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

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’ ὁλον] ‘according to the whole’, the word catholic quite simply means ‘full’, ‘integrated’, ‘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 16:13). 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.” 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 [ὅπως οἰκουμένη οὐ περιήγητον γῆς ἐκείνην]; and because it teaches universally and completely one and all the doctrines which ought to come to people’s knowledge [καί διὰ τὸ διδάσκειν καθολικῶς καὶ ἀναλλοίως συμπάντα τι εἰς γνῶσιν ἀνθρώπων εἰλήφθαι θεολογίαν] ...and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins, which are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue which is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gifts.

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 problems... 

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.”


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


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 identifiable 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 qualities befitting a leader (cf. 1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9), but who were also gifted and authoritative teachers, “faithful people... able to teach others as well” (2 Tim 2:2), as well as “rightly explaining the word of truth” (οὕτος προφυλάσσοντας τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀλήθείας) (2 Tim 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 authoritatively teaching 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, ἀποστάλλω, 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 εἰρήνην προσάλογοιν].” 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

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8. 1 Clement, 42:2-4.
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 even be 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, and to become immersed in God. 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.