



We Believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: The Church's Catholicity and Apostolicity

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In previous articles of the Voice of Orthodoxy we examined the first two attributes of the Church found in the Nicene Creed, namely the Church's unity and holiness. In this article we look at the way Orthodox theology understands the Church's catholicity and apostolicity. When we proclaim that we believe in the 'catholic Church', what do we mean by this? Do we mean by this, for example, that we believe in a universal or world-wide Church? In other words, does this mean that the catholic Church is the sum total of all local Churches around the world? Is this a quantitative term or something far deeper? Also, how do we understand the apostolic character of the Church? What are the different ways that this term has been understood?

The Catholic Church

The third mark of the Church, as recited in the Creed is that of catholicity. The word, 'catholic' for a long time was simply understood to mean universal. In other words, it was believed that the catholic Church was the sum-total of all local Churches around the world. And so, for the Church to be catholic, meant that it had to include all people living on earth. However, if we look at the early Patristic tradition, we see that the term 'catholic' had two meanings, one quantitative and the other qualitative. Whilst the term, for a long time, was simply reduced to its former meaning – namely, the quantitative – we must not overlook the fact that the Fathers of the Church also, and more importantly, meant something far deeper by this term.

Deriving from the Greek word, *kat' holon* [κατ' ὅλον - 'according to the whole'], the word catholic quite simply means 'full', 'integral', 'whole', 'not deficient'. In examining the early Patristic tradition we see that, by the term 'catholic', the Fathers of the Church understood catholicity to be that quality of the Church related to integrity and truth. In other words, catholicity ought to be understood to be that attribute by which the faithful can rest assured that, throughout the centuries, the Church has rightly proclaimed the Word of truth.

The basis for this claim is again the fact that the 'head' of the Church is Christ who is "the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). Furthermore, the Church's claim of such integrity is based on Christ's promise that He would send the Spirit of God who would remain with the Church until the end leading it to the fullness of truth (cf. Jn 16:3).¹ In this way, the conviction that the Church is 'catholic' implies the fullness of God's presence within it.

The second meaning of catholicity, referring to the universality of the Church, reflects a conviction that God's ecclesial gatherings is spread throughout the entire world, in contrast to its different local manifestations.

Both meanings of the term 'catholic' can be found in the early Patristic tradition. And so, understood in a qualitative sense as a reference of the integrity of a local Church, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (ca. 156AD) describes St Polycarp as "the bishop of the catholic Church of Smyrna."² In this example, St Polycarp is clearly identified as the bishop of the 'true' Church in the local city of Smyrna in contradistinction

to other heretical assemblies. In the fourth century, St Cyril of Jerusalem identified both meanings of the term 'catholicity' in his Catechetical Orations:

The Church is called catholic then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other [διὰ τὸ κατὰ πάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης, ἀπὸ περᾶτων γῆς ἕως περᾶτων]; and because it teaches universally and completely one and all the doctrines which ought to come to people's knowledge [καὶ διὰ τὸ διδάσκειν καθολικῶς καὶ ἀνελλιπῶς ἅπαντα τὰ εἰς γνῶσιν ἀνθρώπων ἐλθεῖν ὀφείλοντα δόγματα] ...and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins, which are committed by soul or body, and posesses in itself every form of virtue which is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gifts.³

In this quite lengthy quotation, it is clear that the meaning of catholicity implies both the Church spread throughout the world in time and space and that quality of the Church to be able to both proclaim the truth and preserve it from all error. The Orthodox Church tends to stress the catholicity of the local gathering, namely that each local eucharistic gathering is integral and whole to the extent that it makes present the one body of Christ in its totality and completeness.

Whilst the mark of the Church's catholicity understood in terms of inclusivity and integrity is a gift that has been bestowed upon the Church, it is at the same time a quality that needs to be received, embraced and lived out by the faithful. The faithful within the Church need, for example, to express the breadth of the Church's mission to bring the entire world into this miracle of God's presence within the world. Accordingly, to the extent that the notion of catholicity is inextricably linked with giving witness to the universal truth that the Son of God entered human history and dwelt amongst us, it follows therefore that the calling of those within the Church is to embrace the world in a spirit of "universal solidarity"⁴ and to engage with the world by sharing in the joys and hopes, the "anguish and existential problems"⁵ of all people. The universal call to give witness to the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord is succinctly captured in the final verses of the gospel according to St Matthew:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Mt 28:19-20).

Far from being indifferent to the world and its manifold challenges, the Church is tasked with a specific mission to preach the word of God and to bring all those outside of the Church's membership into the body of Christ. In this passage the catholicity of the Church points not only to the inalienable gift of God's truth bestowed upon the Church but equally importantly the essential task to attend to the needs of the world, presenting God's kingdom and raising it to God since this - as indicated by the mark of catholicity - is intended for the entire world without exception.

1. John 16:13: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."

2. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16, 2.

3. St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Orations* 18, 23. PG: 33, 1044A-B.

4. The Great and Holy Council, Crete, 2016, "The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World", paragraph 6.

5. *Ibid*, introductory paragraph.

The Apostolic Church

In referring to the Church as 'apostolic' there are least two meanings which are implied.

Apostolic Continuity

First and foremost, this mark of the Church expresses the fact that the Church, gifted with the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit, can claim to be in continuity and identical with the Church of the apostles, namely as intended by Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that the understanding of the Church's apostolicity very quickly came to be seen as an expression of God's continued provision for his Church so that the salvific ministry of Christ could continue through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, apostolicity, like the other marks of the Church, is understood as being a gift of God's presence within his Church. For the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the integrity and identity of the Church with that of the apostles is maintained primarily by the episcopal office.

In the early Church it was the college of bishops who were progressively given greater responsibility within their respective communities to preserve the teaching of the apostolic tradition against emerging heterodox teachings and to rightly proclaim the word of truth. With the death of the apostles, the bishops, who themselves had been appointed by the apostles, would continue the apostolic ministry in this way preserving the identity and integrity of the apostolic faith for future generations. Indeed, this was especially important in the face of the growing danger of division and schism, which one would expect within the growing communities. Already the sub-apostolic Church called for the ordination of responsible leaders who not only exhibited the appropriate moral qualities befitting a leader (cf. 1Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9), but who were also gifted and authoritative teachers, "faithful people... able to teach others as well" (2Tim 2:2), as well as "rightly explaining the word of truth [ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας]" (2Tim 2:15). From this it is clear that the episcopacy and teaching office came to be identified, since witness and fidelity to the apostolic faith was of paramount importance for maintaining Christ's organic and *integral* presence amongst the faithful. By the time of St Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca 202AD), authoritatively teaching the truth of the Gospel within the community had become an indispensable characteristic of the bishop's ministry. In writing against the different Gnostic sects, St Irenaeus regarded the bishop as the authoritative organ of the genuine apostolic tradition who could therefore ensure the church's inward continuity and *koinonia* with the apostolic faith. The connection between apostolic identity and the bishop's ministry of leadership is explicitly expressed in the following:

Anyone who wishes to discern the truth may see in every church in the whole world the apostolic tradition clear and manifest. We can enumerate those who were appointed as bishops in the churches by the apostles and their successors to our own day.⁶

Consequently, for Irenaeus the relationship between apostolic continuity and the bishop came to be clearly connected, resulting in the bishop assuming the role not only of authoritative teacher of the apostolic faith in his local church, but also the guarantor and witness to the faith held by all within the community. Having highlighted the apostolic character of the bishop's ministry, Irenaeus also stressed that such a ministry was undoubtedly a gift of the Holy Spirit:

Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the church – those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with succession in the episcopate, have received the assured *charisma* of the truth (*certum charisma veritatis*).⁷

Having received the Spirit's gift – i.e. the *charisma veritatis* – by virtue of his succession from the apostles, the bishop, according to Irenaeus, could act as the discernible link to the authentic apostolic faith of previous ecclesial communities thereby being an authentic witness, for the faithful within the church, to that same apostolic tradition. Outward continuity in apostolic succession, for Irenaeus, served as the sign of inward continuity in the apostolic faith. Moreover, apostolic succession, far from being a transmission of power handed over by one individual to another, was the visible sign that the entire church's life was in continuity with past communities. This meant that apostolic succession, for Irenaeus, was inextricably linked with the local community as a whole into which the bishop, as its head, was ordained and it could therefore never be conceived apart from it. In this way, apostolic succession was a sign of the entire church's *koinonia* in truth, which would continue to be sustained by the bishop's authentic witness to the apostolic faith.

Sent out into the World

The second meaning of the term 'apostolic' deriving from the Greek word, ἀποστέλλω, means "to be sent out" so as to accomplish a task. God sent Christ into the world - Christ sent the apostles - the apostles transmitted the message of Christ by establishing local Churches and entrusting these to specific persons referred to in the New Testament writings as 'bishops'. This understanding is already found in *1 Clement*:

Following the instructions of our Lord Jesus Christ, fully convinced by his resurrection and firm in their faith in the word of God, the apostles went with assurance of the Holy Spirit to announce everywhere the good news of the coming of the kingdom of heaven. In the various villages and cities they proclaimed the word and thus made their premises... established bishops and deacons for the future believers.⁸

In referring to the Church as apostolic, therefore, what is being signified is that the Church in its inner being, as a Spirit-filled body of believers, is tasked with a specific mission, sent into the world, to preach the good news about the crucified and risen Christ and to proclaim his Father's kingdom. All this is made possible because of the abiding presence of the Spirit of God in the Church throughout the ages. In this sense, the term implies the Church's mission in the world, an ongoing task of which the faithful are reminded at the conclusion of every celebration of the divine Eucharist, where the priest says: "in peace let us go forth [ἐν ειρήνῃ προέλθωμεν]." The meaning of this prayer for the faithful is that they go and give witness to the fellowship with God and one another experienced within the eucharistic synaxis.

Some Concluding Remarks

In briefly looking at the different marks of the Church, we have seen that essentially these attributes of the Church are divine gifts coming down from above upon those gathered in the name of Christ. It is for this reason—and this reason, alone—that the Church can continue to claim to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Yet, what is equally important

6. St Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3, 3, 1. Cited in Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* vol. 1 (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics Inc., 1986), 3011.

7. St Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4, 26, 2, translated by Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 497.

8. *1 Clement*, 42:2-4.



Λόγοι περί Ἐκκλησίας
«Μεγά ἐστὶ τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας
μυστήριον»

On the Church¹

*On entering into the uncreated Church we come to Christ;
we enter into the realm of the uncreated*

...mystery of faith is great

Ἡ Ἐκκλησία εἶναι ἀναρχη, ἀτελεύτητη, αἰώνια, ὅπως ὁ ἰδρυτής της, ὁ Τριαδικὸς Θεός, εἶναι ἀναρχος, ἀτελεύτητος, αἰώνιος. Ἡ Ἐκκλησία εἶναι ἄκτιστη, ὅπως καὶ ὁ Θεός εἶναι ἄκτιστος. Ὑπῆρχε πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων, πρὸ τῶν ἀγγέλων, πρὸ τῆς δημιουργίας τοῦ κόσμου. «Πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου» (Ἐφ. 1,4) λέει ὁ Ἀπόστολος Παῦλος. Εἶναι θεῖο καθίδρυμα καὶ σ' αὐτὴν «κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλῆρωμα τῆς θεότητος» (Κολ. 2,9). Εἶναι ἔκφραση τῆς πολυποίκιλης σοφίας τοῦ Θεοῦ. Εἶναι τὸ μυστήριον τῶν μυστηρίων. Ὑπῆρξε ἀφανέρωτο καὶ ἐφανερώθη «ἐπ' ἐσχάτων τῶν χρόνων» (Α' Πέτρ.1,20). Ἡ Ἐκκλησία παραμένει ἀπαράσάλευτη, γιατί εἶναι ριζωμένη στὴν ἀγάπη καὶ τῆς σοφίᾳ πρόνοια τοῦ Θεοῦ.

The Church is without beginning, without end and eternal, just as the Triune God, her founder, is without beginning, without end and eternal. She is uncreated just as God is uncreated. She existed before the ages, before the angels, before the creation of the world – before the foundation of the world, as the Apostle Paul says (Eph. 1:4). She is a divine institution and in her dwells the whole fullness of divinity (Col. 2:9). She is an expression of the richly varied wisdom of God. She is the mystery of mysteries. She was concealed and was revealed in the last of times. The Church remains unshaken because she is rooted in the love and wise providence of God. The three Persons of the Trinity constitute the eternal Church. The angels and human beings existed in the thought and love of the Triune God from the beginning. We human beings were not born now, we existed before the ages in God's omniscience.

Τὴν αἰώνια Ἐκκλησία ἀποτελοῦν τὰ τρία πρόσωπα τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος. Στὴ σκέψη καὶ στὴν ἀγάπη τοῦ Τριαδικοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπῆρχαν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι. Ἐμεῖς οἱ ἄνθρωποι δὲν γεννηθήκαμε τώρα, μέσα στὴν παντογνωσία τοῦ Θεοῦ ὑπῆρχαμε πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων.

The love of God created us in His image and likeness. He embraced us within the Church in spite of the fact that He knew of our apostasy. He gave us everything to make us gods too through the free gift of grace. For all that, we made poor use of our freedom and lost our original beauty, our original righteousness, and cut ourselves off from the Church. Outside the Church, far from the Holy Trinity, we lost Paradise, everything. But outside the Church there is no salvation, there is no life. And so that compassionate heart of God the Father did not leave us exiled from His love. He opened again for us the gates of Paradise in the last of times and appeared in the flesh.

Ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ μᾶς ἐπλασε κατ' εἰκόνα καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν Του. Μᾶς συμπεριέλαβε στὴν Ἐκκλησία παρ' ὅτι ἐγνώριζε τὴν ἀποστασία μας. Μᾶς ἔδωσε τὰ πάντα, γιὰ νὰ μᾶς κάνει κι ἐμᾶς θεοὺς κατὰ χάριν καὶ δωρεάν. Ἐν τούτοις ἐμεῖς, κάνοντας κακὴ χρῆση τῆς ἐλευθερίας μας, ἐχάσαμε τὸ ἀρχέγονον κάλλος, τὴν ἀρχέγονη δικαιοσύνη καὶ ἀποκοπήκαμε ἀπ' τὴν Ἐκκλησία. Ἐξω ἀπὸ τὴν Ἐκκλησία, μακριὰ ἀπὸ τὴν Ἁγία Τριάδα, ἐχάσαμε τὸν Παράδεισο, τὸ πᾶν. Ἐξω, ὅμως, ἀπὸ τὴν Ἐκκλησία δὲν ὑπάρχει σωτηρία, δὲν ὑπάρχει ζωὴ. Γι' αὐτὸ ἡ σπλαγχνικὴ καρδιά τοῦ Θεοῦ-Πατέρα μᾶς δὲν μᾶς ἄφησε ἔξω ἀπὸ τὴν ἀγάπη Του. Ἄνοιξε γιὰ μᾶς πάλι τίς πύλες τοῦ Παραδείσου, ἐπ' ἐσχάτων τῶν χρόνων καὶ ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί.

With the divine incarnation of the only-begotten Son of God, God's pre-eternal plan for the salvation of mankind was revealed again to men. In his epistle to Timothy the Apostle Paul says, 'Incontrovertibly, the mystery of faith is great. God was revealed in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory' (1 Tim. 3:16). The words of the Apostle Paul are dense in meaning: divine, heavenly words!

Μέ τῆ θεία σάρκωση τοῦ μονογενοῦς Υἱοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ φανερώθηκε πάλι στοὺς ἀνθρώπους τὸ προαιώνιο σχέδιο τοῦ Θεοῦ γιὰ τὴ σωτηρία τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Λέει ὁ Ἀπόστολος Παῦλος στὸν Τιμόθεο: «Καὶ ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶ τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον. Θεὸς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν Πνεύματι, ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις, ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν, ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ, ἀνελήφθη ἐν δόξῃ» (Α' Τιμ.3,16). Τὰ λόγια τοῦ Ἀποστόλου Παύλου εἶναι λόγια πυκνά σέ νοήματα, θεῖα λόγια, οὐράνια!

God in His infinite love united us again with His Church in the person of Christ. On entering into the uncreated Church, we come to Christ, we enter the realm of the uncreated. We the faithful are called to become uncreated by grace, to become participants in the divine energies of God, to enter into the mystery of divinity, to surpass our worldly frame of mind, to die to the 'old man,' and to become immersed in God. (cf. Col. 3:9, Rom. 6:6, Eph. 4:22) When we live in the Church, we live by Christ. This is a very fine-drawn matter, we cannot understand it. Only the Holy Spirit can teach us.

Ὁ Θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἀπειρῷ ἀγάπῃ Του μᾶς ἔνωσε πάλι μέ τὴν Ἐκκλησία Του στὸ πρόσωπο τοῦ Χριστοῦ. Μπαίνοντας στὴν ἄκτιστη Ἐκκλησία, ἐρχόμαστε στὸ Χριστό, μπαίνομε στὸ ἄκτιστον. Καλοῦμαστε, δηλαδή, κι ἐμεῖς οἱ πιστοὶ νὰ γίνομε ἄκτιστοι κατὰ χάριν, νὰ γίνομε μέτοχοι τῶν θείων ἐνεργειῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ, νὰ μποῦμε μέσα στὸ μυστήριον τῆς θεότητος, νὰ ξεπεράσομε τὸ κοσμικὸ μᾶς φρόνημα, νὰ ἀποθάνομε κατὰ τὸν «παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον» (βλ. Κολ. 3,9 Ρωμ. 6,6 Ἐφ. 4, 22) καὶ νὰ γίνομε ἔνθεοι. Ὅταν ζοῦμε στὴν Ἐκκλησία, ζοῦμε τὸν Χριστό. Αὐτὸ εἶναι πολὺ λεπτὸ θέμα, δὲν μποροῦμε νὰ τὸ καταλάβομε. Μόνο τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα μπορεῖ νὰ μᾶς τὸ διδάξει.

1. Elder Porphyrios ,Wounded by Love, 87-88

to remember is that whilst these notions are based on God's saving action within the life of the Church, the human task must not be overlooked or worse still rejected. And indeed, to the extent that the necessary human factor is involved implies that these aforementioned marks of the Church are, at the same time, a goal which are yet to be fully received, lived out and actioned by the faithful within the Church. In

this way, the faithful within the Church are called, on a daily basis to work towards the unity, holiness and integrity of the Church within the world. And, only to the extent that the faithful strive to make these marks of the Church ever more genuine realities in their assembled gatherings, will they be able to give an authentic witness of the love and saving power of God within the world.