

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

2. THE CHURCH IS ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC & APOSTOLIC

(Catechism nn. 811-870)

The Church is One

Whereas the Apostles' Creed states simply: 'I believe in the holy Catholic Church', the Council of Constantinople added to the Nicene Creed the words:

'We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.'

The Church is One (Catechism n. 813-822).

We continue our reflections on the Church, covering the Catechism n.811-870, beginning with our belief that the Church is One. The Church is One because there is One Source (the 'Father'), One Word (Jesus) and One Spirit (the love that unites Jesus and the Father) (n. 813).

Among the bonds that keep the followers of Jesus in communion, the Catechism mentions faith, hope, love, liturgy and church order (n. 815), Speaking of the Catholic Church in communion with the Church of Rome, Vatican II chooses its words carefully:

'The Church *subsists* in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him'(LG n.8; Catechism n. 816).

This is intended not to be an exclusive statement: nothing is being said about other churches. It is an assurance that if one looks at the Catholic Church we are seeing the Church of Jesus, in spite of our human frailty and brokenness, and the failure of its members to live up to the ideals lived by Jesus.

The Church is obviously fractured, and the Catechism (n. 817-818) admits that 'often enough both sides are to blame'. In any case, blame is not often helpful. We are to take responsibility for our own actions, and present members are not responsible for past breaks, though we may well be responsible for continuing the break. The diversity of churches is only a problem when communion is broken. It is communion, not uniformity, that is the issue. Hence Paul's plea that we 'make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'(Ephesians 4:3; Catechism n. 814).

It is the responsibility of all who call themselves followers of Jesus to accept each other as brothers and sisters. The Catechism goes on to stress the need for renewal, conversion, knowledge, dialogue, shared prayer and working together (n. 821). We should reflect on Jesus' own prayer:

'I ask ... on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'(John 17:20-23).

Let us reflect on Paul's urgent words:

'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 4:3).

The Vatican II decree on Ecumenism is entitled *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964). The title itself recognises that there has been a fracture, and that there needs to be a re-integration in which all of the fractured parts come together to restore communion. The Council accepted that there will be diversity. Unity is to be only in essentials:

‘While preserving unity in essentials, let everyone in the Church, according to the office entrusted to him, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail. If they are true to this course of action, they will be giving ever richer expression to the authentic catholicity and apostolicity of the Church’ (UR 1.4).

Not everything that is taught belongs to the inner circle of essential truths. It is important to recognise this and not to insist on uniformity in matters that are not central. The same document continues:

‘In Catholic doctrine there exists an order or “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith (UR 2.11).’

In an article entitled “*Philosophy and Theology*” (*Theological Investigations VI*), Karl Rahner writes:

‘We Christians are on the whole too blind or too lazy to recognise the latent ‘Christianity’ in the history of human existence, or religion in general and of philosophy. Unconsciously we are often guilty of living in the selfish narrow-mindedness of those who think their knowledge is more valuable and more blessed with grace if it is possessed only by a few; we rather foolishly think that God himself only makes an impression on men with his truth when we have already made an impression on them.’

In *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (page 356), he writes:

‘We Christians today readily admit that other Christians live in the grace of God, that they are filled with the Holy Spirit, are justified, are children of God and are united with Jesus Christ, and that in the ecclesial and social dimension too they are united in very many respects with all other Christians and with all other denominations. Without doubt, then, much more and much more fundamental things unite Christians of the different churches than divide them.’

Pope Paul VI spoke on this in a homily preached on the occasion of the canonisation of 40 English and Welsh martyrs (Oct 25th 1970). To the prepared homily, he added in his own hand the following paragraph:

‘May the blood of these martyrs be able to heal the great wound inflicted on God’s Church by reason of the separation of the Anglican Church from the Catholic Church ... Their devotion to their country gives us the assurance that on that day, when – God willing – the unity of faith and life is restored, no offence will be inflicted on the honour and integrity of a great country such as England. There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and usage proper to the Anglican Church

The Church is One

when the Roman Catholic Church – this humble “servant of the servants of God” – is able to embrace firmly her ever-beloved sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ: a communion of origin and faith, a communion of priesthood and rule, a communion of saints in the freedom and love of the spirit of Jesus.’

Pope John-Paul II begins and ends his encyclical “*That they may be One*” (1995) by mentioning the unity that we already experience in the shared sanctity of Christians of all churches who have given their lives for Christ. This gives him hope that we can overcome what he calls the ‘burden of long-standing misgivings inherited from the past’ the ‘mutual misunderstandings and prejudices’, the ‘complacency’, ‘indifference’ and ‘insufficient knowledge of one another’(n.2) that ‘openly contradict the will of Christ, scandalise the world, and damage that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature’(n.6). He also asks forgiveness for the hurts caused by the ways in which popes have misused their ministry (n.88).

The central section of the Encyclical is a record of the advances that had taken place in the 30 to 40 years prior to the encyclical. He speaks for example, of the profound impression made upon him when, during his visit to Sweden, the Lutheran bishops approached him as he was distributing communion. They did not request communion, but they did ask for a blessing, thus expressing their deep longing for the day when full unity will be expressed in shared communion (n.72). Sharing their longing the Pope writes:

‘It is now necessary to advance towards visible unity ... so that the Churches may truly become a sign of that full communion in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church which will be expressed in the common celebration of the Eucharist’(n.78).

In the Decree of the Vatican Council on Ecumenism we read (n.24):

‘This council declares that it realises that the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ transcends human powers and gifts. It therefore places its hope entirely in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. ‘And hope does not disappoint, because God’s love has been poured forth in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.’

Our final reflection on the Church being One is from Peter Cornwell, former Anglican Chaplain of Oxford University who joined the Catholic Church in 1985. In his Book *One Step Enough* (a phrase taken from Cardinal Newman who made the same journey a century earlier) he writes:

‘The Christian enterprise is not a book or a club for religious do-it-yourself enthusiasts, but a movement, a stream of life passing through different ages and cultures. In mid-stream are those Christians in communion with Rome.’

He goes on:

‘That stream has encountered log-jams of rubbish, the product of human sin and inertia. So I can understand frustrated reformers who have felt compelled to divert from the main stream. Yet I have come to see that such separation is ultimately destructive and diminishing. Christian creativity lies in unity. Variety is the spice of Christian life, but this variety must be held together in a coherent fellowship. We need one another’s gifts to be balanced followers of Christ. For Christian unity I have always longed and prayed, a unity which is more like marriage than simply the friendly relations of good neighbours, a unity with bonds strong enough to hold together the lively treasures of human life ... For my part, I can no longer see any reason of substance and principle to hold apart from the main stream. Life is too short, the Gospel too precious, the human issues too serious to waste time thinking up reasons for preserving division’ (page 138-139).

The Church is Holy (Catechism n. 823-829)

Strictly speaking the word ‘holy’ applies only to God. It speaks of God’s transcendence. When we speak of a place being ‘holy’, as we do when we speak of a ‘sanctuary’, we are saying that God has been experienced in that place. The Holy One can be encountered there. In this sense we are right to speak of the whole of creation as ‘holy’. When we speak of a person being ‘holy’, as we do when we speak of ‘saints’, once again we are not speaking of some special quality that person has. Rather we are saying that God is present in that person. The Holy One can be encountered there.

The Church is called ‘holy’ because God has chosen the Church as his Temple. Let us listen to Paul’s words to the community in Corinth:

‘God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple’(1Corinthians 3:17).

Obviously there were sinners in the Church of Corinth – the letter makes that very clear. There have always been sinners in the Church, because, in the words of the Catechism (n.827), ‘the Church clasps sinners to her bosom’, as did Jesus (see Luke 15:1-2). God’s love is constantly pruning and purifying the Church. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* n.39, the Vatican Council had this to say:

‘The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful. And so it must be. It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love.’

Since God is love, the Church is holy insofar as the Church loves. It is the Spirit of communion between Jesus and God that is the soul and the heart of the Church. The holiness of the Church has its source in this Spirit. If we lived fully the life offered us in the Church, we would all be able to say with Paul:

‘I live, no longer I, for it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I live now is by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

The Church is Catholic

The Church is Catholic (Catechism n. 830-856)

We refer the reader to our reflections on pages 150ff on the universal ('catholic') mission of the Church (see also Catechism n.831 and 849). The Catechism (n. 835) notes:

'The rich variety of ecclesiastical disciplines, liturgical rites and theological and spiritual heritages proper to the local churches, unified in a common mission, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided church.' The Catechism (n.836) goes on to note: 'All people are called to this catholic unity of the People of God ... And to it, in different ways belong or are ordered: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and every human being called to salvation by God's grace.'

Speaking of the Church's catholic mission, the Catechism (n.850) states:

'The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make people share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love.'

Who, then, belong to the 'Catholic' Church? The Catechism writes (n. 837):

'Fully incorporated into the society of the Church are those who,

1. possessing the Spirit of Christ,
2. accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organisation,
3. and who, by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion, are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops.'

While the general thrust of this statement seems clear enough, I find the language unhelpful. What does it mean to accept the Church's 'entire organisation', when we know that the organisation has changed over the centuries, and needs to change now? Christ loves and inspires the Church. Is this expressed well by 'rules'? The Catechism goes straight on to state:

'Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not persevere in charity remains in the bosom of the Church, but in body not heart.'

We could say of each person who identifies as being a member of the Catholic Church in the sense just defined, that we are members of the Church only to the extent that we live the life of the Church. The 'unconverted' parts of our heart and mind are still outside the Church. In this sense the 'Catholic Church' is the stuff of dreams. It is the goal towards which Jesus challenges us to strive. It is the fruit of the action of his Spirit in the hearts of men and women everywhere. Those Christians who identify with the word 'Catholic' are stating that they are not a 'denomination': they will never be satisfied to be one community as against others.

The Catechism goes on to speak of the real, though imperfect communion that exists with other Christians, especially with the Orthodox Christians (n. 838). It may be of interest here to list the main Eastern Churches with the approximate number of members in each:

1. The Assyrian Church in the East (550,000)

- Nestorians fled to Persia (Iran & Iraq) where they had to show loyalty by distancing themselves from the Catholic Faith of the Roman Empire
- Chaldean Catholic Church (c.500,000)
Syro-Malabar Catholic Church (c.3 million)

2. Oriental Orthodox Churches (opposed to the formula of Chalcedon, 451)

- Armenian Apostolic Church (6 million). 150,000 are in communion with the Catholic Church
- Coptic Orthodox Church (4 million) (Catholic 150,000)
- Ethiopian Orthodox Church (16 million) (Catholic 120,000)
- Syrian Orthodox Church (250,000 + Million in India) (Catholic 100,000)
- Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (1 million) (Catholic 280,000)

3. Orthodox Church (recognise Chalcedon)

There are 13 fully independent Churches in full sacramental and canonical communion

- Patriarchate of Constantinople (3,500,000)
- Patriarchate of Alexandria (350,000)
- Patriarchate of Antioch (750,000) (Melkite Catholic 1 million)
- Patriarchate of Jerusalem (260,000)
- Orthodox Church of Russia (50 million) (Ukrainian Catholic 4 million)
- Orthodox Church of Serbia (8 million) (Catholic 50,000)
- Orthodox Church of Romania (17 million) (Catholic 1,500,000)
- Orthodox Church of Bulgaria 8 million) (Catholic 15,000)
(Hungarian Catholic 270,000)
- Orthodox Church of Georgia (5 million)
- Orthodox Church of Cyprus (440,000)
- Orthodox Church of Greece (9 million) (Catholic 2,300)
- Orthodox Church of Poland (1 million) (Ruthenian Catholic 700,000)
- Orthodox Church of Albania (200,000)

Orthodox Church of Czechoslovakia (150,000) (Catholic 400,000)

Orthodox Church of America (1 million)

The Church is Apostolic

The Catechism speaks, too, of our links with Jews (n. 839), and with Moslems (n. 841). In a beautiful, but challenging comment, the Catechism states (n. 845):

‘The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation.’

This places a major responsibility on the Catholic Church to initiate and encourage dialogue to understand better the elements of truth and grace found in the other communities (see n. 856 and 870).

The Church is Apostolic (Catechism n. 857-870)

Our faith is based on the faith of those who experienced Jesus during his public ministry, and who recognised his presence and action in their post-crucifixion experiences. The Catechism (n. 813) quotes from the Preface used on the feasts of the apostles:

‘Father, you are the eternal shepherd who never leaves his flock untended. Through the apostles you watch over us and protect us always. You made them shepherds of the flock to share in the work of your Son, and from their place in heaven they guide us still.’

The apostles appointed successors to be pastors of the flock (Catechism n. 850, 860-862). We will look at this more carefully in the following chapter. For the present it is enough to note the following statement (Catechism n. 863):

‘The whole Church is apostolic in that it remains, through the successors of St. Peter and the other apostles, in communion of faith and life with its origin, and in that it is sent out to the whole world. All members of the Church share in this mission, though in various ways.’

We conclude with the following statement from the Catechism (n. 864):

‘The fruitfulness of apostolate depends on their vital union with Christ ... Charity, drawn above all from the Eucharist, is always, as it were, the soul of the apostolate.’