



Theology Corner

Vol. 59 – September 9th, 2018

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Four Marks of the Church: How is the Church *Catholic*?”

Continuing on with our analysis of the four marks of the Church, we are not looking into the meaning of “Catholic.” As many of you know, the word Catholic comes from the Greek καθολικός (transliterated: katholikos), which means “universal” or sometimes interpreted as “whole.” The first record we have of this term being used in reference to the Church is through St. Ignatius of Antioch around 107 AD, who said in his letter to the Smyrnaeans: “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.” Recall last week when I spoke about the Church being the body of Christ with Christ himself as the Head. Looking at this quote in that context helps us to better understand what St. Ignatius meant. That is, wherever Christ is, his body is also. In this sense, the Church is Catholic because the Church is made *whole* and united by Christ himself who keeps it whole and seeks that it shall be one just as He and the Father are One. Secondly, the Church is Catholic because the mission of the Church is to be means of salvation to the *whole* of the human race (CCC 831).

I think the central concept in what makes the Catholic Church stand out through its catholicity, is that its teachings are *universal*. This is essentially piggybacking on the Church’s oneness that we spoke of a couple weeks ago. While there are a multitude of dioceses and individual parishes, the faith is universal insofar as we are all in communion with Rome. In other words, the foundation of the faith is one through our unity in faith with the *One* Church under the successor of Peter. The teachings of the Catholic Church are the same teachings of Christ as taught by the apostles in the early Church. More on that next week, but I bring it up now because it relates to why the Church is Catholic and how the teachings of the Church point to the universal teachings of the faith that have its very basis in Christ and the teachings of his apostles who received their authority from Christ himself.

So, who all belongs to the Catholic Church? Remember when we discussed the unity in the Church and how all salvation comes from the Church who is the source of salvation through Christ? Well, this same logic applies to the understanding of *belonging* to the Church. We often refer to Protestants as our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is because they do belong to the Catholic Church, but in a much more limited sense. They are united to it through our common baptism by which they are adopted into the life of God. Yet, they are separated in the sense that they do not believe the tenets of the faith which originate with Christ and his apostles. It helps to think of it as a case where inasmuch as someone professes the truth (with the fullness truth being in the one, holy, Catholic Church) they participate to some degree with the Church. We can look to the Orthodox church and see that the degree of belonging to the Church is much higher, minus the fact that they do not accept the authority of the Pope as the leader of the Church, for example. We now can see that the Church is Catholic because of its unity and universally professed beliefs in line with how it has been historically taught throughout the ages.

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