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"THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH"

Smells, bells, brogue, and birettas: to many Episcopalians that is what the word "catholic" means, with or without submission to the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome. Yet, whatever case may be made for or against such things, the primary meaning of the term 'catholic' is something else. In Greek the word literally means something like "according to the whole", which is why it is often rendered in English as "general" or "universal". So when we confess faith "in the holy catholic church" as the Creed requires, we refer to the whole body of the faithful to which is entrusted the whole truth for the whole world; we mean a society of Christians catholic in its comprehensiveness, doctrine and mission.

To confess faith in the catholic church is to acknowledge in the church and its faith a God-given wholeness and integrity not to be compromised by men. As such, the catholicity of the church is to be distinguished from schism (willful separation from the body of the faithful), heresy (willful maintenance of known error) and apostasy (willful abandonment of the faith.). To be sure, no denomination (not Rome, not Constantinople, and not "non-denominational" evangelical revivalism) fully realizes catholicity: in human institutions there is always a falling short which only divine grace can make good. Yet the church founded and preserved by Christ against the gates of hell, the church of which all true Christians are in fact members here and now, though in exile or pilgrimage, is nothing else than the catholic church. "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." As Saint Paul says, it is our duty and calling to maintain this "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace", and he is specific about the means thereto: "with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love (Ephesians 4.1-6). Catholicity therefore is both gift and vocation, something to pray for, and something to work for.

What we pray and work for is the wholeness and integrity of the church, its unity, truth, and mission, represented and recapitulated in the particular circumstances of this time and place (where- and whenever that may be). The Archbishop of Canterbury put this rather strikingly in a sentence I have quoted before: "The basic challenge that practically all the churches worldwide...so often have to struggle with is, 'Are we joining together in one act of Holy Communion, one

Eucharist, throughout the world, or are we just celebrating our local identities and our personal preferences?" I think that an illuminating question. Since the 1970's, the Episcopal Church has designed liturgy as the worship of the "gathered community" united here and now in its self-conscious solidarity, and thereby it has left itself wide open to the development of those sectarian, schismatic, and even heretical tendencies which it now finds impossible to correct or renounce. In our generation, therefore, as in so many before us (one thinks of St. Francis, in obedience to a vision, literally rebuilding the ruined church of San Damiano), the task is to rebuild a church in ruins.

We begin, in the Prayer for the Church, by asking God "to inspire continually the Universal [i.e. Catholic] Church with the spirit of truth, unity, and concord: and grant that all those who do confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love." We pray for the spirit of catholic truth. In the establishment of the doctrine of the catholic faith, the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century emphatically taught that the Bible has absolute priority. The Sixth Article of Religion says "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation" (Prayer Book, p. 603). Yet the Reformers also acknowledged that, in the right interpretation of the Bible, the historic witness of catholic Christianity (expressed in the Creeds and definitions of the ancient councils, in the writings of the Church Fathers and in the ancient liturgies and prayers of the church) was an indispensable guide. If we read the Bible rightly, it is because (often without our being aware of it), we have taught us how to do so by those who went before us in the catholic faith. Indeed, since the Bible itself does not tell us what books belong to the Bible, there would be no Bible for the individual believer to read if the catholic church had not in ancient times discerned and acknowledged as inspired a canon of sacred writings.

When we speak of the catholic faith, therefore, we are speaking of the corporate dimension of Christian truth. Only in and through our fellowship with the whole body of believers, a body which extends throughout space and time, can we approach to the fullness and wholeness of the truth given in the Word of God. No Christian, therefore, has the right to ignore or dismiss the witness of the saints to the truth of the gospel, given to us in the catholic tradition. Those who do so – "Bible-only" Protestants as much as "Spirit-led" General Convention Episcopalians – have not grasped the whole of Christian truth.

This wholeness of catholic truth is what is expressed in the church's liturgy, its common prayer, albeit in a highly condensed form: God in his supreme reality, holiness, and power, one in substance and three in person; his creation, preservation, and providential government of all things; the gravity of human sin, and the desire of salvation; the greatness of our redemption in Christ, the Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, Ascended Son of God; by whose merits we are justified from all our sins and by whose Spirit we are sanctified and made ready for everlasting life of soul and body; the wonderful grace and virtue declared in all his saints; the account to be rendered to the Judge when he comes again in Majesty; and the glory of his Kingdom. It is this truth, in its wholeness, which must fill and shape our hearts and

minds in the act of common prayer. Whatever hobby-horses, and pet peeves, special interests, agendas, and tastes we bring to the work of common prayer must either be left behind (insofar as they are false) or are taken up (corrected, and completed) in a higher vision of the truth.

In this regard it is highly significant that in common prayer – following the the Lord's Prayer – we usually do not say "I" (except in a necessarily personal declaration like the Creed) but rather "we". Common prayer is not the act of the individual, but of the body of the faithful, and of individuals as members of that body; and this body of the faithful is more than the congregation of those assembled in one time and place: for in their worship is represented the whole of the catholic church ("the blessed company of all faithful people") throughout space and time, and even beyond time: "with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven", that is, "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Hebrews 12. 23). What unites us all is Christ himself, whose mystical body we are, whose Spirit gives that body its living unity.

(To be continued)

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