The Marks of the Church

As the Church moved through the centuries and interacted with different ideas and cultures, it came to recognize a set of criteria for understanding whether developments were legitimate. These criteria are embedded in the Nicene Creed. In a line that specifies what sort of church we believe in, it is described as being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These have traditionally been called the marks of the Church. They identify how the Church continues to evolve as a living tradition.

One

Unity has been a concern of the Church from the start. John's Gospel vividly expresses Jesus' concern for unity among his followers. In the Last Supper scene in John 17:1–26, Jesus prays that the disciples will be one, just as the Father and Jesus are one. Early on, foundational practices and structures of the Church were emphasized to create unity; the Eucharist, the bishop, the creeds, arguments over doctrine, councils, and the canon of the Christian Scriptures all served the oneness of the Church.

Holy

Christians are baptized into Christ himself. Each Christian is to become him. Orthodox Christianity has expressed this vividly; Christ became human so that humans could become divine. Holiness is sometimes visible, sometimes not. The most dramatic image of this mark is martyrdom.

Catholic

The Greek word *katholikos* is often translated as "universal," yet its root meaning is more accurately given as "throughout the whole." The word *catholic* expresses a dynamic image; it is like the biblical image of yeast that enlivens a whole mass of dough. It is like our ripple metaphor, where the Gospel spreads outward in ever-expanding spheres of influence. In the early centuries, when new ideas about Christ's divinity and humanity were debated, the struggle was to see whether innovative expressions would spread and be widely accepted. Would churches throughout different areas and cultures find the newly developed theologies to be legitimate growths of understanding? *Homoousios* ("same nature" as God) became accepted. Marcion's canon did not. The strategy of calling all the churches (represented by their bishops) to come together in councils to argue these points came from the understanding that a "catholic" development would be proven to be from the Spirit of God, if the Church moved toward a *consensus fidelium* ("consensus of the faithful"), an agreement among all believers.

Apostolic

An apostle is one who is sent. In Christian usage it refers to those witnesses of the Risen Christ who were sent to spread the Gospel to the rest of the world. The role of "the Twelve" came from the fact they were witnesses to an original event (see Acts of the Apostles 1:15–26).

This criterion asks whether an expression or practice is connected to the original message. Has growth come from the deepest roots? Early on, apostolicity attached itself to particular cities where the seeds of the Gospel were planted first. Jerusalem was the birthplace of the Church. Antioch, a port to the

north, was the launching spot for missionary journeys of Paul and others. In this city, the followers of Jesus Christ were first called “Christians” (see Acts of the Apostles 11: 26). Alexandria, long a place of scholarship and culture and the home of a large Greek-speaking Jewish community, became the home of an early thriving church, a place for theological scholarship. Rome was the seat of the empire, the place from which persecutions were launched yet ironically then the place where the blood of the martyrs became seeds for faith. From the earliest generations of the Church, Rome was venerated as the place where Peter and Paul were killed, and it held a prominence among other churches. A fifth city, originally Byzantium and renamed Constantinople (and now called Istanbul, in Turkey), became the “New Rome” in Christendom when the emperor Constantine moved his capital there from Rome in the fourth century. A rich mix of leadership, study, and controversy over the apostolic faith became part of its heritage.

When the Church faces challenges today, when it faces difficulties from within or from outside its community, it still finds its solutions and strength most clearly by embracing unity, holiness, catholicity, and deep apostolic roots. The marks of the Church have served in the past to balance and shape its growth. They are the criteria by which we can be guided today.

The image of the ripple effect continues through history, and we see it when looking back through the tradition. We can put it this way: If the Apostle Peter, the preacher from the first-century Pentecost who gave birth to the Church, were to return today, would he recognize what began with that first sermon? As it spread through the major cities of the Roman Empire, through Greek culture, and later through human nations and cultures on all the continents of the world, the *ekklesia* has shown the same recognizable patterns of the original structure provided by God to the first hearers of the Gospel. The ripples that flow from that event have a distinct shape and pattern of that Christ Event. If Peter returned, I think he would recognize the Church today in continuity with his preaching.

What Do the Marks of the Church Mean Today?

We might ask how these criteria challenge the contemporary Church to embrace its full identity.

Unity

What sort of issues cause problems in a parish? in a denomination? between different denominations? Do poor and wealthy churches often work together? Do different denominations often work together? Practical work can unite. Hungry people do not usually quibble about who made the soup. What can be done to overcome factions in a community?

Holiness

What does holiness look like today—an act of service, an apology, a donation of time and money? Do we stand with someone in trouble, even if it means embarrassment? In a culture charged with materialistic values, what forms does holiness take? What does holiness say to violence? Do we ever let humor diffuse a situation so that we overcome the temptation to take ourselves too seriously?

Catholicity

Are there areas where we would rather the Gospel's influence not go? In what situations would we rather not be reminded of our calling? Can we let our own views be questioned by the humanity of others? Are we able to give a reason, explanation, or lived example for what we think and believe?

Apostolicity

Whom do we look to as authorities? Do we look to elderly women and men for advice? Are there children who, by example, show us God's presence? Why did people like Pope John Paul II , Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Billy Graham, and Desmond Tutu from South Africa draw crowds from different continents that numbered in the millions or hundreds of thousands?

To address both historical and contemporary issues, we have resources in the experiences and wisdom of Scripture and Tradition, in the strategies and structures that have been created through human efforts and the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church has drawn on the insights of Church leaders and of the whole people of God. In the Vatican document Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium* ["Light of all peoples"]*,* 1964), we find the council fathers' description of the particular role of the laity today:

> Christ is the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by the testimony of his life and by the power of his word. Until the full manifestation of his glory, he fulfills this prophetic office, not only by the hierarchy who teach in his name and by his power, but also by the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with the appreciation of the faith (*sensusfidei*) and the grace of the word (cf. Acts 2:17–18; Rev 19:10) so that the power of the Gospel may shine out in daily family and social life. (35)