

The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic

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From the third century onward the Church was described as *holy*. This adjective was found in the early baptismal creeds of both the East and West. Later the Apostles' Creed added *catholic*. It was the Council of Constantinople in 381 that settled on four marks - *one, holy, catholic and apostolic* - to definitively describe the attributes of the universal Christian Church as listed in the Nicene Creed. These four marks are interrelated and essential in order for the Church to continue to be that which it is called to be. The Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, refers to the Church as a *mystery*, the mystical Body of Christ, a manifestation of God's grace and presence in our time and place. As such the Church is divine, transcendent and salvific. "As a reality which is 'divine,' the Church is no merely human institution; as 'transcendent,' it will always surpass our efforts to grasp it; as 'salvific,' it forms part of God's plan of salvation for humanity" (Sullivan, Francis. *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic*. Mahwah, NJ. Paulist Press, 1988. p.8). The Greek term *mysterion* has been translated into Latin via two terms: *mysterium* and *sacramentum*. A sacrament is a visible sign of God's invisible grace. So the Church can be considered a sacrament (with a small s) in that it is indeed called to be a very visible sign to God's saving, healing, sanctifying, and empowering grace to the entire world in every generation. The Great Commission is clear: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20 NOB). This is what the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is called to be.

It is clear from the gospels that Jesus established a Church which he intended to be visible. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). Jesus also clearly intended for his visible church to be one. In the 17th chapter of John’s gospel Jesus prays to his Heavenly Father for this unity. “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one....Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them....I ask not only for these (the apostles) but on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (us), that they may all be one” (John 17:11,17,18,20,21 NOB). This visible and united church is to be the Sacrament of Salvation for the entire world, as is Jesus.

The early Christians knew about the importance of this unity, which is clearly stressed in the letters of Saint Paul to the local churches. “Live your life in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ....stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (Philippians 1:27 NOB). Time and time again Paul calls the church to oneness. “Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:2 NOB).

The Church from its very beginnings knew that oneness was an essential part of its very character. “Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:33-6). The evidence for this first mark of the Church is seen in these examples and elsewhere. “The earlier letters of Saint Paul also bear strong witness to his sense that it is truly one and the same church that is present in Thessalonica, Corinth and Rome...The reasons why

the Corinthians (or the Ephesians or the Philippians, etc.) ought to behave as one church are the same reasons that make all Christians everywhere one church: Christ has been crucified for all, and all have been baptized equally into him” (Sullivan 35,36). So the Church has, from the beginning, strove for unity in doctrine, teaching, authority, visibility, historicity, and baptism.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares that “the Church is one because of her source: the highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father, and the Son in the Holy Spirit” (CCC 813). The Church is also one because of her founder, the one Son of God, Jesus Christ. She is one in the Holy Spirit who binds the Church together in a wonderful communion. The Church is one because the one Bread and the Cup that we all share are the one Body and Blood of Christ. The Church is also one in her profession of faith, in her common celebration of the Divine Liturgy and in her apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders. (CCC 815)

From its earliest times, the Church has been called holiness. This does not mean that the Church can be triumphalistic. The Church is well aware that it is better described as a hospital for sinners than a resort for saints. “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Nevertheless, the holiness of the Church is evident in the lives of many of its members, in particular the saints. “We call the Church a ‘holy people’ on the grounds that those who are fully incorporated in it are holy” (Sullivan 77). The Church also promotes the virtue of holiness, and her doctrine of salvation (we are saved by faith and by works (holiness) through grace and the reception of the sacraments) attests to this. The Church is holy because her founder, Jesus Christ is holy. The Church is holy because she is the Bride of Christ who came to sanctify her. (CCC 823) The Church is also holy because she has been given the means of sanctification and salvation. The Church is holy because Christ is present in her – present in the Eucharist, in the

Vicar of Christ on earth (the pope), in her priests who serve *in persona Christi* and in her people united and gathered together in Christ.

The Church is also holy because of her charity which is the soul of the holiness to which her members are called. It is charity that “governs, shapes, and perfects all the means of sanctification” (Lumen Gentium 42). Jesus called his church to charity. “I give you a new commandment – love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34, 35). The holiness and oneness of the Church are intrinsically connected. Her members are bound together by love in the *imitation of Christ* that makes the Church holy. The same one Son of God that died for the church is the reason for her holiness and her oneness. The one Body and Blood of Christ that we share together makes us one as well as holy. The Church is enabled and gathered together as one by the same Holy Spirit through whom we are sanctified and made holy. The other sacraments serve as well to make us holy and, at the same time, bind us together as one. As the Sacrament of Salvation for the entire world, we are all called to become a part of the one Church. We are saved (made holy) by being a part of this one Church - Christ Body which is holy and not divided.

The Church has been called catholic (universal) as early as Saint Ignatius of Antioch around the year 155. “Where there is Jesus Christ, there is the Catholic Church” (St Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Smyrn. 8, 2: Apostolic Fathers, II/2, 311.) “The Church is catholic because Christ is present in her... In her subsists the fullness of Christ’s Body united with its Head” (CCC 830). The Church is catholic in that it was sent and has been commissioned by Christ to go out to the *entire* world, not only a particular part of it. The Catholic Church has been engaged in this *universal* mission from the very beginning, and universality has become a part of its character. “The character of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself whereby the Catholic

Church ceaselessly and efficaciously seeks for the return of *all humanity* and all its goods , under Christ, the head in the unity of his Spirit” ((LC 13) The early Church realized this same call to universality. The gospel was to be preached to Gentiles as well as Jews. The mission of the Church is indeed catholic.

The church is catholic because in and through it the whole material universe is transformed and saved. The church is hospitable. It invites all races, classes and nations. The church is a family. The Church is catholic in the eschatological sense. The Church is catholic in her ultimate destiny – the Kingdom of God & the Bride of Christ. The Church is an extension of the Incarnation (Sacrament). The Church is catholic in the broadest sense in that even those baptized Christians who find themselves outside of the Catholic Church have a certain communion with it. “Men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church” (Unitatis Redintegratio 3). Since the Church of Christ is called to be one and its members are called to be holy and since this calling is for the entire human race, the Church’s marks of one, holy and catholic are intrinsically interrelated and cannot be separated.

Finally the Church is apostolic. It is apostolic because it was founded on the apostles and because it faithfully defends and proclaims the true teachings of the apostles. The Church preserves and rightly exercises the authority that Jesus gave to the apostles, and that the apostles conferred on the elders who took their place. Its bishops, even today, enjoy the charism of apostolic succession. “The bishops have by divine institution taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church, in such wise that whoever listens to them is listening to Christ and whoever despises them despises Christ and him who sent Christ” (LG 20). It was Jesus himself who sent the apostles on their mission. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21)

Jesus wants all to be saved. He sent the apostles and their successors to accomplish this mission through preaching the gospel and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is the one, holy and catholic Church. The Church must also be apostolic because these are the men who were chosen by Christ and charged with founding and leading the church. All are called to follow them, and all who follow them are a part of the universal church founded by Christ on the apostles. Each local Church, under the leadership of the bishop, is a living symbol of the *unity* of the mystical Body of Christ. “In each altar community, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, a manifest symbol is to be seen of the clarity and unity of the mystical body.” (LG, 26) “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Matthew 10:40 NOB). It is by means of this one, catholic and apostolic Church that we are made *holy* (sanctified) and provided the path the eternal life through the sacraments. The four marks of the Church are forever interrelated and can never be separated. This is why and how the Church is what she has always been called to be – the one Sacrament of Salvation until the end of time. “Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20 NOB).