

One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church

All the Apostolic Churches and some ecclesial communities recite in the Creed “of their faith in the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”. The Church as the body of Christ is one and it cannot be divided. It is the living body of Christ. It is holy because its head is holy and all the holiness of the Church comes from Christ its head. All are called to this holiness which comes from its Head. It is Apostolic, because it is founded on the Apostles, whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ himself. It is called also Catholic. Here in this article there is an attempt to explain the concept *Catholic*.

The Church of Christ was and is known as the Catholic Church(*katholike Ekklesia*). It was at Antioch on the Orontes in Syria that the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11,26). It was St. Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch (+110) who used the epithet *Catholic* to designate the Church of Christ: “Where there is Jesus Christ, there is the Catholic Church”(Epistle to the Smyrneans, 8,2). After Ignatius, several of the early Fathers of the Church made use of the expression *Catholic* to designate the Church of Christ. In the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, the Smyrneans write to “the Church of God in Philomelium and the holy Catholic Church in all places”. St. Polycarp is called “the bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna”. Polycarp before his martyrdom prayed “for the whole Catholic Church throughout the world”. Eusebius speaks about the “Catholic Church in Smyrna”. St. Cyprian of Carthage and many others called the Church of Christ, *Catholic*. Until the Council of Chalcedon (451) all the Churches throughout the world were called the Catholic Church. Those who broke away from the Catholic Church were forced to adopt new names such as the Novatians, Montanists, Arians and the Apollinarians. One of the basic characteristics of the Church of Christ is Catholicity. St. Vincent of Lerins (5th c.) in his book *Commonitorium*

says that “Catholicity, antiquity and unanimous consent are the three criteria which guarantee orthodoxy” (c.3). “We must hold fast”, he teaches, “that which is believed at all times, by all and in every place. It is the catholic teaching” (In ipsa item catholica ecclesia magnopere curandum est, ut id tenamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est. Hosc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum”(c.2). “Christian is my name and Catholic is my family name” says Pacian (4th c.) with pride (Christianus mihi nomen est, Catholicus vero cognomen. Catholicus ubi unum, vel, ut doctores plurant, oboedientia omnium nuncupatur, mandatorum scilicet Dei).

St. Augustine gives a resume of the motives for the credibility of the Catholic faith: “Aside from the sincere and genuine wisdom....which you do not believe exists in the Catholic Church (Augustine is speaking to the Manicheans), there are many reasons which hold me in her bosom. The concurrence of peoples and nations holds me, the authority established by the miracles, nourished by hope, increased by charity, strengthened by antiquity, holds me; the succession of bishops, from the very see of the Apostle Peter, to whom the Lord, after his resurrection, entrusted the feeding of his sheep, up to the present episcopate holds me; finally the very name of *catholica*, which not without reason this church alone has obtained, holds me... These bonds of Christian name- so many, so great, and so very gentle- hold the believer in the bosom of the Catholic Church, even if, owing to the slowness of our mind and the unworthiness of our life, the truth does not yet appear.” (Contra ep. Man. 4, 5; see also Conf. 6 11, 19; De mor. eccl. cath. 1 7, 12; De util. cred. 14, 30-17, 35; Ep. 137, 4, 15-16).

Augustine considers that the Catholic Church is the universal church which includes everything. It was not the case with the sects or separated groups. They cannot contain all and they cannot accept all. The catholic church is quite different from such sects or communities.

The sectarian local churches are restricted to limited areas; they can include only very few and they teach only very few doctrines. They lost the integral evangelical vision. The term Catholic refers to the uniqueness of the true church. It is the Catholic church which undertakes the world wide missionary activity and the ecumenical service.

The name Catholic can be applied only to that community which preserves the unity or communion and the universality of the Church. It refers to that Church which is the body of Christ. It makes clear the truth and authenticity of Christ. That is to say, correct in faith and doctrines. According to this view, there can be non-Catholic churches. e.g. the churches of the former false teachers such as the various kinds of Gnostics and the Arians. Their churches were not the Catholic Church of Christ, but were heretical churches. In this sense , Catholicity was the norm of Orthodoxy.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Catechetical Homilies* gives the meaning of the expression Catholic: “The Church is called Catholic because it is spread throughout the world, from end to end of the earth; also because it teaches universally and completely all the doctrines which man should know concerning things visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it subjects to right worship all mankind, rulers and ruled, lettered and unlettered; further because it treats and heals universally every sort of sin committed by soul and body, and it possesses in itself every conceivable virtues, whether in deeds, words or in spiritual gifts of every kind”(18,23). St. Cyril includes the various dimensions of Catholicity in this phrase. But he insists more on one reality, namely the perfection of teachings and doctrines. In short, the expression Catholic signifies the following elements: That church which is spread over everywhere, contains everybody, is open to all and established for all times. Catholic church accepts all the good

elements in humanity. It contains the fullness of doctrine and the means of sanctification.

After the Councils of Ephesus(431) and Chalcedon(451), those who accepted the Councils continued to call themselves Orthodox-Catholic Church. Those who rejected them were known by other names. Later during the middle ages when the Western and Eastern parts of the one Catholic Orthodox Church (the Greek and the Latin Churches) got alienated one from the other, the Westerners, namely the Latins, used more and more the expression *Catholic* and the Easterners, namely the Greeks, used the expression *Orthodox*. However, both were Catholic and Orthodox, but without the canonical communion and visible unity. In accordance with today's ecumenical thinking, even those who rejected the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon were Catholics, in the sense that they maintained the same content of faith, the difference being only in terminology and forms of expression. They too make use of the Nicene expression, "we believe in the one holy Catholic and Apostolic church". They too have not altered the content of faith.

The division among Christians diminished the Catholicity of the Church. But the Church did not cease to be Catholic. However, it cannot exhibit that quality which was existing before the divisions. Catholicity would be perfect only in the perfection of unity.

Before the Second Vatican Council there was a mentality in the catholic circles that only those churches in canonical communion with the Roman Church can be named Catholic. The members of the other churches were named non-Catholics and their communities were named, non-Catholic Churches. In this sense the expression Catholic was narrowed down to mean only the Churches in the Roman Catholic canonical communion. In the same way, the Greeks (Byzantines) also used the expression Catholic to mean only the churches in their

canonical communion. Other churches also did in the same way. Today one can notice a change in this view and attitude. The one Church of Christ cannot but be Catholic. Since it is meant for the whole humanity, it cannot but be catholic. The command the disciples received from the Lord was “to go to the whole world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mt 28,19). “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself”(Jn 12,32). The angel told the shepherds, “Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people”(Lk2,10). All those who are baptized in Jesus Christ are the one body of Christ(1 Cor.12,27). He offered his life as a sacrifice for all. “And through him he reconciles to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven”(Col.1,18-20).Those who are thus united in Christ, cannot but be catholic. But the tragedy of sin of separation is that those who are united in Christ, cannot unite among themselves. Where there is Christ, there is the Catholic Church. There is the perfection of God(Col.2,9;Eph.1,22-23).

Catholicity is one of the basic characteristics of the Church of God. It is an all embracing quality. It wants to be united and it is the power which unites. It is however, not static, but dynamic. It is the unity of perfection. It is the power of Christ who draws all to Himself (Jn 12,32). The Catholic presence of Christ who said, “I am with you till the end of the world”, gives a spiritual meaning to Catholicity. It transcends all human limitations and inabilities. When *Lumen Gentium* says that, “the Church shines forth as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”, it means that the Catholicity of the Church is Trinitarian in dimension. Catholicity is this quality which is inclusive in the spiritual presence and unity. Truth, authenticity and perfection dwell in Christ in their entirety. It is precisely the Catholicity. The ministry of unique mediation between God and men is its essence(1 Tim 2,5). Christ is the Head of the whole humanity(Col.1,19;Eph.1,22).Through this unique Mediator,

the humanity enters into the life of God(Acts 4,12). Humanity should reconcile itself with God in this unique Savior. Since he was God and man, he has a unique relationship with both God and humanity. This relationship is the Catholicity of Christ. Church receives its Catholicity from the Catholicity of Christ. When the Church participates in the mission of Christ, it continues the Catholicity of Christ. The contrary diminishes it. It is the Holy Spirit who moves men to proclaim unceasingly the glory of God by joining the mission of Christ, who makes the Church Catholic. The Church at Pentecost was born as Catholic. It was not a later added quality of the Church.

Catholicity is first of all the internal quality of the church. But the geographical significance is not excluded. In the same way, there is a place for number and magnitude. Because, this too happened in the divine providence. In the same way, the inclusion of various cultures, languages, nations and peoples, are also to be reckoned with. What is seen externally is the manifestation of the interiority. The smallest parish, the diocese under a bishop, the church under a Patriarch, the church under the Pope - all could be called the catholic church. The Church of Christ is at the same time local and universal. Wherever valid Eucharist is offered in the community of love, there exists the Catholic church. Each and every worshipping community is catholic in the full sense. But it does not exhaust the catholicity. It has to be in full visible communion with the other similar communities. Those communities not in communion with others cannot be named catholic. Those who maintain an attitude of self-sufficiency and sectarianism are not catholic. This exclusion, sectarianism and self alienation makes these churches non-Catholic. It is also true of those who do not proclaim the good news to others.

Thus the universal Catholic church is the communion of Individual Churches. Holy Eucharist is the decisive act which manifests the Catholicity(1 Cor 10,16-17). Holy Eucharist is the catholic act of the catholic Church. The Catholic Church is present in the full sense in each of these worshipping community. The Catholicity is made manifest in the participation of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, surpassing all sectarianism. The Catholicity is made manifest through the *episcopos*. The bishop does it as the head of the community, which is centered around the Eucharist.

Although catholicity is the gift of God, the Church does the mission of Catholicity by continuing the efforts to make all men and cultures, one body in Jesus Christ. Church must continue this mandate , as it is the one unique Sacrament of salvation. That is to say, Church can continue to be Catholic only through the continuation of the mission entrusted by the lord. Fulfilling this mandate is a obligatory mandate from the lord. The Catholicity would not be perfect until the realization of this unity of all mankind.

The church by its very nature is catholic. Catholicity is the integral part of Christianity. Those who seek the truth, those who embrace the whole truth, those who are open to all and open to everything, and those who embrace all , are all Catholics. Those who remember and live accordingly that the Church is for all are Catholics.

The church must be Catholic by maintaining the unity and diversity. The churches remain catholic by presenting integrally the Apostolic traditions and handing them over to he posterity in its entirety. Only by maintaining the full and visible communion with other churches can the local or regional churches can become catholic.

According to the view of the Roman Catholic Church, only those churches which maintain the canonical communion with the bishop of Rome as the successor of St. Peter, can be called Catholic in the full sense of the term. The Roman catholic church considers that this canonical communion with the bishop of Rome is part of the apostolic tradition. Consequently, the Eastern Orthodox Churches are not fully and perfectly Catholic as they do not have canonical communion with the bishop of Rome at present. These Orthodox churches have the same sacraments, the same Apostolic faith; their bishops are appointed by the Holy Spirit to look after a part of the flock of Christ. That is to say, the catholic church acknowledges the faith ,sacraments and hierarchy of these Orthodox churches. Still it does not call these churches fully and perfectly catholic as the churches in the Roamn Catholic communion. This is about the churches which maintained the content of faith intact, without alteration. Those who have changed the content of faith are non-Catholics. i.e. All those who recite, “we believe in the only holy Catholic and Apostolic church” are not fully catholic; or are not Catholic in the same sense. They are walking towards its realization. All those who attempt at the full communion are walking towards Catholicity. The Gnostics and the Arians who poisoned the Apostolic faith were not Catholics. The same could be spoken of the various sects of recent origin, who uphold one or the other element in the apostolic faith and reject completely the rest of it. They lost a lot of the fundamental elements in the faith, handed down by the Apostles. They too should walk towards catholicity.

The Conciliar decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* points out that, “ the division among Christians prevent the church from effecting the fullness of Catholicity proper to her” in all its dimensions(4). The human frailty and divisions became causes for presenting the gifts of the lord partially and even to diminish them. Each and every Christian and each and every Church must strive at perfecting the catholicity

by regaining the perfect communion . And also by preaching the message of salvation to the areas not yet evangelized, the Catholicity should be made perfect. In the same way the churches would make an examination of conscience, whether they have in any way deviated from the Apostolic teaching or their teaching is the same as that of the Apostles. It is possible that certain elements of the Apostolic preaching may lay hidden in the churches, or not taken into very serious considerations or forgotten, or not given sufficient attention or not very well stressed as they ought to be stressed.

The gift of Catholicity demands us to accept the various forms of faith as legitimate diversity of the one faith, when there is no diversity regarding the content of faith. The full canonical communion can be realized only when we are ready to surrender certain elements which hinder the full communion such as our prejudices, ways of expressions, practical jurisdictional matters, and evaluation of certain historical events. Then only we can fully express the catholicity in its entirety. All the churches and its members should strive at realizing the catholicity through living the elements connected with it.