

The Four Marks of the Church: Her Origin and Mission

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The Church, like her founder, the Lord Jesus Christ, is both divine and human in nature. In fact, the Church *is* Christ, His Mystical Body, in that together with her divine Head she participates in the “whole Christ,” the *Christus totus* (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 795). Therefore, in order to understand the four marks of the Church (oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity), one must view them in the light of the divinity and humanity of the God-man, Jesus Christ, her founder. In thus viewing the Church in the light of Christ, one finds that her oneness and holiness are the result of her divine origin, while her catholicity and apostolicity speak to her human mission.

The Church, like Jesus Christ, has a divine origin. Jesus has His origin in the Father, from Whom He is begotten as the only Son of God, the *Logos*. The Church, likewise, has her origin in the Father, Who from the beginning willed to create the universe so that He could elevate a people to Himself—to participation in His own divine life—by uniting them to His Son (*CCC*, 759). Thus, the Church is one because she is united to the one God. She has her origins in the heart and eternal plan of the Father, Who willed that she become adopted as sons and daughters in the Son by being constituted as His Body, the soul of which is the Holy Spirit, the very communion of love between the Father and the Son. Thus, the oneness of the Church is rooted in the radical unity of the divine essence of the Three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity (see *CCC*, 813). Since the Holy Spirit, Who is Himself the love of the Father and Son, is the soul of the Church, she is by nature holy, for love is “the soul of . . . holiness” (*CCC*, 826). In short, the Mystical Body is holy because she is sanctified by her Head, the all-holy Christ; and, it is “through him and with him” that she herself “becomes sanctifying” (*CCC*, 824). Yet, though she is holy because of her union with the Triune God, it is so that she may sanctify others that she is

comprised of men and has a human mission—just as Christ, the LORD God, took on a human nature so that He could save men from their sins.

In order that He might use the Church as the instrument of men's salvation, Christ equipped her with a twofold catholicity. Firstly, He entrusted her with the *whole* deposit of faith that she might teach men the truth, and He further authorized her to confect the sacraments, which are the "*fullness* of the means of salvation" (CCC, 830, quoting *Unitatis redintegratio*, emphasis added). He also gave her *universal* jurisdiction over the entire world, and by His providence guided her so that she might reach men of all "peoples and tongues" (Revelation 7:9) with the preaching of the Gospel. The Church is apostolic because it was to the Apostles that Christ directed this mandate of universal preaching (Matthew 28:19), and to whom He entrusted this twofold catholicity. It is through the Apostles that "Christ continues his own mission" (CCC, 858) even today in their successors, the bishops. The "ultimate purpose" of this "mission is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love" (CCC, 850).

Hence, the human mission of the Church is ordered precisely to her divine origin. God the Father, Who from eternity willed to raise the Church to Himself, sent His own Son, anointed with the Spirit, to earth as a man to save men—and He in turn entrusted men with the continuation of this mission. Thus, the four marks of the Church can also be understood "backwards," as it were: the Apostles are sent with a twofold Catholicity of word and sacrament to make men Holy, to sanctify them by bringing them into communion with the One God, the Almighty and Eternal Trinity.

Bibliography

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