

Be Not Afraid

Bishop John M. LeVoir's Monthly Column

for *The Prairie Catholic*

March 2016

One, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church

At the end of the Nicene Creed, which we recite each weekend at Mass, we say: "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." "One, holy, catholic, and apostolic" are called the four characteristics of the Church. How important are these characteristics?

The Catechism teaches: "The Church is ultimately one, holy, catholic, and apostolic in her deepest and ultimate identity, because it is in her that 'the Kingdom of heaven,' the 'Reign of God,' already exists and will be fulfilled at the end of time" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 865).

So, these four characteristics are *very* important because they express the deepest identity of the Church. Consequently, they are well worth exploring so that we might know our Church more thoroughly.

Why does the Church possess these four characteristics? She possesses them because they were given to her by her founder, Jesus Christ, by the will of the Father and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Church is one

Why is the Church one? There are three reasons. The Church is one because the source of the Church is the one God, who is at the same time a trinity of Persons. Reflecting the Trinity, the Church is one, but is composed of many persons.

She is one because her founder, Jesus Christ, suffered, died, and rose from the dead to reconcile humankind to God and to bring all people together as one.

The Church is one because the Holy Spirit, who is the principle of the unity of the Church, brings all the faithful together as one in the bond of charity. St. Paul tells us that the bond of unity or oneness in the Church is charity or love: "And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection" (Col 3:14). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church professes the one faith, a common celebration of the sacraments, and apostolic succession from the first apostles through to today.

About the oneness of the Church, the Catechism teaches: "The sole [one] Church of Christ [is that] which our Savior, after his Resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care, commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter [the pope] and by the bishops in communion with him" (CCC, no. 816).

Furthermore, the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism explains: "For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained" (CCC, no. 816).

Church is holy

Second, the Church is holy because her founder, Jesus Christ, is holiness itself. Jesus made the Church holy through his death and resurrection and by joining the Church to himself. Jesus gives the Church the Holy Spirit, making her a holy people.

The Church is holy, but this does not mean that every member of the Church is perfectly holy. "The Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity [holiness] that is real though imperfect" (CCC, no. 825).

So the holiness of the Church is real, but it is imperfect. That means that all of us sinners are called to cooperate with Christ and advance in the perfection of holiness by the means given to us by the Church, such as the sacraments.

Church is catholic

Third, the Church is catholic. “The word ‘catholic’ means ‘universal,’ in the sense of ‘according to the totality’ or ‘in keeping with the whole’” (CCC, no. 830). The Church is catholic for two reasons. One is because the Church possesses the fullness of Christ’s presence and the fullness of the means of salvation. To emphasize the fullness of Christ’s presence in the Church, one of the early theologians of the Church wrote: “Where there is Christ Jesus, there is the Catholic Church” (CCC, no. 830).

In the Church, one finds everything that Jesus has revealed, all of the sacraments that Christ instituted (seven in number), and apostolic succession. Apostolic succession is “the handing on of apostolic preaching and authority from the Apostles to their successors the bishops through the laying on of hands, as a permanent office in the Church” (CCC, Glossary).

The second reason that the Church is catholic is because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race (CCC, no. 830). Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus commissioned his Apostles to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:9). At present, there are an estimated 1.2 billion Catholics throughout the world.

Church is apostolic

Fourth, the Church is apostolic because she is founded on the apostles. Everything that Jesus wanted to give to the Church, he gave to the Apostles. Through the Apostles, the words and deeds of Jesus were handed on within the Church. It is by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the Church, that the words and deeds of Jesus are kept, lived, and handed on. The Church “continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ’s return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, assisted by priests, in union with the successor of Peter, the Church’s supreme pastor [the pope]” (CCC, no. 857)

So, the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. “These four characteristics, inseparably linked with each other, indicate essential features of the Church and her mission. The Church does not possess them of herself; it is Christ who, through the Holy Spirit, makes his Church one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and it is he who calls her to realize each of these qualities” (CCC, no. 811).

The Catholic Church is the one Church that Christ founded. But this does not mean that there is not holiness and truth outside of the Catholic Church. God can work outside of the structures of the Catholic Church to bring about holiness and truth. Nevertheless, the “Church possesses the fullness of Christ’s presence and the fullness of the means of salvation” (CCC, no. 830).

Easter

Let these words of Pope Francis from Easter 2013 inspire us this Easter: “On this radiant night, let us invoke the intercession of the Virgin Mary, who treasured all these events in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19, 51) and ask the Lord to give us a share in his Resurrection. May he open us to the newness that transforms. May he make us men and women capable of remembering all that he has done in our own lives and in the history of our world. May he help us to feel his presence as the one who is alive and at work in our midst. And may he teach us each day not to look among the dead for the Living One. Amen.”

May all have a most blessed Easter!