CHAPTER 1

The many meanings of Catholicism

INTRODUCTION

It is common for many people to understand the word "Catholicism" to mean a particular denomination as distinguished, say, from Protestantism or Orthodoxy, within the larger world of Christianity. Thus, for example, Catholics say the rosary, revere the pope, go to mass on Sunday, and have a clergy that does not marry, and those characteristics, among many other things, distinguish Catholics from Protestants. Catholics are also said to reflect certain ethnic backgrounds: The Irish are Catholics but the Scots are Presbyterian; Italians are Catholics but Norwegians are Lutheran. In some places, Catholics are identified by class. In the USA a century ago, Catholics were considered mainly but not exclusively working class while some mainline Protestants were identified with the managerial class. In England, until very recently, that was also the case. These and similar stereotypes are very much a part of the popular culture, but they are stereotypes nonetheless. People are divided by denominational difference, and they frequently understand themselves through their inherited religious upbringing: To be Irish is to be Catholic. This popular conception of Catholicism, understood as a sociological category, is true of most large religious traditions. To belong to any or other religious tradition depends very much on where one lives and how one perceives oneself relative to the larger culture.

In that general sense, then, Catholicism can be considered as one Christian denomination among many but identifiable as having its own distinct culture, character, and sometimes dependent on ancestry and geographical location. Catholicism, then, not to put too fine a point on it, can be understood as a recognizable social grouping. This sociological understanding is not the way in which we wish to present Catholicism in this volume although, to be sure, we will have to pay attention to Catholicism's social manifestation in the world while also being alert to its cultural character. This volume is not a book about the social description

of Catholicism but about Catholic belief and practice. It is also an "insider's view" in that the presentation is made by someone who is a member of the Catholic Church.

We should also note in passing – and this will be discussed further in this chapter – that within Catholicism there is more than one tradition (for example, there are Roman and Byzantine Catholics – all part of the Catholic Church). This distinction needs to be pointed out because words such as "Catholic," "Orthodox," and "Protestant" are abstractions. Presbyterians are not Lutherans, and Russian Orthodoxy is not the exact same thing as Greek Orthodoxy.

The burden of this present chapter is to get behind the bewilderingly complex phenomenon of Catholicism to ask not how to describe all of the parts that make up the structure, belief system, and worship of the Catholic Church – we will attend to such matters later in this work – but to ask a far more fundamental question: What does it mean historically, sociologically, and theologically when we use the word "catholic"?

To answer that question will demand that we pay attention to how the word "catholic" was first used in the Christian vocabulary, how it developed in the history of Christianity, and, further, how the word is understood from within the Church which calls itself "Catholic." This is not as easy as it at first might seem since many people who are not denominationally Catholic still profess a belief that the Church is catholic when they recite the historic creeds about their belief in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

When we have done the preliminary historical work we can then further stipulate what the essential characteristics of catholicity are as Catholics understand them. In this chapter, then, we will trace out the evolution of the word "catholic" and how it is understood from within the Catholic tradition, and we will inquire into its theological significance. Once having done that, it will then become possible to reflect on the development of Catholic belief and practice. It is within that context that we will be able to explore fully the statement in the historic creeds which says that we believe in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" and how that creedal phrase is understood by those who identify themselves as being Catholics.

It should also be said, again at the outset, that what follows is an account written from *within* the Roman Catholic tradition. It is very much a simplified account, which may be read differently from other perspectives. Some may very well quarrel with some assertions made in this work. In other words: This is a Catholic account of Catholicism and a

somewhat traditionally unapologetic one at that. No one understands better than the writer that many will quarrel with the understanding of Catholicism presented here (including some fellow Catholics!), but readers must be tolerant as we lay out the Catholic self-understanding even if not all would accept the premises that stand in the background of this understanding.

THE HISTORY OF A WORD

The word "catholic" comes from two Greek words, *kath holou,* which means something like "of the whole." When we use the word "catholic" in nonreligious discourse (for example, "Her tastes in literature were very catholic"), we mean some something like "broad," "far ranging," and the like. In that sense, the opposite of "catholic" is "narrow" or "limited." The word "catholic" is not found in the New Testament. It does occur, as we shall see, very early in Christian history. To understand the word, we need to make a preliminary observation about the primitive growth of Christianity.

The word that we usually find translated as "church" in the New Testament (and the term is used most commonly by Saint Paul) comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* (from which we derive the word "ecclesiastical"), which means an "assembly," "community," or "congregation." When Saint Paul, who makes most use of the term *ekklesia,* uses the word, he is referring to those groups of early believers who assembled in community for common worship and instruction. The word *ekklesia* did not mean a structure or building but the community itself. Indeed, Paul clearly distinguishes the assembly from the place where it met in a phrase which is to be found in his postscript to his letter to the Romans where he wishes to have greetings to be sent to Prisca and Aquila and "also the Church (*ekklesia*) which meets in their house (*oikos*)" (Rom. 16:4). It is worth noting that in that same section of his letter Paul refers not only to "church" in the singular but also in the plural: "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the Churches of Christ greet you" (Rom. 16:16). We can truly speak, as does Paul himself in his letters, of the Christian assembly and Christian assemblies.

We can then think of the earliest stages of Christianity as a loosely organized network of small communities in various parts of the Mediterranean world keeping linked to each other by traveling apostles, evangelists, and other missionaries as well as by circulating letters like those of Paul's letter to the Churches of Galatia, Corinth, or Philippi.

Thus, at the end of his letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul mentions in passing the "churches of Galatia" (1 Cor. 16:1) and the Churches of Asia (1 Cor. 16:19). If there was a center hub of this network, it would have to be Jerusalem, the place where Jesus lived out his earthly life and the place where the Apostles of Jesus began their public lives. Christianity radiated from Jerusalem, but even Jerusalem was not the center of Christianity in any strict organizational sense.

It is within the context of this wide-ranging network of small Christian communities that the word "catholic" first appears. It is generally agreed that the first Christian to use the word "catholic" was a Christian convert named Ignatius (?35–107), who was the leader of the Church in Antioch, even though he may have been born in Syria. Condemned to death by Emperor Trajan, he was to be transported from his city to Rome, under guard, to die in the arena, which, in fact, occurred around the year 107. Ignatius lived in the period that closed the Age of the Apostles. He wrote seven letters to various churches while making his journey. In a letter to the Church in Smyrna (in present-day Turkey), he writes, "Where the bishop appears, let to the people be, just as where Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." The obvious sense of that passage is that the word "catholic" was to be understood as the whole church as opposed to this or that particular congregation: the whole or entire as opposed to the part. Ignatius, in short, was thinking of the entire body of Christians as opposed to any particular community that was part of that whole. Thus, in the first instance, the word "catholic" meant the whole (body of Christian believers) as opposed to this or that particular community of Christians. It was not then a description of a denomination but an adjective to describe a collectivity, i.e. the Christian community globally understood as opposed to this or that particular community. The word "catholic" enters the Christian vocabulary simply as a way of describing the whole or entirety of the Christian body of believers as opposed to its particular instantiation in this or that particular place.

Before the end of the second century, the word "catholic" began to mean the witness and teaching of this whole or "catholic" church as opposed to the claims of dissident groups. This new understanding begins to sharpen the notion of catholicity. That is the sense in which Irenaeus of Lyons (?130–200) in France uses the term. Irenaeus came from Asia Minor (probably Smyrna) but settled in what is present-day France in the city of Lyons after having studied and worked in Rome. Ordained a priest, he became Bishop of that city around the year 178. In a famous work written to confute those who held erroneous ideas about Christianity,

he assumed the unity of one world church of Christianity which held one faith and one preaching:

> the Church, although scattered over the whole world, diligently observes [this faith], as if it occupied but one house and believes as if it had but one mind and preaches and teaches as if it had one mouth. And although there are many dialects in the world, the meaning of the tradition is one and the same. For the same faith is held and handed down by the Churches established in the Germanies, the Spains, among the Celtic tribes, in the East, in Lybia, and in the central portions of the world. But as the sun, the creation of God, is one and the same in all the world, so is the light of the preaching of the truth, which shines on all who desire to come to the knowledge of the truth. (*Adversus haereses,* I: 10, 1–2)

Two things are to be noted about that passage. First, Irenaeus clearly distinguishes churches (plural) and the Church (singular). It is in that latter sense in which the word "catholic" is to be understood (i.e. the worldwide church). Second, and more importantly, Irenaeus now adds another qualification to the words "Catholic Church" (i.e. the entire church): It is in that Catholic Church where one finds the faith handed down by the Apostles of Christ.

In that added meaning, Irenaeus now develops a meaning of the word "catholic" which was to become very common, that is, the term "catholic" now means those who hold to the authentic faith of the Apostles who were entrusted with the teaching of Jesus. Thus, "catholic" became a synonym for the word "orthodox." The word "orthodox" has two meanings: (1) right or correct belief and (2) right or correct worship. Thus, Catholic and Orthodox became the term used to indicate the "great church" as opposed to this or that heretical sect or schismatic group who dared to call itself "Christian." Writing in the middle of the third century, the bishop (and eventual martyr) Cyprian (d.258) of Carthage in Roman North Africa uses an extended metaphor to make the point:

> The Church also is one, each part of which is held by each one for the whole. As there are many rays of the sun, but one light; and many branches of a tree but one trunk based on its tenacious roots; and since from one spring flows many streams even if many seemed diffused because of the liberality of the overflowing abundance preserved in the source. (*De unitate ecclesiae,* Chapter 5)

From the fourth century on, then, the word "catholic" meant the "true" Church (often times called the "Great Church") as opposed to schismatic or heretical groups.

A very interesting distinction between schismatic groups and the Catholic Church can be seen in the martyrdom account of the priest

Pionius and his companions during the persecution of Emperor Decius around AD 250. When Pionius was brought before the tribunal the following exchange took place:

What is your name?
Pionius.
Are you a Christian?
Yes.
What church do you belong to?
The Catholic Church; with Christ there is no other.

What makes that exchange so interesting is that when Pionius was finally condemned to death, he was burned at the stake with a follower of the schismatic sect founded by Marcion in the mid-second century in Rome. What is clear about this text is that Pionius clearly distinguished the Catholic Church from other sectarian movements then current in the world.[1]

The clearest expression of the notion that catholicity is to be taken as the universal consensus of belief is to be found in a famous passage from the fifth-century monk theologian Vincent of Lerins (d. *c.*450). He expressed it this way:

> In the Catholic Church itself, every care must be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always and by all. This is truly and properly 'catholic' as indicated by the force and etymology of the name itself which comprises everything truly universal. This general rule will be truly applied if we follow the principles of universality, antiquity, and consent. (*Commonitorium,* Chapter 2)

Vincent goes on to say that by universality he means the faith that the Church professes all over the world. By antiquity, he means that the faith is not in dissonance with what the Church professed as far back as can be determined, and, similarly, consent means that "we adopt the definitions and propositions of all, or almost all, the bishops and doctors" (*Commonitorium,* Chapter 2). Vincent, then, understands catholicity to mean the universally held truths handed down by apostolic authority as it is perceived in the whole of Christianity.

At this early stage of Christian history, then, catholicity meant two things: (1) the unity of all the local churches in union with each other; and (2) the common faith as it was professed in its worship, creeds, and other

[1] The full text of this martyrdom text can be found in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs,* edited by Herbert Musurillo, S.J. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 136–67; my citation abbreviates the exchange.

articulations of the ancient tradition. Thus, when bishops met in a universal (ecumenical) council – the first one was at Nicaea in 325 – they joined together to express their common faith and to express their unity against dissident groups who were not in unity and did not hold to the "catholic" faith.

> Here is an explanation of the word "catholic" given by Saint Cyril of Jerusalem to newly baptized converts in the late forth century:
>
> The Church is called Catholic because it is spread out throughout the world, from end to end of the earth; also because it teaches universally and completely all the doctrines which man should know visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly, and also because it subjects to right worship all mankind, all rulers and ruled, lettered and unlettered; further because it treats and heals universally every sort of sin committed by body and soul, and it possesses in itself every conceivable virtue, whether in deeds, words or spiritual gifts of every kind. (*Catechetical Sermon,* No. 18)

For reasons too complex to describe here, the general unity of Christianity understood as the Great Church or the Catholic Church, was broken in the early Middle Ages with the Church of the East and the Church of the West separating. It then became customary, and somewhat confusingly, to describe Eastern Christianity by the term "Orthodox" and Western Christianity as "Catholic" even though each church would insist that it was both orthodox (right believing and right worshiping) and catholic (universal). In popular speech, however, Orthodox and Catholic became a common way of distinguishing the Churches of the East and the West. That distinction is standard today.

A further division in Christianity arose in the sixteenth century in the West when many Christians separated from the Catholic Church. This division, of course, is known familiarly as the Protestant Reformation. With that fissure, the term "Protestant" entered into common usage to describe those various Christian bodies who had separated from the old Catholic Church as a way of "protesting" the older church's deviations from the Gospel. Even later, it became customary to speak of the Catholic Church as the "Roman Catholic Church" because the unity of Catholicism depends on unity with the bishop of Rome, who is also known as the pope. We shall see below that the phrase "Roman Catholic" can be understood in a misleading fashion. It would be more accurate to speak of the Catholic Church at Rome. The term "Roman Catholic" was often used by those in the Church of England (Anglican) who wished to distinguish the Orthodox

and Roman Catholic Churches from the Anglican Church. This "branch" theory (i.e. one Catholic Church with three branches of Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) has received a mixed reception even within the Anglican Communion.

To sum up: The term "catholic" has a long history behind it but in common usage we today speak of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant as generic terms to describe broadly the three great divisions of Christianity. In the rest of this volume, we will understand "Catholic" in the generic way (i.e. as opposed to the Orthodox or Protestant or Anglican Churches) as is commonly used unless stipulated otherwise.

HOW CATHOLICS UNDERSTAND CATHOLICITY

According to the authoritative *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 830), three things constitute the essential marks of the Catholic Church: (1) the complete and full confession of faith as it was preserved from the tradition of the first Apostles; (2) the full sacramental life of worship and liturgy; (3) and the ordained ministry of bishops in apostolic succession who are in union with each other and the bishop of Rome (i.e. the pope). A word should be noted about these three essentials:

1. A complete and full profession of faith: The possession and teaching of everything given by Christ both as recorded in the biblical witness and as that teaching has been articulated in the constant teaching of the Church and enshrined in its creeds. We will expand on this subject in Chapter 5, on the so-called rule of faith.
2. A full sacramental life: In the Catholic Church are those rites ordained by Christ and accepted in the Church to incorporate people into the faith, to nurture their Christian lives in worship, and to make available to them the gift of Christ. This crucial part of catholicity will receive its own chapter also when we describe the liturgical and sacramental character of Catholicism.
3. An ordained ministry in apostolic succession: It is of the Catholic faith that the bishops are the legitimate successors of the Apostles of Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church is present when each bishop in his local church is in communion with all other bishops and that communion is especially bonded through communion with the bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter.

The *Catechism* (No. 832) goes on to say that when those three elements are a reality – where the full Gospel is preached, the sacraments are fully

available, and the local bishop is in communion with all other bishops and the bishop of Rome – there is present the Catholic Church. So, the Catholic Church is not just the sum total of all churches: catholicity is fully present in each local church that has possession of those three essential characteristics. Thus, we can speak of the Catholic Church in London, Jakarta, Paris, Dublin, Rome, Los Angeles, etc. In that sense, it is more technically correct, as we already noted, to speak of the Catholic Church at Rome rather than the Roman Catholic Church. In that sense, at least, Catholics insist that the Catholic Church is a *visible* reality – where the three elements are present, there is the Catholic Church.

With those characteristics in mind, we can then add that from the point of view of the Catholic Church another church would be in schism (from the Greek *skisma* – to tear or rent) if it broke the bond of the bishops who are in union with the bishop of Rome, the pope. That is what the Catholic Church has judged the Orthodox Church to have done. It would be (formally) heretical if it denied one or other of the dogmatic teachings of the creedal tradition or denied the legitimacy of some of the sacraments of the Church. In point of fact, as the Catholic Church tries to emphasize points of closeness rather than points of rupture, the Catholic Church attempts to be in dialogue with other Christian bodies to foster greater unity rather than to emphasize divergences.

CATHOLICITY CLOSELY CONSIDERED

A generation ago, the American Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles (now Cardinal Avery Dulles) gave the Martin D'Arcy lectures at Oxford University which were later published under the title *The Catholicity of the Church.* That work remains to this day the best and most comprehensive English-language study of the meanings of catholicity from the perspective of a Catholic thinker. The book is very substantial and need not be fully outlined here. However, a few of its major theses should be noted because they will be studied in more depth later in this present book. Here it will be sufficient to sketch out some of the more pertinent points to add to our understanding of the term "catholic." These elements may be understood as distinguishing characteristics of catholicity.

First, Catholicism roots itself in the biblical belief that the created world comes from God and that God's presence is somehow to be detected in this world without being identified with it. Catholicism, in short, affirms both the transcendence of God (God is not to be identified with the world) and the immanence of God (God is detected through the

world). That tension between God's transcendence and God's imminence is made manifest in the Catholic understanding of who Jesus Christ is. It is part of Catholic faith that Jesus is both divine and human – that He is the Word made flesh (see John 1:14) – and, further, that his humanity and divinity are present in one single person. Furthermore, Jesus left a community made up of humans who are at the same time the bearer of the message and power of Jesus. And, further, this community functions as a visible sign through visible signs to manifest and provide of power of Jesus.

The theological notion that the invisible can be mediated through the visible is called the *sacramental* principle, namely, that signs (sacraments) deliver meaning. That is why the Catholic tradition has called creation itself a sacrament: it is a sign of the creator God. The Catholic tradition calls Jesus Christ the Great Sacrament because in his life he shows us God. Christ is a visible sign in the world who grants us the favor (i.e. grace) of God. The Church, likewise, is a sacrament that functions through further sacraments using visible signs, such as water in baptism, bread and wine in the eucharist, etc. This commitment to a strong sense of the power of the visible to mediate the invisible also explains why the Catholic Church is hospitable to ritual, art, sculpture, vestments, etc.

Catholicism, then, in the first place, is characterized as committed to the *sacramental principle.*

Second, the Catholic Church understands itself to be "catholic" in the sense that it wishes the Gospel to be preached universally – to the whole "world." In that sense, the Catholic Church is a missionary enterprise. As an ideal, then, it is contrary to Catholicism to restrict itself to one ethnic class or to one language or to one stratum of society. In that sense, at least, its catholicity is an ideal to be achieved as opposed to an already-arrived-at reality. Since that kind of fullness will come only at the end of history, the Catholic Church must constantly seek out strategies to preach the Gospel in a fashion that all peoples in all their particularities can hear it.

Attempting to teach the Gospel to all nations explains why what seems like the bewildering complexity of institutions, schools, literary texts, music, art, various media, forms of ministry, etc. all dwell within the Church: They are means towards the end of inviting everyone to hear the Good News of Jesus and to embrace its life-giving message.

This aspect of catholicity means that the Catholic Church is both inclusive (everyone is welcome) and expansive or missionary as it attempts to invite all peoples to be a member of the Church. In order to do that, the Catholic Church is concerned to keep two realities in constant tension. On the one hand, it must remain faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,