

The Catholic Church - The Principle And Sources Of Its Indefectible Life

The Glories of the Catholic Church

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(Sermon preached by Most Rev. Dr. O'Dwyer at consecration of Most Rev. B. Hackett, late Bishop of Waterford, March 19, 1916. This Sermon is reproduced in the hope that the words of the Bishop will enlighten those who are seeking a light in the darkness and will approach the altars of the Church built and sustained by Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.)

“And I say to you: that you are Peter; and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Mathew 16:18)

Five months ago, we assembled in this Cathedral to offer to God our prayers and the suffrages of the Church for the repose of the soul of the great Bishop who had just passed away. We desired also to pay a tribute of respect to his memory, and no one who was present on that occasion will forget the manifestation of reverential sorrow in the midst of which the remains of Dr. Sheehan were borne to the grave. It was worthy of this fine old Catholic City of Waterford and showed how quick its people are to recognise and to honour the worth of a bishop who devoted his high abilities without stint to the duties of his sacred office.

Today the period of our mourning is over, and God, through his Vicar on earth, has sent you a child of your own diocese to fill the vacant chair of Waterford, to take in his hand the crozier of Saint Carthage and to lead the flock committed to his care into the way of salvation.

No episcopate could begin under happier omens. We all know your young Bishop, and to know him is to love and to respect him. Years ago, he turned away from all the attractions which even in the Church might move a young priest's ambition. He severed all the ties that bind one to home and friends and gave himself to the service of God and the work of the missions amongst the devoted sons of Saint Alphonsus Liguori. He had little thought of becoming Bishop of Waterford. But God can work out the designs of His providence in other than human ways; and now the Holy See, with its own, unfailing prudence, having received from the clergy of the diocese the names of three ecclesiastics whom they deemed worthy of the bishopric, and submitted these names for a special report to the Bishops of the Province of Cashel, has made its choice and given you Dr. Hackett for your Bishop. We all hope and pray that the episcopate which is now begun may be blessed by God, and prolonged for many years, and be fruitful in blessings for the clergy and people of the diocese; and when your Bishop's turn comes to render an account of his stewardship, he may appear before the great Bishop and Shepherd of all souls with his hands full of merit for work well done for the Church of God. And it is in its relation to the universal Church that the sacred function in which we are engaged has its sanctity and its importance.

We are not merely filling a local vacancy, appointing a distinguished man to a high office, but the solemn function of today is instinct with the life of the whole Catholic Church. The spirit of God Who sustains and directs her has descended on your Bishop in the fullness of the Sacrament of Orders; he is constituted ruler, teacher, shepherd of this portion of the flock of Christ and his authority has behind it, and in it, the full power and sanction of the Catholic Church. He does not take the honour to himself; he is sent; he comes to you bearing in his hands the commission of the Vicar of Christ: fulfilling God's word: — "How shall they hear without a preacher, and how shall they preach unless they be sent?"

That is the great strength of our position as Catholics. We are not isolated communities but we all live by the one divine life of the Church herself. Individuals pass away; bishops and priests do their work for their allotted span of life, but the Catholic Church can never fail. And in that, We, the Church, are not isolated communities. We are raised above the vicissitudes of life although the Church is composed of mortal men and carries on her mission in the conditions of human society. She, the bride of Christ, is of this world, and will last to the end of time.

If then you will bear with me for a little while, I shall say something about the indefectibility, the unflinching life of the Catholic Church, and the means which her Divine Founder has provided for its maintenance. I suppose no one will question the fact that, as an organisation, the Catholic Church at the present moment is the greatest society of men that exists in the world. There is nothing to come near her, nothing to compare with her. Whether you regard the number of her members, the astonishing unity by which they are held together, the absolute oneness and unquestioned authority of her government, the perfection of her discipline; in everything that goes to give cohesion and strength to a human society, there is no institution, secular or religious, that can approach in grandeur, in all the elements of real greatness to our glorious Catholic Church. She is spread over the world; she transcends all the limitations of time or race or language that mark the fundamental distinctions between peoples. She does not weaken the characteristics of their several nationalities, but by her mysterious power, raises them all to a higher level, in which they find a nobler unity. One life pervades them all and holds them in its extraordinary vitality.

Thus, we see then, that the spiritual energy with which the Church is discharging her universal mission is truly marvellous. Her Clergy, in every quarter of the globe, are proclaiming the truths of the Gospel, and administering the sacraments, and working with an unflagging zeal. All her agencies are for the sanctification of the people. She is continually enlarging her boundaries and gathering new peoples into her fold. In the world and not of the world, she holds herself the debtor of rich and poor alike, and discharges, at all costs, and against all opposition, the divine trust which has been committed to her. To look at her as she is today, without taking into account the unseen forces which we know she wields, but merely as she appears to the world, you would say that she was a young society, strong and vigorous with all the fresh energy of youth, and was setting out in hope and courage on her career. You see no traces of age upon her; she shows no sign of lassitude; her heart is as strong and her courage as high as if it were yesterday she received the divine commission: "Go, teach all nations."

Yet think what a history she has behind her. Nineteen hundred years of labour and suffering and strife such as never fell to the lot of any institution. The hatred of the world, which the Lord Himself predicted, has followed her down the ages, and to this day has never relented. When her foundations were laid, and for hundreds of years afterwards, not a single kingdom of modern Europe was in existence. She came into being while the mighty Roman Empire was in the heyday

of its power, and her first experience was to feel for three hundred years the heavy hand of its merciless persecution. Attempts have been made by infidel writers to extenuate the deeds of that Pagan Government, but the evidence is overwhelming of the inhuman cruelty with which the Christians were hunted down. The scenes in Rome itself, that make one's blood creep, were the standard for the provinces. It was the sport of emperors and their courts and the populace to sit in the amphitheatre and see the Christians torn to pieces by wild beasts, in the arena.

That was the death by which the venerable Saint Ignatius (Bishop of Antioch) won his crown, praying that the lions might grind him between their teeth and make him the fine flour of Christ. So, too, in Rome, poor little Saint Agnes, a child of thirteen years, gave up her life proclaiming herself the spouse of Him Whom the angels adored. Old and young alike were struck down, but in vain. Christians sprang up in numbers as if from the ground, and the great saying of Tertullian was verified "that the blood of martyrs was the seed of Christians." And all the time, these Christians never turned on their oppressors, but prayed for them, and their revenge was to draw them into the knowledge and service of their Master. It was an astounding victory, the full splendour of which shone out when the Emperor Constantine, the ruler of the world, gave peace to the Church, and himself sought from Saint Sylvester, Bishop of Rome, admission to the fold.

Later again the unconquerable strength of the Church of God was seen in her struggle for centuries with the barbarians. One after another, these wild races in their millions swarmed over Europe, and swept everything before their irresistible onset. They were like the locusts, innumerable, and their progress was marked by universal ruin. They broke the resistance of the representatives of the decaying Empire of Rome, and conquered their way through Germany and Belgium and France and far into Spain and Italy; and civilisation itself seemed in danger of perishing. There was no physical force capable of withstanding the wild rush of these invaders. But what the legions of Rome could not do, the Gospel of Christ in the hands of His Church did triumphantly: she subdued them, and civilised them, and taught these wild children of nature to know the Child of Mary, and to consecrate their wild energies to the service of the Crucified. It is all most wonderful, almost like a fairy tale, — the story of the triumph of the truth of God. The Church of Christ, weak and powerless in the weapons of this world, withstood these barbarian hordes and issued from the contest, fresher, and stronger than ever, and led them, in her triumphant progress, the captives of her Lord.

But physical violence, bad as it has often been, is the least of the dangers that beset the Church. It, touches her only on the outside, but cannot reach the vital principle. It is so ordinarily with human societies. Disintegration comes from within; they go to pieces when the bond of union is weakened, and dissensions rise amongst their members. So the supreme trial of the Church has been to overcome the forces of disruption which her own children set in motion. Heresy has been her worst enemy; it attacks the very principle of her life, which is the faith of God. And all through the centuries, she has had to put forth all strength to guard that sacred deposit. She has had to deal with errors against faith which, in the subtlety with which they were urged, the learning and authority of their authors, the support which they receive from secular powers, would have broken up and destroyed any merely human organisation.

We have but an imperfect idea of the strength of some of the early heresies. The Arians at one time by deceit, by intrigue with the civil power, seemed to have defeated the Church, so that Saint Jerome in sadness complained: "The whole world groaned at finding itself Arian." So, too, the powerful body of the Nestorians, led by the patriarch of Constantinople, and supported by numbers of bishops, swept over Asia Minor, and, for the time, seemed irresistible. Other heresies, not less

formidable, sprang up at intervals with much vigour and spread rapidly; but in the end, the Church survived them all. By a divine instinct, she detected their errors, and inexorably rejected them, and resumed her own way, more healthy and vigorous for cutting off these dead branches.

Nearer to our own time, and with disastrous consequences which are felt at this very moment, was the attack which began in Germany in the sixteenth century against the faith of the Church. Luther and Calvin led the revolt, and were only too successful in their evil enterprise. Kingdom after kingdom fell away, until people began to discuss the question how far the defections might go consistently with the Church's Catholicity. But here again the promises of Christ were fulfilled, and the divine life of His Spouse asserted itself. By her own innate health, the Church threw off the false doctrines as a foreign body, and drove out of the fold those who would lay profane hands upon the Ark of God. It was a great and solemn crisis; strong powers of evil combined against the Church of God; the restless and rebellious minds of men, the ambition and corruption of temporal rulers, the impatience of human passions under the restraint of the Gospel, made a combination that was almost overwhelming in its strength, but again, as always, the Church emerged from the trial as if she renewed her life in the very dangers of the contest. The loss of so many members was deplorable, but the faith should be saved at any cost. And see the result. For the last three hundred years the Church has gone on from victory to victory, displaying in every quarter of the world a fuller and more beneficent energy; multiplying her religious communities, and all her other spiritual agencies, fulfilling her great mission with an even more ample and striking success.

What is the explanation of this unflinching vitality, which runs counter to all the laws of human institutions, that cannot be destroyed by violence, nor betrayed by deceit: that even time itself, to which everything in this world succumbs, cannot wear out or weaken? After nineteen hundred years, during which, in one form or another, the Church has been in conflict with the world, and pursued with an unflinching hatred, how is it that she is today fresh with the beauty and the young vigour in which she came from her Founder's hands, standing four square against all the forces of evil, the one solid structure in a world of change? You know the answer: she is the work of God who has given to her in the supreme ruler whom He has placed in His own stead, the principle of her cohesion and her stability. "And I say to you," said Christ, "that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." That is the pledge of the Church's endurance, and against it, the powers of evil have beaten in vain. The tremendous strength of the Roman Empire, the wild hordes of the barbarians, the deceits of error, the corruption of the world, and time itself, have never prevailed against her because she was built upon the rock. "And the rains fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and they beat upon that house and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock."

And all through the history of the Church, you see the working of that divine dispensation. The See of Peter has withstood all trials, and has sustained the whole Church. Other Sees, at one time bright glories of the Catholic Church, have fallen away and been lost. Rome stands unshaken in her unflinching strength. Alexandria, with which forever is associated the splendour of the dauntless Saint Athanasius, "Athanasius contra mundum": "Athanasius, against the world"; Antioch, the great school of Christian learning; Constantinople, which rang with the golden eloquence of Saint Chrysostom: the great churches of Africa, where Saint Cyprian of Carthage, and the mighty Saint Augustine taught, have disappeared long ago, but the mother of them all, the living centre on which the forces that have borne them down, have beaten with a concentrated fury, has preserved her immortal life.

In one unbroken succession, the line of Roman Pontiffs goes back from Benedict XV, our current pontiff, to Peter, and is itself the witness to the Divine Power that has maintained it. There is no need to retell the story of the Popes during the persecutions in which the Pagan Empire of Rome put forth its strength to crush the religion of the Galilean. One after another, they won the martyr's crown; when one fell, another took his place. With superhuman intrepidity, they entered on the duties of their sacred office, celebrated Holy Mass on the tombs of their predecessors, confirmed and encouraged the survivors of the persecution, and when their own turn came, stepped with a light heart from the Papal Throne to the scaffold, rejoicing because they were deemed worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.

And through all the ages, since these great days, the Popes have led the Church in dangers and given her strength against all attacks. At times, you see great potentates who can bend their fellowmen to their will, powerless in presence of some old man who sits in the Chair of Peter. In defence of the rights of the Church, Saint Gregory VII, the great Hildebrand, brought the Emperor Henry IV on his knees to Canossa, just as in our times his successor, Leo XIII, led the German Catholics to victory against Bismarck, "the man of blood and iron," and established them in the position of independence which they hold today. So, too, [Saint] Pius X. confirmed his brethren, the Bishops of France, and inspired them with the spirit of sacrifice which surrendered to an infidel and persecuting government the whole material wealth of their Church rather than compromise his and the Church's spiritual liberty.

But in nothing does the glory of the Roman Pontiffs stand out more luminously than in their fidelity as guardians of the faith and teachers of the Church. The doctrine of Rome has been the standard of the faith. Who held her was within the fold: who separated from her cut themselves off from the Church of God. It was the manifest fulfilment of the word in which our Lord Himself guaranteed the unfailing faith of the Head of His Church. And the Lord said: "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has desired to have you all, that He might sift you all as wheat; but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not, and thou being once converted, confirm thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). (The old English 'thee' emphasizes how it was to Peter himself that this commission was given.)

Far away back in the fourth and fifth centuries of our era, it is most impressive to see that prayer of Christ realising itself in the great part which the Bishops of Rome took in the preservation of the faith. In all the great councils they presided through their legates; they propounded the doctrine of the Church as it had come down from Peter and Paul in the living tradition of Rome. And that place of authority was given to them, not as a mere courtesy but as a mark of inalienable right. In the Council of Ephesus this doctrine of the Primacy of jurisdiction of the Bishops of Rome was proclaimed in words of great force and solemnity by one of the Papal Legates: "It has been known at all times that the holy and most blessed Peter, the Prince and Head of the Apostles, the Pillar of the Faith, the foundation stone of the Catholic Church, received from Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour and the Redeemer of the human race, the keys of the kingdom, and the power of binding and loosing from sin was given to him, and he, down to the present day, lives in his successors."

That is our faith without the change of a word. That is the reason of the love and reverence with which we look to Rome. Peter lives in his successors, and his divine commission is the sanction of their authority. You see an instance of it in the strong action by which Pope Pius X saved the Church from the dangers of modernism. In this country of Ireland, we have known little of that pernicious heresy or, as the Pope styled it, collection of heresies. On the continent of Europe, it was spreading and undermining the very foundations of the faith. In one great encyclical letter, the Pope went to

the heart of the issues involved and demonstrated the fatal opposition of the new errors to the doctrine of the Church. In its splendid exposition of Catholic faith, the encyclical "Pascendi" reminds one of the tome of Saint Leo which was read in the Council of Chalcedon. There the Bishops, in their exultation, cried aloud: "Peter has spoken through the voice of Leo." We may say the same; Peter has spoken through the voice of Pius as he will speak to the end of time through his successors in the See of Rome.

These supernatural powers make the Catholic Church always something of a wonder and a mystery to the unbelieving world. In her history she has withstood so many enemies, has come triumphantly out of so many dangers, that, humanly speaking, seemed hopeless, that they look upon her with a certain amount of awe which easily passes into distrust, and hostility. Anyway, she is the only Church which they ever think it worth while to persecute. But those who read human history in the spirit of faith, see in the Catholic Church much more than a wonder of the world. As they follow her in her unbroken greatness from age to age, they say: "The finger of God is here." There is something more than human in this institution. Popes and bishops and the other members of the Catholic Church, after all, are only men. Where do they get the superhuman power that nothing can defeat? But for us who can look at our Holy Church from within, and know the sacred forces that animate her, there is more to be seen than the perfection of her immense organisation. She is like a noble tree firmly rooted, standing in the grandeur of its symmetry and clothed in the rich beauty of its foliage while the whole of that array is but the expression of the vital force that sends its influence from the root to the uppermost branch. It is so with our Holy Church. She is great and beautiful to look at, but she is divine in the spiritual life which she sends through her members.

That is the real wonder of her indefectibility. She has lasted throughout all the ages, not by a mere passive existence, but with a teeming life of holiness which has made her today, after all the long centuries of her career, the same living body that she has been from the first. In each diocese the threads of discipline are gathered into the hands of the bishop, and through him run up to the universal centre, the Seat of the Fisherman, and under it all there is circulating, as the sap in a tree, as the blood in our bodies, the full flow of God's holy grace.

Never, I believe, since the Apostles times, did the people lead holier lives. There are exceptions: there will always be. But in the vast, majority of the members of the Church there is a great holiness, a sense of the supernatural, an apprehension of the unseen, a grasp of the things to be hoped for, that God alone could produce in a world like this. "I have come," said Christ, "that they may have life and have it more abundantly," and that blessed word is being realised this moment in millions upon millions of humble souls who are leading the true life of faith. Many causes have been at work to produce these results. The sources of Grace by which God has surrounded us, in His Church are countless, and for every one of them we have to bless and thank Him; but, I think we may attribute to two devotions which in our time have received a great extension and intensification, much of the spiritual fervour which is now seen amongst us: the worship of Our Divine Lord Himself in the adorable Sacrament of the Eucharist and then the filial piety of the whole Church towards our Blessed Mother Mary.

I mention these two devotions, first, because of their intrinsic sanctity and spirituality, and then as illustrating in a striking way the living power of the authority which God has, established for the maintenance of his Church.

There is no need to tell you who have been our leaders and teachers in this higher way. Pius X will live for ever in the grateful memory of the faithful for all that he has done for the worship of our Divine Lord in the sacrament of His Love. By one magisterial stroke of his pen he swept away the barriers which a mistaken reverence had raised between the people and their Lord, and opened up broadly, with the large charity of the Sacred Heart Itself, for all of us — the old in our needs, the young in their innocence, — the approach to the Living Bread which came down from Heaven.

In the same spirit of adoration for the presence of our God, did Pius X. also encourage and bless our great Eucharistic Congresses, which have astonished the world by their magnificence and their demonstration of the power of our Catholic faith. It has been the same from the beginning. Since the Church received this greatest of her treasures, the centre of our religion, out of the hand of Christ Himself on the night before He suffered, she has guarded it as the Living Bread for the sanctification of her children. The Holy Mass itself, with its prayers, and ceremonies, comes down to us from the earliest times as the grand and solemn liturgy in which the Popes have enshrined the Holy Sacrifice. And today, as ever, they gather the people around the altar to offer to God the tribute of their adoration and thanks, and to receive Him, under a sacramental form, as the food of their souls.

So it was another Pius, the saintly Pius IX, [now beatified] who added the latest gem to the crown of Our Lady by the definition of her Immaculate Conception; and since that event everyone sees that the devotion of the faithful to the Mother of God has grown in depth and tenderness and in its influence on their lives. In this also, the Pope was like the householder who produces from his store things old and new. Our Mother Mary has ever lived in the hearts of the faithful as a holy and purifying influence. In the catacombs in Rome there is a beautiful painting which goes back probably to the first century of our era; it represents the Virgin Mother with the Divine Child in her arms, such as you may see it any day in our churches, and it tells us more eloquently than words that the divine motherhood touched the hearts and imaginations of the first Christians with the same feelings that we experience now. And the lovely invocation that we say each day, "Holy Mary, Mother of God," comes down to us for fifteen hundred years from the Council of Ephesus as the cry of joy that went up from the hearts of the people when the Bishops, under the presidency of Saint Cyril, the representative of the pope, defined as the doctrine of the Church that in Christ our Lord there was but one Person, the Second Person of the Adorable Trinity, and that Mary was His Mother.

It is fully in the spirit of that tradition that the Popes in Our time have turned the minds of the faithful, in all the trials of the Church, to the intercession of the Virgin Mary. Through her prayers, and by the blessing of her Divine Son in the Holy Eucharist, they have deepened the faith of the people, quickened their piety, sanctified their lives, and thus reinvigorated the spiritual life which, as the soul in the body, is the force that gives the Church her cohesion and her strength.

Between the two Piuses came the great Leo XIII, whose name must not be omitted when we speak of those who strengthened the Church of God. In the elevation of his intellect, his sure grasp of principle, his instinctive sense of the needs of his time, Leo XIII stands out in the long line of Popes like one of the Fathers of the Church. He confirmed his brethren. In his grand encyclical letters he dealt with every phase of the spiritual life, sent the Catholic schools back to the true sources of philosophy; dedicated the homes of the people to the Holy Family; taught governments and their subjects, employers and employed, rich and poor, their mutual rights and obligations; and the sound of these pronouncements was heard with respect outside the limits of our Holy Church.

Who on earth can speak with the power of these Popes? Who like them can shape the views and opinions and move the hearts of hundreds of millions of people by their words? They are the true teachers of the world; for them, in Peter, Christ's prayer has been heard; their faith fails not, and they in turn confirm their brethren. And at the present hour, [1916] when, in the terrible war that is raging, men slaughter one another, and hate one another with a savagery that is revolting in professing Christians, one figure, that of the Pope, rises in the midst of the storm, like Christ upon the waters, and pleads for peace, appealing to them all for the sake of the Master Whom they profess to follow, to remember that they are brothers, the children of their Father Who is in Heaven. Ah! Well it would be for the world if they would heed that word of the Vicar of Christ; well would it be if the warring nations had not broken away from the unity of the faith, and in their religion, had a common ground on which to meet and here, again, we see, almost in a dramatic way, the power of Rome's attraction. Around the throne of Benedict XV, there gathered a few weeks ago a number of Cardinals, amongst whom were Cardinal Mercier, the Patriot Primate of Belgium; Cardinal von Hartmann, of Germany; Cardinal Bourne of England; and Cardinal Beckin of France. Each of them, I dare say, is as enthusiastic for the cause of his own country as any soldier in the trenches, but all of them are drawn together in the higher and holier union which binds them to the Chair of Peter.

Your Bishop, who is consecrated today, is the evidence and the symbol of your place in that union with Rome. He is sent to you as the pledge of the solicitude of our Holy Father the Pope for the members of his flock in this diocese, and I have no doubt that through his administration the ties of love and reverence and filial obedience that have bound you all, as they bind all Catholics in Ireland to the Chair of Peter, will be drawn, if possible more closely and firmly than ever. For Dr. Hackett himself I fear that it is a change which he must contemplate with anxiety. It is no small sacrifice to exchange the peace and the happiness and security of his life in religion for the cares and responsibilities of the Bishop's office. But it is not his own choice. The burden has been laid upon him by the Vicar of Christ, and he need have no fear but that in accepting it in obedience to that call he will receive grace and strength to bear it worthily.

In passing from his convent to the Episcopal chair, Dr. Hackett is following the footsteps of the great and illustrious founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. Saint Alphonsus Liguori, in spite of his earnest appeals, was made Bishop of Saint Agatha of the Goths, and in that position lived a life of extraordinary sanctity and apostolic zeal which is one of the glories of the Catholic Church and an inspiration for all bishops. He was a man of the very highest intellect and of great leaning, and has been declared a Doctor of the Church. But amongst the profoundest lessons that he has taught us, and has been the means of impressing on the minds of the faithful, are the devotion of true faith to the Divine Presence in the Adorable Eucharist, and then a triumphant love for the Glories of Mary.

Surely it is not without a special providence that Dr. Hackett has been trained for many years in the school of Saint Alphonsus, and has been breathing among the members of the grand Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer the spirit of their Founder, and has learned and felt in his missionary labours the power of Mary's intercession and the divine greatness of God's gift of love in the Adorable Eucharist. These will now stand him in good stead. Our Blessed Mother will intercede for him, and the glorious Saint Joseph, on whose feast he has the happiness to be consecrated, will join his prayers to those of his spotless spouse and plead for him, his clergy, and his people, that they may be one in heart and soul in the unity of faith and the bond of peace. The prayers of Mary and Joseph and the blessing of the Divine Child will, we hope and pray, rest from this hour on your

Bishop and make him a true shepherd of the flock, expending himself for their sakes, and doing, while he lives, great work in the ministry for the edification of the Body of Christ. Amen.
