

Part V: The Church is Apostolic
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We all know about the twelve apostles, those disciples chosen by Christ. When we read the Gospels, they seem to be a mixed bag of confusion and fidelity, of hesitancy and dedication. But, it is in looking beyond the Gospels, in places like the Acts of the Apostles, in the early writings of the Church, and in the Epistles of Paul, that we learn what it means to be apostolic. For here is where the Church is called to remain faithful to Christ, even after the Resurrection. No longer is the Lord present in the same way He was during those days when he journeyed from the shores of Galilee to the horror of Golgotha.

As Jesus was sent by the Father, so too the apostles were sent by Christ and in turn we are sent by the Holy Spirit in Christ because of our Baptism. In a way, the Church is sent forth with a message, with something to be delivered. This is the meaning of the Greek words *apo stallein*, and means a messenger, someone sent forth. This implies that someone is doing the sending and there is something to be delivered. Being apostolic means we are to be faithful to both the sender and the sender's message. The New Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that the Church is apostolic in three ways: (1) it is founded on the Apostles "chosen and sent by Christ himself;" (2) it is assisted by the Holy Spirit and "keeps and hands on the teaching . . . heard from the apostles;" and (3) it continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles . . . through their successors in pastoral office." (#857) This pastoral office, the Catechism explains, is made present through the college of bishops, "assisted by priests in union with the successors of Peter, the Church's supreme pastor." Our profession of the Creed reminds us that the Church as "apostolic" is faithful to the tradition handed on by the Apostles. It means that any maverick group, any movement that thinks itself faithful to Christ, must be tested by this apostolic sense that demands both integrity and fidelity to Christ and those sent by Christ.

Being "apostolic" is critical to our remaining faithful to Christ's call to be the Church. When Christians lose sight of the apostolic tradition, when people think that we should disregard the apostolic tradition as culturally and historically conditioned, they deny a key aspect of being the Church. This is why we Roman Catholics have an understanding of the Church so different from those congregationalist groups that limit the apostolic tradition to a contemporary interpretation, without any question of fidelity to what has gone before us. Some Christian groups take apostolic in a fundamentalist way, with strong focus on gospel preaching and the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. While this is in part true, it falls short for it fails to root its mission in the integrity of Christ's message handed on by the Apostles. Some other Christian denominations reduce the notion of apostolic to an historical time, limiting the role of bishops to that of organizational managers, not the living manifestations of an ongoing teaching and sanctifying aspect of the Church's apostolic mission. While others may retain a pastoral sense of the bishops, they fail to appreciate their collegial identity and unity with the successor of Peter, the Apostle uniquely commissioned by Christ.

To profess that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic is to hold ourselves to a sense of being the Church that is marked and formed by these four aspects. We have seen how each of them places before us a reality of being the Church. Being apostolic, truly being apostolic as the Creed intends, serves to guarantee that the Church remains faithful to the message and to the one who has sent forth this message. In Christ we see the universal, catholic call of the Father. Through the apostles, Christ sent forth to all people this good news of salvation. It makes us a holy people and a sanctifying people who must be and become the sanctifying presence of God. In so being the Church draws the broken and fragmented shards of humanity into the unity that makes us one in Christ, one Body and one Spirit in Christ.