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ON THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

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In the analysis of Catholicity offered here, Fr. Robert Slesinski examines insights from both Roman Catholic and Orthodox sources in an effort to suggest a richer meaning for this third mark of Christ's Church. Arguing that Catholicity is rooted in the fullness of Christ in the Church, Fr. Slesinski presents a description of the marks of the Church which may well have a positive impact on our separated brethren of the East.



OR THE SINCERE BELIEVER IN TODAY'S TROUBLED WORLD, THE GREATEST source of consolation has to be the Church as a sign of salvation—even in the face of the manifold forces seemingly conspiring against the continued existence of the Church as an institution. The salvation, which is the Church, is especially experienced at the Divine Liturgy or Holy Mass, when the Savior gives himself to the faithful in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist whereby true communion is effected between God and man, and among men themselves. It is, indeed, around the altar of the

Lord that the ecclesial community is at once constituted and sustained, and from which the divine presence irradiates the *ekklesia* or assembly of the people, thereby giving luminous significance to the words of the Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Creed, “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic,” which refer specifically to the Church, but which have their ultimate foundation in the Lord.

“One, holy, catholic, and apostolic”—these are the essential marks of the Church of Christ as professed by the Christian assembly in its recitation of the Creed and as traditionally taught in catechesis. These marks “sign” the Church, because they bear the impress of her Founder. The Church is “one,” because there is but one Body of Christ and one Spirit of God at work in the Church. As St. Paul trenchantly notes (Eph 4:5-6): “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all, and works through all, and is in all.” The Church is “holy,” because her Lord is the font of all holiness. “For I, the Lord, am your God; and you shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy” (Lev 11:44). The Church is “catholic,” because she is “the fullness of him who fills the universe in all its parts” (Eph 1:23). The Church is “apostolic,” because she is fully faithful to the heritage of the first apostles, her first shepherds, and has, throughout the ages, been the zealous guardian of the spiritual patrimony originally bequeathed her by the Lord. She has put on the armor of God (see Eph 6:10-17) in order to go forth and fulfill the divine mandate first given the faithful Eleven and bring the Good News to the four corners of the globe: “. . . go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you . . .” (Mt 28:19-20).

The marks of the Church moreover enjoy *internal unity*¹ among themselves, because they are all signs of the *presence* of Christ in the Church. This latter point is the profound, *theological* meaning of the marks of the Church that is so often misunderstood by the rank and file faithful. The Church is one, because her Lord is One; the Church is holy, because her Lord is Holy; the Church is catholic, because she is the Body of him who enjoys the fullness of

Truth and Life; and the Church is apostolic, because her mission in and to the world is a continuation of the work of the first apostles, itself a holy charge of her Redeemer who alone can guarantee its success.

The marks of the church belong to the Church's very essence as willed by God. The perception of this essence, however, is not a matter for mere empirical observation, but concerns theological insight into the nature of the Church. From without, that is, from the perspective of blunt observation, the Church presents herself as a mixed sign, as both a sign and a countersign. The Church enjoys a certain unity in concept, but manifests herself in the world as divided, and possibly even in total disarray. Sanctity can also be perceived in the Church. But who would deny, from the empirical standpoint, that sin is ever present in the Church, both in her structures and personnel? Again, the Church does indeed show catholic aspects to the world, but, then, what about her provincialisms in many quarters? More gravely, what is one to make of the phenomenon of national or ethnic Churches around the world?² Lastly, the Church professes to be apostolic, but could this not be more an indication of a romantic spirit, a pretense to past glory? How could anyone hold that, structurally speaking, the Church of today is identical to the Church of the Apostles?

To perceive the essential features of the Church, one must grasp the nature of the Church from within, from the privileged standpoint of faith in Christ both as Founder and everlasting Spouse of the Church. It is exclusively from this perspective that the spiritual reality of the Church underlying her active presence in the world can be ascertained. The Church is one with Christ, and serves as His temporal extension in the world until the end of time. The marks of the Church in this viewpoint cannot, for this reason, be construed as something extrinsic to her inner nature, something in the order of an ornament, but only as radical expressions of what is willed by Christ for her as the Head of her Body. Otherwise the Church would lose all intelligibility and credibility to the world. Only in the light of Christ, accord-

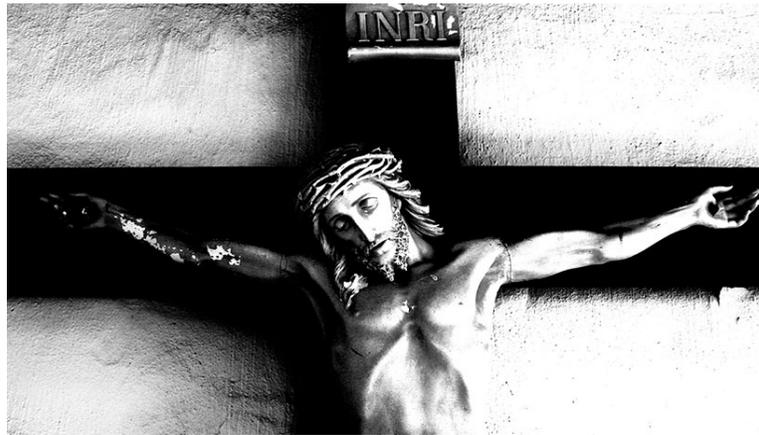
ingly, is the formal standpoint of empiricism seen to be entirely deficient. Likewise, it is only in this perspective that the profound truth of the Church's unicity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity can come to the fore.

Of all the marks of the Church, one of them in particular, the "Church as catholic," is especially prone to misunderstanding and misstatement. Without keen theological insight this note of the Church all too readily is reduced to a mere question of geography and cultural diversity. Insofar as the aspect of "quantity" is given preeminence, the "catholicity" of the Church takes on the air of a secular standard, albeit imposing. But, in the light of eternity, "does might ever make right?" Is it bigness that really counts? Is the Catholic Church "catholic" solely owing to the number and type of her members? Or is some other criterion involved.?

What, indeed, does it mean to be the catholic Church? How does the Church, herself understand her "catholicity?" In what precisely does her "catholic" self-identity consist?

THE MARK OF CATHOLICITY

A brief survey of popular Catholic literature on the subject is somewhat disappointing in what it reveals. Two misconceptions are common to this literature. First, the Church of Christ, which is the Catholic Church, is identified solely with the *Roman* Catholic Church. Often this identification is made upon a hasty reading of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, esp. no. 8).³ This document explicitly states: "This Church [of Christ], constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successors of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure."⁴ The Council Fathers specifically use the more nuanced word, "subsists," rather than "is," not owing to any lack of consciousness of the Church's "catholic" identity, but only to indicate that other Christian "Churches" and "ecclesial



communions” enjoy Catholic elements outside the visible bounds of the Catholic Church, which truly lead to full communion with the Catholic Church. The quoted affirmation thus accords with the ecumenical intent of the Council Fathers without in any way understating the Catholic Church’s self-identity.

The conciliar documents, however, never refer to the Catholic Church as the Roman Catholic Church and, it would seem, for good reason.⁵ What would the Council Fathers otherwise be imputing to the Eastern Catholic Churches enjoying full communion with the Apostolic See, which are not Roman, but which do indeed recognize the universal authority and jurisdiction of the Roman Pontiff? They are fully Catholic Churches in themselves, and are by no means mere appendages of the Roman Church. Unquestionably, papal supremacy is recognized in these Churches, but that does not subsume them in some fashion into the Roman Church.⁶ Such an erroneous understanding, unfortunately, has often led in the past to the many tragic-and generally forced-Latinizations of the Eastern Catholic Church so lamented by the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox not in communion with Rome.

One, of course, can readily understand why so many Roman Catholics identify the Catholic Church with the Roman Catholic Church, considering the vastly greater numerical strength of the Roman Rite compared to the relatively miniscule-but not insignificant-Eastern Rites. But the addition of the qualifier, “Roman” to describe the Universal Church remains an unwarranted interpolation nonetheless, and the typical Roman Catholic is in no way exonerated from his error. Indeed, the cause of ecumenism itself is at stake, for, it would seem, we are dealing with more than a mere terminological dispute, but rather with the question of how a true unity in diversity or diversity in unity obtains with the very bounds of the Church, thus rendering her “catholic.”

The Universal Catholic Church is a communion of local Catholic Churches which acknowledge the “universal episcopacy” of the Roman Pontiff as being the will of the Lord for the governance and preservation of the unity in diversity of the Church of Christ. But the local Catholic Church the Roman Rite-of which the Successor of Peter in his capacity as Bishop of Rome is the chief shepherd or patriarch, does not thereby acquire any “pre-eminence” over the other Rites or local Churches of the Catholic Church as stated in the theory of some

Roman Catholic theologians in the past, especially in the eighteenth century. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches (no. 3) explicitly rejects this view and states that all individual Churches or Rites, whether of the East or of the West, are of “equal dignity.”⁷ Therefore, it behooves all Catholics, when speaking of the “Catholic Church” in her universality, to avoid such restrictive designation as “Roman Catholic,” “Byzantine Catholic,” “Maronite Catholic,” “Malabar Catholic,” etc.

Considering the Church’s, especially the papacy’s, overriding interest in the ecumenical movement, another clarification must be made concerning the meaning of the “catholicity” of the Church in order to foster a radical appreciation of both her unity and diversity. It must be remembered that other Christian Churches not united with Rome, in particular the Orthodox Church, claim to be the Catholic Church. How do they understand their catholicity? And is there possibly some common basis in these claims to “catholicity” that can enhance, rather than upset, the cause for ecumenical unity in today’s divided Christianity?



Typically, a Catholic, when asked to define “catholicity,” responds that it means “universality.” The answer, of course, is correct. But the difficulty lies in the fact that it is a *derivative* meaning that has in effect displaced its primary, *theological* meaning. When the word, “catholic” was first used in Christian literature by St. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 100) in his letter to the Smyrneans, the term referred exclusively to the *presence* of Christ in the Church. “Where Jesus Christ is,” St. Ignatius declares, “there is the catholic Church.” (*Smyrn.* 8:2) His usage of the term, “catholic” is derived from the Greek adverb *kath’holon*, meaning “in reference to the whole,”⁸ and the theological point he is venturing to make is that the fullness of life and truth found in the Church is to be explained solely and simply by the fact that Christ resides there. As the evangelist writes (Jn 1:16): “Of his fullness we have all had a share.” Or, as St. Paul observes, the Church is the Body of Christ, “the fullness of him who fills the universe in all its parts.” (Eph 1:23).

Thus, it is because Christ heads the Church that she truly is “catholic,” that the whole of truth and life is

within her bounds, that, in sum, she is salvation. This is, in essence, the *qualitative* significance of the term, “catholicity.” It is also only now that the sense of “catholicity” implying “orthodoxy” can become intelligible. The “right believer” is the one who remains faithful to the whole truth about Christ, the one who does not pick and choose his beliefs as the heretic (Gr. *hairesetikos*, able to choose) does, nor the one who causes divisions in the community, the schismatic. “Orthodoxy,” meaning fidelity to the fullness of Christian revelation, is thus the first quantitative consequent entailed by the quality of “catholicity” as inhering in the Church. The second necessary implication, quantitatively speaking, of “catholicity” is that it intends the “universal:” all people and all cultures are summoned to be instaurated in the light of Christ and his gospel. The Church is thus essentially evangelical in her nature, and any lack of sense of “mission” in her midsts, accordingly, can only be construed as a betrayal of her catholicity.

Catholic authors⁹ generally seem to highlight only the quantitative dimension of the Church’s catholicity, while just implicitly affirming its qualitative core, its foundation in Christ. Orthodox thinkers, on the other hand, possibly owing to their penchant for “mystical theology,”¹⁰ have tended to focus on the qualitative side of catholicity in their reflections on the nature of the Church.¹¹ To confirm this observation, a study of relevant texts is in order. Most importantly, an examination of the principal adult catechisms for Catholics on the market today is advised.

CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX EMPHASES

The excellent and frequently cited handbook by Fr. John Hardon, S.J., *The Catholic Catechism* is a good first case in point. In spite of his clear expositions throughout the work as a whole, when examining the doctrine of Vatican II on the question of where the one Church of Christ is to be found, he unfortunately falls into terminological inexactitude in stating that this Church subsists in the Roman Catholic Church.¹² He also moves too quickly when discussing the mark of catholicity in the Church in that he manages only to isolate two of its aspects, both of them “quantitative” in character. Speaking of the mark of catholicity, he notes that by the end of the second century, “it had acquired the two meanings now mainly associated with the term: ‘universal’ in the sense of extended throughout the world and ‘orthodox’ or faithful to the teachings of Christ.”¹³ In this passage,

we see that, for Hardon, catholicity refers to the geographical universality of the Church which strives for a “unity amidst diversity”¹⁴ among all peoples and cultures, and to the “orthodox” character of the Church as faithful to all the teachings of Christ. Surprisingly, however, though he cites¹⁵ the famous aphorism of St. Ignatius of Antioch (“Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”), he neglects to explicate its full theological significance for the catholicity of the Church.

Similar remarks can be said of the other important American Catholic adult catechism, *The Teaching of Christ*. This catechism notably describes the Church as the presence of Christ and of his Spirit,¹⁶ and thus we witness a virtual grasping of the true qualitative dimension of the marks of the Church. Still the work falls short of the mark in its explicit treatment of the Church’s catholicity. We read:

Christ’s Church must be “catholic.” The word “catholic” means “universal.” The Catholic Church is a Church for all peoples in all places and in all times.

Moreover, the Church is universal, or catholic, in that it continues to teach all of what Christ taught. And it regards itself as obliged by Christ to teach that doctrine to all men.¹⁷

Three shadings of meanings are given to the “catholicity” of the Church in this passage. It refers variously to the Church’s universal geography (“catholicity in space”), her continuity in time (“catholicity in time”), and to her complete orthodoxy or faithfulness to the totality of Christ’s revelation. Everything in this elaboration, it must be stressed, is true. And so also is this the case in Karl Adam’s exposition of catholicity and the Church in his now classic work, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, where he distinguishes the external catholicity of the Church in her mission to all mankind from her internal catholicity which refers both to her orthodoxy or comprehensive acceptance of the whole of revelation and to her message to the integral man, to man in his totality as body and soul, as both sensate and intellectual.¹⁸ But something of the exact quality of catholicity of the Church is still lacking in these treatments of the Church’s catholicity. All of the universal dimensions to catholicity, notwithstanding their truth, are still secondary. They are dependent upon the presence of Christ in the Church, who alone ultimately founds the catholicity of the Church. And to the objection that the insistence upon clarity of insight in this regard is only a matter of fine theologizing, it must

be rejoined that his insight is crucial to the recovery of the true spirit of catholicity in the bosom of the Church and for impelling her forward to complete her ecumenical imperative as mandated by the Lord.

Orthodox authors, even if they fail to appreciate the critical need for a visible center of unity in the Church in order to oversee a truly vital catholicity worldwide, still have managed to capture the essential core of meaning of catholicity in the Church. To corroborate this, we need cite only one Orthodox catechism for adults, Fr. Thomas Hopko's *The Orthodox Faith*. In volume I of this work devoted to Orthodox doctrine, Fr. Hopko writes:

The Church is also catholic because of its relation to God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The word catholic means full, complete, whole, with nothing lacking. God alone is full and total reality; in God alone is there nothing lacking.

Sometimes the catholicity of the Church is understood in terms of the Church's universality throughout time and space. While it is true that the Church is universal-for all men at all times and in all places-this universality is not the real meaning of the term "catholic" when it is used to define the Church. The term "catholic" as originally used to define the Church (as early as the first decades of the second century) was a definition of quality rather than quantity. Calling the Church catholic means to define how it is, namely, full and complete, all-embracing, and with nothing lacking.¹⁹

What explains this shift of accent in the understanding of catholicity? Certainly, it is true that as an institution in today's world the Orthodox Church is much less a force than Catholicism, and, therefore, one cannot imagine Orthodox basking in the glories of universality, even though it must be admitted that there are solid reasons explaining the lack of Orthodox expansion in the world arena (Orthodoxy still is, even if only marginally, represented on all six inhabitable continents), namely, the impenetrable force of Islam on the one (Greek) front and the unforeseen emergence of Communism on the other (Russian and Slavic) front.

The true reason for the change of stress in Orthodoxy from "quantity" to "quality" in the area of catholicity is rather to be found in the experience of the Lord had by the Orthodox at the Divine Liturgy, which has effectively shaped all Orthodox perceptions of the Church.

It is in truth this experience which undergirds the Eucharistic ecclesiology indigenous to Orthodox theology. The Western tradition of Catholicism has, on the other hand, generally favored what is technically called a "universal ecclesiology," a doctrinal stance which has characteristically stressed the elements of primacy and jurisdiction as the divinely-willed forces for maintaining and promoting the Church's catholicity as a true unity and diversity and as ever orthodox in her response to divine revelation.

What has happened at the same time is that the focus on the Church in the Eastern and Western modes of Christianity has tended to be different. Whereas the East highlights the local Church and the local bishop whose chief function is to preside over the celebration of the Eucharist, the West has concerned herself with jurisdictional order and with the linking of any multiplicity in the Church to a primary unicity, this latter finding its most visible and cohesive expression in the person of Peter (and subsequently his successors) as the Universal Pastor in the Church. The consequences of this emphasis for catholicity are capital. For the West, the emphasis naturally falls on the integral whole, the Universal Church girded with a primacy, while for the East, there does not seem to be any need to go beyond the local Church to appreciate the catholicity of the Church.

CONCLUSION

The local Church actualizes catholicity by offering a true Eucharist. The local Church, of course, is not the whole Church, the Universal Church, but still is a manifestation of the catholic Church because Christ is the sole principle of her catholicity. Thus, it is absolutely wrong to determine catholicity by a head count or by merely geographical considerations. One Church is not more catholic than another by a sole consideration of the extent of her human membership. Catholicity is not something "quantifiable" that can either increase or decrease. In other words, it is not something material, but, like the other marks of the Church, is essentially a spiritual reality. As signs of the abiding presence of Christ in her midst, the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the Church accordingly remain constant. Only her human membership can be more or less divided among itself, more or less holy, more or less total in its response to Christ, or more or less apostolic.

A Church properly conscious of her catholicity understands that her true identity lies with Christ, and

that her true mission in life is to reach out, like her Master, to all mankind throughout all time and share the gift of grace she has received from him. Moreover, having in this fashion grasped that she is fully one with the Lord, she also understands that outside of her ambit there is no salvation. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*²⁰ The proper manifestation of this catholicity, however, does not lie in any sort of “triumphalism,” but rather in a gnawing preoccupation and pastoral solicitude for a true unity in faith and in charity among Churches. This catholicity is, in sum, fundamentally, and tenaciously, ecumenical and ever conscious of Jesus’ own prayer to his Father “that all may be one.” (Jn 17:21)

However, the local Church loses this catholicity when it is isolated from other local (Catholic) Churches. A branch cut off from the trunk can no longer be called a tree. There is, as Karl Adam rightfully noted,²¹ an essen-

tial, centrifugal force to catholicity. What real meaning would catholicity have if no real union of Churches were possible in the first place? Would they not all then be essentially atomistic? The Catholic defies ecclesial atomism with his insistence on the absolute need for a papacy with universal jurisdiction. The Orthodox believer may not share this view, but the burden then falls on him to provide a convincing alternative that offers more than a mere, velleitous call for common action and witness to, for and in the world. To embrace the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with him as the Church of Christ, on the other hand, required a Catholic willingness to accept what faith claims is the free disposition of the Lord-i.e., the universal primacy of Peter and his successors. Such a faith commitment possibly could be made easier for the Orthodox to proffer were a deft synthesis of Eucharistic and universal ecclesiologies to come to light.



NOTES

1The then Holy Office underscored the central importance of this insight in its noteworthy *Letter to the Bishops of England* of September 16, 1864 in which we read: “Each of these marks is so closely linked to the others that it cannot be separated from them.” (DS 2888)

2Here we think especially of how the Eastern Catholic Churches seem to present themselves to the outside viewer.

3A ready case in vpoint is found in Fr. James T. O’Connor’s article, “The Church of Christ and the Catholic Church,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, 84:4 (1984): 10-21. He writes (p. 20): “According to the teachings of Vatican Council II, the Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same complex reality.” See also pp. 10,13 and 18 of his study.

4*The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., (New York: The American Press, 1966): 23.

5Another reason for avoiding the term, “Roman Catholic” is that historically it has a pejorative connotation, having arisen among Protestants as a protest against the Church’s claim to be the one, true, holy, and apostolic Church. Cf. Albert J. Nevins, M.M., *The Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary* (New York: Dimension Books, 1965): 498.

6Sometimes one hears Eastern Rite Catholics referred to as Roman Catholics of the Eastern Rite. This designation, however, only vainly conjoins contrary opposites.

7*Documents of Vatican II*, 374.

8This is the derivation given to the term by two noted Orthodox theologians, Paul Evdokimov and John Meyendorff. See Paul Evdokimov, *L’Orthodoxie* (Neuchatel, Switzerland: Delachaux & Niestle, 1959): 156 and John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983): 7.

9Cf., e.g., the interpretation of “catholicity” found in John A. Hardon, S.J., *The Catholic Catechism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc. 1975): esp. 217ff; Ronald Lawler, O.F.M. Cap., Donald W. Wuerl, Thomas Comerford Lawler, eds., *The Teaching of Christ* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1976): esp. 199; and the classic work of Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929): 162-82.

10Possibly the most classic exposition of Orthodox thought in the twentieth century is Vladimir Lossky’s *Essai sur la theologie mystique de l’Eglise d’Orient* (Paris: Aubier, 1944; Eng. trans., Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary

Press, 1976), which aptly underscores the “mystical” perspective of Orthodox theology.

11Cf. Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, esp. 7-10; Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Church* vol. I (Doctrine) (New York: Department of Religious Education-*The Orthodox Church in America*, 1981): esp. 124f; and, above all, The Proceedings of the Second International Conference of Orthodox Theology on “The Catholicity of the Church” in St. Vladimir’s *Theological Quarterly*, 17:1-2 (1973).

12Hardon, *op. cit.*, 213.

13Ibid., 217.

14Ibid., 218.

15Ibid., 217.

16Lawler, *op. cit.*, 186, 197f.

17Ibid., 199.

18Adam, *op. cit.*, esp. 168, 175.

19Hopko, *op. cit.*, 124f.

20This maxim owes its origins to St. Cyprian of Carthage.

21Adam, *op. cit.*, 187.