

Why I Believe the Catholic Church Is the Church Christ Founded

1. Why I Started Asking a Bigger Question

The question of which Church Christ founded got harder for me once I stopped treating Christian disagreement as a side issue. Christians who all love the Bible can still land in opposite places on baptism, the Eucharist, salvation, church government, divorce and remarriage, tradition, and even what counts as an essential doctrine. That does not prove Catholicism. But it made me ask a bigger question: what did Jesus intend to remain after the apostles were gone?

What pulled me toward the Catholic claim was not one proof-text. It was the number of pieces that started lining up. In the New Testament I see a visible Church with authority, apostles handing ministry on, a council that can make a binding decision, sacramental worship, and a special role given to Peter. Then, immediately after the apostles, Clement, Ignatius, and Irenaeus are already talking about bishops, succession, unity, the Eucharist, and public apostolic teaching. I wanted to know whether that was one continuous story or whether I was reading later Catholicism back into the sources.

I also wanted the Protestant side stated fairly. Sola Scriptura is not simply 'me and my Bible,' and Protestants have serious arguments about the sufficiency of Scripture, the priesthood of believers, and the spiritual unity of the Church. The questions I could not get rid of were more practical: who settles a doctrinal dispute when sincere readers disagree, how do I know the canon, why does the early Church look so visibly organized, and what kind of unity did Christ actually leave behind? Those are the questions that drive this paper.

2. The Question I Eventually Had to Ask

At some point I realized I had been asking the question backwards. I kept asking whether I could find this Catholic belief or that Catholic belief somewhere in the Bible. The bigger question was simpler: what did Jesus actually leave behind? Did he leave a book by itself and expect Christians centuries later to rebuild the Church from it, or did he establish a visible Church that taught, worshiped, settled disputes, and eventually recognized the books of the New Testament?

I also want to be fair to Protestants. They do have serious answers. Reformed Christians appeal to Scripture as the final infallible authority. Lutherans define the Church around the Gospel rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Evangelicals often talk about the universal spiritual body of all true believers. I don't think those positions are stupid or insincere. I grew up around versions of them.

What I am saying is more specific. When I put the New Testament beside the Christians immediately after the apostles, the Catholic model seems to require fewer breaks in the story. I see a visible Church, bishops who succeed the apostles, sacramental worship, a teaching

authority, a way to identify the canon, and a real principle of unity. Protestant systems can answer each of those questions, but a lot of the answers depend on principles that become much clearer after the Reformation than they are in the second-century Church.

3. Jesus Didn't Talk About the Church Like It Was Optional

Jesus and to make a judgment. He gives the apostles authority to bind and loose (Matt. 18:18), sends them to teach all nations (Matt. 28:18-20), promises the Holy Spirit will guide them (John 14:26; 16:13), and prays for a unity among his followers that the world can actually see (John 17:20-23).

Paul even calls the Church 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15). That doesn't mean every Christian or every local church is perfect. The New Testament makes that impossible to believe. But it does treat the Church as a real body with offices, discipline, sacraments, and authority.

That changed the question for me. Catholicism isn't claiming every Catholic is better than every Protestant. It is claiming that Christ founded an actual Church and gave that Church a mission that continues in history. If that's true, then I have to ask where that Church is.

4. Peter, the Keys, and the Question of Unity

Matthew 16 is hard for me to treat as a small detail. Jesus renames Simon Peter, talks about building his Church on this rock, promises the gates of Hades won't prevail, gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, and gives him authority to bind and loose (Matt. 16:18-19). Catholics also see Isaiah 22 behind the keys, where the key of the house of David belongs to a royal steward. Jesus is the Davidic King; Peter receives kingdom keys.

I know Protestants read the 'rock' in different ways: Peter's confession, Christ himself, Peter as representative of the apostles, or some combination. I don't think the Catholic reading requires denying that Christ is the ultimate rock or that Peter's confession matters. What seems most natural to me is that Jesus is doing something specifically to Peter because of that confession. The wordplay between Peter and rock looks intentional.

Luke 22 adds another piece. Jesus tells Peter that Satan has demanded to sift all of them, but Jesus has prayed specifically for Peter so that after he turns back he can strengthen his brothers (Luke 22:31-32). Then John 21 gives Peter the threefold command to feed Christ's sheep. None of those verses is a fully written-out Vatican I document. But taken together, a real Petrine role makes a lot more sense to me than it used to.

5. Acts 15 Looks Like a Church That Can Actually Decide Things

I keep coming back to the Council of Jerusalem. A serious doctrinal fight breaks out over circumcision and Gentile converts. The answer isn't, 'Everyone go home, read the Old

Testament, and decide for yourself.' The apostles and elders gather, argue, hear Peter, hear Paul and Barnabas, hear James, and then send a decision that the churches are expected to follow. The letter can even say, 'It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28).

Scripture is part of the decision. Apostolic testimony is part of it. And an actual teaching body makes a judgment. That pattern looks much closer to Catholic authority than to a system where the final court of appeal is ultimately each Christian, congregation, or denomination deciding which interpretation is right.

6. Apostolic Succession Shows Up Earlier Than I Expected

The handoff of ministry is already visible in the New Testament. Matthias replaces Judas (Acts 1:15-26). Paul tells Timothy to entrust what he has heard to faithful men who will be able to teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). Titus is left behind to appoint presbyters in every town (Titus 1:5).

Then 1 Clement, written from the Roman Church to Corinth near the end of the first century, says the apostles appointed bishops and deacons and gave instructions so that other approved men would succeed them after their deaths (1 Clement 42, 44). That sounds remarkably straightforward to me. The ministry is supposed to continue after the apostles die.

Ignatius of Antioch makes the structure even harder to miss. On his way to martyrdom early in the second century, he keeps telling Christians to stay united to the bishop, presbytery, and deacons. In Smyrnaeans 8 he says the proper Eucharist is the one celebrated by the bishop or someone he authorizes, and he uses the expression 'Catholic Church.' Whatever details developed later, Christianity is already episcopal, sacramental, and visibly organized.

7. Irenaeus Gives a Very Concrete Test for Apostolic Christianity

Irenaeus matters to me because he is dealing with people who claimed secret or superior interpretations of Christianity. He doesn't answer them by saying, 'I have my Bible and you have yours.' He points to the public teaching of the churches founded by the apostles and to the succession of their bishops (Against Heresies 3.2-3).

He then gives the succession of the Church at Rome and says every Church must agree with it because of its preeminent authority (Against Heresies 3.3.2). People can and do debate exactly how to translate and understand that sentence. Still, I don't see how Irenaeus can be made to sound like a modern congregational Protestant. His test for orthodoxy is public apostolic teaching preserved in visible succession.

Elsewhere he says true knowledge includes apostolic doctrine, the ancient organization of the Church throughout the world, and the succession of bishops by which the Church has been handed down (Against Heresies 4.33.8). That is almost the exact historical question I had started asking.

8. The Bible's Table of Contents Became a Big Question for Me

The canon may be the Protestant question that bothered me most. The Bible is inspired, but it doesn't contain an inspired table of contents. Matthew never tells me which twenty-six other books belong next to Matthew. Revelation doesn't hand me a New Testament list. The early Church had to distinguish apostolic books from a lot of other Christian writings that were circulating.

A Protestant can answer that the books are self-authenticating through the Holy Spirit and that the Church recognized them rather than gave them authority. I understand that distinction, and Catholics don't think the Church made uninspired books inspired either. God is the source of inspiration. My question is more practical: how does a Christian centuries later know which books God inspired?

The Catholic answer is concrete. The same apostolic Church that received, read, preserved, and handed on these writings also discerned the canon. The Catechism says that through apostolic Tradition the Church discerned which writings belong in Scripture (CCC 120). Augustine puts the historical point sharply when he says he wouldn't believe the Gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church (Against the Fundamental Epistle of Manichaeus 5.6).

That one issue doesn't prove every Catholic doctrine. But it did make 'the Bible apart from the Church' much harder for me to picture historically. The New Testament came to me through a Church that existed before the final canon list was universally settled.

9. Scripture and Tradition Didn't Look Like Enemies in the Early Church

I grew up hearing 'tradition' and instinctively thinking, 'human ideas added to the Bible.' The New Testament itself uses the word in a more positive way. Paul tells Christians to hold to traditions taught by word or letter (2 Thess. 2:15), praises the Corinthians for keeping traditions he delivered (1 Cor. 11:2), and tells Timothy to guard what has been entrusted to him (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13-14).

Irenaeus is useful again because he argues against heretics with both Scripture and apostolic tradition. He says his opponents agree with neither Scripture nor tradition when both are used against them (Against Heresies 3.2). Catholicism isn't claiming there is a secret second Bible. Vatican II says Scripture and Tradition come from the same divine source and form one sacred deposit, while the Magisterium serves that deposit rather than standing over it (Dei Verbum 9-10).

10. Sola Scriptura Is Clear as a Rule - the Hard Part Is What Happens Next

The strongest Protestant version of sola Scriptura isn't 'me and my Bible.' The Westminster Confession says Scripture is the supreme judge and that councils can err. It also

says harder passages should be interpreted by clearer ones. I think that is a serious and much stronger position than the caricature Catholics sometimes argue against.

What kept bothering me was what happens when sincere Christians use that rule and still land in opposite places on baptism, the Eucharist, perseverance, predestination, church government, women's ordination, divorce and remarriage, charismatic gifts, and even the Old Testament canon. At that point the question isn't whether Scripture is authoritative. Catholics agree that it is. The question I kept asking was whether Christ also gave the Church an authoritative way to settle competing interpretations.

I also don't use the popular '40,000 denominations' number. It is usually thrown around too casually and counts groups in ways that can be misleading. I don't think the argument needs it anyway. The existence of lasting doctrinal contradictions among sincere communities that all claim biblical authority is enough to show that a text plus private or denominational judgment doesn't automatically produce visible unity.

11. The Protestant Idea of the Invisible Church

Reformed theology often distinguishes the invisible Church, known perfectly to God, from the visible Church made up of professing believers and their children. The Westminster Confession explicitly uses that language. Lutheranism is somewhat different: the Augsburg Confession says the one holy Church remains forever wherever the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered.

Those Protestant definitions are trying to solve a real problem: there have always been hypocrites, corrupt clergy, and messy institutions. Catholics know that too. But I still think the New Testament and the early Fathers expect more visible unity than an invisible-Church answer gives me. Ignatius can point to the bishop to identify the proper Eucharist. Irenaeus can point to lines of succession. Cyprian can speak of one episcopate. Those are visible tests, not just an invisible reality known only to God.

12. The Sacraments Expose the Problem of Competing Interpretations

The Lord's Supper is where the disagreement becomes really obvious. Lutherans confess the real presence in strong terms. Reformed Christians speak of real spiritual participation but reject the Catholic explanation. Many Baptists and evangelicals treat Communion primarily as a memorial symbol. All of them appeal to Scripture. Those views aren't just different ways of saying the same thing.

Baptism has the same problem. Some Christians baptize infants; others say infant baptism is invalid. Some say baptism actually regenerates; others say it publicly symbolizes a salvation that already happened. Those aren't tiny side issues to the people arguing about them. They concern what Christ told the Church to do and what those acts actually accomplish.

Catholicism doesn't make every theological disagreement disappear. Catholics argue about plenty. The difference is that there is a living authority that can settle a question definitively when the Church actually needs a final answer. I see the beginning of that pattern in Acts 15 and then again in the councils of the early Church.

13. The Early Eucharist Looks Catholic Before the Empire Was Catholic

The early Eucharist is another thing I struggle to explain on a low-church Protestant model. Ignatius says certain heretics stay away from the Eucharist because they don't confess it to be the flesh of Jesus Christ (Smyrnaeans 7). Justin Martyr says Christians don't receive it as ordinary food after the prayer of thanksgiving (First Apology 66). Irenaeus even uses the Eucharist while arguing for the resurrection of the flesh (Against Heresies 4.18; 5.2).

These aren't medieval writers. They live before Christianity has imperial power, before Nicaea, and centuries before Trent. The vocabulary becomes more precise later, but the sacramental realism is already there. That is one reason Catholic worship feels more like continuity to me than reconstruction.

14. The Church Fathers Do Not Sound Like Modern Protestants

I need to qualify this. The Fathers aren't identical to modern Roman Catholics in every detail, and Catholics can absolutely cherry-pick them if they aren't careful. There are real disagreements and real development. Still, when I step back and ask about the basic shape of Christianity - bishops, succession, baptismal regeneration, Eucharistic realism, liturgy, prayers for the dead, visible unity, councils, and the importance of Rome - their world looks much closer to Catholic and Orthodox Christianity than to modern evangelicalism.

That by itself doesn't prove Rome over Eastern Orthodoxy. That question needs its own argument, especially about the papacy. But it does make it difficult for me to believe that the Church became sacramental and episcopal almost immediately because it had already abandoned apostolic Christianity. If that happened, the change was incredibly early and left surprisingly little evidence of Christians protesting it.

15. Why Rome Specifically?

Catholicism isn't the only ancient Christian tradition with bishops and sacraments; Orthodoxy can make that case too. Rome matters to me because Peter has a distinctive role in the New Testament and the Roman Church has a distinctive place very early in Christian history.

First Clement is a striking example. The Church at Rome intervenes in a serious dispute at Corinth while the apostle John may still have been alive. The letter expects obedience and speaks as a Church conscious of responsibility beyond its local city. Irenaeus later appeals specifically to Rome's succession as a public standard against heresy. Cyprian, even while

strongly defending episcopal authority and later disagreeing with Pope Stephen over baptism, can call Rome the chair of Peter and the principal Church from which priestly unity has its source (Epistle 54/59 in common numbering traditions).

None of those texts looks exactly like Vatican I, and I don't think Catholics should pretend it does. The way papal primacy was exercised and legally described developed over time. What matters to me is that the roots are early enough that I can't honestly treat Roman primacy as a medieval invention that appears out of nowhere.

16. The Protestant Answers I Understand - and the Questions I Still Have

A Protestant can tell me Scripture is clear enough in what is necessary for salvation. My question is still who decides when two serious readings both claim to be clear.

A Protestant can say the true Church is the whole body of believers known to God. I still have to ask why the earliest Christians identify the Church through bishops, Eucharistic communion, and visible succession.

A Protestant can say the Church recognized the canon but didn't create it. I agree with that. What I can't quite make fit is trusting the Church's corporate judgment about the canon while assuming that same Church couldn't reliably preserve apostolic teaching in other major disputes.

A Protestant can say councils can err. Of course they can if God has given them no protection. My question is what Jesus' promises about the Church, the Spirit, and the gates of Hades amount to in history if the whole visible Church can definitively bind Christians to error.

A Protestant can say denominations disagree on secondary issues while still agreeing on the Gospel. Sometimes that is fair. But baptism, the Eucharist, ordained ministry, justification, perseverance, and the nature of the Church itself aren't secondary to everyone involved. Even the line between 'essential' and 'secondary' becomes another interpretation Christians disagree about.

17. Catholicism Does Not Claim Church Leaders Never Sin

Church corruption used to feel like a deal-breaker for the Catholic claim. Then I realized I was mixing up the holiness of an office with the holiness of the person holding it. Peter denies Jesus and later acts hypocritically at Antioch. The Corinthian church is a mess. Yet the New Testament still treats the offices and the Church as real gifts from Christ.

Catholicism makes the same distinction. Bishops can be cowards. Popes can make terrible decisions. Priests can commit crimes. None of that should be minimized. The claim of indefectibility is much narrower: Christ won't let the Church, as Church, lose the apostolic faith she is bound to teach.

18. Why the Pieces Started Fitting Together for Me

What finally won me over wasn't one verse. It was the way the pieces started fitting together. Why is there a New Testament canon? An apostolic Church received and discerned it. Why are bishops everywhere so early? The ministry was handed on. Why is the Eucharist treated as more than a symbol almost immediately? That is how the apostolic worship was received. How are doctrinal disputes settled? The Church actually gathers and teaches. Why is unity supposed to be visible? Because Christ founded one communion, not a collection of independent interpretations.

I don't think one paragraph proves Catholicism. What convinced me was the cumulative picture. Scripture, the canon, apostolic succession, the sacraments, councils, and the structure of the early Church all make more sense to me as parts of one continuing body. That is the kind of explanation I had been looking for.

19. Where I Ended Up

I believe the Catholic Church is the Church Christ founded because, when I looked backward, I found more continuity than I expected. The generations right after the apostles are already talking about bishops succeeding the apostles, a visible Catholic Church, a serious Eucharist, binding Church authority, and the need to remain in communion. Rome has a distinctive role very early even though the later vocabulary and legal form of papal primacy develop over time.

That isn't the same thing as saying Protestants have no faith or no truth. Protestants love Scripture, preach Christ, and are genuinely Christian where there is valid baptism and faith in the Trinity. The Catholic Church herself says there are real elements of sanctification and truth outside her visible boundaries. I am not trying to erase that.

For me this is really a question of fullness and historical identity. Who can tell me what the canon is? What the sacraments are? How apostolic ministry continues? How a doctrinal fight gets settled? What visible unity Christ intended? Catholicism gives me one connected answer, and it gives me a Church I can actually follow through history. That is why I think the Catholic claim is stronger.

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References

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