

# Defending the church's truth claims

## 10. The Roman Apostolic Tradition

In this piece I want to look at the early links in the chain of the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church and to consider the credentials of that tradition in terms of secular history. It is important to be clear what this venerable tradition amounts to when thinking how to defend the church's truth claims in the modern world, because it has a key role to play in the earthly mechanics of divine revelation. Christians claim that God has revealed to them the nature of reality, and that this revelation is contained in a few specific ancient books. It is the church's Apostolic Tradition which tells the church exactly which those books are. If we are going to defend the church's truth claims we are going to have to defend the church's understanding of divine revelation, because the church's truth claims depend upon specific revelations in specific books. Whether the Christian vision of reality depends utterly upon the particular revelations in these specific books is another matter. I have tried to suggest that for Peter, Paul and James it did not.

The general position of the Roman Catholic church as to tradition is well known. Both 'scripture' and 'tradition' must be equally accepted and honoured, for the church derives its certainty about revealed truths from both.

How was this Apostolic Tradition of the Roman Catholic church formed? The position of the Roman Catholic church as to the formation of its tradition can be summarised in this way. Jesus commissioned twelve apostles and commanded those apostles to preach the good news. The apostles entrusted the 'Sacred Deposit' of the faith contained in scripture and tradition to the church. The good news was passed on by word of mouth by the apostles. The apostles and other men associated with them also passed on the good news in writing. The apostles left, or alternatively, appointed 'successors' - for this statement the arrangement whereby Matthias came to 'replace' Judas Iscariot is relied on. Apart from Matthias, bishops were the successors of the apostles. The apostles handed to the bishops their own established position of teaching and authority. The twelve apostles were chosen to be the foundation of the church because they were witnesses of the resurrection.

'Tradition' in the secular world is a matter of history. These statements appear to be straightforward statements about history rather than statements of faith. As such they should in principle be capable of being defended on examination of the evidence like any other statements about history. But it is a serious question whether they are capable of being defended in terms of secular history. Once you perceive yourself as standing within the Apostolic Tradition, you do not need to enquire about the tradition in terms of secular history, for the important thing is that the tradition is constantly being verified for you at the profoundest level of reality by the action of the Spirit. We can not count on everyone outside the church being immediately convinced of this further divine action as an obvious fact of nature.

Personnel in the Apostolic Tradition - 'the twelve'. Paul refers to 'the twelve' in his first letter to the Corinthians at 15. 5; but did not claim to have met them. Let us assume that Paul wrote that passage in '1 Corinthians', though the matter is disputed and it may be a later interpolation. On that assumption, Paul appears to be quoting a tradition already established; but exactly what that tradition was is obscure. Though most of the tribes had been wiped out centuries before the time of Jesus, it seems that there was an element of expectation among his Jewish contemporaries that 'at the end time' God would act decisively to restore the twelve tribes of Israel and give them positions of importance in the kingdom which He then intended to establish. It is reasonably clear that Jesus must have spoken to his disciples about the end time. But what did he say? It seems that he said something about disciples of his in the context of the end time; but did he speak of his disciples as somehow representing Israel at the end time? or of his disciples as symbolising the old dispensation in the new one in some way? By the time Chinese whispers had done their work tradition was satisfied that Jesus had spoken of the end time in such a way as to cause an expectation that there would be a disciple of his in a position of importance in relation to each of the twelve tribes. Accordingly, it was from very early on assumed that there had to be twelve disciples for whom a specially distinguished future had been prepared.

But things, as they turned out, were puzzlingly different. The kingdom of God did not come at once. Every one of the early followers of Jesus knew that, as things turned out, Judas Iscariot had betrayed Jesus; and that that left eleven. We can see that the defection of Judas later presented each of the gospel writers with a problem which each answered in a different way. There was a tradition that 'the twelve' had been reconstituted by a holy lottery in the course of which 'the lot' fell upon Matthias. Some now think that the most probable explanation of all the evidence is that Jesus had spoken of 'the twelve' as an eschatological symbol and that we are now left to puzzle over the doubtful 'historicity of a symbol'. Be that as it may, it seems that a tradition of 'the twelve' grew up and became ineradicable despite the defection of Judas (see EP Sanders \*Jesus and Judaism\*, SCM Press, 1985, p. 98ff). But, curiously in a society in which oral tradition played so large a part and people's memories for names and genealogies were so much more retentive than our own, from very early on there were slightly varying traditions as to who exactly 'the twelve' were ('Matthew' 10. 2-4; 'Mark' 3. 16-19; 'Luke' 6. 14-16; 'Acts' 1. 13). Within a generation, it seems, the identity of the twelve apostles was so shrouded in obscurity that Chinese Whispers delivered one list of names to the author of 'Mark' and a slightly different list to the author of 'Luke'. The result is that there is today a measure of uncertainty as to whether there ever were twelve identifiable persons with names who constituted 'the twelve'.

Paul and 'the twelve'. If the Apostolic Tradition is factually correct, it is odd that Paul did not check with 'the twelve' that he was preaching the true gospel. But we know that in fact he did not do so (see his letter to the Galatians 1. 15 - 21). Paul had persecuted followers of Jesus for some time before he was converted and it is difficult to believe that, after interrogating a good many of them, he did not have a pretty clear picture of the set-up of the Jesus movement as it existed in his time. If indeed he wrote verse 5 of chapter 15 of '1 Corinthians', we 'know' that he was aware of the 'symbolic' position of 'the twelve'; but for practical purposes it seems that he saw no point in meeting any of them save Peter. Moreover, it is extremely odd, if 'the twelve' were the commissioned agents of Jesus, that Paul goes out of his way to tell the Galatians that he did not meet any other of 'the twelve' beyond Peter. And why consult James at all? The oddity is compounded by the fact that in his letter to the Galatians he is setting out his credentials as an apostle and could be expected to make the best case for his apostolate that he was capable of making.

Secondly, as to apostolic activities. If we turn to what 'the twelve' did so far as we are aware of it, it seems that Judas Iscariot ruled himself out as a transmitter of the apostolic tradition at an early stage; and then, strictly speaking, there were eleven.

Preaching. Peter was the acknowledged spokesman for 'the twelve' in Jerusalem and did some preaching to the Gentiles. On these points the traditions which 'Luke' records in 'Acts' confirm the general picture we have derived from Paul's account of his first journey up to Jerusalem. There was a tradition that Philip and John preached in Samaria, and Philip on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza ('Acts' 8). Whatever else they did while they were alive by way of example and private conversation, as far as the evidence of the writings in the New Testament goes, there is, I believe, no evidence of any other of 'the twelve' preaching. We have (in the books which the church accepts as canonical) evidence of three of 'the twelve' preaching and a number of ciphers. There are lots of legends, of course.

'Office' and 'succession'. There is no clear evidence in the canonical writings that any of the apostles had any 'office' in a 'church' as those words are now understood by the general public. There is no reliable historical evidence that any one of 'the twelve', save possibly Peter, 'left', much less 'appointed', a successor to succeed him, and dispute as to what in historical, as opposed to religio-mythical, terms is proved by the tradition recorded only by 'Matthew' (at 16.18) that Jesus said something about building the 'church' on the rock of Simon (Bar Jonas) (Peter) and giving him the keys of the kingdom. Again, there are lots of legends.

Written work. As far as the existing evidence goes, not one of 'the twelve' actually passed on anything in writing. Paul, the only one of the apostles whom we know actually passed on anything in writing, is not counted as one of 'the twelve' apostles on whom the church has laid its foundations.

Teaching. The tradition ignores the teaching position of presbyters, (which lasted into the fourth century CE), and by doing so presents a distorted picture of who did the teaching in the church in the early days.

Witnesses of the resurrection. Of all the witnesses to the resurrection who are mentioned in different traditions in the New Testament - women first and then men and then 500 together as was reported to Paul - the church has committed itself to an understanding that the shadowy twelve were its foundation stones.

Peter and James. The great church does not count James the brother of Jesus as one of its foundation stones. In this vital matter it differs decisively from his contemporaries. The Roman Catholic Apostolic Tradition totally ignores the witness to the resurrection and the position and authority of James the brother of Jesus. As far as it could, the Roman church has painted him out of church history. As long as the followers in Jerusalem were there to keep the outlying churches in order, they did their best to do so. There is evidence that it was James the brother of Jesus who called the tune and that Peter himself changed his habit about eating with Gentiles because James told him to. When he first went to Antioch, which was a mixed community of followers with both Jewish and Gentile members, Peter joined in and ate with them all. But when James sent a message to him he withdrew, and Paul did not hesitate to suggest that he was a hypocrite for doing so (see Galatians 2. 11-14).

We can not now know 'the facts' about the Jesus movement in the first decade after the crucifixion for certain. What we can do is arrive at a reasoned opinion as to whether one proposed version of the 'facts' stretches credulity further than another. Putting the evidence of Paul with indications of other traditions in 'Acts', and elsewhere, I suggest this. Putting on one side for the moment the missionary journeying of Philip and John, the assertion that 'the twelve' as a group, if they ever existed, were in that decade actively transmitting anything (as opposed to ten of them listening approvingly to Peter doing it - subject always to correction as appropriate by James) almost beggars belief. This somewhat sceptical view would tie in with the subsequent uncertainty as to the very names of some of them. If, as tradition has it, the first disciples were Galilean fishermen, there would be no surprise to learn that most of them were strong, but rather taciturn. We can't be sure.

Conclusion. My conclusion from the matter in this and the next piece is that, whatever its status in sacred history, the Roman Catholic Apostolic Tradition is, in terms of secular history, lacking in a number of the characteristics of a tradition properly so called and might more accurately be characterised as a myth.

Footnote. Some church people may feel that it is inappropriate to look at the Apostolic Tradition in terms of secular history at all and that to do so is to make a

category mistake. In as much as the tradition asserts that Jesus commissioned twelve apostles and commanded those apostles to preach the gospel it simply restates matter contained in the New Testament. Some understand God to be the author of the New Testament and, accordingly, that it contains nothing untrue, or mistaken. For them the origins of the Apostolic Tradition are a matter of divine revelation and historicity is irrelevant. In as much as the church depends on the Apostolic Tradition to determine which books constitute the New Testament and, accordingly, contain the divine revelation, there would perhaps be a certain circularity of thinking here; but I shall come to the earthly mechanics of divine revelation in Part 12.

In the meanwhile, in Part 11, I shall consider the faith content of the Apostolic Tradition of the Roman church.