

One, Holy, Catholic. . .

“Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of Heaven from God, . . . And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. ~ Revelation 21:9-10, 14

WE PROFESS IN THE CREED, “the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” Traditionally these four characteristics are called the *four marks* of the Church. The first three marks are discussed below. Although the last mark, apostolicity, is discussed in a separate handout (see *The Church is Apostolic*), it must be understood that it is the *sure foundation* of the Church which ensures her unity, holiness, and catholicity; it is the mark that links them all. The Church is one, holy, and catholic *because she is founded by Jesus Christ on the apostles, and he supernaturally guarantees that the apostolic ministry will perpetually continue in her bishops.*

The name “Church” is a derivative of the Greek *Kyriake*, meaning “what belongs to the Lord.” The Church is the moon to the sun of Christ; she reflects his brilliance but does not create it. For this reason, when we profess our faith in the marks of the Church, we are not professing our faith in the Church herself, but in the Triune God who created, established, and continually sanctifies her.

The relationship of the Church to God is so rich and so diverse that numerous symbolic images have been used in an effort to communicate this wonderful reality. The Greek word *ekklesia* (derived from “to call out of”), was the preferred word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) to designate the assembly of the Israelites, the Chosen People, before God. The Church sees herself as the heir to that assembly, in the threefold sense of the

liturgical assembly, convened to pray and worship; the local community of believers; and the universal Church that is the People of God gathering in the entire world. In all these senses, she is the Body of Christ (see Col 1:18).

St. Peter and his successors were commissioned by Christ with the task of feeding and tending his sheep (see Jn 21:15-17). Jesus himself is the door to the sheepfold (see Jn 10:7), and the Church is his sheepfold. The Church, in another image, is a cultivated field, specifically a vineyard (see Mt 21:33-43) of which Jesus is the true vine and we the faithful are the branches who bear fruit if we abide in him (see Jn 15:1-8). The Church is also symbolized as a building: the house of God (see Heb 10:21), the household of God (see 1 Tm 3:15), the dwelling-place of God among us (see Rv 21:3), the holy temple (see Eph 2:21), and the new Jerusalem (see beginning verses above). The faithful are the living stones of this building (see 1 Pt 2:5).

Finally, and most beautifully, the Church is the Bride of Christ whom he loved and “gave himself up for her; that he might sanctify her; having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27). This is the glorious Bride of the book of Revelation, the Bride of the Lamb (see, for example, Rv 19:7; beginning verses above), and she is our mother (see Gal 4:26).

“While unity subsists in the Catholic Church, this unity has been profoundly wounded.”



The largest church in the world, St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, constructed from 1506 to 1615

The Church is One

The Church is one because of Christ. He founded his Church

on St. Peter (see Mt 16:18) and the rest of the apostles and ensured that through them and their successors gathered around the successor of St. Peter, the Gospel would continue to be preached and his Kingdom would spread throughout the whole world. The one Church continues his saving presence on earth and unites the People of God in *“love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”* (Col 3:14). Although charity is the most important sign of the Church’s unity, there are also three other visible bonds of her communion: **1)** the profession of the one faith received from the apostles; **2)** the common celebration of the sacraments; and **3)** the apostolic succession which ensures that the authority of our present pope and bishops is the same as that received by the apostles from Christ.

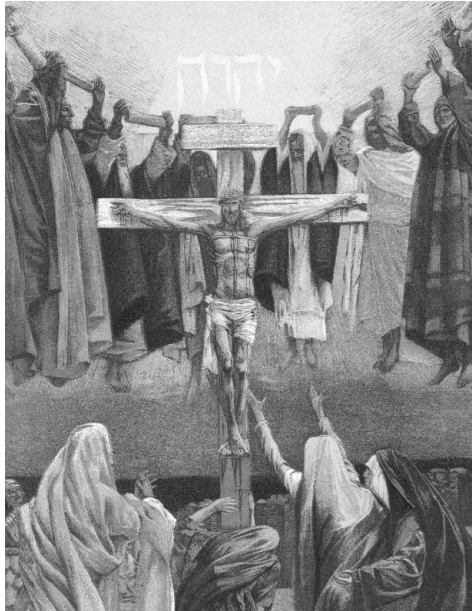
We cannot fail to recognize that, while unity subsists in the Catholic Church, this unity has been profoundly wounded by divisions caused at least in part by the sins and pride of her own sons and daughters. The Church prays constantly for Christian unity in its work of ecumenism and strives to heal these wounds and reunite all Christians into the one Church of Christ.

The Church is Holy

Jesus taught us to *“be perfect as [our] Heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mt 5:48) and so the Church offers to its members every spiritual gift and grace toward this end of perfection and sanctity. Viewed from above, the Church is that divine institution created by the Father, established by the Son, and animated by the Holy Spirit. She is the Bride of Christ and the new Jerusalem shown to St. John in his Heavenly vision: *“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”* (Rv 21:2). Viewed below, the holiness of the Church is imperfect. As the Kingdom of God on earth, the Church is made up of saints *on the way* who have not yet attained the perfection which awaits them in Heaven.

This of course does not fully explain the weak-

“The Church is meant to draw people from every corner of the world into her fold.”



It is Finished, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

nesses and moral failings of some of her children in past and present centuries. For that, our Lord offers the parable of the wheat and the weeds (see Mt 13:24-30, 36-43). Like the master of the field who allows the weeds to grow up with the wheat until harvest lest in uprooting them the wheat is destroyed, the Church is patient with all her children and holds out to them, even the most hardened sinners, the mercy and love of God. When Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, only then will he *“gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire”* (Mt 13:41-42). It should also be noted that, during the Church’s more difficult times, the Lord has been gracious in sending her great models of sanctity and charity.

The Church is Catholic

The word “catholic” means universal, which is applied to the Church in two ways. First, the Church is catholic in the sense of being “whole” or “total” because in her, according to the merits of Christ, subsists the fullness of Revelation and means of universal salvation. Only the Church has the fullness of the deposit of faith because only she is linked to the apostles who were entrusted with it and given the great commission from the Lord: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”* (Mt 28:19-20).

Second, the Church is catholic in the sense of “universal” because she is meant to draw people from every corner of the world into her fold. Thus, evangelization is both a sign and a requirement of the Church’s catholicity. God desires all people to be drawn into the Church and form the one People of God as one family. Her missionary effort respects cultural differences from around the world when they do not conflict with Gospel values, and the Church herself is made more beautiful by the diversity of gifts poured out by the Holy Spirit and by the diversity of cultures in which she finds herself.

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