

Did Jesus found the Catholic Church? No, but...

The following is an excerpt from an article written by Father Lawrence Tosco and published in the Cleveland Catholic Universe Bulletin on January 28, 2005. Father Tosco is professor of Scripture at St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology.

One of the most frustrating things in conversations about religion is the fact that some people want a yes or no answer to questions that have no such clear-cut answer.

As a teacher of Scripture I get these questions daily: Did Abraham exist? Did God give Moses the commandments? Did the prophets announce the coming of Jesus? Did Jesus know he was God? Did Jesus institute the priesthood? Does Revelation announce the end of the world? They are all questions for which the best answer is probably “yes, but” or perhaps “no, but.”

To those who hold onto clear and simple ideas this may sound insufficient and confusing. But often it is the best we can do especially when it comes to questions that involve the interaction between God and humans. While necessary and valuable, in the end all our attempts are limited and insufficient. Who in fact can really pretend to grasp the mystery of God? Only fools or idolaters.

So, did Jesus found the Church? No, but...

No, Jesus did not found the Church if by church we mean the structured institution we have come to know over the centuries. He did not give his disciples a blueprint concerning governance, sacraments, and laws. To think that way is not only simplistic, but misguided.

Even more radically, Jesus could not have founded the church because the church had already existed for a long time: it was god’s people, Israel, the “assembly of God.” Jesus’ ministry was not about establishment of a separatist sect or a new religious community that would leave Judaism behind and spread to the Gentile world. What the thoroughly Jewish Jesus, rooted in prophetic tradition of his people, did was to call on his fellow Israelites in order to gather them into the community of the end time – a community renewed and restored through response to his message of God’s mercy and

acceptance of the last and excluded. That’s what he called the kingdom of God.

In response to Fr. Tosco – We as human beings are capacitated to receive knowledge by way of direct experience or by way of faith, which is the belief in something on the word of another. To accept a truth on the word of another human being is natural faith. To accept a truth because God has said it is supernatural faith. History is a record of what happened in the past and our knowledge of history is based on someone else’s word (natural faith).

By way of my own observations, I know for certain that George W. Bush was re-elected President of the United States in 2004. On the other hand, although not by my personal observation, I do know with certainty by way of natural faith that George Washington was the first president of the United States. Natural faith accounts for most of what we know and is the foundation for life in society.

Skeptics oftentimes reduce natural faith knowledge such as history to mere probability. If history is no more than opinion, it must share the uncertainty of opinion. It is not a matter of opinion that Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, but a matter of historical fact.

The amount of historical evidence that exists to validate the existence and miraculous workings of Jesus Christ is incontrovertible. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus and the Pharisees oftentimes were engaged in heated debates about Jewish law and tradition, but never did they disagree on the existence of their father Abraham or that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God at Mt. Sinai. Furthermore it does not appear from the Gospel accounts that Jesus had any doubts about his divinity when he walked on the Sea of Galilee.

With regard to the establishment of the Church by Jesus Christ, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states in paragraph #771 “The one mediator, Christ, **established** and ever sustains here on earth his Holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as a **visible organization** through which he communicates truth and grace to all men. #765 The Lord Jesus **endowed** his community with a **structure** that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve **with Peter as their head**... Christ **prepares and builds** his Church. #766 **The Church is born** primarily of Christ’s total self-giving.... As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so **the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ** hanging dead on the cross.

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