

# The Church Is One

In the Nicene Creed, the Church is described as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” This “oneness,” the unity of the Church, is emphasized in the Scriptures. When Paul tells his community in Corinth that they are members of the Body of Christ, he does not mean the Corinthian church alone. “As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:12–13; see also Romans 12:5). The Letter to the Ephesians also speaks of “one body, one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (4:4–6). This unity of the followers of Christ was also stressed in Jesus’ prayer in the Gospel of John before his death, “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (17:21). As the Vatican Council stated, “Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only” (*Decree on Ecumenism [Unitatis Redintegratio]*, 1).

## The Visible, Hierarchical Church and the Mystical Body of Christ

How does the Catholic Tradition understand this one Church? *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium, 1964)* compares the Church to the incarnate *Logos*, as the Church is “one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element.” The Church is hierarchical, visible, and earthly; at the same time, it is the “mystical body of Christ,” “a spiritual community,” and a “Church endowed with heavenly riches.” The visible structure of the Church serves the “Spirit of Christ” who gives life to it in a way similar to how the assumed human nature of Jesus “serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation.” The visible, hierarchical structure of the Church and the mystical body are not to be thought of as two realities; rather they form together “one complex reality” (*Church*, 8).

The Church is “mystical” or “spiritual” in a variety of ways. We see this aspect first in the belief that the Church existed in some way before Jesus established his eschatological community, above all in the community of Israel. The continuing presence of Christ in the “Body of Christ” transcends strictly rational explanation. So too the precise way in which believers are united to Christ through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist is mysterious. There is a close relationship between the concepts of mystery and Sacrament: in Latin, *sacramentum* means the sign of a hidden reality [a *mysterium*] of salvation. The Orthodox Churches in fact call the Sacraments “the holy mysteries.” The way in which the Church is related to the rest of the world is described in terms of a sacramental mystery: “The Church is the sacrament of the unity of the human race” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 775).

By “visible structure,” *Church* means especially the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church: the Pope is the head, governing the Church in union with the bishops. At this point, then, we need to turn specifically to the Roman Catholic understanding of its role in the mystical Body of Christ.



## The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and the Roman Catholic Church

Many passages in the Vatican II documents are complimentary toward, and open to, dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian faiths. But in the clear words of the Council's *Decree on Ecumenism*, "It is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3).

Referring to the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" Church described in the Nicene Creed, the Vatican II Council taught the following:

This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, *subsists in* the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines. (*Church*, 8)

The visible structure of the one Church, then, is identified with the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican's *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF)* comments that there is "an essential identity between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. . . . We encounter the Church of Jesus Christ as a concrete historical subject in the Catholic Church." The *Congregation's* 2000 document, *Dominus Iesus*, taught that "the Church of Christ . . . continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church" and that "there is an historical continuity—rooted in the apostolic succession—between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church" (16).

The claim may appear arrogant. One out of the hundreds of Christian denominations claiming to be the only one in which the Church of Christ exists fully. Why does the Catholic Church insist on this point?

To answer this question, we must refer once again to the doctrine of the Incarnation and its particularity. In Christian belief, the divine truly was reconciled with the human in the one man Jesus at a particular time and place in history. Jesus, in turn, established a specific, visible community headed by Twelve Apostles, passing on to them his teaching and sharing with them his authority (see 10.9.1–2). The twelve apostles and their close associates, in their own turn, passed down this teaching and authority to their successors (see sec. 12.13).

In the Catholic understanding, only certain churches (that is, churches within the Catholic and the Orthodox Traditions) can show in a specifically concrete and historical way that they are in continuity with this apostolic tradition. Only the Catholic Church, in its continuity with the role and authority of the Apostle Peter and his successors as the visible head of the Church, is in full continuity with this apostolic tradition.

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The quotations labeled *CDF* are from *Commentary on the Document "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church,"* numbers 16, 10.9.1–2, and 12.13, at



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