EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 23

Articles and book reviews original and selected from publications worldwide for an international readership for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

Volume 23 • Number 1 • January 1999

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The Church as 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic'

Avery Dulles

Keywords: Church, Unity, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic

In the Apostles' Creed, the standard baptismal creed in the West, belief is professed in 'the holy catholic Church'. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is based on a local baptismal creed of Eastern provenance, contains a more developed ecclesiology. In it Christians profess their faith in the church as 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic'. This most ecumenical of all creeds, promulgated by the First Council of Constantinople, was accepted by the Council of Chalcedon, and has since entered into the liturgies of many Christian churches. Catholics today recite it (with the medieval addition of the *Filioque*) in the Eucharist on Sundays and feast days.

The credal article on the church, however, is by no means unproblematical. How can we confess that the church is one when our eyes show us that Christianity is racked by internal controversy and is divided into hundreds of churches and denominations that refuse to recognize or communicate with one another? How can we speak of the church as holy when its members freely confess themselves to be sinners in continual need of forgiveness? How does the church deserve to be called 'catholic' when Catholics and

Christians are a minority, and indeed a diminishing proportion, of the world's population? While some formerly Christian nations are falling away from the faith, vast regions of the world still remain to be evangelized for the first time. How, finally, can we speak of the church as apostolic in view of the radical mutations that it has undergone over the centuries? Many of the structures, doctrines, and practices of contemporary Christians would surprise and baffle the apostles.

It is not immediately clear what claim is made by an assertion of the four attributes. Are they being predicated in a general way of the whole body of Christian believers or specifically of some socially organized body of Christians, such as the Roman Catholic? In either case it must be asked, furthermore: Do the properties designate the actual situation of the church or an ideal to which it must aspire? If these attributes are actually present in the church, one must ask, besides, whether they can be verified by empirical research or are apprehended only by faith. Can the four properties be used as 'notes' or 'marks' to identify the true church as against spurious pretenders? These questions are too large to be handled with any adequacy in a single brief paper. Without fully answering the difficulties, I shall try to summarize the doctrine of the Catholic Church on these points, with some reference to the biblical foundations and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

In Catholic apologetics from the sixteenth century until a generation ago, the four properties were regularly used as 'notes', with a view to proving that the Catholic Church, and it alone, was the true church of Christ. The argument consisted of two main stages. In the first stage it was shown on the basis of Scripture and early tradition that the church of Christ must possess all four of these characteristics and possess them visibly. The second stage was a demonstration from history or experience that the Roman Catholic Church, and she alone, possessed these attributes, or at least that she possessed them in a degree clearly superior to any other Christian body.

The First Vatican Council, without precisely adopting the textbook approach, did affirm in its Constitution on Catholic Faith that God had endowed the true church with 'manifest notes so that it could be recognized by all as the guardian and teacher of the revealed word' (DS 3012). The Catholic Church, and she alone, was incontrovertible evidence of her own divine mission, because of 'her astonishing propagation, her outstanding holiness and inexhaustible fruitfulness in every kind of goodness, her catholic unity, and her unconquerable stability' (DS 3013).

Although the tone of Vatican I is too triumphalistic to appeal to the contemporary mood, some recent authors continue to use the four properties to exhibit the credibility of Catholic Christianity. Yves Congar has proposed an 'ostensive' apologetic based predominantly on the note of sanctity.[1] Karl Rahner argues rather from apostolicity, contending that the Roman Catholic Church stands in greater continuity with the primitive church than any other Christian community.[2] Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, building on the work of Congar and Rahner, contends that the four properties make the Catholic Church a sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God, which is both a gift and a

[1] 1. Yves Congar, *L'Eglise une, sainte, catholique et apostolique*. Mysterium Salutis 15 (Paris: Cerf, 1970), pp. 144–47, 266–67. He maintains that in the Catholic Church one finds a coherent assemblage of elements of sanctity that qualify the Catholic Church as a 'hagiophany' or sacrament of encounter with God. I call his approach 'ostensive' because he points to concrete realities and shuns the deductive form of the argument that was customary in earlier apologetics.

[2] 2. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 357– 58.

task (*Gabe* and *Aufgabe*.[3] Nearly all contemporary Catholic authors emphasize the dialectic between the 'already' and the 'not yet', between the historical and the eschatological phases of the church. Only at the Parousia will the properties of the church be perfectly realized.

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Church speaks of the unique church of Christ 'which in the creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic' (LG 8). Two observations are here in order.

In the first place, the four properties are here taken as characteristics in which we are to believe rather than as notes that can be empirically verified. Does this mean that there is no empirical evidence to support the church's credibility? Some Protestants, holding to the invisibility of the church and to the self-sufficiency of faith, maintain that we are to believe in the four properties without any support from experience and indeed in spite of all evidence to the contrary.[4]

Vatican II, in its Constitution on the Church, adopted a different approach. It taught that the church of Christ is a complex reality consisting of a human and a divine element (LG 8). It is both a hierarchically structured society and the mystical body of Christ, both a visible assembly and a spiritual community. Because the communion of grace is not exactly coextensive with the structured institution, the full reality of the church transcends human reckoning. But because the church is a sacrament, its outer form is a sign and bearer of the interior grace. In order for the church to function as a sacrament, the visible structure must point to the spiritual reality to which it is ordered. While Vatican II did not develop the apologetical use of the four attributes, it rejected any dichotomy between the visible structure and the spiritual communion.

Second, it should be observed that in the sentence quoted above, Vatican II attributes the four properties to the church of Christ, not directly to the Roman Catholic Church. Later in the same article, however, the Council goes on to say that the church of Christ, 'organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him'. The Council also remarks that many elements of sanctification and truth which properly belong to the church of Christ are to be found outside the structure of the Catholic Church. In other words, no claim is being made that the four attributes are exclusively proper to the Roman Catholic communion.

The claim that the church of Christ 'subsists' in the Roman Catholic communion has important implications for our subject. Assuming that the church of Christ is destined to endure to the end of time (as may be inferred from biblical texts such as Matt. 16:18 and Matt. 28:20), and that it inalienably possesses these four properties, it follows that unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity must be abidingly present in the Catholic Church. If the Catholic Church were ever deprived of any of these gifts, which are affirmed in faith as properties of the church, the church of Christ could not be said to subsist in her. Catholics, without denying that unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are verified in

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[3] 3. Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, 'Die Frage nach der wahren Kirche', in *Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie* 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), pp. 212–41.

[4] 4. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), asserts that 'we have to apply the attributes of unity, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity to a reality of the church that instead of confirming them is in plain contradiction with them' (409). In this context he refers to similar statements of Gerhard Ebeling in his Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979), pp. 369–75

some measure in other communions, are convinced that each of these properties has been given to the Catholic Church as something she can never lose.[5]

This conclusion with regard to the four attributes in general will be confirmed when we review the Council's teaching on each of them in particular. We shall also have occasion to note that none of the four is perfectly present in the church at any time. So long as the church remains in its pilgrim state, the four properties are not only gifts to be gratefully received but, under another aspect, ideals to be prayerfully cherished and assiduously pursued. The church is charged to grow continually in unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.

Nearly all the modern authors who have discussed these four properties make the further point that the four are inseparable and mutually coherent. The unity proper to the church of Christ is not any unity at all, but a unity that is holy, Catholic, and apostolic. Similarly, it may be said that the catholicity of the church is one, holy, and apostolic. And so likewise with each of the other attributes: no one of them can be explained without reference to the other three.

With these preliminaries it may now be possible to say something about how each of the properties in particular is understood in contemporary Catholic teaching. In discussing each property I shall indicate some biblical points of reference and then take up the interpretation of the same property in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

THE CHURCH AS ONE

To bring people together into loving union with God and with one another was a central aim of the ministry of Jesus. He laid down his life for the sheep so that there might be 'one flock and one shepherd' (John 10:16). Jesus is described in the Fourth Gospel as having died 'to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad' (John 11:52). In his high-priestly prayer at the Last Supper Jesus implored that all who believed through the words of the apostles might be perfectly one, as he and the Father were one, 'so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me' (John 17:23).

Although the term 'one church' does not occur verbatim in Scripture, the idea is undoubtedly implied in the great biblical images of the People of God, the Body and Bride of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The term *ekklesia* is frequently used in the singular to designate the universal church. In describing Christ as head of the church, Paul indicates that the church as a whole is his body (Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:18). He exhorts the Ephesians to be 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace', since there is but 'one body and one Spirit' (Eph. 4:4). All the members have been called to one hope, with 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all' (Eph. 4:5–6).

In the letters of Paul the unity of the faithful is described as stemming principally from Christ, as head of the body (Rom. 12:5), and from the Holy Spirit, who distributes graces in the body that he animates in such a way as to build up the whole membership in unity (1 Cor. 12:1–26; cf. Eph. 4:12). As a bond of unity, Paul frequently mentions the baptism whereby all have put on Christ (Gal. 3:26–27; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1–4; 12:13). He also speaks of

[5] 5. As we shall note below, the Decree on Ecumenism states with regard to unity: 'This unity, we believe, dwells in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time' (UR 4). Consistently with its principles the Council could have said the same with regard to the other three attributes as well.

the Eucharist as a bond. Partaking of the one bread and the one cup, the communicants become really one in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16–17).

Christians must, however, live out in actual practice the unity that is already theirs in principle. Paul pleads with the Philippians to be one in mind, having the same love and living in full harmony (Phil. 2:2). Writing to the Corinthians, Paul is distressed that, having been baptized in the name of Christ, they adhere in a spirit of partisanship to human authorities such as Cephas, Apollos, and himself (1 Cor. 1:10–13; 3:4). Together with other apostles, Paul laboured strenuously to prevent the divergences between Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity from tearing the church apart.

The doctrine of Vatican II on the unity of the church is set forth most fully in the Decree on Ecumenism. It declares that Christ bestowed upon the church from the beginning the unity of full ecclesiastical communion, and then adds that 'we believe that it subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose' (UR 4). Earlier, in its discussion of 'the sacred mystery of the unity of the Church', the Decree on Ecumenism teaches that the Holy Spirit, dwelling in individual believers and animating the church as a whole, brings the faithful into union with Christ. The Spirit, therefore, is 'the principle of the Church's unity' (UR 2). Baptism 'establishes a sacramental bond of unity among all who are reborn through it' (UR 22). The Eucharist is the sign and effective instrument of ecclesial unity (UR 2).

The church is described in the Constitution on the Church as a sacrament—that is to say, an efficacious sign and instrument—of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race (LG 1). Its unity involves a fourfold bond: the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion (LG 14). Similar elements are mentioned in the Decree on Ecumenism, which affirms that Christ perfects the unity of his fellowship by governing it through the successors of the apostles under the direction of the Holy Spirit, so that all are maintained in the confession of a single faith, in the common celebration of divine worship, and in the fraternal concord of the family of God (UR 2). In the thinking of the Council Fathers the lived solidarity of the faithful, whereby the church is constituted as a communion of life, derives from, and depends upon, the three institutional elements: unity in professed faith, sacramental worship, and pastoral government.

The Catholic position regarding pastoral rule, since it differs from the usual Protestant position, may require some further elaboration. Christ is seen as having entrusted to the Twelve, with Peter at their head, the tasks of teaching, ruling, and sanctifying in order to preserve the church in unity throughout the world and to the end of time. These functions are perpetuated in subsequent generations by the bishops, with and under the pope as successor of Peter (LG 19, 20, and 22).

Vatican I in its Constitution on the Church declared that Christ the Lord set Peter over the rest of the apostles and instituted in him a permanent principle of unity in order that the episcopal office might be one and undivided and that, by the union of the priesthood, the whole multitude of believers might be held together in the unity of faith and communion (*Pastor aeternus*, Prologue, DS 3051). Vatican II, after reaffirming this doctrine (LG 18), declared that the Chair of Peter has the functions of protecting legitimate differences and seeing that they do not hinder unity but rather contribute to it (LG 23). The roles of the pope and bishops will have to be considered from another aspect under the rubric of apostolicity.

The unity of the church is that of a living, organic communion of individuals and of particular churches, all of which have their own identity. Every diocese, parish, and eucharistic assembly recapitulates, in some sort, the mystery of the universal church. In each local church, through the power of Christ, the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic

Church is assembled' (LG 26). The particular churches of the Catholic communion are maintained in fellowship by their bishops, who are in hierarchical communion with one another and with the Holy See (LG 21–22). We shall speak further of the character of this communion as a variegated unity when we turn to the church's catholicity.

The unity of the church is far from perfect. Baptized Christians, though incorporated into Christ, are often divided in their ecclesiastical allegiance. Even within the Catholic Church, which has the fullness of the means of union, there are tensions and disagreements. The members do not always act as having 'one heart and one soul' (Acts 4:32).

The unity of Christ's Body extends in some measure beyond the Roman Catholic communion. All Christians who believe in Christ and are baptized in his name are already bound together by a certain imperfect communion and must therefore be recognized by Catholics as brothers and sisters in the Lord (UR 3). The ecumenical movement is intended to build upon, and increase, the partial communion that already exists with a view to overcoming all divisive differences and strengthening the church in the unity for which Christ prayed.[6]

THE CHURCH AS HOLY

In the same prayer in which he asked his Father to make his disciples one, Jesus besought the Father to make them holy. 'Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth … And for their sake I sanctify myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth' (John 17:17–19).

Holiness, in biblical and Christian theology, consists in being delivered from sin and guilt, being set apart for God, and being united to him as the paragon and source of all holiness. Three aspects of the church's holiness may be distinguished.[7] The church is holy, first of all, in its formal or constitutive elements: that is to say, the word of God, the sacraments, the hierarchical office, and the charismatic gifts that the Holy Spirit may be pleased to bestow. The church and its members are holy, in a second respect, by virtue of being consecrated or dedicated to God, as occurs, most fundamentally, in the sacrament of baptism. Thirdly, the church is holy in so far as its members, by personally responding to God's gifts, 'complete in their lives the holiness they have received' (LG 40). This personal sanctity, accomplished through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, consists in grace and supernatural virtues, such as faith, hope, and charity.

The New Testament offers innumerable texts identifying the church as a holy community. According to the Letter to the Ephesians Christ 'loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:25–27). The Letter to the Hebrews likewise teaches that Christ suffered 'in order to sanctify the people through his own blood' (Heb. 13:12).

The holiness of the church is powerfully brought out by the first Letter of Peter, which recalls the saying of God in Leviticus 11:44–45, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' (1 Pet. 1:16). This letter goes on to exhort Christians to be 'a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 2:5).

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[6] 6. According to John Paul II, 'Ecumenism is directed precisely to making the partial communion existing between Christians grow towards full communion in truth and charity.' See his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), §14.

[7] 7. I borrow this threefold distinction from Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist, 1988), pp. 69–74.

Unlike those who stumble against Christ the cornerstone, Christians are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people' (1 Pet. 2:9).

In the teaching of Vatican II holiness is designated as the supreme purpose of the church. According to the Constitution on the Liturgy everything in the life of the church is directed toward a twofold goal: the holiness of human beings and the glory of God in Christ (SC 10).

The holiness of the church, like its unity, is both a gift and a task. The Constitution on the Church, in its fifth chapter, declares that the indefectibility of the church's holiness is a matter of faith (LG 39). The faithful have really been made holy by their baptism, but they must maintain and perfect that holiness by their way of life (LG 39–40). Earlier in the same Constitution, the holiness of the church and its members is attributed to the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple (LG 4).

The church is most perfectly holy in Mary and the saints, who are intimately and abidingly united with God in heaven (LG 48). But already here on earth 'the Church is adorned with true though imperfect holiness' (LG 48), for in her the renewal of the world is realized in a preliminary way. 'The Church, clasping sinners to her bosom, is at one and the same time holy and always in need of purification, as she unceasingly pursues the path of penance and renewal' (LG 8).

The Council stops short of affirming in this text that the church is both holy and sinful, but some Catholic theologians would concede this. The church is entirely holy in its divinely given principles but sinful in its members who fail to measure up to the demands of their vocation. Saints and sinners, however, are related in different ways to the church. The saints exemplify what the church by its inherent nature tends to be and to accomplish, whereas sinners by the very fact of their sinfulness separate themselves in some degree from the church. By the sacrament of penance, sinners are reconciled both with God and with the church, which they have offended by their sin (LG 11).

Sin, therefore, cannot be attributed to the church when considered in its formal principles, but only when considered materially, in its guilty members. They exhibit not the true nature but rather the 'un-nature' of the church. Nevertheless it is true that, as Hans Küng has said, 'In all its historical forms the true nature of the Church is accompanied, like a dark shadow by its "un-nature"; the two are inseparable.'[8] The church as a visible society is tarnished by the sins of its members, including those of its pastors.

In comparison with Vatican I, which spoke of the church's 'inexhaustible fruitfulness in every kind of goodness', Vatican II strikes a modest note in its claims for the sanctity of the Catholic people. According to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 'It does not escape the Church how great a distance lies between the message she offers and the human weakness of those to whom the gospel is entrusted' (GS 43). The false ideas and unworthy conduct of Christians 'must often be said to conceal rather than to reveal the authentic face of Christ' (GS 19).

The Decree on Ecumenism recognizes that 'both sides were to blame' in bringing about the present ruptures of communion (UR 3). The failure of Catholics to live up to their high calling has contributed to Christian divisions. Catholics are therefore obliged to forgive others and to beg pardon of God and of their separated brothers and sisters for their own sins against unity (UR 7). The Decree goes on to speak of 'spiritual ecumenism' as 'the very soul of the whole ecumenical movement' (UR 8). Christ, says the Decree, 'summons the Church to continual reformation, of which it is always in need, insofar as it is an institution of human beings here on earth' (UR 6).

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[8] 8. Hans Kúng, *The Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Image Books, 1976), p. 51.

While recognizing the harm inflicted on both sides by these divisions, the Council exhorts Catholics to esteem the truly Christian endowments that are to be found in other Christian churches and communities. 'It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and the virtuous deeds in the lives of others, who bear witness to Christ, even at times to the shedding of their blood' (UR 4). Holiness, therefore, is not exclusively proper to Catholic Christianity. It is not for us to set limits to what the Holy Spirit can bring about in individuals and communities that lack the full institutional means of holiness.

THE CHURCH AS CATHOLIC

The term 'catholic' is never applied to the church in Scripture, but it is frequently used by the Fathers beginning with Ignatius of Antioch. Etymologically, 'catholic' (*kath› holou*) has reference to the whole (*holos*) as opposed to the parts. In modern usage it commonly denotes wide expansiveness but not in the sense of merely abstract universality. Some of the richness of the term is captured by Henri de Lubac, who writes, in a pregnant sentence, ' "Catholic" suggests the idea of an organic whole, of a cohesion, of a firm synthesis, of a reality which is not scattered but, on the contrary, turned towards a center which assures its unity, whatever the expanse in area or the internal differentiation might be.'[9] Catholicity, therefore, must be understood in light of the other three properties.

The church received from the risen Christ a mandate to teach and baptize all nations (Matt. 28:20; cf. Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). The universality of its diffusion was symbolized at Pentecost, when the Spirit came upon 'devout men from every nation under heaven', all of whom were able to hear the preaching of the apostles in their own languages (Acts 2:4–6). From that time forth the church has had a real though imperfect catholicity—a catholicity in principle that incessantly tends to achieve itself in historical actuality. The Revelation of John, in a vision of the redeemed in heaven, speaks of 'a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9). The blessed have been ransomed by the blood of the Lamb 'from every tribe and tongue and people and nation' (Rev. 5:9).

Paul throughout his correspondence makes much of the church's capacity to transcend the differences of social class, gender, language, and race by which human society is commonly torn. In Christ, he says, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). Christ in his crucified flesh has broken down the walls of division, reconciling all enemies by establishing a new dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:11–22). As is evident from texts such as these, the idea of catholicity, though not the term, is abundantly present in the New Testament.

Vatican II presents a compact treatise on catholicity in article 13 of the Constitution on the Church. The new people of God, it declares, 'while remaining one and unique, is to be spread throughout the whole world and through every age to fulfil the design of the will of God'. Later in the same article we read: 'This note of universality, which adorns the people of God, is a gift of the Lord himself by which the Catholic Church efficaciously and continually tends to recapitulate the whole of humanity with all its riches, under Christ the head, in the unity of his Spirit.' Catholicity, therefore, is both a gift and a task. The gift is conferred upon the whole people of God, but may be expected to be realized more

[9] 9. Henri de Lubac, 'The Particular Churches in the Universal Church', in his *The Motherhood of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), pp. 173–74. I discuss this passage in my *The Catholicity of the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, paperback, 1987, reprinted 1989 and 1996), p. 167.

conspicuously in the Catholic Church, which is equipped to overcome divisive barriers thanks to the fullness of the doctrinal, sacramental, and ministerial structures with which it has been gifted.

The Constitution on the Church at several points emphasizes that the unity of the church is not the same as uniformity. It is a pluriform unity in which particular churches enjoy their own proper traditions (LG 13). 'The variety of local churches, in harmony among themselves, demonstrates all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church' (LG 23).

The dynamic catholicity of the church is treated most explicitly in the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity. Such activity, according to the Council, is intimately linked with the very nature of the church and with all four of its essential properties, but especially with catholicity: 'It spreads abroad the saving faith of the church and brings its catholic unity to perfection by expanding it' (AG 6). By evangelizing all nations the church realizes its own essence as a sign and instrument of universal salvation. It also contributes to the salvation and sanctification of those whom the church evangelizes. In its chapter on particular churches (AG 19–22) this decree speaks at some length of the regional customs and traditions by which each people is called to enrich the 'catholic unity' of the whole.

The ecumenical significance of this diversity is noted in the Decree on Ecumenism. 'The inheritance handed on by the apostles was received in different forms and ways, so that from the earliest times the church has had a varied development in different places, owing to diversities of natural gifts and conditions of life' (UR 14). Provided that unity in essentials is maintained, different theological, liturgical, canonical, and spiritual traditions can coexist within the church (UR 15–16).

Christians who are not in full communion with Rome are not for that reason destitute of the catholic unity that is an inalienable property of the church of Christ. To the extent that they remain authentically Christian in their faith, worship, and practice, these churches share in, and contribute to, the splendid diversity of the whole. But, as we are told in the Decree on Ecumenism, 'the divisions among Christians prevent the church from realizing in practice the fullness of catholicity proper to her, in those of her sons and daughters who, though attached to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her. Furthermore, the church finds it more difficult to express in actual life her full catholicity in every respect' (UR 4). Churches separated from Rome have lost something of the fullness of the apostolic heritage of faith, sacraments, and ministry that would be available if they had retained the bonds of full ecclesiastical communion. The Catholic Church itself is prevented from benefiting as it might from the inculturated expressions of Christian faith in nations where other forms of Christianity are dominant. Ecumenism, by progressively overcoming the wounds of divisions, contributes to the palpable realization of the church's catholicity.

THE CHURCH AS APOSTOLIC

The fourth property of the church, apostolicity, has reference to continuity with the apostles who were the first witnesses of the faith and the first pastors of the church. The church, by reason of being apostolic, is not a mere movement that takes its rise from Christ, nor is it a society that reinvents and restructures itself at will. Its essential form and teaching have been given to it by Christ, who remains for all ages the one foundation that has been laid (1 Cor. 3:11). The apostles are associated with Christ as living instruments by which he imparts his saving grace and holy doctrine. The church, therefore, is 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone' (Eph. 2:20). The Revelation of John, consequently, can describe the

holy city Jerusalem (that is to say, the church in glory) as having twelve foundations, 'and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb' (Rev. 21:14).

The apostolicity of the church, as understood in the Catholic tradition, consists in its fidelity to the apostolic deposit of faith, sacraments, mission, and ministry. The ministers who succeed to the apostles play an indispensable role. At the end of Matthew's Gospel Christ instructs the Eleven to teach and baptize all nations, promising to be with them always, to the close of the age (Matt. 28:20). This great commission, as interpreted by Vatican II, implies that Christ remains with the apostolic leadership throughout the centuries (LG 17; 19; AG 5). The apostolic tradition is regarded as a vital force that safeguards the identity of the deposit of faith while continually adapting its forms and styles of expression to new audiences and situations under the impulses of the Holy Spirit (DV 8).

As the church expanded and as the apostles and their first companions began to die off, measures were taken to ensure the perpetuation of the apostolic ministry. In the Acts and the Pastoral Letters, Paul and others are shown as laying on hands for the ministries of the episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate (e.g., Acts 6:6; 14:23; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6; 5:22; Tit. 1:5). The practice of ordination as a means of transmitting ecclesiastical office in the apostolic succession is even more clearly attested by early church writers, such as 1 Clement, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. The succession of bishops ordained by apostles and their authorized associates was of great importance in protecting the early church against the incursions of Gnosticism.

In so far as apostolicity conserves the integrity of the word of God, Vatican II treats of it in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. The gospel, says the Council, was entrusted by Christ to the apostles, who handed it on in the inspired writings of Holy Scripture and in the form of living tradition. The bishops ordained in the apostolic succession have been seen since ancient times as the authorized guardians of the apostolic deposit (DV 7–8).

The Constitution on the Church cites Irenaeus and other early Fathers as witnesses that the apostles appointed bishops to succeed them, so that the apostolic tradition might be made accessible to subsequent generations (LG 20). The bishops do not take the place of the apostles as founders of the church but perpetuate their functions as 'teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship, and ministers of government'. At this point Vatican II makes one of its most emphatic statements:

> Just as the office that was given individually by the Lord to Peter, the first of the apostles, is permanent and meant to be handed on to his successors, so also the apostles' office of feeding the Church is a permanent one, to be carried on without interruption by the sacred order of bishops. Therefore the synod teaches that by divine institution the bishops have succeeded to the place of the apostles as shepherds of the Church. Whoever hears them hears Christ, but whoever rejects them rejects Christ and him who sent Christ (cf. Luke 10:16). [LG 20]

The Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops takes up many of the same points. It teaches that Christ entrusted the pastoral office to the apostles with and under Peter, and that the bishops, in union with the Roman pontiff, succeed to that responsibility (CD 2). Echoing Vatican I, Vatican II in its Constitution on the Church teaches that the ministry of Peter and his successors was established by Christ as the 'perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity' (LG 23).

The Decree on Ecumenism nevertheless affirms that the separated Eastern churches, while lacking full communion with the apostolic See of Rome, possess 'by apostolic succession, the priesthood and the Eucharist' (UR 15). The 'ecclesial communities' of the West—a term presumably intended to include Protestant bodies—are judged not to

possess the authentic and full reality of the eucharistic mystery because of their lack of the sacrament of order (*propter sacramenti ordinis defectum*, UR 22).

Since Vatican II the topic of apostolic succession in the ministry has been extensively analysed in ecumenical dialogues between the Catholic Church and episcopally ordered churches, such as the Anglican and the Orthodox. The theme of presbyterial succession has been taken up in dialogues with some churches of Lutheran and Calvinist lineage.

Many of the fruits of these dialogues are gathered up in the Lima text on 'Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry', issued by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in 1982. Reflecting a broad ecumenical consensus, the chapter on Ministry affirms that apostolic succession in the ministry is to be valued as 'serving, symbolizing, and guarding the continuity of the apostolic faith and communion' (§36).[10] Distinguishing between the apostolicity of the whole church and the apostolic succession in the ministry, the document treats the latter as subordinate to the former, which constitutes its goal and purpose. The succession of bishops is described as having become 'one of the ways, together with the transmission of the Gospel and the life of the community, in which the apostolic tradition of the Church was expressed' (ibid.) Even without the historic episcopate, says the text, 'a continuity in apostolic faith, worship, and mission' can be preserved in a variety of ways including, for example, the restriction of the power to ordain to 'persons in whom the Church recognizes the authority to transmit the ministerial commission' (§37). The Faith and Order Commission here encourages all churches to accept the episcopal succession as a sign of the apostolicity of the life of the whole church (§38).

Although the Catholic members of the Faith and Order Commission voted in favour of the Lima text, the Holy See, in its official review of the text, expressed some reservations about the handling of apostolic succession. The bishop, according to the critique, is not just a sign and servant of apostolic succession, but, in the Catholic understanding, the qualified spokesman in the communion of the churches. 'Through the episcopal succession, the bishop embodies and actualizes both catholicity in time, i.e., the continuity of the Church across the generations, as well as the communion lived in each generation.'[11] This criticism should not be interpreted as a rejection of the Lima text but rather as an indication that, like most ecumenical statements, it calls short of embodying the full Catholic doctrine. Evangelicals, of course, will criticize Lima from a very different perspective.[12]

The problem of apostolicity arises in sharpest form with regard to churches that make no claim to ministerial orders in succession to the apostles. Must the Catholic deny that such churches are devoid of apostolicity? The principles of the Lima text are helpful because they indicate that these churches may have a large measure of apostolicity without apostolic succession in the ministry. They may, for example, adhere staunchly to the apostolic Scriptures and to the doctrines and practices authorized by those Scriptures. The Apostles' Creed as a reading of the central biblical message, has authority for Evangelical as well as Catholic Christians. Evangelical theologians, like Catholics, are wary of any modernism that would let the structures, doctrine, and mission of the church be

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[10] 10. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), quotation from page 29.

[11] 11. Vatican Appraisal of the WCC Document, 'Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry', *Origins* 17 (November 19, 1987): pp. 401–16, at 414.

[12] 12. See 'An Evangelical Response to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, a critique prepared by the World Evangelical Fellowship and edited by Paul G. Schrotenboer in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13 (1989): pp. 291–313, esp. pp. 303–5, 307–8.

radically refashioned according to the whims and the preferences of the members. To insist on the sole lordship of Christ as known to us from the Scriptures is already to accept a large measure of apostolicity.

CONCLUSION

The unity of the church, which may be understood as the ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement, cannot be measured in a purely quantitative way, by counting the elements that the participating churches hold in common. Unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are dynamic realities that depend on the foundational work of Christ and on his continued presence and activity through the Holy Spirit. Evangelical communities that excel in love for Jesus Christ and in obedience to the Holy Spirit may be more unitive, holy, catholic, and apostolic than highly sacramental and hierarchically organized churches in which faith and charity have become cold.

With respect to unity, there are grounds for the statement of Pope John XXIII, repeated by John Paul II, to the effect that 'what unites us is much greater than what divides us'.[13] What could outweigh their faith in the triune God and in Jesus Christ the Lord? While still disagreeing on certain important points of doctrine and ecclesiastical order, they may have very fruitful contacts and stimulate one another to a closer following of Christ. By coming together in prayer, worship, dialogue, and service to the whole human family, they promote the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church.

Members of these communities can agree that all believing Christians are in some sense one and that they must strive to overcome their divisions, which are clearly against the will of Christ. As followers of the one Lord they are committed to strive for the unity for which he prayed. Partaking of one baptism and praying to the same Lord, they should aspire to unity in mind and heart, in will and action. There should be as little dissension among them as possible.

Evangelicals and Catholics can agree, moreover, that holiness is an essential mark of the Christian life as pursued by individual believers and by communities. It is not enough to confess Christ while refusing to do what he commands. Believers must be obedient to the Lord and docile to the Holy Spirit, manifesting in their conduct the holiness of the Church for which Christ sacrificed himself.

In the third place, all who call themselves 'Evangelical' or 'Catholic' should be able to share a universalistic faith. The gospel is unquestionably to be disseminated to all human beings, regardless of race, language, gender, and social status. All who accept that gospel have a bond of unity that transcends all ethnic and sociological divisions. The company of believers, as a worldwide fellowship, cannot fail to be in a true sense catholic.

It can be agreed, finally, that the church should remain forever faithful to its origins in Jesus Christ and in the apostles whom he sent into the world. The Scriptures of the New Testament are themselves apostolic and are a norm of the apostolicity that Catholics and Evangelicals seek to preserve.

Once these agreements are firmly in place, Evangelicals and Catholics can joyfully recognize each other as members of one Christian family, sharing in common their faith in the triune God and in Christ the Redeemer. With this realization they can approach the historically disputed points with greater hope of agreement. The full unity for which Christ prayed cannot be treated as an empty dream. Even though its realization surpasses human power, it lies within the capacity of the Holy Spirit, in whom Christians must finally place their trust.

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[13] 13. John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, §20.

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Ecclesiology in the Breach: Evangelical Soundings

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Keywords: Dialogue, Church, Baptism, Ministry, Eucharist, Ecumenical

INTRODUCTION: ECCLESIOLOGICAL HURDLES

Writing a discussion paper on ecclesiology from an Evangelical perspective for a consultation with Roman Catholic theologians, one faces multiple hurdles. Though two of these are common to any ecclesiology, both are 'evangelically' compounded. The first is the dilemma inherent in the profession of the unity of the church in the face of its evident brokenness: in elaborating an ecclesiology one must write about *the* church, the *one* church[1]—yet one can do so only from the perspective of a *partial segment* of the one church. The other problem that is common to all ecclesiological discussion is closely related to the dilemma of division, in fact, may be considered as an explication of this dilemma. Current ecumenical discussion has placed ecclesiology centre-stage: greater visible unity can be achieved only as basic ecclesiological differences are resolved. But especially those traditions with the most highly developed ecclesiologies are loath to relativize their ecclesiology as a *particular* ecclesiology, a unique, tradition-shaped window through which one views the *one church*. The 1950 Toronto statement, in fact, enshrines this problem within the heart of the ecumenical movement. After insisting that the World Council of Churches 'cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the church', the statement allows that membership in the Council 'does not imply that a church treats its own conception of the Church as merely relative', nor does it imply that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word'.[2] While all traditions face the ecclesiological problem of the single and multiple, the one and broken church, this conundrum is compounded when examining ecclesiology from an evangelical perspective. This complication will become clear in examining the particular hurdles that lie in the way of elaborating an evangelical ecclesiological approach.

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[1] 1. See Roger Haight, 'On Systematic Ecclesiology', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8 (1992): 220–238; ' … the object of ecclesiology must be the whole or universal church' (pp. 220–221). Already the Reformers were aware of the conundrum of the one-broken-church. Rolf Ahlers states that, in drafting the *Confessio Augustana*, 'Melanchthon specifically avoided including a separate doctrine of the church lest it be mistaken for a doctrine of a separate church'; see Rolf Ahlers, 'The "Community of Brethren": The Contemporary Significance of the Third Thesis of Barnmen', *Calvin Theological Journal* 20 (1985): 7–31; citation from p. 9.

[2] 2. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), pp. 465, 467.