

The Marks and Attributes of the Catholic Church

The following is from a book by Father Thomas E. Cox: *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*.
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UNITY

The Catholic Church is one in doctrine, one in ritual or baptism, one in regimen or hierarchy. Moreover, the Church is one in time and in space. It is not enough that the Church should be *like* the Church Christ founded: it must be the *same* that Christ founded. Nor is it enough that the Church *was* the Church that Christ founded, but it must *continue to be* the Church Christ founded. The unity which we vindicate for the Church, then, is not a unity founded on similarity, but on identity.

The oneness of the Church includes union and unity. Union excludes division, unity excludes plurality, whether simultaneous or successive. Hence we can consider the oneness of the Church in three respects: (1) in its very nature; (2) with regard to extent of space (3) with regard to time. The Catholic Church Jesus Christ founded must be one in itself, it must be the same all over the world, and it must be the same down through all time.

One thing is sure, we can never arrive at the one true Church by shaving the corners off discordant creeds and then pasting the residue together. There are two things that violate the unity of the Church. These are heresy and schism. Heresy is a pertinacious continuance in a doctrine that is erroneous. It rejects one or more of the articles of Christian belief. It assails the unity of faith. It strikes directly at the mind of the Church. Schism spurns the authority of the Church. It is a spontaneous withdrawal from its communion. It strikes directly at the unity of the body of the Church. Schism and heresy are both great sins.

One thing is certain: the true Church has no sect which is part of it. The unity of the Church is not a union of sects. Schism in unity, and sects in a Church that is one, are terms that carry a contradiction. If one Church is true, all sects are false.

HOLINESS

Whether we consider the Church in its entirety, as something consecrated to God; or whether we consider it as something tending in its purpose and practices to produce righteousness; or, finally, as having in fact produced and therefore as actually containing saintly members, the Church is holy.

The sanctity of the Church is both an attribute and a mark. As an attribute it may be viewed in several ways: first, in its Author or Founder; secondly, in its essence or constitution; thirdly, in its end or aim; fourthly, in the means it employs; fifthly, in the members which compose its body. Sanctity as a note or mark of the Church is found especially in the body or members of the Church, and implies the practice of exalted virtue, even in the heroic form. The Church is also known to be holy by the sanctity of all the doctrines it teaches, and by the reasonableness of its practices.

The primal cause of the holiness of the Church, as well as a claim for its sanctity as a society, is clearly set forth by St. Paul in these words to the Ephesians: "*Christ also loved*

the Church, and delivered Himself up for It, that He might sanctify It, cleansing It by the laver of water in the word of life; that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

Truth is uncompromising, and the Church is uncompromising because She is true, even “*the pillar and ground of the truth.*” “*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*” The Church however, whose teaching conquers corrupt human nature, subdues the savage passions of men, overcomes concupiscence of the flesh, the wickedness of the world and the wiles of the devil, and from the sinner makes the saint, needs no other miracle to prove its holiness.

CATHOLICITY

The word “Catholic” comes from the Greek *katholikos*, which means “universal.” When applied to any society, it conveys the idea that such society is intended for all men, through all time, and in every place. But when applied to a society which has for its purpose the teaching of truth, it includes also the thought that it teaches all truth. Therefore, a society to be Catholic in the sense in which we give the epithet to the Church must be universal in time, in territory, and in truth.

Jesus was the Redeemer and Teacher of all men. The society which He came to found was to be truly Catholic, worldwide, and perpetual. The Catholic Church must teach the same truths and the whole truth through every age to the consummation of the world. The Church was territorially Catholic at its birth.

Can any of the sects, or any of the schismatical bodies, establish a claim to catholicity? Can all of them put together make anything more than a pretense of being Catholic? Whence have they origin, where is there bond of union? What about differences in doctrine?

Now there is one Church, and only one, that can justly claim the title of Catholic. One Church alone is Catholic every way to look at it. All others are not Catholic in any way to take them. They are every one of them recent affairs, compared with the Catholic Church. The fact that they begin long since the Ascension of our Lord, proves that none of them are Catholic in time. An examination into their tenets will disclose that none of them have Catholicity of doctrine. None of them teach the *whole* truth. Any denomination that says that the Bible simply is the rule of faith, and the Bible only, has not the whole gospel of God. This defect is still more conspicuous since even great portions of the Bible are rejected. If however, the sects taught every truth, of those which Christ taught, except *one*, they could not claim Catholicity of truth. The fact of their closer resemblance to Christ’s Church in doctrine would only make them more to be dreaded as counterfeits. “There is nothing more dangerous than those heretics who admit nearly the whole cycle of doctrine, and yet by one word, as with a drop of poison, infect the real and simple faith taught by our Lord and handed down by the Apostolic tradition.” It is nothing to boast of that the sects teach some truth – of course they teach some truth, but the Church which all are commanded to hear must teach *all* true.

St. Augustine, arguing against the heretics of his time, says: “In many things they are with me, and in a few they are not: what will it profit?” Again he says: “You who believe what you like of the Gospels, and believe not what you like, believe yourselves rather than the Gospels.” None of the sects are Catholic in territory.

APOSTOLICITY

The word “Apostle” signifies “one sent.” It is a term that implies a relationship, for in some way it denotes both the messenger and the sender. As applied to the Church, it expresses its ministerial cause, the Apostles, and it implies its dependence on the primary cause, Jesus Christ.

The term “Apostolic,” when applied to the Church, is synonymous with “genuine,” “accredited,” “authorized,” “true.” A church which is not Apostolic is confessedly spurious, and at once proclaims itself an upstart, an imposter, a sham. It follows, then, that the Church which is directly derived from the Apostles is the only true Church. By direct derivation or lineal descent, we mean coming down in unbroken succession from the Apostles, and having its orders, *doctrine*, and *mission* from them. The Church that is really Apostolic must have in itself everything that the society of the Apostles originally had. It must be *identical* in doctrine, in orders, and in the authority. It must teach *all* the truths committed to the Apostles and it must succeed as an organization in such a manner as to be strictly the same society. It is not enough for it to teach all the doctrines of the Apostles, if it lacks either their orders *or their jurisdiction*. Nor is it enough to have the orders of the Apostles if either their doctrine or *mission* is wanting. “*Bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu,*” is an axiom that has application here. “A thing is good only when good every way, a thing is bad if bad in any way.” No church is truly Apostolic that teaches a doctrine at variance with those taught in handed down by the Apostles. Neither is a church Apostolic unless its orders come down in an unbroken succession from the Apostles. Finally, no church is Apostolic that is not authorized and commissioned by apostolic continuity.

All innovators take for a first principle that the provisions which Christ made for continuing His work in the world are inadequate for the purpose. But what evidence do they bring to prove their claim? What credentials or authority do they produce to show their *mission*? The world never produced a fool that could not find another to follow him.

Those who invent doctrines unheard of before are not the successes of the Apostles. Novelty and error are children of the same father – the father of lies. Those who have lost the line of valid ministers leading back to apostolic times cannot plead the possession of Apostolicity. Where there is no ordination, no priesthood, no authority, no power, Apostolicity is out of the question. Even if valid orders exist, where jurisdiction is lacking there is no real Apostolicity. Schism, as well as heresy, destroys apostolic succession.

Now I hold that there is one Church, and only one, that can vindicate its Apostolic title, which ought to be done by showing its origin in the unbroken succession of its orders and *mission* from the Apostles, and by proving its doctrinal identity with their teachings.

INFALLIBILITY

The infallibility of the Church is a matter of paramount importance. It is the key to the whole ecclesiastical situation. As soon as we have found the true Church, and have learned that it cannot teach us error, there remains nothing for us to do but to listen and obey.

Infallibility is an inerrancy in interpreting and expounding law. Infallibility has nothing to do whether the Pope observes law or not. Infallibility is before the fact. It is antecedent to its exercise. It is something in the teacher that prevents the teaching of untruth. An infallible Church does not and cannot teach error.

Essentially, infallibility belongs to God: for God, of His own essence and nature, can neither deceive nor be deceived. The infallibility of the Church is an infallibility by participation. Man of his own nature is not incapable of error, but by reason of a divine assistance, in the circumstances and limitations and proper field of infallibility, he may participate in the divine prerogative, and so be insured against error. *Hence infallibility may be defined as a supernatural assistance by which the Church is preserved free from error.*

If we had no other source of proof, reason alone would demand the doctrine of infallibility of the Church. Since Christ is God, and God is truth, the Church founded by Christ must teach the truth. Christ owes it to Himself not to authorize a lie.

Again, no man is bound to submit his intellect to error. The intellect was made to know and believe truth. It is bound only by the truth. If I am bound to hear the Church – that is, to believe the Church and obey the Church – under pain of condemnation, the Church must teach me the truth and command me to do only what is right. Now, we are bound to believe certain things, and to do certain things, in order to obtain salvation. The Church is the society which Christ founded for teaching what is necessary for us to believe and what is necessary for us to do. Can we suppose that the Church is unable to do that for which it was founded? Infallibility must therefore necessarily belong to the Church.

“It would be foolish to say that the Church has authority to declare dogmatic points, and yet that She can err. Dogmatic matters appeal to conscience, and conscience is only subject to truth in matters of belief. To say that the Church has authority, and yet She may err in Her declarations, would be to destroy authority of conscience, which everyone should hold sacred: it would be to substitute something else besides truth as sovereign Lord of conscience, which would be tyranny. If the Church has authority in dogmatic matters, She must be the organ and representative of truth; in one word, the Church must be infallible.” (Cardinal Newman)

Again, the infallibility of the Church is proved from the necessity of divine faith for salvation. *“He that believeth not shall be condemned.”* An act of faith is a supernatural act; its certainty is absolute and unconditional. Faith precludes doubt. You may have an opinion, an inclination, a disposition, but can have no faith unless you have *absolute* certainty. Has God given us any authority upon which to base our belief as certain? If He has, we have an infallible Church. If He has not, we have no saving faith.

How could we become perfect, if the Church were liable to teach us untruth, and if we were bound to believe it? How could our Lord say, as He does, that the gates of hell shall not prevail against His Church, if it could be conquered by error? If the Church could

teach the world a lie, if it could teach us error, the Devil would laugh: for then he would have gotten God's instrument of salvation to do his work of damnation. The Church is infallible because the Spirit of truth is with it.

Besides the Catholic Church there is no other that claims infallibility. Now if there is a Church that is infallible, it must necessarily lay claim to that title. Every church that disclaims the title gives proof thereby that it does not possess the thing. For proclaiming its own fallibility, it either tells the truth or it falls into error. If it tells the truth, it is not infallible; and if it falls into error, it is not infallible. The church that denies its own infallibility cannot be the teacher of all truth.

INDEFECTIBILITY

Indefectibility belongs to the essence of the Church. It means not only that the Church has never failed, but that it cannot fail. Indefectibility asserts, in spite of all opposition, the duration of the Church up to the end of the world, with all its powers and properties, both internal and external, as it was first constituted and endowed by Christ.

Indefectibility includes two thoughts: perpetuity and immutability. Perpetuity of the Church has reference to the continuous and unbroken existence in time. It does not mean that some fragments of Christianity, battered and broken and scattered, will survive here and there, but it asserts that the Church which Christ founded upon His Apostles will continue to flourish, vivifying a dead world by its supernatural life, dispelling the world's darkness by its holy light, and performing in perfection all the functions of the Church of God to the end of time.

The perpetuity of the Church is nothing but Her Catholicity in duration, it is Her unity and identity in time. The dictates of common sense, together with a knowledge of man's religious needs, and the purpose and aim of Christ in instituting the Church, logically prove that the Church ought to be a perpetual. The Church ought to endure as long as there is work for it to do, as long as souls are to be saved, as long as there lives a man who needs to be taught the message is truth

If the Church could cease to be, if it could change from the truth, if they could teach error, the powers of hell would prevail over it. The Church which the Scriptures said will last to the end of time is Christ's Church. If it were mutable it would not remain, for if it should change essentially it would lose its identity. But Christ's Church must prevail. Therefore it cannot change in its essential features. Christ Church is immutable because it is perfect.

PostScript note: You can hear a lot more of what is in this book on MP3 files. The Marks and Attributes of the Catholic Church were explained during the Catechism Classes. The MP3 files for the classes can be found at: http://jmjsite.com/catechism_classes.html. From 3-20-11 through 6-5-11 we covered this first part of the IX Article of the Apostles Creed.

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