

THE CHURCH

Some folks say, "I don't need a Church. I have my Bible and a personal relationship with Jesus." Well OK, but how do they really know about Jesus and what he taught? "The Bible," they might respond. This would not be incorrect but it is incomplete for the question still arises, Where did the Bible come from? "From God!" Right again but the question remains as to *how* he brought it into existence. After all, the Bible did not fall from heaven as a book in completed form. The Bible came from God *through the Church*. We know which books belong to the Bible and which do not because the Church has taught us. And, though some claim the Bible alone is the source for all truth the Bible itself assigns this status to the Church: *[T]he household of God...is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.* (1 Tim 3:15) So it looks like the Church is pretty essential after all. Well then, what is the Church?

When we think of the "Church" we might first think of a building or of an organization. But the Church is first of all a people, God's people. Perhaps the best way to understand the Church is to look at some images of the Church.

The Church is Bride

This image is not the first one that comes to mind for many and yet it is quite biblical and very meaningful. The image of bride really begins with the Old Testament. One of the more common ways God chooses to describe his relationship with Israel is in terms of a marriage (e.g. Hosea 1-3; Ezek 16) and His relationship with her is called a covenant. The New Testament also calls God's Church a bride (Rev 22:17; Eph 1:4; 5:27; 1 Cor 6:15-17; 2 Cor 11:2). Here it is important for us to understand that the Israel and the Church are *not* two different brides. St. Paul is clear to teach in Romans 11, that the true Israel consists of Jews and Gentiles who have faith in Christ Jesus.

Thus the Church is the same Israel but now consisting of both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ Jesus. Since the Church is Christ's bride then each of us, members of the Church, are also espoused to Christ and to God: *I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you*



as a pure bride to her one husband. (2 Cor 11:2). Just as the Church is called to be faithful to Christ, so too are we as individual members of the Bride called to that same fidelity.

The Body of Christ

Another more familiar image of the Church is that it is the Body of Christ: *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.* (1 Cor 12:27) St. Paul goes on to develop this image in great detail in Chapter 12 of the First Letter to the Corinthians. Just as a body is one but has different members with different functions, so it is with the Church, the Body of Christ (See also Eph 4:11ff). Each of us has

different gifts and fulfills different functions but it is all the work of the one Body. And no one member should feel any more or less important because of their function for in a body all parts and functions are essential for the well-being of the whole body. This is how it is with the Church as well. And, *Jesus Christ is the head of the Body, the Church* (Col 1:18). Thus, we all have a unity and can work together only because Christ is our head, uniting and directing us.

Complementary Images

It is possible to wonder how these two images of the Church can be reconciled. Either the Church is the Bride of Christ or the Body of Christ but it cannot be both. And yet this is not only possible but it is essential to understanding the Church as a marital union of Christ and His bride. The scriptural teaching about marriage is that the two spouses become one. And thus it is that the Church is at one and the same time the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ: *Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body."For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church* (Eph 5:28-32).

Four Marks of the Church

Another way to understand the Church is to examine four marks given in the Creed which describe the Church. A "mark" is a characteristic or a quality by which we may recognize who or what something is. Thus if you had never seen me and were to meet me at the airport, I might give you some marks, or characteristics by which you could recognize me (e.g. six feet tall, beard,

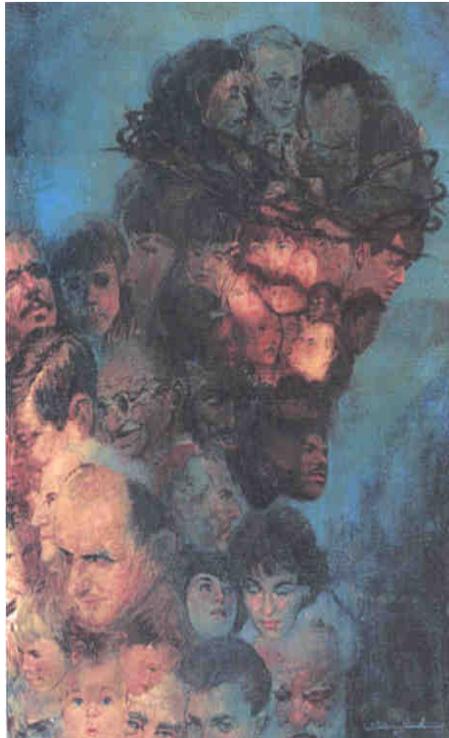
brown hair, white, etc.) Here then are four marks by which we can recognize the Church. She is: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

One

The Church is one because of the will and the work of God. There can be only *One Lord, one faith, and one Baptism* (Eph 4:5) because of who God is, *He is one and there is no other* (Mk 12:32). And His Word does not change, *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.* (Matt 24:35). For all these reasons and more a key characteristic of the Church is that she be one, that she have an intrinsic unity. There is today a loss in the sense of the oneness and uniqueness of our Holy Faith. Many think of the Christian faith as just one way among many that people can “find God.” and that no one should claim to have a “monopoly on the truth.” But the simple fact remains, Jesus did not come to be a way, he was clear, *I am the way, the truth and the light, no one come to the Father except through me* (Jn 14:6). Thus the Church is one. There is a diversity of gifts within the one Church but there is only one body. We are one in the profession of and obedience to the faith received from the apostles. We are one in a common celebration of divine worship, and we are one by means of our common unity to the pastoral care and authority given the Church by Christ. Jesus entrusted the Church to Peter’s pastoral care (Mt 16:18, Lk 22:32) and commissioned him and the other apostles to extend and rule it (Mt 28:19). As Catholics we have kept this oneness by apostolic succession (see apostolic below). We thus show unity not only by a spiritual oneness but also by a visible submission to the governance of the Church exercised by Christ through the Pope and the bishops. In this way our unity is expressed and realized at a practical level and in a very concrete way. Sadly, there are many divisions evident in the wider body of Christ. Catholics and Protestants experience divisions and Protestants are also divided one from another. We must continue to pray and work for the unity for which Christ also prayed (Jn 17:20).

Holy

How can the Church be holy when she is filled with sinners? Many today like to criticize the Church and emphasize the shortcomings of her members. But ultimately the Church is holy because Christ is holy. He will bring to perfection all the members of his body. This is already realized by the saints in heaven. For now, we must simply pray on our own behalf that *he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to*



completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Phil 1:6) The Church’s holiness is drawn entirely from Christ and it is especially manifest in the fact that, for two thousand years now she has never failed to call others to Christ and to faithfully hand on his word. Likewise, she sanctifies us by the power of God through the sacraments and the ministry of the word.

Catholic

The word “catholic” means “universal.” What this means is that the true Church of God cannot ever exclude any race or nation. The call of Christ is universal. As he sent the apostles forth he declared, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have*

commanded you (Matt 28:19-20) This mark of the Church is evident today as we see that our Catholic Church has gone forth to every part of the world by God’s grace embraces people of every race and nation.

Apostolic

To say that the Church is apostolic means not only that we proclaim the faith given us by the apostles but also that the true Church can trace its origins in an unbroken line of succession back to the apostles themselves. Christ entrusted his Church to the care and governance of Peter and the other apostles. The Apostles likewise and handed this authority on to others through explicit appointment (e.g. Acts 1:20; Titus 1:5). This explicit appointment was to distinguish them from the false teachers who would inevitably arise (Mt 24:11 etc.) Down through the centuries our Catholic Church has very carefully maintained this unbroken succession (through the laying on of hands) of authority. The Pope is a direct successor of St. Peter and each bishop is in a direct line of succession going back to the apostles themselves. No man ordains himself but is chosen carefully by the Church and ordained only by those who are already bishops. In this way the line of succession has been preserved intact down through the centuries. This last quality or mark of the Church may seem rather technical but it has been an important safeguard to keep individuals from within the body from claiming authority on their own and leading to endless divisions. This reality of endless division has been the experience of the Protestants who abandoned the practice of apostolic succession. With no agreed upon final authority such as the Pope and the college of Bishops in union with him there is no way to resolve inevitable disagreements. The result among Protestants is almost endless division and separate Churches every time there is disagreement. When no one is Pope everyone is Pope. Thus apostolic succession and the office of Pope (Peter) ultimately preserves by God’s grace the Church which must always remain, one, holy, catholic and apostolic.