

One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic

The four marks of the Catholic Church are essential to understanding the Body of Christ

BY BISHOP WILLIAM E. LORI, SUPREME CHAPLAIN

In the Nicene Creed, we profess our belief in the Church as “one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic.” In order to understand the Church, we need to recognize these four essential attributes or “marks.”

Let us begin with the unity or oneness of the Church. Regrettably, we often hear about Church’s disunity. Of course, we are aware of divisions within the Catholic Church: some are stylistic, others substantive and still others are the result of human discord. In addition, we are aware that we are separated from other Christians. So, how can we speak of the Church as “one”?

We need to begin with the source of our unity, namely the one God in three divine Persons. St. Cyprian of Carthage described the Church as “a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (cited in *Lumen Gentium*, 4). The Church is made up of many members, but she is united by the Holy Spirit, who brings God’s people together in communion. As the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, “The Church has but one faith, one sacramental life, one apostolic succession, one common hope, and one and the same charity” (161).

UNIFIED AND HOLY

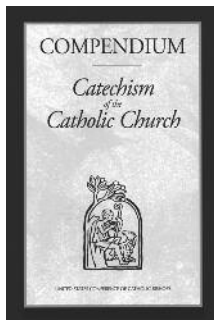
It is sometimes said that God’s gift of unity can be found in the spiritual core of the Church, but not in her visible existence. The Church herself steers us away from this false opinion. The Second Vatican Council restated that “the one Church of Christ, as a society constituted and organized in the world,

subsists in (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him” (*Compendium*, 162). The phrase “subsists in” may sound unusual, but it was chosen carefully. It means that in spite of the problems and divisions caused by human frailty and sinfulness, there is to be found in the Church the fullness of truth, sacramental life and communion.

In addition, the phrase “subsists in” helps us see how we can recognize the “many elements of sanctification and truth” found in church communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church (163). This recognition is not meant to downplay serious differences among Christian communities, but rather to underline the inner requirement of the Church to seek the unity that Christ willed for his followers. We must all pray and work for this unity by deepening our communion with Christ and his Church, as well as by respectful theological dialogue (164). Taken together, this graced effort to seek Christian unity is called ecumenism.

We also profess our faith in the Church as “holy.” Once again, we recognize that not all members of the Church, including ourselves, are holy; we all stand in need of forgiveness. Happily, the Church is more than the sum of her members and shares in the holiness of God. As St. Paul teaches, Christ gave himself up for the Church and her sanctification (see Eph 5:22-27; *Compendium*, 165). The Church, therefore, provides all that we need to respond to the call to holiness.

In a particular way, the Church’s holiness is found in the saints. With Mary leading the way, the saints not only show us how to participate in God’s truth, goodness and love, but they also support us by their prayers.



The 17th installment of Supreme Chaplain Bishop William E. Lori's faith formation program addresses questions 161-176 of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Archived articles are at www.kofc.org.



CNS PHOTO/ANDREA COMAS, REUTERS

A man carries a cross at a Catholic rally in support of the traditional family, attended by more than 1.5 million people in Madrid, Spain, in 2007.

UNIVERSAL AND APOSTOLIC

Next, we proclaim that the Church is “Catholic,” or universal. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read that following the Resurrection, Jesus sent the Apostles to preach the Gospel in every corner of the world and to baptize all peoples in the name of the Trinity (see Mt 28:19). At the same time, Jesus commissioned the Apostles to teach all nations “all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20, *Compendium*, 172). From the very beginning, the Church was Catholic because her mission was to all nations and was entrusted with the totality of the Christian faith (*Compendium*, 166). As the faith spread, the Church was organized into dioceses or eparchies, which are presided over by bishops in union with the bishop of Rome (the pope). We sense the universality of each particular church during the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass when we pray “in union with the Church throughout the world.”

Obviously, not everyone considers himself to be a member of the Church. Nonetheless, every person is called to share in “the Catholic unity of the people of God” (168). Some Catholics, of course, are initiated into the Church but do not practice their faith. Members of the Knights of Columbus and other practicing Catholics must seek to spread the Gospel by word and example, working with pastors to encourage other Catholics to return to their faith

(173). Meanwhile, the baptized who belong to other Christian churches “do not enjoy full Catholic unity” but “are in a certain, although imperfect communion with the Catholic Church” (168). We are called to foster unity with these Christians and to bear witness to the fullness of our Catholic faith.

In addition, the Church recognizes in a special way that God revealed himself to the Jewish people and made them his own; they were the first to receive his Word, setting them apart from all other non-Christian religions (169). Still, the Church recognizes even in other non-Christian religions elements that reflect God’s truth and goodness. We must seek to foster understanding with followers of those

religions for the common good and as a way of bringing about “the unity of humanity in the Church of Christ” (170). Through no fault of their own, many people have not received the Gospel of Christ and his Church. While Christ is the source of all salvation, non-Christians can cooperate with grace and be saved if they sincerely seek God and strive to follow their consciences. On the other hand, those who know that the Church founded by Christ is necessary for salvation — but choose to remain outside or apart from her — imperil their salvation (171).

Finally, we profess our faith in the Church as apostolic. This means several things: Christ founded the Church upon the Apostles (Eph 2:20); the

Church’s teaching is the same as the Apostles; and the Church is apostolic in her structure — for the bishops are the successors of the Apostles in communion with the successor of St. Peter (*Compendium*, 174). In the New Testament, we read how Jesus chose the Apostles and formed them. They were witnesses to the Resurrection. As the word “apostle” itself indicates, they were “sent” by Christ into the world to proclaim the Gospel (175). By means of the sacrament of holy orders, “the mission and power of the Apostles” is transmitted to their successors, the bishops. In this way, through the centuries, the Church remains linked to her apostolic faith, mission and origins (176). ■

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some reasons that there is ultimately only “one” Church? What are some external manifestations of this unity?
2. How can we call the Church “holy” when so many Catholics, including ourselves, fall short? In what, then, does this mark consist and what does this say about how we can grow in holiness?
3. What is the role of Jesus and the Church in one’s salvation, whether Catholic or non-Catholic? How do we articulate the Church’s teaching on the possible salvation of non-Catholics

while avoiding these two errors: only Catholic Christians can be saved, and all will be saved?

4. How can we be sure today that we are following the same faith that Jesus built on his Apostles? If it is the same faith, how do we explain the various changes and development that have occurred over 2,000 years?
5. How does the virtue of charity — the undeserved gift of God by which Christians can love with God’s own love — relate to each of the four marks of the Church? In our own lives, how can we make visible to the world the four marks?

FROM ‘COLUMN’ PAGE 1

their vocation within the Order. We know that the Knights are the strong right arm of the Church. Wherever the Order is present, this means they are the strong right arm of parish priests.

Unfortunately, there is also a downside to this story. There is a tendency for many of our brothers to engage solely in activity, to the neglect of contemplation and spirituality. We have all tried to answer the question of why so many take up the cause of the Knights and become involved for a short time, but then fade from view. While many, especially younger members, have heavy family commitments after their day’s work, that is not always the only reason for short-lived participation. Some have said to me that they had hoped for more “on the spiritual line” when they joined the Knights. They felt something was lacking, even though they could not put their finger on what precisely they needed.

Council members look to us chaplains to bring them hope. While Knights of Columbus Insurance agents bring hope to members with regard to financial security, we as priests are expected to be even more vigilant in addressing their spiritual needs.

On June 19, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated the Year for

Priests. What a joyful occasion for our Church, and especially for our Knights who have so much respect and love for their priests! Our state jurisdictions and individual councils have been urged to consider the many ways in which they can honor their chaplains during this special year. It behooves us to respond in a very positive way to their desire to reach out to us.

I am looking forward to spending time with those of you who will attend the 127th Supreme Convention.

God bless and keep you all.

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