



Apostolic Succession

Two words that seem to matter immensely to Rome and to independent Bishops outside her embrace. Why?

In the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 1: 23- 26, we find the election of Matthias as a replacement for Judas. The drawing of lots was seen by the Jewish traditions of the time to be an indication of God's choice. Mathias was then present with the others at Pentecost and received the Holy Spirit as an Apostle.

A little later, Chapter 6:1-7, we see the election and commissioning of the seven deacons. This followed what we now know as the traditional threefold rite of ordination – election from among the people – prayer and the laying-on of hands.

St Paul acknowledges this process in 1 Timothy 4: 14 where the process of prayer and laying-on of hands raised Timothy to become Paul's "true child in the faith" (1 Tim, 1:2) and effectively his successor.

The constant and unwavering teaching of the Church, Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox alike, is that this process has gone on unbroken since that time. In other words that every bishop in the world today can say that their consecration, given after election, prayer and the laying-on of hands, can be traced back in unbroken links to one or other of the 12 gathered in the upper room at Pentecost. It is seen as handing-on that same gift of the Holy Spirit that was given to the 12.

So why is this so contentious and important if it is an historic fact?

Mainly because bishops of the independent churches are sometimes fearful of being described as charlatans and imposters who cannot prove their credentials.

Sadly this sometimes leads to a process of “line gathering” in which bishops undergo consecration after consecration in order to ensure that they are “valid”.

In whose eyes? Sadly, usually those of Rome and its Curia, who will attempt to discredit those not in their close embrace.

All Catholic Bishops in the world today are able to trace their lineage back – but not to an Apostle, the documented Roman records stop at Bishop Scipione Rebiba, consecrated in 1541, from who 95% of current RC bishops descend as he consecrated the later Pope Benedict XIII who in turn consecrated many bishops and cardinals who dispersed around the world.

No documents exist in the West to confirm links prior to that but Eastern lineages often link back to one of the 12 Apostles. It is for this reason that many independents seek Eastern lineage as well as Western.

The Roman Curia has acknowledged that there are certain undisputed lines outside of Rome that they describe as “valid but irregular”, a phrase that means the one carrying out the act of consecration possesses the appropriate order but not papal permission. The current Pope, Benedict XVI, himself re-stated this recognition of such lines in his declaration “Dominus Iesus” of 2000, written as Cardinal Prefect Ratzinger, and approved by his Predecessor John Paul II. In this he states:

“The Churches which, while not existing in perfect communion with the (Roman) Catholic Church, remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular Churches. Therefore, the Church of Christ is present and operative also in these Churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church.....

Therefore, these separated Churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from defects, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church”. (Section 17)

(It is of note that this section can be understood to include **ALL** non-roman christians, including those described by Rome as “venerable sister churches”, the Orthodox and Eastern Rites. It is another underlining of Papal Primacy and universal sovereignty even over those who have never accepted that supremacy.)

The undisputed lines of succession I refer to usually have a Roman Catholic Bishop as their source and the Roman Curia cannot therefore deny the appropriateness of the origin of the line, or its continuity.

All bishops of the UECC have such lines and have been consecrated bishop in clear, undisputed Apostolic Succession derived from Roman Catholic Bishops. The three primary lines involved in the UECC are through Archbishop Carlos Duarte Costa of Brazil (1948), Bishop Eduardo Sanchez y Comacho of Guadalajara, Mexico(1889) and, most recently, Archbishop Immanuel Millingo of Kampala, Uganda (2001).

The Bishops of UECC do not condone or approve of “line-gathering” and multiple consecrations as these are a scandal to the faithful.

It is Apostolic Succession that differentiates Catholicism from Protestantism most clearly since it is seen as a “passing-on” of the mission of Jesus to save the world through Sacramental and spiritual life and practice, whereas the protestant position is that faith alone is required for salvation and, in the words of a dear friend who just happens to be a Calvinist Anabaptist – “Everyone got it wrong for 1500 years”! Personally I find that one difficult to accept.

Apostolic Succession is seen by East and West as the bedrock on which ministry is founded; it gives confidence and reassurance to all who are called to minister in Jesus’ name that they are doing what He wanted and with His authority.

Apostolic Succession is not to be seen in the same light as an hereditary monarchy or nobility. It is not about power. The only power a bishop has is the power to hand on the permission given by Jesus to act in His name. The only power any rank of priesthood has is the power to speak in Jesus’ name and to serve as He served.

As Paul said to Timothy the gift is given “to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you.” (2 Tim 1:6)