

The Church Part III: The Church is Holy
by Fr. Michael Demkovich, OP

The second mark of the Church professed in the Creed is that the Church is Holy. It flows from the same unity with Christ as we see in the mark of oneness. The Church is Holy not because of any of our achievements but because of Christ's relationship to and with the Church, the Holy People of God. While holiness is a mark of who and what we are as Church in Christ it is also a call to our personal growth in holiness. We grow in holiness as we grow in being the Body of Christ, the Church. However the Church is Holy not by virtue of our holiness but in virtue of Christ. The New Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: *United with Christ, the Church is sanctified by him -- through him and with him she becomes sanctifying. "All the activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, to the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God." It is in the Church that "the fullness of the means of salvation" has been deposited. It is in her that "by the grace of God we acquire holiness"* (CCC 824). So holiness as a mark of the Church is threefold. It is Holy because of Christ who makes it Holy. It is Holy because it is a means to holiness. And finally, it is Holy because of the women and men made Holy in and through the Church.

Vatican II addressed the doctrinal understanding of the Church in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964). It tells us that "the Church on earth is endowed with a sanctity that is real though imperfect" (n. 48). While the Church is Holy it must also continue to grow in Holiness. We do this by living our life in Christ through the sacramental life of the Church. By devoting time to the life of faith we mature in our relation to God by grace, the life of the Holy Spirit. The rich spiritual treasury of the Church, in its sacraments, devotions, prayer and praxis aids us in this growth. This holiness shines forth in the lives of those women and men the Church has recognized and canonized as saints. They teach us of holiness in the holy example of their lives. The Church grows in holiness as it learns from these holy ones, the *hagios*, but it is in the example of Mary that we see the perfection of holiness that the Church yet awaits. Catholic teaching has long seen in Mary a model of the Church and we learn much from her human "yes" to God.

To say the Church is Holy isn't egotistical bragging. It is to say that such holiness is our source as Church and the perfection to which we journey as a Pilgrim People. Holiness is not an attribute of an individual, but it is the manifest reality of the Body of Christ. We are made Holy by our participation in holiness, by our drawing near to holiness, truly gathering around the Holy which is fundamental to the ecclesial reality of being the Church.