

The Catholicity of the Church. The events just related were of the highest importance for the development of the Church. The apostles had known that the Gospel was to be preached to the Gentiles. Soon after their Lord's Birth, Gentiles had come from afar to worship Him and hail Him as the Saviour of the world; and just before His Ascension Jesus had commanded His apostles to "go and teach all nations"; but the manner and conditions under which Gentiles were to be made Christians, were not yet clearly and distinctly perceived by the apostles. A further and special revelation was necessary to shew that nothing but sincere faith was required, and that none of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament were to be imposed on them. Peter, therefore, was taught by this wonderful vision that the Jewish ceremonial law was done away with by our Lord; and God's marvellous and direct interposition in the case of the call of Cornelius taught the apostle that the Gentiles were to be admitted directly into the Christian Church, without first submitting to the rite of circumcision. Thus the reception of Cornelius and his friends into the Church was a most important and decisive moment in her history, for it proved not only her Catholicity, but also her entire independence of Judaism. Moreover, by the conversion of the Roman centurion and his friends a link was formed between the Christian Church and Rome, the capital and mistress of the ancient world, and a road to the centre of civilisation was thrown open to the vicar of Jesus Christ; the development of the infant Church into the Church of the whole world being thus facilitated. God, by giving the impulse to her further development, by His direct intervention in the conversion of the first Gentiles, proved that He ever governs her, and that our Lord was faithful to His promise: "Lo, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world."

The Primacy of Peter. Why was the revelation that the Old Law was done away with, and that Gentiles were to be received into the Church, given to Peter only, and not to the other apostles? And why did Almighty God refer Cornelius to Peter for instruction, and not to the other apostles, or even to the deacon Philip, who was living in the very same town (Cæsarea)? He did so, because to Peter was given the power of the keys of His kingdom, the Church. Peter was the chief pastor of the Church, so to him was assigned the office of receiving the first Gentiles into her fold, even as he had been appointed to admit the first Jews on the Day of Pentecost. He it was who had authority to throw open the gates of salvation to the pagan world.

The graces of Redemption can be received only through the Church. When our Lord Jesus revealed Himself to Saul, He might Himself have imparted to him all necessary instruction, and the grace of regeneration. He did not, however, do so, but sent to him the priest Ananias to teach him and baptize him. Our Blessed Lord acted in the same way regarding the conversion of Cornelius. He neither taught him directly Himself, nor by the mouth of an angel, but commanded him to send for Peter, and hear his words. Nor did the wonderful outpouring of the Holy Ghost on Cornelius and his companions make Baptism superfluous; for each one had to be baptized, and be thus received into the Church by her ministers. It is only by the exercise of the threefold—teaching, pastoral, and priestly—office of the Church, that men can be united and reconciled to our Lord Jesus Christ. He who despises and neglects the means of grace entrusted to the Church cannot receive grace; and he who says that the priesthood is unnecessary, falls into a most fatal error. St. Paul writes thus (1 Cor. 4:1): "Let a man so account of us as the ministers of God, and the dispensers of the mysteries of God."

Baptism is the first and most necessary of the Sacraments. The Holy Ghost descended visibly on Corneilius and his companions, and imparted to them the gift of tongues, in order to convince the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles need not first become Jews before they could receive the gifts of the Holy Ghost. This outpouring of the Holy Ghost prepared them for a worthy reception of holy Baptism, but it was only by their Baptism that they received the grace of regeneration, and became members of the Body of Christ, that is, His Church.

The good works of sinners. Cornelius was convinced of the nothingness of the pagan gods, and believed in One Invisible God, the Creator of heaven and earth. He also observed the moral law which God has written in the hearts of men, and which He revealed in the ten Commandments. He constantly prayed to God for guidance and knowledge of the truth; and he supplemented his prayers by works of mercy and almsgiving. Now, these good works of prayer and almsgiving were indeed supernatural good works, but still could not directly merit for Cornelius everlasting happiness, for only those good works which are performed in a state of sanctifying grace have meritorious value for heaven. Because Cornelius corresponded with divine grace, he received the further gift of faith, and by Baptism received sanctifying grace.

The following virtues are to be found in Cornelius:

1. He was religious, for he prayed continually, and honoured God, and according to his lights strove after religious truth.
2. He was conscientious, for, as far as his conscience taught him, he observed God's commandments, obeyed the will of God, and kept himself from sin.
3. He was charitable and compassionate, working for the good of his neighbour. He practised not only the corporal but also the spiritual works of mercy, by inviting his friends to hear the words of Peter, and thus leading them to the true faith.
4. He was obedient to God's command to send for Peter, and he thereby obtained salvation.
5. He was humble. If he had said to himself: "What can an uneducated fisherman like Peter do for me, a cultivated Roman?" he would not have obtained the gift of faith in Jesus Christ.
6. He believed the word of God, as it was announced to him by Peter, and therefore he received the gift of faith from the Holy Ghost, and the grace of Baptism.

Indifferentism in matters of faith. The sentence in Peter's discourse: "In every nation he that feareth God and worketh justice is acceptable to Him", has been interpreted by people either indifferent about, or weak in faith, to mean: "It is all the same what people believe, or what religious creed they profess, if only they live good lives." Now is this principle, that religion and faith are matters of indifference, correct? No! it is utterly false and un-Christian, and that for these reasons: 1. Peter did not say: "Faith does not signify"; for he was, on the contrary, most anxious to convert Cornelius to the true faith; but his words meant rather that nationality does not signify—it does not matter what nation a man belongs to, for all nations are called to believe in Jesus Christ, and all persons, to whatever nation they may belong, are acceptable to Him, if, as Cornelius did, they keep the commandments and strive after a knowledge of the truth. Such men, being acceptable to God, are called by Him to believe the true faith, and thereby obtain salvation. 2. Peter, at the end of his discourse, expressly teaches that no one can obtain forgiveness of sins but through faith in Jesus (compare with this his words in chapter LXXXV: "There is no other Name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved"; Acts 4:12). 3. If no account was to be made of holding the true faith, St. Peter need not have preached to Cornelius, and need not have baptized him. 4. If it be a matter of indifference what faith a man holds, then the whole revelation of God would have been unnecessary, and it would have been quite superfluous for our Lord Jesus Christ to have come into the world, to have taught the true faith, and founded His Church. 5. The principle that it does not signify what a man believes is in direct opposition to the teaching of the Gospels, in which we find our Blessed Lord so often demanding faith in Himself and His doctrine (see, for example, chapter XV). There is only one true God, one Saviour, and one true faith, which Jesus Christ taught and bequeathed to the Church that He founded. Any indifference in matters of faith, or any admiration of it in others must come from a want of firm religious convictions, and is a grievous sin against faith.

The name of Christian means a disciple and adherent, a follower of Jesus Christ. It is a glorious title to bear, and is a continual exhortation to us who do bear it, to cling to our Lord by a firm faith and true love, to keep His commandments, and to follow His example.