



## The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: Divine Gift and Human Calling

Every time the Creed is recited, Orthodox Christians confess their faith in the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.' These four characteristic features or 'marks' of the Church - as they have come to be known - continue to be recited by the faithful of the Church, not only when they gather within the context of the Eucharist, but also as part of their daily prayers. And this has been taking place since the late fourth century. In so doing, Christian faithful, throughout the centuries, have not only made a confession of faith in 'one God, the Father' and in his Son and Spirit but have also professed a reverence and trust in the Church. Indeed, reference to the 'Church' within the Creed, makes it an article of faith in the same way that statements referring to God the Father, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit are articles of faith. Even before the Creed was officially promulgated in the Councils of Nicaea (325AD) and Constantinople (381AD), the fathers of the Church, in their writings, had identified a link between God and the Church. And so, for example, St Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 202AD) wrote: "where the Spirit is there is the Church. Where the Church is there is the Holy Spirit." Statements of this kind bear witness to the fact that the Church was understood to be nothing other than the very locus of the action and presence of the Spirit - and indeed the Father and the Son - in the world; a gathering in which God could truly be experienced.

In light of the countless divisions between Churches, questions justifiably arise regarding the extent to which the Church can be said to be truly one. Even within the fourteen autocephalous Orthodox Churches one can easily discern a lack of unity over issues such as the celebration of important feast days such as Christmas, divisions over territorial claims and the diptychs. And so, the claim that the Church is one and united can at best be challenging since the Church, throughout its history, has experienced much disunity and division. Alternatively, a similar question which often surfaces is how the Church can genuinely claim to be holy - namely sinless - when it is constituted by sinful people since even a cursory look at its history will bring to light different scandals or injustices suffered in the name of the Church. Whilst any honest Orthodox Christian might question how these four marks of the Church reflect our concrete situation today, in what way does the Orthodox Church hold together what at first glance might be seen to be conflicting or incongruous realities.

In an attempt to respond to these questions, Orthodox ecclesiology sees these four marks of the Church both as gifts bestowed upon the faithful by God - and therefore are believed to be inherent features of the Church - but they are at the same time characteristics that Orthodox Christians are called to make a reality within their daily life within the Church. As such they are said to be both divine gift and a human calling urging the faithful to

work towards their greater realisation. Our attention is now turned towards briefly looking at the first mark of the Church from within this dialectic.

### The One Church

In Orthodox ecclesiology, the basis of all references to the oneness of the Church is God, and more specifically the Church's teaching in the Trinitarian God. In this way, the Church can claim to be 'one' because it understands God to be not only the source of this unity but also constituting the paradigm of its oneness. To the extent that the oneness of the Church is a gift from God, it does not come into existence by human persons, nor is it established by any human authority. Simply put, therefore, the Church claims to be one since there is one God and because Christ, the head of the Church is one. Archbishop Stylianos characteristically attributes the oneness of the Church to "the one and immutable essence of God." Furthermore, there is one Spirit guiding the Church to the fullness of truth. In this sense, in the same way that God is a mystery of "unity in diversity and diversity in unity [μονάς ἐν Τριάδι Τριάς ἐν μονάδι]" so too the Church's unity ought not to be thought of as uniformity. Within the Godhead, the three divine Persons remain distinct, while at the same time being one.

Indeed, it is the uniqueness of each divine Person which constitutes the unity within the Godhead. In this way, belief in the one Church need not necessarily exclude differences in the same way that the uniqueness of each divine Person is not a cause of division. This mystery of diversity in unity is expressed in the way that it is quite natural to refer to the Church in Orthodox circles both in its singular and plural forms - namely as the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Churches. Based on a Trinitarian framework, the oneness of the Church, therefore, is not destroyed by its diversity. The permanent presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, making Christ present and allowing the faithful to call upon God as 'abba' provides a more complex understanding of the oneness of the Church that does not exclude diversity (to the extent of course that this diversity does not end up being divisive). As a gift of God's fellowship nurtured by the unitive love of God, the Church is bestowed with the gift of unity which also embraces and indeed celebrates difference.

In order to further shed some light on the Church's unity in diversity, the New Testament provides us with a very relevant image of the Church as "the body of Christ" (1Cor 12; Eph 4:12; 5:23 and Col 1:24). St Paul writes: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (1Cor 12:12-13). In the same way that a body is made up of many parts, yet organically linked in one integrated whole, so too can the Church be thought

of one notwithstanding the different people and even communities that constitute it. In the letter to the Ephesians, the image of the Church as the body of Christ was used to express the unity of Jews and Gentiles reconciled "in one body" (Eph 2:16). Reflecting a little further, the image of the Church as the body of Christ highlights the fact that the oneness of the body is preserved only to the extent that the integrity of each member is not compromised. Quite daringly, the letter to the Colossians states that the Church complements Christ since the body is "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23). It is only to the extent that the Church - as the Spirit-filled body of Christ - is linked to its head that it can be thought to be inherently one Church and not many.

Gifted with this unity from God, it follows that there can be no division within the Church between the heavenly and human realms, between its visible and invisible aspects - often referred to as the triumphal and militant Church. Rather, they are to be seen as integrally related and in continuity with one another - namely one and the same Church. In this way, the belief often put forward by some Christian denominations that the one Church, in its ideal form, is a future or invisible reality would be unacceptable since the one Church, as a gift of God of the the Spirit-filled body of Christ genuinely exists in time and space. As a gift coming from God, the Church's oneness can in no way therefore be impaired by the sins and failures of its members since in coming together the faithful become something more than what they are as individuals; they become the one body of Christ, inextricably linked to Christ, their head. Put another way, precisely because the Church, as we are told in the Scriptures, is built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Jesus Christ as its "cornerstone" making it a dwelling place of God (cf Eph 2:19-22) it is one Church. If, on the other hand, the Church were a merely human initiated gathering of people, then dissension, disagreements and divisions amongst them would undoubtedly compromise the

unity of that gathering. In this way, it becomes clear that Orthodox faithful continue to profess their faith in the oneness of the Church - despite their failures - because they believe that it is God who brings about the Church's unity helping it to grow "into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:21).

Having brought to the fore the gift aspect of the Church - namely as a gift of the Spirit-filled body of Christ to the faithful - it is important to highlight, in light of human shortfalls, that God's gift of 'oneness' to the Church, is not only a gift but at the same time a human calling. In this sense, this attribute of the Church - together with the remaining three - needs to be seen in dynamic terms, namely dependent on the ongoing work of God for his Church but also requiring a response to work towards unity by the faithful within the Church. This is especially important so that we may not become complacent in thinking that the Church is a statically perfect reality bereft of any degree of realism.

It is equally important to realise that the greater the gift, the greater the responsibility to make that gift a reality. There can be no doubt that divisions between Churches are a fundamental contradiction of God's intention and desire for the Church. Gifted with unity, it is absolutely imperative for faithful to strive, on a daily basis, to express the unity of the Church more fully. Whilst unity is a gratuitous divine gift, it also involves a necessary human activity, a desire to make unity a reality in love. Accordingly, dialogue in love with others for the sake of unity is not an optional luxury but indeed a directive given to us by Jesus. Praying to his heavenly Father before his impending crucifixion, Jesus said: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world... that they may all be one. As you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:18 & 21). Our faith in the 'oneness' of the Church should therefore renew our commitment to promote and work towards the reality of unity desired by God through dialogue on all levels



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