

Jesus Christ *now* reigns from the right hand of his Father in heaven. Since his coming, we are already in the 'last days' or 'end times'.

In order that Jesus' message could be proclaimed after the death of the Apostles, his promise to remain with them until the end of time is fulfilled in their successors, the bishops. Through the Holy Spirit, the Church maintains and teaches the deposit of faith containing the message of Jesus Christ entrusted to the Apostles, 'through their successors, the college of bishops in union with the successor of Peter'.³³ Thus the office entrusted to Peter and the Apostles is permanent and destined to be exercised without interruption by the bishops: the 'bishops have by divine institution taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church'.³⁴

For the above reasons and more, Catholics can therefore be confident that Christ will always remain with his Church and that the teaching of the Church is his teaching. This is not primarily because of the ingenuity of her members but because of the graciousness of God and his desire that all 'be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth'.³⁵

Now but not yet: the Church's Destiny and Mary

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus states that 'the Kingdom of God is at hand'.³⁶ In his Epistle to the Colossians, St Paul tells us that the Father has delivered Christians from the 'dominion of darkness' to 'the kingdom of his beloved Son'.³⁷

What this means is that Jesus Christ *now reigns* from the right hand of his Father in heaven. Since his coming, we are already in the 'last days' or 'end times'.³⁸ As was noted in Part I of this series, the Church is the 'initial budding forth' of the Kingdom of God on earth - the Church is thus both earthly and heavenly. When we partake of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, perform acts of charity, pray and fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we experience, albeit it in a very limited and imperfect fashion, the sanctification that awaits us at the end of time.

Before the second coming of Christ, the Church teaches that she will experience a final trial that will destroy, or at least, challenge the faith of many believers.³⁹ Thereafter follows the general resurrection, the return of Christ and the general judgment. Then, and only then, in 'the new heavens and a new earth'⁴⁰ will the Kingdom of God be present in all its fullness and the unity of the human race be accomplished⁴¹ - 'there shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him...'.⁴²

It is in Our Lady that the yet-to-be attained perfection of the Church has *already been attained*. Preserved free from sin and now intimately united with her Son, she is our mother and model of faith. As such, she 'is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come'.⁴³

Conclusion

In Part II of this series of the Church, we have undertaken a brief survey of the Church's essential properties and destiny. As with Part I, there is much more that could be said. It is hoped that this mini-

series will provide a catalyst for further exploration of what the Church teaches about herself in her documents, especially during the Year of Faith. Whilst not in any way condoning the more serious misdeeds of some of her members, especially those placed in positions of trust and responsibility, Catholics should be alive to the fact that perfection of the Church *lies ahead of us*. In the interim, mindful of all that we have covered in this series, we should busy ourselves with proudly professing our belief in the Church, striving to conform ourselves to Christ's image and lovingly but boldly inviting all peoples to enter into the Kingdom of God.

³³Catechism, 857

³⁴LG, 20

³⁵1 Timothy 2:4

³⁶Mark 1:14-15

³⁷Colossians 1:13

³⁸As the Catechism teaches, 'the "Reign of God" *already exists*', (865 (emphasis in italics added)).

³⁹Cf. Catechism, 675

⁴⁰Revelation 21:1

⁴¹At this time, the Church 'will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven' LG, 48.

⁴²Revelation 22:3

⁴³LG, 68

Errata- INFORM 142

After footnote 31, insert the following:

³²LG, 9-17

³³LG, 9

³⁴1943, 13

³⁵LG, 7 & 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

³⁶LG, 8

³⁷LG, 1

³⁸Catechism, 871

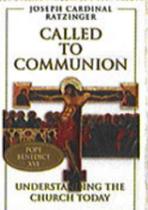
Back page, paragraph 3, insert '43' after 'who freely took 'the form of a slave' for us.'

Subsequent print runs of INFORM 142 will incorporate these omissions.

Questions

1. How do you experience the oneness of the Church in your Christian life? Stop and reflect upon the fact that people all over the world profess one Faith and celebrate the same sacraments under one Church government.
2. Do you agree that the Church is holy? How might you explain the holiness of the Church to somebody who objects? What examples can you give?
3. What are the practical implications for the catholicity and apostolicity of the Church? Do we seek to introduce those around us to Christ and his Church? Do we have confidence in Church teaching given Christ's promise that he would be with the Apostles and their successors 'until the close of the age' (Matthew 28:20)?
4. Have you personally gained a sense of the reign of God? Does this give you confidence even in life's difficult circumstances?

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PART TWO-

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By Thomas Waugh

PART TWO OF A TWO PART SERIES ON THE CHURCH

Is the Church for everybody?

How can the Church be holy when her members are imperfect?

Is missionary activity necessary?



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Discover the role of the Catholic Church within God's loving plan for humanity and all of creation.

Introduction

HAVING provided a brief overview of the Church's *origin* and *nature* in Part I of this two-part series, we now turn to those *essential features* of the Church (also known as the Church's 'marks' or 'properties'), which distinguish her from other Christian communities and which justify her claim to be the Church founded by Christ himself. We Catholics, of course, profess belief in these features when we recite the Creed. Additionally, we examine what theologians call the *eschatological* nature (Greek: *eschatos*: final) of the Church - the Church's destiny, which is the attainment of 'perfection...in the glory of heaven, when will come the time of the renewal of all things'.¹

One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic: The Church's properties

The Church is One

As we will recall from Part I, Adam is depicted as 'high-priest' of all of creation representing and mediating on behalf of it within the context of God's covenant with his creation.² We might say that through humanity, all of creation was *unified* in its covenantal relationship with God. In his plan to 're-establish all things' the Father decreed that in Jesus Christ, the New Adam, all things should 'hold together'.³ It should not surprise us, then, that the Church established by the New Adam is marked by her essential unity.⁴

Our Lord said that he would build his 'Church' not churches. He also indicated that there would be 'one fold'.⁵ Employing the imagery of the Church as bride of Jesus Christ, our Lord marries one bride only, he is not a polygamist! Jesus' desire that his Church be one is nowhere more clearly expressed than in his prayer following the Last Supper as recorded in the Gospel of John that: 'they [i.e. his followers] may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me'.⁶

The causes of the Church's unity are threefold. She is one because of the absolute unity that exists within her source: 'the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit'.⁷ She is one because of Jesus Christ, her founder and head of his Body, who restores all 'to the unity of one people and one body'.⁸ As head, he orders all the members of his Body to the achievement of its purpose: the participation of humanity in the divine life. Lastly, the Church is one owing to her 'soul': the Holy Spirit.⁹ The Holy Spirit constantly calls people to, and brings about growth in, the divine life for which we were made.

The unity of the Church is manifested in three ways. Firstly, she is one in her profession of Faith. Members of the Church may choose, to their detriment, to dissent from her teachings but the Church herself, in accordance with the will of Christ, preserves and expounds his teachings given to his Apostles.¹⁰

Secondly, she is one in her worship. This follows from the unity of Faith, for the worship

of the Church is the means by which the will of the Father manifested in the teachings of Christ is brought about. The Mass may be celebrated in Latin or English or any of the numerous vernacular languages in which the People of God worship but it is essentially the same Mass celebrated throughout the world.

Thirdly and finally, the Church is one in her government. Individual bishops throughout the world bring about and manifest the unity that exists amongst a variety of peoples in any given local Catholic community. In turn, it is their membership within the college of bishops of which the Pope is the head that ensures the unity of government of the Church. The Pope himself, as head of the Church, is at the service of unity and 'is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful'.¹¹

As we saw in the Gospel of John, it is the unity of the Church upon which our Lord staked her credibility. The unity of the Church thus assists her in the work of evangelisation and provides a cogent reason for an individual to consider her message.¹² It is not hard to see that disunity amongst Christians hinders the task of spreading the Gospel. For this reason, amongst others, the Church, through her ecumenical activities, properly understood, strives towards that unity amongst Christians which our Lord willed.¹³

Communion as a consequence of the Church's unity

The unity of the Church presupposes a diversity of members each ordered, according to their vocation, to her overarching purpose. This 'communion' (Latin: *com*: 'together or with' + *unus*: 'one') entails a sharing in the richness of her divine life. Specifically, it consists in a sharing both in spiritual goods and holy people. The goods all the members of the Church share are: faith, sacraments, charisms (special graces for the building up of the Church), material goods and charity.¹⁴ The persons are of course the faithful on earth ('the Church Militant'), the souls in purgatory ('the Church Suffering') and the saints in heaven ('the Church Triumphant').¹⁵

In Christ, all members are truly brothers and sisters by virtue of their participation in the one divine nature.

¹Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964 (henceforth LG), 48

²Genesis 1:26:27 & 2:7

³Cf. LG, 3; c.f. Ephesians 1:4-5,10; Colossians 1:17

⁴Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 813 (henceforth Catechism)

⁵Cf. Matthew 16:18; John 10:16. St Paul, of course, states in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body...'

⁶John: 17:21

⁷Cf. Unitatis Redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism, 1964 (henceforth UR), 2

⁸Cf. Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965, 78

⁹Cf. Catechism, 813

¹⁰Cf. Matthew 28:19-20

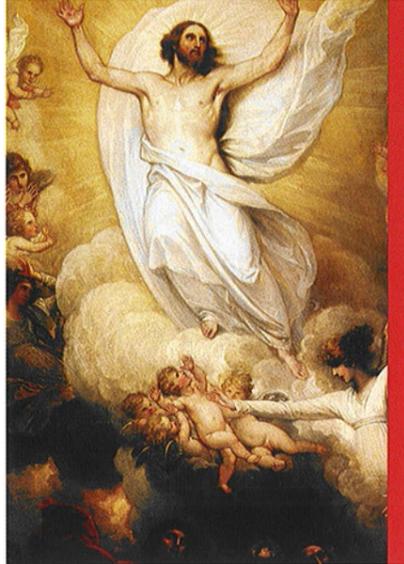
¹¹LG, 23

¹²Cf. Ut unum sint, Encyclical Letter: On commitment to Ecumenism, Pope John Paul II, 1995, 98

¹³See UR and Ut unum sint

¹⁴Cf. Catechism, 949-953

¹⁵Cf. Catechism, 954-959



The Church is holy primarily because 'Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is hailed as 'alone holy,' loved the Church as his Bride, giving himself up for her so as to sanctify her.'

The Church is Holy

To those in the media and elsewhere, who are not slow in pointing out the faults of her members, this assertion might seem ludicrous. But, as we have seen, this is because such people constantly mistake the shortcomings of her members for the essential nature of the Church herself.

The Church is holy primarily because 'Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is hailed as 'alone holy,' loved the Church as his Bride, giving himself up for her so as to sanctify her.' The Church, then, is holy primarily through the holiness of her founder and head, Jesus Christ. Through his death, Jesus 'unites her to himself as his own Body' and graciously imparts the Holy Spirit so she may partake in the divine life.¹⁶

Consequently, the Church is both 'sanctified' (made holy) by Christ but she is also 'sanctifying', in the sense that, 'All the activities of the Church are directed, as toward their end, to the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God.'¹⁷ In other words, the Church is also holy because her goal is the salvation and sanctification of souls.

Moreover, she possesses 'the fullness of the means of salvation' and in her 'by the grace of God we acquire holiness'.¹⁸ That is, the Church is holy in that she has all the means of sanctification, especially the Mass and the sacraments. In her teachings, she also calls 'all the faithful of Christ' to 'strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state'.¹⁹

In speaking of the Church's holiness, it is important to acknowledge the manifest lack of holiness in her members, who are all sinners. The Church's sanctity is 'real though imperfect'²⁰; her members have yet to be fully sanctified. Indeed the Church is always in need of renewal because, whilst called to holiness, all her members are sinners in need of repentance: 'The Church, however, clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal'.²¹

The Church contains sinners - she acknowledges that, and so does the media. But how often do we hear about those members of the Church, who have lived and continue to live lives of exceptional holiness? The saints are those people who have chosen to consistently say 'yes' to the Church's teaching in every aspect of their lives and to avail themselves of all the means of holiness that she offers. Indeed, in wishing to assist her members, the Church canonises some of these saints and proposes them as 'models and intercessors'.²² One only need to examine the life of a 'St John Vianney' or a 'Mother Teresa' to ascertain that when one lives in complete fidelity to the Church, a holiness of an outstanding nature is produced, that far exceeds anything that fallen human nature, in the absence of God's grace, could achieve.

The Church is Catholic

It is easy to note, and be impressed by, the catholicity of the Church, manifested as it is by her presence throughout history and throughout the world. But, in truth, the Church was catholic before she had taken the Good News of Jesus Christ to the four corners of the earth.

The Church is catholic because she possesses the fullness of the means of salvation. As the Catechism notes, she possesses the 'correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession'.²³ Whilst her origins lie in a particular time and particular place (the Church at Pentecost was comprised of a few unknown individuals in Jerusalem), she was catholic from day one. She possessed, from her very beginning, the fullness of truth and means of salvation destined to spread to embrace all peoples over all the earth.

Moreover, the Church is catholic because she has been 'sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race'.²⁴ Our Lord Jesus Christ is the redeemer of the entire human race: he did not come for a subsection of humanity but for all of it.²⁵ It is for this reason that he sent his apostles out 'to all nations'.²⁶

The Church is therefore by her very nature missionary.²⁷ This may surprise some, who associate 'mission' with itinerant preachers from a range of protestant groups, the tireless Jehovah's witnesses or ubiquitous Mormons, but if Christ's message of salvation is for all peoples how could the Church be anything but missionary?

In fact, missionary activity is, and will always remain, the *primary* activity of the Church as she seeks to proclaim the Good News of the coming of the Kingdom of God, liberation from sin and the joy of knowing God and being given over to him:

... the task of evangelising all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church... Evangelising is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelise...²⁸

Noting the urgency of the missionary task, we do well to *pray for* and *witness* to our non-Christian family members, friends and colleagues by word and deed, in an appropriate and loving way, inviting them to become members of God's family.²⁹

The Church is Apostolic

The Church's apostolicity means that the Church is founded *by* Christ but *on* the apostles, who were sent out by Christ himself.³⁰

The Church was and remains built on 'the foundation of the apostles' and hands on the teaching she has received from them. 'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you'.³¹ There is thus a continuity between the mission of Jesus and that of the Apostles. Just as Jesus received everything from his Father, so too the Apostles received everything from Jesus and could do nothing apart from him.³²

¹⁶Cf. LG, 39

¹⁷Sacrosanctum Concilium, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 1963, 10

¹⁸Cf. Catechism, 824

¹⁹LG, 42

²⁰LG, 48

²¹LG, 8 (emphasis in italics added); Pope Paul VI, in his *Credo of the People of God*, states: 'The Church is therefore holy, though having sinners in her midst, because she herself has no other life but the life of grace. If they live her life, her members are sanctified; if they move away from her life, they fall into sins and disorders that prevent the radiation of her sanctity', 1968, 19.

²²Catechism, 828

²³Catechism, 830

²⁴Catechism, 831

²⁵Cf. 1 Timothy 2:4

²⁶Matthew 28:19

²⁷Cf. Ad Gentes, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, 1963, 2

²⁸Evangelii Nuntiandi, Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelisation in the Modern World, Pope Paul VI, 1975, 14

²⁹The number of those who do not know Christ and do not belong to the Church is constantly on the increase...

When we consider this immense portion of humanity which is loved by the Father and for whom he sent his Son, the urgency of the Church's mission is obvious' *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter: On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, Pope John Paul II, 1990, 3.

³⁰Cf. Ephesians 2:20

³¹Matthew 10:40

³²Cf. Catechism, 859



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