

The Apostolic Succession: A Reply to Francis A. Sullivan

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Recently a book has appeared¹ which provides the signal service of gathering together in one place most of the texts and arguments underpinning the discussion of the apostolic succession. The book is a well-argued presentation of a broad consensus of modern scholarship on the history of the episcopal ministry in the early Church, together with a theological hypothesis based on this history seeking to justify the Catholic belief that the office of the bishop in the Church is of divine institution. A good number of questions remain however. A most basic one regards whether or not the conclusion reached by the book fits with the faith of the Catholic Church. Another regards the validity or otherwise of the method used in the book, and a third regards the solidity of the scholarly consensus on which the book's case rests.

The Faith of the Catholic Church in Regard to the Apostolic Succession

Sullivan is unhappy with a summary of the Catholic faith given in the *Catholic Response to the Final Report of ARCIC-I* in 1991. This document stated that “[t]he Catholic Church recognises in the apostolic succession . . . an unbroken line of episcopal ordination from Christ through the apostles down through the centuries to the bishops of today . . .”² Sullivan offers his interpretation of this short statement. He says that “[t]o speak of ‘an unbroken line of episcopal ordination from Christ through the apostles’ suggests that Christ ordained the apostles as bishops, and that the apostles in turn ordained a bishop for each of the churches they founded, so that by the time the apostles died, each Christian church was being led by a bishop as successor to an apostle.”³ This picture does not fit with the scholarly consensus regarding the history of

¹ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: The Newman Press, 2001).

² *The Secretariat For Promoting Christian Unity, Information Service*; N. 82 1993 (I), 51. (Sullivan gives as reference *Origins* 21/28 (19 Dec. 1991): 441–47, at 446.)

³ Sullivan, 13.

the episcopate in the early Church, and so Sullivan concludes: “Clearly, such a simplistic approach to the problem will not do.”⁴ For Sullivan, the faith of the Catholic Church is adequately summarized by the statement of *Lumen Gentium*: “The sacred synod teaches that the bishops have by divine institution (*ex divina institutione*) succeeded to the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church . . .”⁵ For him, the aspects of the apostolic succession added by the summary in the *Catholic Response* do not belong to the Catholic faith. Our first task therefore is to determine just what is the Catholic faith in the apostolic succession.

The fullest magisterial treatment there has ever been on this issue is Chapter 3 of *Lumen Gentium*, and we will give a few pertinent extracts from its teaching.

This sacred synod, following in the footsteps of the First Vatican Council, with that council teaches and declares that Jesus Christ, the eternal shepherd, built the holy Church by sending the Apostles just as He Himself had been sent by the Father. He willed that their successors, the bishops, would be shepherds in His Church to the close of the age.⁶

Th[e] divine mission, entrusted by Christ to the Apostles, will continue to the end of the age . . . For this reason the Apostles, in this hierarchically ordered society, took care to arrange for the appointment of successors . . . They therefore appointed such men and then ordered them that when they died other approved men would take on their ministry . . . So, as those who were appointed bishops by the Apostles and through their successors right down to us, the apostolic tradition is manifested and safeguarded all over the world . . . Therefore the sacred synod teaches that by divine institution the bishops have succeeded to the place of the apostles as shepherds of the Church . . .⁷

For the fulfilment of such great duties, the Apostles were enriched by Christ with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit who came down upon them, and they by the imposition of hands handed on the spiritual gift to their helpers (see 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6–7); and this has been handed down to us in episcopal consecration.⁸

. . . the order of bishops, which succeeds the college of Apostles in teaching authority and pastoral government, and indeed in which the apostolic body continues to exist without interruption . . .⁹

From this somewhat longer summary, it is clear that the Catholic belief that the apostolic succession is of divine institution contains certain specific points. It is affirmed that the institution is from Christ Himself and represents His will. It is affirmed that the Apostles

⁴ Sullivan, 16.

⁵ *Lumen Gentium* § 20.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium* § 18. (Translations are from the Tanner edition, but the liberty is taken to make any changes which seem to be indicated on the basis of the original.)

⁷ *Lumen Gentium* § 20.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium* § 21.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium* § 22.

appointed successors to the apostolic office and ordered them to appoint successors in their turn. It is affirmed that gift of the Holy Spirit has been handed down by the imposition of hands. And it is affirmed that this line of succession goes back to the beginning, without interruption. Given these points, the summary of the *Catholic Response* is acceptable as far as it goes and one can indeed truly say that “[t]he Catholic Church recognises in the apostolic succession . . . an unbroken line of episcopal ordination from Christ through the apostles down through the centuries to the bishops of today.” The precise complaints that Sullivan makes we will deal with in due course, but it is clear that the Catholic faith in the apostolic succession is more precise and detailed than Sullivan allows.

The Proper Method of Catholic Theology

Sullivan makes the method of his study quite clear. For him the starting point is the historical study of the source texts, and the agreed consensus of scholarship is the touchstone by which the rest is to be judged. He says that “[a]n accurate knowledge of the history is . . . necessary in avoiding assertions about the link between the apostles and the bishops that cannot stand the test of historical investigation or critical exegesis.”¹⁰ The theological question comes second. “The question that divides Catholics and Protestants is not whether, or how rapidly, the development from a local leadership of a college of presbyters to that of a single bishop took place, but whether the result of that development is rightly judged an element of the divinely willed structure of the church.”¹¹ Now, this is not the proper method of Catholic theology, or indeed of any theology, as Sullivan himself admits. Introducing his own hypothesis to explain the matter he gives a short summary of his approach at this stage.

The Catholic belief that bishops are the successors of the apostles by divine institution is based on a combination of historical evidence and theological reflection. Since theology, by definition, is “faith seeking understanding,” theological reflection will necessarily presuppose faith. The reflection I propose is based on belief that Christ founded the Church, that he continues to guide it through the abiding gift of the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit maintains the Church in the true faith.¹²

Theological reflection certainly presupposes faith, but the faith it presupposes is more informed than the short summary Sullivan presents here. For a Catholic theologian it presupposes the full

¹⁰ Sullivan, 218.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Sullivan, 224.

faith of the Catholic Church taught by the Second Vatican Council which has been summarized above. It is not true to say, however, that the Catholic faith “is based on a combination of historical evidence and theological reflection.” The Catholic faith is witnessed to by the monuments of faith which go to make up the Tradition, Scripture and the documents of the Fathers. However, finding out what the Church believes is not a matter of a historical study but a matter of discovering what the Church actually believes and teaches. The study of the history is not a presupposition for discovering the faith of the Church. Rather, the reverse is the case. The study of the history must be conducted at every stage within the parameters of the faith already known. When examining the traditional documents, Scripture and the Fathers, the Catholic exegete brings his full and informed faith to that study, and this presupposition of faith will govern his exegesis at every stage. Sullivan advocates a different approach. Before beginning his survey of the documents, he pleads that “[w]hile I write as a Roman Catholic, I hope Protestants who may read this book will find my presentation of the history objective...”¹³ Sullivan is here advocating an unrealisable ideal. There is no such thing as an “objective” presentation of history. In this matter, as in all matters of importance, one’s presuppositions govern the research at every stage. It is not a matter of aiming at an “objective” account, but of admitting one’s presuppositions and engaging in an amicable discussion of the texts with those who do not share them. In proposing to review that crucial document in the discussion of the apostolic succession, I make no claim to “objectivity.” I will be writing as a Catholic who accepts fully the faith of the Catholic Church. I make no secret of the fact that my faith will be the determining criterion of my interpretation at every stage, and I will be inviting those who advocate different interpretations to recognise and admit that the same pattern is operative in their case also.

What is a Bishop?

Before beginning our survey of the relevant documents we should clarify a number of points in discussion with Sullivan, and the first is the rather important question as to what a bishop is. Sullivan’s first complaint against the summary of the *Catholic Response to ARCIC I* runs as follows:

The first problem has to do with the notion that Christ ordained the apostles as bishops. On the one hand, it is no doubt true that the mandate Christ gave to the apostles included the threefold office of teaching, ruling and sanctifying which Vatican II described as conferred by episcopal

¹³ Sullivan, viii.

consecration (LG 21). However, the correctness of describing the apostles themselves as “bishops” is another question. A “bishop” is a residential pastor who presides in a stable manner over the church in a city and its environs. The apostles were missionaries and founders of churches; there is no evidence, nor is it at all likely, that any one of them ever took up permanent residence in a particular church as its bishop.¹⁴

To speak of “an unbroken line of episcopal ordination from Christ through the apostles,” as the *Catholic Response* did, does seem to suggest that Christ ordained the Apostles as bishops, but it is hardly what the drafters of the document had in mind. Christ appointed the Twelve to be Apostles, he didn’t “ordain” them, in the normal sense of that word. He “breathed” on them to communicate the Holy Spirit, He didn’t impose His hands. Further, to describe the Apostles as “bishops” is not a common manner of speaking but it has a very good foundation. In Acts 1:20, where St. Peter is calling for the election of a successor to Judas, he quotes Ps 109:8: “His *episkope* let another take”. So, the office of an Apostle, to which St. Matthias is to succeed, is *episkope*, episcopacy.¹⁵ If the word “bishop” is taken to refer to the function of oversight a man exercises, then one could indeed call the Apostles “bishops,” and doing so pinpoints exactly what a bishop is, a man who succeeds to this function of oversight by apostolic appointment and ordination. For, contrary to Sullivan’s assertion, a bishop is not necessarily “a residential pastor who presides in a stable manner over the church in a city or its environs.” Most bishops are and have been such, but residence is not of the essence of a bishop. The obligation of episcopal residence is of long-standing in the Church, and the idea that it is of divine law has been proposed. That doctrine was strongly pressed by some of the bishops at the Council of Trent, but it was not accepted there, and there is no mention of it whatever in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. The teaching of the Church is, rather, that a bishop is a successor to the Apostles, ordained to the threefold office of teaching, ruling and sanctifying one or more churches, and, in principle, he can be resident or missionary as circumstances demand. The Apostles were indeed missionaries and founders of churches, and there have been successor bishops who have exercised that same role at different stages in Church history. One thinks of St. Boniface and Saints Cyril and Methodius. It may have to remain a moot question whether or not “any one of

¹⁴ Sullivan, 14. The inadequacy of Sullivan’s overly narrow definition of a bishop has been pointed out by Oswald Sobrino in “Was Peter the First Bishop of Rome?” *New Blackfriars* Vol. 84 No. 991 September 2003, 415–421.

¹⁵ See Sobrino, 418.

them ever took up permanent residence in a particular church,” but that in no way detracts from their ability to appoint and ordain successors to their primary apostolic tasks of preaching, sanctifying and oversight.

Is there Mention of Successors to the Apostles in the New Testament?

Sullivan narrows the sense of this question in his second complaint against the Catholic summary.

A second question also arises: Did the apostles ordain a bishop for each of the churches they founded? The New Testament contains good evidence that the churches founded by St. Paul had local leaders, to whom the apostle urged the community to be submissive . . . some of whom, at least, were called “bishops.” However, it remains unclear whether these “bishops” of whom Paul speaks were actually appointed or ordained by him. Secondly, there is no evidence that St. Paul or any other apostle ever appointed one of these local leaders as the chief pastor of the whole church in a particular city. Rather, the evidence suggests that up to the end of the New Testament period, leadership and other ministry were provided in each local church by a group of “elders” or “overseers,” with no one person in charge except when the apostle or one of his coworkers was actually present. The New Testament offers no support for a theory of apostolic succession that supposes the apostles appointed or ordained a bishop for each of the churches they founded.¹⁶

The problem here, again, is with Sullivan’s presumption that the Catholic belief in apostolic succession demands that the Apostles ordained a bishop for each of the churches they founded, and, indeed, there is no evidence to that effect. Sullivan makes much of the fact that there are no residential bishops mentioned in the New Testament, in the sense of one man appointed as leader of the local church.¹⁷ St. Paul, in Acts 20:17–35, speaks only to the priests of the Church in Ephesus, and St. Peter, in 1 Peter 5:1–5, addresses his remarks only to priests. But the fact that there are only priests in the apostolic churches need be a cause for no surprise. Bishops are successors to the Apostles, and while the Apostles are still alive, there can be no bishops. St. Peter and St. Paul were continuing to exercise their apostolic oversight over the churches they were addressing, and the absence of a bishop in such circumstances is exactly as it should be. Sullivan’s mistake is to infer that this absence of a bishop implies government by priests alone, for the government of these

¹⁶ Sullivan, 14.

¹⁷ Sullivan, 219–21.

apostolic churches continued to be invested in the founding Apostle who was still alive and who had obviously not yet made any provision for the succession. Every church founded by an Apostle had an Apostle in charge, and the question is not whether they appointed a successor in each church, but whether they appointed successors at all.

St. Paul is the only Apostle of whose later apostolic career the New Testament gives us any information, so it is to him we must look in search of any mention of arrangements for the succession to his apostolic ministry. The arrangements are mentioned all right, and Sullivan presents the point adequately, but he makes very light of it. He tells us: "The Pastoral Letters witness to the belief of the subapostolic church that Timothy not only continued Paul's work, but that he received his authorization to do so from Paul himself, and therefore shared the mandate Paul had received from the risen Christ. We are surely justified in seeing Timothy and Titus as successors of the apostle Paul in his apostolic mission and ministry."¹⁸ All Sullivan needed to add to this is that St. Paul ordained them to this task (2 Tim. 1:6.), and you have all the New Testament witness there is for the apostolic appointment and ordination of bishops in the apostolic succession. Sullivan, however, will not have them bishops because they were not residing in a local church. He says:

In our liturgical calendar Timothy and Titus are called "bishops," but Paul did not leave them as permanent residential leaders of those churches; they remained missionaries and were to rejoin Paul when had completed their present task (Titus 3:12; 2 Tim 4:9, 11, 21). The task was not evangelization, but the pastoral care of established Christian communities. This principally involved the teaching of sound doctrine, the choice and appointment of local leaders and the instruction of the community in proper conduct.¹⁹

As was said earlier, this adding of residence to the definition of a bishop is a mistake. Saints Timothy and Titus were bishops, as the liturgy affirms, but they were not residential bishops. They succeeded to St. Paul in his missionary apostolate and continued to govern his churches as he had done before them. So, while it is true that the New Testament gives us no evidence of the appointment of any residential bishops in the local churches founded by the Apostles, it does give us this perfect witness of St. Paul's appointment and ordination of successors to his apostolic ministry which is the essence of what a bishop is.

¹⁸ Sullivan, 78.

¹⁹ Sullivan, 71.

Interpreting the Patristic Texts

The New Testament witness to the apostolic succession is clearly quite scanty, and even when we turn to the other documents of the Tradition, texts are not that much more abundant. Everything will therefore turn on how we interpret the few texts we have. None deal with the issue clearly and fully, so it will be a matter of making the most of what is available. A place to begin can be the earliest text we have in favour of the doctrine, *1 Clement* 42. Here Pope St. Clement tells us that “preaching both in the country and in the towns, they [the Apostles] appointed their first fruits, when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons for the future believers.” Of this Sullivan asks the question: “Can we rely on this statement of Clement as an historical account of what the apostles did to provide for ministry in the churches they founded?”²⁰ Later he tells us:

Disagreement among scholars focuses on Clement’s account of the apostolic origin of this structure of ministry. . . . Protestant scholars reject this account as a fiction, invented to give apostolic, and ultimately divine, authority to a development that, in their view, was simply natural and historical, following the sociological laws that apply to any developing society. . . . However, most Catholic writers reject the claim that Clement’s account is “pure fiction.” With varying emphases and nuances, they defend the view that ministry in the postapostolic period can be traced back to the founding apostles, at least in the sense that they did not leave their churches without local leaders and that they supported them with their own apostolic authority.²¹

Sullivan, however, doesn’t advert to the fact that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, with no nuance at all, simply paraphrased St. Clement and said: “They [the Apostles] therefore appointed such men and then ordered them that when they died other approved men would take on their ministry.”²²

Now, is it not clear from this spectrum of interpretations of a rather simple text, we see operative the determining role that pre-suppositions play in this matter? A consistent Protestant has to deem Clement’s affirmation ‘pure fiction,’ for his understanding of church order demands that the Apostles made no binding rulings in the matter. The spectrum of Catholic views has its clearest point of reference for those who follow the Council in seeing the apostolic appointment of successors as a matter of faith. From this perspective

²⁰ Sullivan, 94.

²¹ Sullivan, 100–101.

²² *Lumen Gentium*, § 20, referring to *1 Clement* 44.2 in a footnote as the basis for their affirmation.

there is no room for “varying emphases and nuances.” Either they did or they didn’t appoint successors, and how do we know which? Sullivan asks the question as to the reliability of St. Clement’s statement “as an historical account.” The important thing about St. Clement’s statement is that it is not simply an historical account, but a statement of faith. The appointment of successors by the Apostles is not simply an historical issue, but an issue of faith for the Catholic Church. It has been handed down in the apostolic tradition and is believed by faith, and Pope St. Clement is honoured as the earliest witness to this faith. St. Clement’s statement is otherwise vague and imprecise. He makes no distinction between the appointment of bishops and deacons, but he does affirm the fact of appointment, and that is what we take from him. For the rest we must look elsewhere.

The issue of the approach we take to these Patristic witnesses and the weight we attribute to them arises again in the case of St. Ignatius of Antioch. St. Ignatius’s witness to the threefold structure of ministry, a bishop surrounded by a college of priests and assisted by deacons, is too strong to be overlooked by anyone. However, attempts are made to weaken his witness in different ways. In one place he says that bishops are “appointed throughout the world,”²³ and in another he describes the threefold structure of bishop, priests and deacons and states: “Without these no group can be called a church.”²⁴ Sullivan, and the scholars he relies upon, reject both these statements. They take St. Ignatius as just any other witness in a historical or sociological study, and on the basis of alternative views of the matter dismiss his witness as untrustworthy. They consider that they have reason to believe that there were churches contemporaneous with St. Ignatius which did not have bishops, and they prefer that view, and hence they reject St. Ignatius. The traditional Catholic position is different. It is of faith for the Catholic that a church without a bishop, priest and deacons is not a valid church in the apostolic succession, and Catholic theology recognises St. Ignatius as the first clear witness to this faith and accepts his testimony fully. As regards his remark that bishops are appointed throughout the world, it is taken as another way of saying the same thing, that where the true church exists, there the threefold structure must be found. He is not making a statement based on a sociological survey, which can be accepted or rejected as such. Rather, he is witnessing to the faith of the Catholic Church and is to be accepted or rejected on that basis.

The same option as to the genre of the statement arises in regard to St. Irenaeus’s listing of the bishops of the Church of Rome. In setting

²³ *The Letter to the Ephesians* 3:2.

²⁴ *The Letter to the Trallians* 3:1.

up his argument against the Gnostics, St. Irenaeus appeals to the apostolic tradition maintained in the churches and establishes certain points in regard to it. He tells us:

The tradition of the Apostles is there, manifest throughout the world in each church, to be seen by all who wish to see the truth. Further we can list those who were appointed by the Apostles to be bishops in the churches and their successors to our own day.²⁵ ... But since it would be extremely long in a book such as this to give the succession list for all the churches (we shall take just one), the greatest and most ancient church, known to all, founded and established at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul.²⁶ ... The blessed Apostles after founding and providing for the church, handed over the leadership and care of the church to Linus... Anacletus succeeded him. Next, in the third place from the Apostles, Clement received the episcopate... To this Clement succeeded Evaristus; to Evaristus, Alexander, and then, sixth from the Apostles, Sixtus. After him came Telesphorus... And then Hyginus; afterwards Pius, and after him, Anicetus. After Soter had succeeded Anicetus, then came Eleutherus who now holds the episcopate and twelfth from the Apostles. By this order and succession, the tradition of the Apostles in the Church and the preaching of the truth have come down to us. And this is a most complete demonstration that one and the same life-giving faith which is in the Church from the Apostles until now has been preserved and handed down in truth.²⁷

In response to this witness, Sullivan concedes that the succession list is genuine and coming from the Church of Rome, but, following the eminent Protestant church historian, Hans von Campenhausen, he concludes that “given the fact that toward the end of the second century the clergy of Rome could provide the names of the men who at that time were thought of as having been the past bishops of their church, we can conclude that they remembered these men as the principal leaders and teachers among the Roman presbyters.”²⁸

The option of interpretation is clear. For the Catholic theologian who accepts the full faith of the Church in regard to the apostolic succession, St. Irenaeus and the Church of Rome from whom he received his list are witnesses to the faith of the Church in the apostolic succession. They affirm the appointment of bishops by the Apostles and the historic apostolic succession which the Church

²⁵ *Adversus Haereses* III.3.1. (Translation, following Sullivan is from *Early Christian Fathers*, Volume 1.)

²⁶ III.3.2.

²⁷ III.3.3.

²⁸ Sullivan, 149. (Underlining in the original.)

continues to believe and accept. For Sullivan and the scholars he follows, this list is a piece of historical evidence to be critically examined. The formal witness of the Church of Rome and St. Irenaeus give only points of view which can be set aside if alternative evidence indicates. The Church of Rome simply thought *at the time* that their list of men was a list of bishops in the apostolic succession. The Catholic theologian, however, does not have this option of setting aside the witness of the Church of Rome as an opinion *at the time*. It is of Catholic faith that the Church of Rome is the infallibly guaranteed principle witness to the apostolic faith, and the episcopal structure of the Church and the apostolic succession belong to the Catholic faith itself. The precise point at issue, the succession of bishops of Rome, has been declared infallibly by the First Vatican Council: "If anyone says that it is not according to the institution of Christ our Lord himself, that is, by divine law, that St. Peter should have perpetual successors in the primacy over the whole Church; or if anyone says that the Roman Pontiff is not the successor of St. Peter in the same primacy, *anathema sit*."²⁹ The issue here is primacy over the whole Church, but it is clearly presupposed the Pope is the successor of St. Peter as bishop of Rome.

We have examined three of the fundamental texts supporting the Catholic faith in the historic apostolic succession. There is no suggestion that these texts "prove" the Catholic faith in the historic apostolic succession.³⁰ The Catholic faith is not susceptible of proof or disproof. The Catholic faith is what it is, and it comes to us sovereign and authoritative constituting the fundamental norm for faith and theology. The texts we have examined can be said to verify, or confirm, or corroborate the contemporary Catholic faith, showing that it has been in the possession of the Church, more or less explicitly, from the beginning. It is not even being suggested that the orthodox interpretation of these texts is the only possible one. Sullivan, and the scholars he follows, have produced alternative interpretations, plausible enough to support a steady consensus among intelligent Christians for the best part of two centuries. The implausibility of these alternative interpretations only becomes clear when they are placed in the context of the Catholic faith. These interpretations do not fit with the faith which constitutes the fundamental norm of interpretation for Catholic exegesis, and they are not so persuasive to reason that they constitute an insurmountable obstacle to the peaceful possession of that faith.

²⁹ DS 3057/ND 824.

³⁰ Sullivan suggests a number of times that such "proving" is the business of a theologian. See ix, 16, 218 and 223.

The Alternative Vision

However, the Catholic vision of the historic apostolic succession is rejected completely by the scholarly consensus to which Sullivan subscribes and has been replaced with an alternative historical hypothesis which postulates that there were no bishops at all in the Church during the first century of the Christian era. This consensus postulates “that the historical episcopate was the result of a development in the post-New Testament period, from the local leadership of a college of presbyters, who were sometimes also called bishops (*episkopoi*), to the leadership of a single bishop.”³¹ The evidence for this hypothesis will have to be examined, obviously, but it first of all it seems appropriate to examine the hypothesis itself in relation to the Catholic faith in the historic apostolic succession.

Sullivan’s first step is to offer an interpretation of the mind of the Apostles as they founded their churches. They were sent out by the Lord to preach the Gospel to all nations.

However, when they set out on their task, they faced a great number of questions that Jesus had not answered. For instance: Were they supposed to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles? If so, should they oblige Gentile Christians to keep the Mosaic Law? How should they structure the communities they would form by their preaching? Would their own supervision over those communities be sufficient, or should they appoint local pastors? Some sayings of Jesus had suggested his return to judge the world within their own lifetime. Did that mean that they need not make provision for a structure of leadership that would last beyond the present generation? Raymond Brown has summed up the questions facing the apostles by saying that Jesus had not given them a blueprint to follow in building the church.³²

On this understanding, Jesus had no plan for the constitution of His Church. The Catholic faith, on the other hand, says that He did. He established a college of Apostles with St. Peter at their head, and He instituted seven sacraments as the basic form of worship. The Catholic faith assumes that Jesus was a wise man building His house on rock, and that He was not subject to any illusions about an imminent closure of the present age, and that, therefore, it was the clear understanding communicated to the Apostles that the apostolic college would be made permanent in His Church by the appointment and ordination of successors. This is hardly the moment to seek to justify all these points, but this is the Catholic faith as most recently declared by the Second Vatican Council, as we saw above.

³¹ Sullivan, viii and 217.

³² Sullivan, 225. (The reference to Brown is, *Biblical Crises Facing the Church* (New York/Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1975), 52–55.)

On the basis of Jesus' lack of a clear foundation for His Church, Sullivan then proposes a scenario of development during the first decades of the Church's life culminating in the transition sometime during the second century from government by a college of presbyters to government by a single bishop. His thesis, and the ultimate point of his book, is that this transition was guided by the Holy Spirit in a way analogous to the canonization of Scripture, and that, on this basis, it adequately represents the faith of the Catholic Church in the apostolic succession.

A first problem with this scenario is its lack of historical plausibility. The process of canonization of the Scriptures is documented. Different list of books were circulating during the fourth century, and a definitive list was drawn up in the African councils at the end of that century and by Pope Innocent I in 405. This list was in peaceful possession in the Western Church until the Reformation, and it was necessary to reaffirm it at the Council of Trent (DS 1502–03) and at Vatican I (DS 3029). The fact that the Church had a decision to make in regard to the Scriptures is documented and clear. Of the corresponding process of canonization of the episcopate, there is, on other hand, no trace whatever. The notion of a church choosing its church order is unheard of in Christian tradition until the sixteenth century with the Reformation in Switzerland, and the choice between presbyteral and episcopal government is church-dividing to this day. Is it plausible to suggest that it would not have been equally divisive in the first decades of the Church's life, and could have taken place without leaving any trace whatever?³³

The heart of Sullivan's theory is that "the Christian faithful recognised the bishops as successors of the apostles,"³⁴ in the same way as the Church received certain writings as canonical. Now, can someone be constituted as a successor of the Apostles by a process of recognition? There were criteria applied in the reception of the canonical Scriptures. Eligible writings were those in liturgical use, those of apostolic origin and of guaranteed orthodoxy. What might the corresponding criteria for a successor of the Apostles be? Sullivan offers none. His suggestion actually runs along a different line. He says: "During the second century, the church met the growing threat to its unity by developing and accepting the stronger leadership that having a single bishop over the church in each city provided."³⁵ That is not a process of recognition, it is the establishment of a constitution for the Church. Choosing monarchy may be a wise choice of government, and it is possible that such a choice had to be made in some cases, but it does not constitute the chosen man as a successor of the Apostles,

³³ On this see Jones, March 1999, 137.

³⁴ Sullivan, 229.

³⁵ Sullivan, 228.

at least not in the sense understood by the Catholic Church. The Catholic understanding is that the constitutional choice was made by Jesus right at the start and implemented by the Apostles appointing and ordaining successors. One cannot become a successor of the Apostles by any retroactive process implemented later. For there to be any successors to the Apostles in the historic line, there must have been such successors right from the beginning, without interruption, as the Second Vatican Council taught. We therefore find Sullivan's suggestion unacceptable as being both historically implausible and inconsistent with the faith of the Church.

The Evidence for the Alternative Vision

To conclude the reaction to Sullivan's book, it is necessary to examine the few small pieces of evidence underpinning this alternative theory of the apostolic succession. There are just a few early texts, none of which are dealing with precisely the question at issue. The edifice is built rather on what the texts did not say. In certain contexts where early writings might have been expected to speak of a bishop in a church, they failed to do so, and the conclusion is drawn that there was in fact no bishop in the church in question.

On the basis of St. Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*, it is concluded that there was no bishop in Philippi at the time it was written. At one stage in his letter St. Polycarp is exhorting different categories of the community, presbyters, deacons, young men and young women. In his exhortation to the young men he tells them to "be obedient to the presbyters and deacons as to God and Christ."³⁶ On this basis Sullivan concludes: "Whereas Ignatius called on Christians to be subject to the bishop as to God and Christ and to the presbyters as to the apostles, Polycarp calls for obedience to the presbyters and the deacons as to God and Christ. One could hardly explain his not mentioning the bishop here if there were a bishop at Philippi at that time."³⁷ All are agreed that arguments from silence are weak arguments. St. Polycarp is here exhorting the young men of the church to a moral life, and his mind is not focused on matters of church order. It was quite common then, and even later, to think of bishops and presbyters together and call them by one name or the other. It is only the context will make clear who is meant in a given instance. Is it possible that Philippi did not have a resident bishop at this time and was still under the authority of a missionary bishop in the style of Timothy or Titus? That would explain the absence of mention of a bishop and still be compatible with the historic apostolic succession. However, the conclusion that the church at Philippi was not

³⁶ *Letter to the Philippians* 5:3.

³⁷ Sullivan, 128.

under the authority of any bishop at all is the one which is unacceptable.

On the basis of this one text alone it would be hard to decide the issue, but there are facts available from the background to the letter which make this conclusion highly unlikely. St. Ignatius had just recently visited Philippi and been welcomed by the church there. The Philippians had written to St. Polycarp and, among other things, they had asked him to send them as many as he could of St. Ignatius's letters. Now, these two facts tell strongly against the idea that Philippi was a church without a bishop, led only by a college of presbyters. Being welcomed by a church at that time meant a good deal more than a simple act of hospitality in the modern style; it implied full communion. Now is it likely that St. Ignatius, who made it quite clear in his letters that a church without a bishop was no church at all, would have accepted hospitality from such a church? And is it likely that the church at Philippi would have been so keen to receive and read his letters, with their clear affirmation of the episcopal order of the Church, if they themselves were living in quite a different church order at the time? I suggest that the answer to both these questions is a definite No.

Another piece of evidence for the absence of bishops is provided by *1 Clement* 44, which has to be given in full.

Our apostles likewise knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the bishop's office. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the officials mentioned earlier and afterwards they gave the offices a permanent character, that is, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. Those, therefore, who were appointed by them or, later on, by other reputable men with the consent of the whole church, and who have ministered to the flock of Christ blamelessly, humbly, peaceably, and unselfishly, and for a long time have been well spoken of by all – these men we consider to be unjustly removed from their ministry. For it will be no small sin for us, if we depose from the bishop's office those who have offered the gifts blamelessly and in holiness. Blessed are those presbyters who have gone on ahead, for they need no longer fear that someone might remove them from their established place. For we see that you have removed certain people, their good conduct notwithstanding, from the ministry which has been held in honor by them blamelessly.³⁸

Here again St. Clement is affirming the basis of the apostolic succession, but there is undoubted vagueness in his text. The argument against bishops is that the word is always used in the plural, speaking of bishops, and therefore not referring to a single resident bishop at Corinth. Further the same men are called presbyters in the

³⁸ Translation following Sullivan from *The Apostolic Fathers*.

text and for the rest of the letter. Are these arguments probative? The interchangeable use of the terms bishop and presbyter is still in evidence much later than *1 Clement*, so very little can be based on that point. Does the fact that the Corinthians appear to have unjustly removed more than one man from office definitely imply that such men cannot have been bishops? Might there not have been more than one bishop serving the Church in Corinth at the time? Might not the depositions have taken place at different times? For Sullivan, the clinching argument is that Clement did not refer to a single bishop in his letter. "It seems inconceivable that, if there had been a bishop in charge of the church of Corinth at that time, Clement would not have said something about the obligation of the guilty parties to submit to their bishop or about his role in restoring good order to his church."³⁹ Now, maybe there was not a bishop in Corinth at the time. Maybe the men deposed had not yet been replaced. Another suggestion made is that Clement was stressing the more fundamental point about the authority of the ordained in general and not stressing the authority of the bishop, for the Corinthians had already shown their disrespect in deposing him. Jones has remarked that "Clement's main concern here is that the Corinthians are trying to depose their bishop/presbyters. He is not concerned at this point to defend the office of head bishop so much as to defend the apostolic roots of the clergy itself. So he does not clearly distinguish a head bishop from the college of bishops."⁴⁰ So, what seems inconceivable to Sullivan does not seem so to others of us.

The scholarly consensus also concludes that there was no bishop in Rome either at this time. Based on the likelihood of the same order in both churches, and taking it as established that Corinth had no bishop, it seems reasonable to conclude that Rome would also be without a bishop. Similar arguments in this sense are based on the *Didache* and *The Shepherd of Hermas* but they are even less clear and the response in any case is going to be the same. A remark made by Jones in regard to these texts applies to them all. He writes that:

the three texts which might have given direct evidence for a single presiding bishop are frustratingly ambiguous on the matter. That is it. . . . These three short texts are compatible *both* with admitting the existence of a president of the college of bishop-presbyters *and* with denying the existence of such an office. . . . the interpretation of this meagre evidence has been shaped by the presuppositions brought to it.⁴¹

³⁹ Sullivan, 222.

⁴⁰ David Albert Jones, "Was there a Bishop of Rome in the First Century?," *New Blackfriars*, March 1999, 128–143, at 140.

⁴¹ David Albert Jones "The Bishop of Rome Revisited," *New Blackfriars*, June 1999, 309–312, at 309–10.

The rub is there, and it concerns the all-importance of the presuppositions one brings to these texts, as to any texts. The weight one gives to the different arguments is going to be determined by one's presuppositions. The Catholic who knows by faith that every true church in the apostolic succession had bishops from the beginning is not open to the possibility that one of the churches founded by St. Peter or St. Paul was a false church without a bishop, and that will affect his apprehension of the arguments. For those who reject the Catholic vision of the historic apostolic succession, the arguments will appear to be weighted differently. If one is open to or prone to the conclusion that there were no bishops in the Church of Rome or Corinth or Philippi during the first century, then the lack of mention of such a man can be taken as an argument for his non-existence. If one is not, other possibilities will be sought, and such possibilities are always available. Let it be remembered again that there is no question here of "proving" the point one way or the other. Drawing conclusions from texts which are not explicitly dealing with the matter in hand is difficult, and on the level of these texts, not much can be concluded with any certainty and definitely not with the kind of certainty that might trouble the faith of the Catholic Church. If the issue were merely historical, the debate could go on and one scholarly consensus or another hold the field as best it could. However, in this case, it is a matter of faith for the Catholic, and when a scholarly consensus, however long-standing or authoritative, is found to contradict the faith of the Catholic Church, it is the scholarly consensus which must fall.

The ultimate issue at stake in this whole discussion is methodological. Everything is determined by one's choice of starting-point. Sullivan started by taking for granted the scholarly consensus built up in recent centuries, and that was his mistake. The starting-point for Catholic theology is, and must be, the contemporary faith of the Church. Starting from the faith of the Church, what is clear and certain in that faith will be upheld unshakably. Where the traditional sources pose difficulties, there may be clarification in order, but the fundamentals of the faith cannot be distorted. This discussion may have led to a certain nuancing of the Catholic faith in the historic apostolic succession, but not its simple abandonment. It is not necessarily a part of the Catholic faith that the Apostles appointed a single successor in every church they founded, though it is part of the Catholic faith that such a single successor was appointed in Rome. It is not part of the Catholic faith that St. Paul appointed a single successor in Corinth and Philippi, but it is part of the Catholic faith that he appointed successors, part of whose responsibility would include Corinth and Philippi, and that Corinth and Philippi, and every other church of apostolic foundation, was under the authority of a bishop, resident or missionary, and that that

situation has continued unbroken until today. The short summary of the *Catholic Response to ARCIC I* surely needs expansion and explanation but, properly understood, it is still true to say that “[t]he Catholic Church recognises in the apostolic succession . . . an unbroken line of episcopal ordination from Christ through the apostles down through the centuries to the bishops of today.”

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