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About the Holy Church

Petr Chelčický

1421

Let us add something to these words, which say that the holy church is the assembly of the elect unto salvation.

And that the only thing we can say about the holy church in these words is that it is without addition or detriment to one thing the holy church, the assembly of the elect unto salvation.

And the second are those things which are certain without error of that holy church: these are the gifts of the Holy Spirit, by which it is given, that it may be made capable through them in the members divided in the ministry for the benefit of the whole body or that church.

The third are the true and certain things of that church, and these are the various realities and ministries which are laid down by God for the making of the just, because by these works they merit eternal life for themselves.

But it cannot be immediately certain, if many people are found in such realities, or there are fewer of them, that it would certainly be the side of the holy church, or one or two members. For untrue people can also enter under such realities, who for a time stand in them or perhaps even stand, but there is no sincerity in them true to those realities. For all virtuous things can stand on covered people, only the love of God cannot. And

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this is most evident in a person [in] the forgiveness of injustice, which is done by others, and so in loving enemies and in abandoning pleasant things for the commandment of God or in forgiving unpleasant things for the commandment of the first. These are the things most evident in the true love of God for a person. And even an insincere person can have them on himself; because other facts can only stand on such, but on others there is no reason that having them, they are therefore members of the holy church.

Fourthly, there are the estates or offices of the holy church and in these at least it can be assured of the holy church: as there is the priestly estate with its office, and that it is known that it is an estate of the holy church. But it is far from all that all are members of the holy church who enter or enjoy that estate with its office. For they can be evil in it, since they are members of the devil and only drive the devil himself to gain souls through his seductions. But that estate, when true people stand in it, doing service through the reading in it of the holy church, then it can be called an estate of the holy church, serving it and expanding it in good. And so with a worthy cause is the state of the holy church, when it has worthy servants in it.

Also, the states of the holy church are, such as virginity, widowhood, and marriage. And these things are least certain to her. And that most for the cause of fornication is added so that it may be held that the states of the holy church are, so that according to the number of those states fornication ceases: virginity [must] be separated from it, and widowhood after the marriage of the beloved [is] understood... fornication; so also must even have the intention of not fornicating and marriage only adultery and irregular fornication in marriage. But other things are no longer forbidden to them, and whatever does not follow this order must be either the promiscuity of manifest sinners, or adultery, or other disorderly fornication, therefore it is the duty of the Holy Church to add to such things the subversion of many evil things.

But in order that these estates may otherwise be justly attributed to the holy church, they must therefore have the virtues proper to them, such as true faith and infallible charity, and more besides, as one can attain according to the gifts given to them. Therefore these estates have within themselves a place for the goodness proper to the holy church to possess. But in themselves, without these gifts, they cannot be so attributed to the holy church. For such estates may be among the pagans, or among the Jews, or a virgin may be a widow in the flesh, some Jew or pagan, and among the Christians a virgin may be a heretic, or in mortal sin, in some. And all this is far removed from the holy church. Also married people are everywhere therefore, for reasons of speech, estates of the holy church, but it can never be rightly said of them, if they do not have the truths of these things. For therefore it is to be added to them the most, that they are estates of the holy church, that in them there is a place for the elect to salvation, or that righteousness which is maintained or follows election. For election itself, although perhaps at some time it really stands without righteousness, yet in general the righteousness commanded by God with election stands most upon the saints. And if any elect in those estates holds the righteousness commanded by God, then he is a member of the holy church; if there be a great multitude of such, then it is a side of the holy church. And so the holy church cannot be measured by bodily goals or foundations, so that these and those differences of the people could be laid down and bodily realities added to them, as they are or can stand without virtue and without faith; therefore it is not and from the estate, but if election is mixed with the estate.

And these things are too necessary for the confusion to know, that the world, of course, run away from God, because of such differences of people, they call the holy church. And the priests no longer seek to distinguish the pure from the impure in their service, but they are guided by the fact that there must

be a mixture of the evil with the good. And to this are added these states: the state of priests, knights and workers; the state of virgins, widows and married people — that is, the shortened holy church. And to that holy church this teaching is attributed, everything that the Roman doctor established, and which the doctors accepted as saints, was given as a law for teaching.

And the priests, as if lying in a trap in that confusion, already crawl through the world with their priesthood, spreading the errors of their service. And they always say that the church is holy, that the estates of the holy church are always there, some see, neither roam with swords, that is the knightly estate; nor do they add children to baptism, that is the married estate; and the peasants, nor horses, that is the working estate. And that together is the holy church. And this can also be said in truth, that those offices, which the pagans simply need, or the world, that those offices cannot be attributed to the holy church, so that it may take administration from them or act its necessity through them, although perhaps some usefulness to the holy church or its power may be from the service of those offices, which are the only ones necessary to the pagans or the world. But God does not establish them for his church, so that it may distribute them.

For God did not establish through the apostles a king of the holy church, to bear her temptations on his sword, and to fight for her against her enemies, and to stir up the church by power to his service. Nor did he establish for her magistrates or councilors, that the holy church should come before them to be judged concerning the goods of this world; nor did he establish for her scourges and torturers, that the members of the holy church should hang one another, or torture each other on the gallows for bodily matters — this is commanded to the pagans and to this world. Therefore, St. Paul speaks of the offices of the holy church, and he places nine distinctions in them, and he says of them: “And God hath set some in the church; first apostles, and some prophets, and some teachers;

— and has already corrupted the faith, and itself already stands as an advantage of faith — this is contrary to me.

And if those words should still remain in place, that heresy is a false teaching, repugnant to Holy Scripture, then this multifaceted heresy should be shown! But if all these heresies are already a benefit of faith, then these heresies will fall upon me, and I will still be ruining the great benefit of the holy church, yes, it will shade the power like a shade from the heat and will be beneficial in everything that it attempts through the power of this world, but without power it would remain like a widow in mourning.

and some miracle workers; and some healers; and some helpers, and some exhorters; and some speak in divers kinds of tongues, and some interpret tongues.” Such things he speaks of the offices of that church. He never places those officers with temporal power, nor those whom he appoints in bodily ministries, but only the gifts of the Holy Spirit differing in them; ; for the holy church has need of only these officers. For the holy church is spiritual, and needs spiritual officers for her education; For all his courage lies in spiritual matters, even though he has bodily things to do, but all through a spiritual sense.

Without this reason being found, the apostles, dividing the holy church into three, commanded one side to work, so that by that effort the other two might hold on and be like a foundation for them, so that it might rest on the empty ones. Saint Paul speaks of this, starting from himself and from other priests, and says: “You yourselves know how you ought to follow us. For we were not idle among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread for nothing, but with labor and toil, night and day, working with our own hands, that we might not be a burden to any of you. For when we were with you, we preached these things to you, that if anyone did not want to work, he should not eat. For we hear that some among you are walking untidy, doing nothing, but making a show of it.” And in that speech of the apostle we find the report of the church divided into three parts, that the lords and priests should be made there, and he commanded them to be empty, and he placed in their charge peasants and other workers, to keep them on themselves as a foundation under them. But from the clergy he begins, that they “worked with their own hands night and day.” Why does he say, “so that we would not be a burden to any of you,” by imposing others on you? Therefore, “so that we ourselves might give you an example, that you should follow us in this, and work with our own hands; but if anyone does not want to work, let him not eat, or as we have heard of some things among you, walking restlessly, doing nothing, but acting in a courtly manner.”

And by this he clearly disparages the message about priests and lords, because both sides of the first two are pretending that the holy church sent the truth to lie for them, saying that the peasants and other laborers should keep the lords and priests as a foundation by their own efforts. And perhaps the holy priests do not have a different foundation in the church, only the stomachs of the workers' efforts. But against them the apostle with his other assistants worked day and night so as not to burden the workers and those who do not work among them, but wander around empty-handed like courtiers, codfish. And since for the sake of the lazy courtier codfish, how would he establish such courtiers in that village, and here, did they not want to correct the courtier's veil, so that they would mark them and separate themselves from them? And since he cannot have a quarrel with those idle courtiers in faith, how could he make such masters over them in faith and call it a third party of the holy church, so that they may eat ready-made what they can hardly obtain?

Therefore he teaches to preserve equality for those who are the holy church, such as equality has the members of the natural body, and says: "That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another, and whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member rejoices, all the members rejoice with it." And considering this speech, let someone so wise take out of it the pagan dominions and insert them into the church of Christ and call them a third party of that church, since he takes an example from the natural members of the body! And truth is more glorious than example; and that equality undivided in the body among the members is assumed, that without envy one serves the other, has care for one another, works together for everything; if good, rejoices together; if adverse, grieves together; the more honest do not boast of the more dishonorable, but eternal honesty protects them.

And since the members of the holy church draw such a measure, then they could not impose great interests on each other, nor think of various works on them, so that, sitting in the cold, they mock those men and women, who are still baking in the heat; nor would they drive them out in the great winter in their coats on hares and sit themselves in the warmth, nor would they command them any servitude under their will, which they would not want from others. Therefore, paganism is very far from the Holy Church according to the apostolic understanding. If that people appear to be the Holy Church to someone, then they cannot understand this appearance from anywhere else, only because the world appears to be the Holy Church and its Christian faith is heresy; but since it is already gone, therefore it will be bitter to divide.

And this I say: if God does not give such priests, who would know how to separate this from the faith and set them apart as open pagans, then the Reading will not even be preached properly. Or until the priests depart from the world, how can they preach Christ and as long as that paganism will bless the faith with their violent cruelty, with their pride and manifold inequality and with their delightful life and with the multiplication in the accidents of all virtues? For all this is the body of that world; and as long as that faith is blessed and makes one participate in Christ, to whom in the world can the priests answer for that participation in Christ, or is the world known to all others than to them? Therefore, by right, every witness man will be drawn to the participation in the faith, when such open paganism is blessed by faith and yet that paganism is called the benefit of faith.

I have spoken of these things only because I consider it the greatest harm that the faithful people are subjected to these powers and bear their burdens. It is nothing [that] the apostle subjected the faithful people to the pagans openly for worthy reasons, but did not unite them with them in faith; but this is worse than that paganism is accepted in faith and united with it