

The Church Part One: Whose Church is It?

In the Nicene Creed (325 AD) we profess our belief in the Church as “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.” These are often called the four marks of the Church. Why is it that at the Council of Nicea and later at the Council of Constantinople the early Church took such care to spell out this professed belief in the Church? How should we understand it today over 2,000 years later?

The New Catechism tells us “*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 n.811). Vatican II’s dogmatic constitution on the Church begins by rooting the very nature of the Church in the activity of Christ who is “the light of humanity.” So first and foremost we cannot understand the Church apart from understanding Christ. Christology (the study of Christ) and Ecclesiology (the study of the Church) are intimately linked in Catholic thought. What we say about the Church has implications for what we are saying about Christ, and Christ is the Truth that the Church is called to be and become. The Church is not just some human organization but the instrument through which God continues to act in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The Church, we believe, was inaugurated by Christ in his preaching the Good News. This proclamation, this call, this *evangelium*, gathers us into the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ preaching of conversion, of service, of mercy, heralds a new reality, the Kingdom of God. But its fullest meaning was revealed in the outpouring of Pentecost. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit are given, as St. Paul (I Corinthians 12) tells us, for the ordering of the community, the building up of the Body of Christ. They are true gifts (*charismata*), given for the fulfillment of the mission entrusted to the Church. Again, the New Catechism tells us “the Church is in history, but at the same time she transcends it. It is only ‘with the eyes of faith’ that one can see her in her visible reality and at the same time in her spiritual reality as bearer of divine life” (CCC n. 770).

So when we profess our belief in the Church it is not our believing in some organization but our believing that Christ is present, working through this frail reality and bestowing upon it the necessary gifts of the Holy Spirit to fulfill its mission. It is both “the visible society and the spiritual community” (*Lumen Gentium* n. 8). In one sense the Church is itself “sacrament”—Christ’s instrument of salvation, drawing us into the life of grace, diving life itself. This is why we Catholics have so many ways of talking about the Church. She is mysteriously the “People of God,” the “Body of Christ,” and “Temple of the Holy Spirit.”

Ecumenism is about this mystery of the Church, so if we hope to engage one another as Christians, if we hope to learn what it means for us to be the Church, we must begin with realizing that it is Christ’s Church. In the Creed we profess our belief not in buildings, nor in an organizational structure, nor in an ideology, but in Christ working through his Body and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Church doesn’t belong to the Pope, or Luther, or Calvin, or any one of us. We belong to it! It defines who we are and not vice versa, that is why it is an article of the Creed. So now that we understand the Church as intimately linked to Christ we must next examine the Creed’s four marks of One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. This will be done in subsequent issues of the *People of God*.