

One

Holy

Catholic

Apostolic

By Canon John H Heidt, D.Phil (Oxon)

# The Church Is One

Jesus' prayer that His disciples might be one was not just an exercise in wishful thinking. Nor was it even a command that His followers work towards church unity. Jesus is the all-powerful Word of God incarnate, and by the Word all things were made. When Jesus speaks things happen. When He says something, something gets done. When He prays that His disciples may be one, they become one.

We are His disciples; we are His church; we are one with Jesus and one with one another just as the Father and the Son are one. Just as they live in one another, so by our baptism and communions we live in one another.

This is why we can say that the Church is One. The Church is a community, a common-unity. It is not a collection of individuals who meet or collide with one another, but a community of persons united spiritually, with outward signs or sacraments to show for it, and with bishops who are the outward and effective signs of this unity.

Aristotle, the great pagan philosopher, said that a community consisted of those who believe the same things. The Church is a common-unity because it has a common faith. St. Augustine said that a community consisted of persons who love the same things. The church is a common-unity because it loves Jesus and all that He taught.

We cannot improve upon the church's unity. We cannot create or perfect that unity by political manipulation nor denominational mergers nor even by inter-communion. Only the Word can create and perfect the church's unity, and He has already done so.

Nor can we divide the church. By His prayer Jesus has made the church one and indivisible.

But we can distance ourselves from the Church. Instead of believing in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, we can believe in a cafeteria kind of church - a church in which we think we are free to pick and choose what we happen to like, a church that agrees with our secular beliefs and prejudices, a church that says "I'm OK, you're OK" no matter what we are really like. We can become satisfied belonging to a denomination of like-minded people, instead of submitting the attitudes and practices and beliefs of our particular denomination to the mind of the whole church.

The church is one, but we are divided. And we make the church appear divided by putting ourselves with our private likes and dislikes before the mind of Christ.

Just as Jesus prayed that His church might be one, so may we pray that we are at one with the mind and will of the church.

# The Church Is Holy

You and I are members of something that is sacred. By Holy Baptism we belong to a holy people set apart from the world for the worship of God. Our world today is a city of confusion. It does not know where it is going. But we have been called out of this world and we know where we are going; we are going to be with Jesus.

The holiness of the church does not depend upon us, neither upon our personal holiness nor upon our goodness. The Church is holy because God is holy; He is set apart from the world; He transcends the world. God the Holy Spirit is the life of the church; He molds her and shapes her to be the body of God the Son just as He shaped the flesh of the Virgin Mary to be Jesus' body.

Another word for "holy" is "ecclesiastical." The church of which we are members is the "ecclesia" - that is to say, "the called out ones." Just as the church has always been one from the time of Jesus' prayer, so the church has always been holy. It has always been set apart from the world for the glory of God. The church is God's alternative society. Its members are bound together by love rather than competition, by adoration rather than self seeking. That is the secret of holiness. The world will recognize the holiness of the church by seeing how its members love one another.

God did not create the holy church out of hatred for the world but out of His love for the world. Just as He takes one day of the week, Sunday, and makes it holy so that all days may be holy, one week of the year and makes it Holy Week so that all the year may be holy, and takes a little water and makes it holy water to bless the city's water works, so He made the church holy in order to make the whole world holy. He sets us apart from the world in order to send us back into the world as a holy people, as leaven in the lump, as the yeast of a new creation.

All the baptized belong to the communion of saints, the common-union of the holy – not just holy people, but holy things as well. The Church's holy things are called sacraments and sacramentals. God takes the things of the earth out of the world of ordinary human life, things such as water, bread and wine, oil, human bodies and human hands, and uses them in an extraordinary way, in a supernatural way, to make us supernatural and extraordinary people, to make us full-blown members of His holy community, to turn us into saints.

God also takes certain people and turns them into walking sacraments of His sacrificial love by setting them apart from the world. Bishops, priests and deacons become outward signs of the church's holiness and the effective means of keeping the church holy.

The church herself takes things out of the world of ordinary human life to remind us of our common holiness, things like crucifixes and holy water, candles and incense, making the sign of the cross and bowing before the altar. The church creates an outward environment to remind us who we are, the holy common people of God.

The church is holy, but you and I are all too often only half-hearted members of the church. We are afraid to leave the world behind. We grew up with the world's beliefs, its prejudices and expectations, and we still cherish them. We often try to use the church to help us get on in the world; we try to use Christian sacraments to receive the grace of pagan gods. But it doesn't work. We become frustrated and discouraged. Some give up the pursuit of holiness altogether, but that does not make the church itself any less holy.

# The Church Is Catholic

To be catholic is to embrace everything; the word “catholic” means all, whole, complete, entire. The church is catholic because in it we find all we need to know about God, ourselves and our world, and all the grace we need for our spiritual health and salvation. The church has all that is spiritually necessary for all people in all places at all times.

The catholicity of the church does not depend upon our understanding or insight, any more than its holiness depends upon our goodness, or its unity upon our love for one another. The church already is catholic; our job is to become more catholic ourselves, to overcome our innate heresies. The opposite of catholic is not protestant or evangelical or charismatic. The opposite of catholic is heretical. A heresy is not something wrong but a half truth. Because of our limited insights and understanding all of us are implicit heretics. We only become dangerous heretics, explicit heretics, when we take our partial insights and shadowy understandings and act as though they were the whole complete truth. Heretics become dangerous when they pretend that they are the true catholics. They compete with one another for the truth rather than loving one another. Heretics that parade themselves as having the whole truth end up creating prejudice against everyone different from themselves and division within the body of believing Christians.

When we say that the church is catholic we can easily fall into one of two opposite errors: denominationalism or universalism. Denominationalism pictures the church as a collection of different ecclesial bodies: Lutherans, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Eastern Orthodox, etc. Faced with all these denominations, our job is to find the right one, the one that most authentically teaches the truth about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To do this we have to figure out which one is the most catholic, and then join up as soon as we can. The Roman Catholic Church claims that among all the denominations it is the only one that is fully catholic; that only in the Roman Church can you find the whole truth for all peoples.

Anglicans, however, point out that there are two kinds of denominations: national churches like the Greek, Russian, Anglican, Roman, or Polish churches. All these have the fullness of catholicity though with different cultural expressions. Other denominations are based on particular doctrines or the teachings of some particular person such as Methodists or Wesleyans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, or Moravians. These share in the catholicity of the church but in themselves are not fully catholic because they lack something of the faith or practice of the national churches.

Those who become discouraged by the existence of so many denominations sometimes fall into the opposite error of universalism. This is the belief that there is a little bit of catholicism in every denomination, that the church is an eclectic bunch of religious organizations, none of which has claim to absolute truth. Ultimately this leads to the false belief that there is no absolute truth, but only many different forms of truth. Everyone is right no matter what they believe. Universalists believe that to be fully catholic we have to merge all the denominations into one giant organization and eventually include all the other religions as well. This leads to a wrong kind of ecumenism, a false attempt to unite the church rather than discovering and exhibiting the unity it already has.

# The Church Is Apostolic

Today's church is apostolic because it is the same church Jesus commissioned to His first apostles. It continuously looks back to them and to their teaching. We know what the apostles taught because it is set down in our sacred writings, the holy scriptures, and interpreted through their successors, the bishops and other church fathers throughout the ages.

The presence of an apostolic bishop, a successor of the apostles, secures the church's catholicity, because he embodies in himself the church throughout the world and is the sacramental presence of the whole church in the local community.

The church is more interested in origins than in originality. All Authentic Christian teaching is consistent with what was taught from the beginning. We believe in Our Lord's promise that the Holy Spirit will guide His church into all truth, and bring all the things He taught His apostles to our remembrance. We believe that the official teaching of the church will not let us down; that the church is what is called "indefectible." We find out the official teaching of the church by examining the teachings of apostolic Christians round the world and finding out what most all Christians believe is the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. The church has invented different ways of doing this: ecumenical councils of all the bishops, regional councils such as the Anglican Lambeth Conferences, those papal decrees which reflect the thinking of the worldwide church, theologians and other writers who proclaim the same truths in a variety of ways and forms.

Because the church is apostolic it is always looking forward to the future as well as keeping an eye on the past. An apostle is a missionary. He is sent out into the world to change the world – not to be changed by it. Jesus said to his first apostles: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus is the first missionary. He is the apostle and bishop of our souls. And by becoming fully involved in the life of the church, in study, prayer and sacraments, we too become apostles and missionaries.

The church had a beginning and it will have an end. It began 4,000 years ago with the call of God to our forefather Abraham and the founding of Israel as a nation/church. It will have its end, its fulfillment, its completion with the Second Coming of her Lord, Jesus Christ, when the whole universe will be a sacrament of His Body and Blood.

At any one time only a small portion of the church is here on earth. Most of her members are in the Church Expectant or the Church Triumphant. You and I are united to them by their prayers and ours, and by the Holy Eucharist. Every time we receive the Body of Christ in Holy Communion we receive all the members of His Body. We don't need to find esoteric ways to communicate with the departed. We communicate with them at every mass, with the ever-Blessed Virgin Mary, all the angels and saints, and with all those we have loved here on earth who have now departed this life.

# Who Are These Anglicans?

Anglicans are Catholics. Originally they were English Catholics, spiritual descendants of the Celtic Christians of the earliest centuries and of St. Augustine, sent to England by Pope Gregory the Great in the 6th century to be the first Archbishop of Canterbury. Chiefly through the spread of the British Empire, Anglicans are now found throughout the world and of every culture and civilization. Being the largest communion of Christians after Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, there are now more Anglicans in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world.

Anglicans officially adhere to the same ancient apostolic and catholic faith as Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox: the same scriptures, the same creeds, sacraments, and ministry. But unlike official Roman Catholic teaching we believe in what the Eastern Orthodox call autocephalous churches, that is to say, churches that are free to run their own affairs within the context of catholic faith and order. Anglicans believe that local and regional bishops and pastors can understand and respond to the spiritual needs of their people better than a centralized authority.

On controversial issues Anglicans have always relied on tradition. They look to the thought of the undivided church in the first Christian millennium, believing that the Holy Spirit has faithfully guided the whole church into all truth, not just one particular national church or denomination.

The Archbishop of Canterbury – there have been 104 of them from the time of St. Augustine – is the spiritual and moral leader of Anglicans throughout the world, but he does not have any legal or doctrinal authority outside of England. Nor do any of the other bishops outside their own diocese. And even then that authority is very limited by priests and laity as well as bishops, meeting in convocations, synods and conventions.

This lack of centralized authority creates a great diversity of opinion among Anglicans, and often considerable confusion and even conflict. Current conflicts center on sexual morality, the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the ordination of women. Some believe that these are simply matters of church discipline, while others insist that they are departures from scriptural teaching and catholic order.

In spite of contemporary controversy, authentic Anglican teaching can be found in the family of prayer books used throughout the Communion. These are called The Book of Common Prayer and originally, The Book of The Common Prayer, for they contain the traditional corporate prayer of the whole catholic church adopted to particular cultures and circumstances.

The Episcopal Church is the official body of Anglicans in the United States. Many have either separated from the Episcopal Church entirely or distanced themselves from some of its recent decisions. Yet they are still Anglicans.

We pray for the day when all who call themselves “Anglicans” will continue to grow in personal unity with Anglicans throughout the world and with the whole catholic church.