

Part IV: The Church is Catholic
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When we profess our belief that the Church is “catholic” what does this mean? Some people wrongly think this is limited to only the Roman Catholic Church, but that isn’t what we mean by “catholic.” The word itself comes from the Greek meaning universal, literally “according to the whole” (*kata holos*). This is an extremely significant mark of the Church especially given that the Church is “one” as we discussed earlier. How can we say that the Church is one yet see that there are so many distinct and particular elements

The New Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that the Church is catholic in a two-fold sense. In the first sense, the Church is catholic because Christ is universally present. “In her subsists the fullness of Christ’s body united with its head; this implies that she receives from him ‘the fullness of the means of salvation’ which he has willed; correct and complete confession of the faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession” (n.830). In the second sense “the Church is catholic because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race” (n. 831). The Church is catholic both in the universal presence of Christ and in its universal mission to all of humanity.

Being catholic then, requires a communion that is genuinely universal. This is why we understand the Church of Christ as subsisting in the Roman Catholic Church. Communion with Rome, with the primacy of the Chair of Peter, is essential to the Church being “catholic.” As early as the late 2nd century St. Irenaeus saw the importance of this catholic communion with Rome while he was bishop in what is now Lyon, France. He knew first-hand the persecutions of the Roman Empire in the Church of Lyon and saw the importance of this catholic communion with the Church of Rome amid adversity. “By reason of its [Rome’s] pre-eminence, the whole Church, that is the faithful everywhere, must necessarily be in accord” (*Adv. haeres.* 3,3,2).

The “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” of Vatican II beautifully expresses this catholic reality in paragraph 23. It states: “It has come about through divine providence that, in the course of time, different Churches set up in various places by the apostles and their successors joined together in a multiplicity of organically united groups which, whilst safeguarding the unity of the faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage and inherit a theological and spiritual patrimony. Some of these, notably the ancient patriarchal Churches, as mothers in the faith, gave birth to other daughter-Churches, as it were, and down to our own days they are linked with these by bonds of a more intimate charity in what pertains to the sacramental life and in a mutual respect for rights and obligations. This multiplicity of local Churches, unified in a common effort, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church.”

So when we profess the Church to be catholic, we express our belief in the universality of the Church of Christ. We believe that the Church of Rome presides in charity, in keeping with the whole this catholic reality of Christ’s universal presence in the Church and the Church’s universal mission to all people, all times and all places.