on earth, but this office has no meaning outside the apostolic faith and must not be isolated from the other gifts of the Spirit to the Church. The historic succession has meaning only when it guarantees the continued apostolic faith of the Church. It is a living reality not only because of its continuity in time but also because it is transmitted directly from the apostles themselves through the bishops to-day as in the days when they walked the earth. It is the living presence of the apostles themselves as the living witnesses of the resurrection of Christ in the Church to-day that alone confers meaning on the office of a bishop.

In this ecclesiological dimension of life Peter is Peter, John is John, James is James and the twelve are the twelve and are the only foundation stones laid by the Christ. They have no «successors» for they are not absent or dead, but there is a true apostolic succession in time which is the visible witness to their invisible presence in the Church to-day. This is the source of the apostolic faith to which the Orthodox Church witnesses.

---

1. (P. G. CXLIX, 704 CD).