

THE CHURCH (PART TWO)
The Four Marks of the Church
(C 811-870, USC Ch.11)

You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of the netherworld will not prevail against it. (Mt 16:18)

...We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church... (Nicene Creed)

In this article, we will look at:

- The Four Marks of the Church
- Who Belongs to the Catholic Church
- Salvation of Non-Catholic Christians
- Salvation of Non-Christians

The Four Marks of the Church

Reality and challenge. Since the Council of Constantinople 381, the Church has spoken of herself as “*one, holy, catholic and apostolic,*” words found in the Nicene Creed. One, holy, catholic and apostolic are known as the “marks” or “signs” of the Church, four traits that identify the Church before the world. In ancient times, these “four marks” of the Church served to distinguish her from heretical or false churches that developed in time. They also refer to the *divine* element—Christ and the Holy Spirit at work in the Church.

Because the four signs or marks of the Church are never lived out fully, they are seen as both *reality* and *challenge* (USC p.127). For example, the Church is *one* and yet wounded because of many Christian denominations. The Church is *holy* and yet sinful in her members. The Church is *catholic* (universal) and yet she can be uninviting to outsiders. Individual Christians can show prejudice to nonbelievers. The Church is *apostolic*, yet many denominations ignore the belief of apostolic succession. So while in a real sense the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, in another sense, these marks or signs of the Church may sometimes not be very evident. Let us now look more closely at each of the four marks or signs of the Church and their countersigns.

The Church is One (C 813-822, USC p.127)

May they all be one, as you Father, are in me and I in you...that the world may believe that you sent me. (Jn 17:21)

The Church “acknowledges one Lord, confesses one faith, is born of one Baptism, forms one Body, is given

life by one spirit, for the sake of one hope, at whose fulfillment all divisions will be overcome.” (C 866)

The source and model of the Church’s unity or oneness is the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity. Jesus died on the cross to gather all people to himself. Jesus spoke of “one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). The Holy Spirit present in the Church seeks to bring about an intimate communion between all of God’s people (C 813).

Within the unity of the Church, we find a wonderful and rich diversity, a multiplicity of peoples, cultures, spiritualities, gifts and liturgical rites (C 1200-1203). What keeps our rich diversity from creating chaos in the Church? The *invisible bond* of charity and the *visible bonds* of a common creed and sacraments. For the Catholic Church, the Pope—successor of St. Peter—is also a very important visible symbol of our unity.

Countersign: *division in the Body of Christ.* Tragically, down through the history of the Church, some members of the Church have offended the unity that Jesus prayed for. The two main events that inflicted serious wounds on the Body of Christ are: the split between Rome and Constantinople in 1054 (a wound that had been festering for centuries) and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Today, Eastern Christians separated from communion with Rome are called the “Orthodox Church,” its two main branches being the Greek and Russian Churches. The Protestant Reformation proved disastrous as its attempt to bring about much needed reform in the Catholic Church only led to more brokenness in the Body of Christ. Today, there are over 300 churches in the membership of the World Council of Churches.

Pause: *What do you like most about belonging to the Catholic Church? If you are a convert, what caused you to join the Church?*

Ecumenism (C 817-822). The word ecumenism comes from a Greek word meaning *universal*. The goal of Christian ecumenism is a common commitment among Christians to live out the Gospel more fully and to be open to the unifying work of the Spirit. Its goal, in the words of the late Pope John Paul II, is to work towards making the *partial unity* that exists

between Christian Churches grow into *full communion* (That All May Be One #14).

Disunity amongst Christian Churches is both a sin and a scandal that weakens the witness of Christianity in the non-Christian world. Catholic leaders recognize that the Church is partially to blame for the divisions in the Body of Christ and has asked for the forgiveness of other Christians leaders. Working and praying for reunification of Christianity is not an option but an essential activity of the Church.

How to work for reunion of the Church (C 820-822). “The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call to all Christians” (C 820). Para. 821 of the *Catechism* names some of the ways we can respond to the call to work for the reunion of the Church.

- *A permanent renewal of the Church in greater fidelity to her vocation.* A hurting marriage is healed when both spouses get back to living out their marriage promises. The best gift to ecumenism that the Church can make is to get her own house in order. In doing this, her life will be a clearer witness to her teachings.
- *Conversion of heart.* If sin caused the divisions, only holiness of life will heal them.
- *Prayer in common* should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. “When Catholics and Protestants put their knees together in common prayer, God will put their heads together to understand common truths” (Peter Kreeft).
- *Fraternal knowledge of each other* will help to dispel ignorance and misunderstandings about each other’s beliefs.
- *Collaboration among Christians in various areas of service to mankind.* Hands working together can educate the head.

The *Catechism* (822) states that, in the end, the work of reconciliation transcends human powers and gifts. This is God’s work. Only Christ can save us from sin and only Christ can heal the divisions amongst Christians.

Pause: Growing up, how much association did you have with non-Catholics? To what extent have you had conversations with non-Catholics about Catholic and non-catholic beliefs? How ecumenical are you?

The Church is Holy (C 823-829, USC p. 129)

Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her...that she may be holy and without blemish. (Eph 5:25-27)

The Church has her origin in the Holy Trinity and that is the source of her holiness. (USC p. 129)

In his book *Catholic Christianity*, Peter Kreeft writes: *The Church is “holy” in a way her members are not. Her doctrine, her moral principles, and her sacraments are pure because they are from Christ. But her human members, clergy as well as laity, are far from pure in their understanding of those doctrines, in their living according to those principles, and in their participation in those sacraments. For Christ established his Church, not as a museum for saints, but as a hospital for sinners. “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Mk 2:17).

Christ through the Church offers each of us wonderful means to become holy. We see the proof of this in the thousands of holy men and women the Church has produced down through the ages.

Countersign of holiness. The countersign of this mark of the Church is, of course, the sinfulness of her members, both clergy and lay faithful. The presence of sin in the Church can tempt one to quit attending church or to join what we perceive to be a less imperfect church. To act on such a temptation would be sad and destructive to our spiritual lives. If we feel that our parish has failed us in our desire to grow spiritually, we would be much better served to look for another catholic parish than to break ties with the Church by staying at home or by choosing to join a non-church.

Pause: In your opinion, what causes Catholics to quit church or join a non-Catholic church? What causes them to return? Have you a personal story in this area?

The Church is Catholic (C 830-856, USC p. 129)

“Catholic,” as used in the Nicene Creed, means “universal” or “all-embracing”—referring to the totality or whole which is embraced. This mark of the Church has three dimensions:

- “Catholic Church” can simply mean the whole Church. This is what St. Ignatius of Antioch meant when he said in 110 AD, “where Christ Jesus is, there is the Catholic Church.” Where

Jesus is proclaimed and accepted, the Catholic Church exists in some form.

- The Church is *catholic* in that she seeks to embrace all peoples and cultures at all times and places. Just as Christ, the founder of the Church, reached out to all, so must the Church. The *Catechism* states “*the Church is catholic because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole human race*” (C 831).
- The Church is *catholic* in that she includes all of what Jesus has entrusted to her—the “fullness of truth” and the “fullness of the means of salvation” subsist or reside in the Church.
- St. Cyril of Jerusalem in 387 described the Church as “*catholic because it extends to the ends of the earth, teaches all doctrines necessary for salvation, instructs all people, heals every kind of sin and possesses every virtue.*”

The title “*Roman Catholic Church*” highlights the importance of the unity of the Catholic Church with the successor of St. Peter, the Bishop of Rome. Particular churches are fully catholic through their communion with the Church of Rome. Regarding union with the Church of Rome, St. Irenaeus in the second century said: “For with this church, by reason of its pre-eminence, the whole church, that is, the faithful everywhere must necessarily be in accord” (C 834).

Who Belongs to the Catholic Church? And Who Will Be Saved? (C 836-845)

Catholic Christians. People are fully incorporated into the Catholic Church who accepts her entire system and means of salvation given to her (creed, sacraments, ecclesiastical governance). In order to be saved, it is not enough to belong to the Church. *Lumen Gentium* 14 states: “*He is not saved who does not persevere in charity.*”

What About Non-Catholic Christians?

The Church teaches that Christians who believe in Christ and are properly baptized are to be received with the affection of brothers. Through baptism and their belief in Christ, they are in *partial* communion with the Catholic Church (Vat.2, *Decree on Ecumenism* 3). These brothers and sisters in Christ are saved if they persevere in following the ways of Jesus as they understand them. While we Catholics may believe that we have the “fullness of truth,” we should remember that there is a difference between “having”

the fullness of truth and “living” whatever truth we have grasped.

What About Non-Christians?

Non-Christians do not belong in any direct sense to the Church. Yet this does not mean that the grace of Christ is not at work in their hearts.

Judaism. The Catholic Church acknowledges her special relationship with the Jewish people. The Christian religion has its roots in Judaism. The Jewish people were the first to hear the word of God (Rom 9:4-5). They have not ceased to be God’s Chosen People. We share with them the faith of Abraham, the Ten Commandments and the books of the Old Testament.

Islam. The Church also recognizes that she has a unique relationship with Muslims. “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day” (C 841).

Other non-Christian religions. The church also engages in dialogue with Hindus and Buddhists. “She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often have a ray of that truth that enlightens all people. (Nostra Aetate 2).

Regarding the possibility of the salvation of non-Christians, *Lumen Gentium* (16) states: *Those also can attain everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.*

What about non-believers? In a similar way, the church believes that “*Divine Providence does not deny the help necessary for salvation to those who without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace*” (*Lumen Gentium* 16).

Finally, a saying attributed to St. Augustine: “God has some people whom the Church does not have. The Church has some people whom God does not have.”

Pause: *How do you feel about the Church’s attitude towards non-Catholic religions and their salvation? Would you want the Church to change her attitude in any way?*

Countersign. One way the Church has failed in the past, and continues to the present time, to live more fully this mark, is in the area of *inclusivity*. For example, in the sixteenth century, the Church lost a great opportunity to evangelize China and Japan due to failure to permit missionaries to adapt Church beliefs and liturgies to Asian mentalities and customs. Of course, such adaptations should never involve falsifying or watering down the essentials of the faith. Even though the Church since Vatican II has become more inclusive and appreciative of women's gifts, she still has a ways to go in this area. Nearly all of the important decisions in our Church today are still made by men.

Pause: *What can the Catholic Church learn from other Christian and/or non-Christian*

Missionary mandate (C 849-856). While the Catholic Church very much respects the beliefs of other Christian churches and non-Christian religions, she also has a deep sense of her obligation to continue to share the fullness of the Gospel with all who are willing to listen. This missionary mandate is carried out with a spirit of prayer, love and respect for the beliefs of others. The *Catechism* (856) states: "Believers can profit from respectful dialogue by learning to appreciate better those elements of truth and grace which are found among people, and which are, as it were, a secret presence of Christ."

The Church is Apostolic (C 857-865, USC p.132)

The Church is apostolic in a threefold way:

Origin. The Church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20).

Teaching. The Church is apostolic because she teaches and defends the teachings of Christ and guards them against false teachers. The Church seeks to act on Paul's exhortation to Timothy: "You must keep to what you have been taught and know to be true..." (2Tim 3:14-17).

Structure. The Church is apostolic because she continues to be taught by the bishops who are the successors of the apostles, assisted by all involved in the catechetical ministry of the Church and united with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter. This mark or characteristic of the Church has led many Protestant clergy and laity to enter into *full communion* with the Catholic Church. (For their stories, see *Surprised by the Truth* edited by Patrick Madrid.)

Countersign. The main countersign of this mark is the large number of ecclesial communities that ignore the importance of apostolic succession.

Pause: *Hundreds of Christian churches only started in the past one or two hundred years. They have no historical ties to the Apostolic Church. This does not seem to bother them. Should it?*

Suggestions for action. Continue to take small but real steps towards becoming an informed and transformed Catholic Christian. Read one book each year that will help to deepen your understanding of catholic beliefs and practices. Participate in an annual retreat that will help you to live more fully the teachings of Christ.

————— **Meditation** —————

...To be holy is not to be perfect yet. The Church's obvious human imperfections have been an occasion for scandal and apostasy for...centuries. But paradoxically this very fact is also a powerful argument for her divine nature. This is cleverly brought out in Boccaccio's story of Abraham, the medieval Jewish merchant in The Decameron. Abraham is contemplating becoming a Catholic. He tells his friend, the bishop of Paris, who has been trying unsuccessfully to convert him, that he has to go to Rome on business. The bishop is horrified: "Don't go! When you see the stupidity and corruption there, you'll never join the Church." (This was the time of the Medici Popes who were notoriously worldly and corrupt.) But Abraham is a practical man. Business calls. Upon his return to France, he tells the bishop he is now ready to be baptized. The bishop is astounded, but Abraham explains: "I'm a practical businessman. No earthly business that stupid and corrupt could last fourteen weeks. Your Church has lasted fourteen centuries. It must have God behind it."

(Peter Kreeft, Fundamentals of the Faith)

Fr. Eamon Tobin ©
 Ascension Catholic Church
 Melbourne, FL
 tobin2@live.com