

In the creed, we say that we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. These four properties or characteristics were seen as so essential to the nature of the Church that they found their way into the creed itself.

The first one is UNITY. This is the most fundamental of the four since it can be seen as being the source of the other three. The unity we are talking about begins with the unity of the members of the Trinity and radiates out from there so as to include all who are united to Christ through the Holy Spirit. If God's plan is to become one community with humanity, then unity is an absolutely essential characteristic of the Church. It also means that there can be only one visible, structured community on this Earth which embodies all the characteristics essential to the visibility of Christ's Church. Catholics of course believe that Church to be the Catholic Church.

The fundamental building blocks of unity are: our common faith, our sharing in the sacramental life of the Church, and finally the ordained ministry. The fact that we all proclaim our belief in the same dogmas of our faith; that we all share the same spiritual life given to us through the sacraments and the fact that we all recognise the same ordained ministers as our spiritual leaders – all of this shows forth visibly our unity with Christ and with each other in him.

A similar sort of unity is found in Protestant Churches too. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc. each have a detailed statement of the faith that binds them together. They also share the same sacraments, even if they recognise only two of our seven. And the fact that they accept their ministers as truly ordained ministers of Christ's Church – shows forth visibly *their* unity with Christ and some degree of the unity of Christ's Church. The fact that the various Christian denominations do not agree in some essential areas of doctrine and practice and structures is a major tragedy and an appalling scandal: for we preach unity in Christ and practice (or are compelled by conscience to practice) separate development.

The ecumenical movement was founded over 100 years ago to try and sort out this problem. Much has been achieved but much still remains to be done. Ironically, the most difficult problem is the Catholic belief in a special ministry established by Christ to take on the responsibility of caring for the unity of the Church. Catholics believe that this ministry was first of all given to Peter as the leader of the apostles. And since Peter died in Rome, the responsibility of the Ministry was passed on to each succeeding Bishop of Rome down to our own day. Hence it is also called the Petrine ministry and the man who exercised it was called the Vicar of Peter. I suspect that that name was not grand enough for a time came when a title that belonged to every bishop was restricted in its use for Bishop of Rome, or the Pope as he is most commonly known. The title is The Vicar of Christ and Vatican II stressed that every bishop is the Vicar of Christ in his diocese.

The Bishop of Rome carries then the extra burden of caring for the unity of the whole Church and not just his diocese. To be in communion with the Bishop of Rome is *the* visible sign of the unity of all Catholics spread throughout the world and therefore of Christ's Church. And he alone can exercise by himself the supreme authority in the Church that all the bishops of the Church have when they act in unison with each other, for example, in a council of all the Church's bishops.

This power and authority is enormous. The way in which the Pope chooses to exercise it is his free choice. For much of the Church's life the Pope intervened only now and then in the affairs of the Church beyond his diocese. But in the late middle ages a policy of centralising Church administration began to take root in Rome and reached its high point in the middle of the last century. It has been very beneficial but it also has had its drawbacks – chiefly its reduction of bishops to little more than administrators of centralised Church policy. In recent years therefore many theologians, bishops, Cardinals and lay people are calling for a return to a less centralised administration. Moreover the Pope's authority has moral limitations and remains subject to Christ's teaching. There are many things that a Pope cannot do. But it may be useful for every Pope to have engraved on his cassock Lord Acton's famous comment about the papacy that all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I believe part of the reason why other Christian Churches cannot accept catholic belief about

the authority of the Pope because it is so often experienced as crushing rather than liberating. Many people involved in ecumenical work believe that the doctrine concerning the papacy will be more acceptable if it is exercised in a spirit that clearly seeks to be of service rather than to dominate.

The second property of the Church is HOLINESS. The unity I was talking about is a *holy* unity because it comes from God and binds us to God and through God to each other. For this reason the Church has always been spoken of as holy and in Scripture its members are referred to as ‘saints’. But the Church is also meant to be holy in the sense that its God given holiness bears fruit in holy living. We have come to reserve the word Saint for outstanding examples of holy living. But in fact everyone who is in loving unity with God is a saint. The Church is, as the Creed puts it, ‘the communion of saints’ which in the original Latin refers to both the community of its members and the holy realities they all share in (for example the sacraments).

Of course, only that part of the Church whose members have died and are now fully transformed by God’s grace can be regarded as completely sinless, without ‘spot or wrinkle’ (Eph 5:27, 1Pet 1:19). The Church in this world is indeed rooted firmly in God’s holiness and is made up of people who are holy in their lives. But we all fail to live out love to the fullest and so fill the Church not only with our goodness but also with our sinfulness, even if it only be what we call venial sins. This is why at the very beginning of every mass we openly confess that we have sinned and receive God’s forgiveness from the priest. And because our sins let down the whole Church, we confess not only to almighty God and the saints in heaven but also to our neighbour: to the persons standing around us.

The third property of the Church is its CATHOLICITY. The Church’s unity is not only a holy unity but a Catholic one, i.e., one that is open to all peoples. Remember that God’s plan was for the whole of humanity to form one community with the Trinity. That demands catholicity: openness to all people. The Church’s leaders should therefore be very careful not to impose unnecessary rules on the whole Church, if those rules are culturally very threatening or offensive to any portion of the Church. There should be room for Tridentine

rites, new liturgies, different spiritual practices, etc. While some degree of uniformity is necessary to preserve the unity of the world-wide Church, this should not be overdone.

The fourth property of the Church is its APOSTOLICITY. Apostolicity is unity in time: it refers to the fact that the Church was founded on the testimony of the Apostles. No matter how big the Church may grow it must always remain firmly rooted in that original testimony. This does not mean that it does not develop in its understanding of that apostolic testimony and therefore introduce new ways of looking at or doing things in the Church. But it cannot contradict the apostolic testimony.

The building blocks of apostolicity are the same as for unity: our common faith, our sharing in the sacramental life of the Church, and finally the ordained ministry. This is passed down from generation to generation, thus ensuring the unity in time that is the essence of apostolicity.

Those then are the four properties or marks of the Church. I would like to end by dealing very quickly with the teaching that “there is no salvation outside the Church”.

If the Church is not simply a *means to salvation but IS salvation, IS* the God-humankind community taking shape down the ages, then the only salvation that exists is membership of that community. But this does not mean that people who do not believe in Christ or who are not signed up members of the Church cannot be saved. For there are many ways of being linked to the Church. For example, anybody who tries to live a life that seeks at the very least to love neighbour but knows nothing of Christ can be saved. The Spirit of Christ can work secretly in the hearts of all human beings leading them to live a life which practices love for others. They are linked to the Church invisibly by sharing in Christ’s grace and visibly through their good lives. We believe that they are therefore not outside but inside the community of salvation formed by the Trinity with humanity – even if they would not see themselves as being such.

But that having been said, another way needs to be found to express the necessity of the Church for salvation. For while the phrase “outside the Church there is no salvation” is the truth, to simply repeat it without explaining why it is true and yet at the same time why any human being can be saved, is to perpetuate the false belief that we believe all non-Christians or non-Catholics are damned.

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