

We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

This is all fine on a piece of paper and as a creedal statement of our faith and for catechism. But, the cynic in me cannot help thinking that all this sounds more like a remote and lofty ideal.

I have heard people say, “I believe in God but I don’t believe in organized religion.” This is a common rationalisation for not going to church. Behind such a statement is the suspicion of the institutional church. I too am suspicious of the institutional power-structure of the church. I wouldn’t be so much in favour of “organized” religion either, if religion could be so neatly organized.

Take the idea of “one” Church, for instance. In America, there are over 500 denominations of the Christian Churches and still increasing. Faced with a possible schism in the worldwide Anglican Communion, it seems useless to talk about “one” church in any meaningful way. In fact, the early church councils attempted to preserve the “one” Church by excommunicating those who disagreed, and the excommunicated, in turn, have continued their churches throughout history. The Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church were the result of Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Then there are the embarrassing skeletons – its violent history of the Crusades and its collusion with the Western colonialism, and still other unholy scandals. It has become more difficult to make a case of holiness for the Church to the unchurched. Some say that they cannot find God in the church. There are days when I can’t either. But, as one Benedictine monk reminded me, “The church is a human and therefore sinful institution. How could it be otherwise?” I came across one church website which actually says that the Church is not a human organization and that in the church all problems are solved. That’s a pretty hard sell in this day and age.

The church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition, which still points toward a deeper mystery of God’s presence in the world. It is a human institution, and consists of ordinary people, sinners like me and you, who say and do cruel and stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired and divinely ordained institution, with good purpose and good works, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. The Church is not an abstract concept or an ideology. It is a messy and disorganized assembly of sinners who are nonetheless called and set apart, sanctified, to witness to God in Jesus Christ in this world at this time.

Faced with the religious pluralism just outside the door, the catholicity of the Church couldn’t be more challenged. If you ever go to All Saints, Margaret Street

in London today, you couldn't help noticing the Jesus Army and a thriving Buddhist temple right across the street from the church, both of whom are housed in the former All Saints buildings. The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally claimed and defined catholicity strictly within the jurisdictional boundary of the Vatican. So, outside the Roman Catholic Church there can be no Catholic Church, nor Catholic religion. But, in this day and age, this sounds rather ludicrous than credible.

If not all the Churches are concerned with being catholic, just about every Church claims apostolic heritage either historically or biblically.

So, on what basis can we discuss one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in a meaningful way? The theologians of the Second Vatican Council offered a sensible and foundational solution to help us move forward on this issue. The Vatican today has largely disowned this Council as a twentieth-century protestant movement and has suppressed its doctrines.

The theologians such as de Lubac, Marion, Karl Rahner and others, developed an ecclesiology, an understanding of the Church, rooted in the notion of communion, the New Testament concept of *koinonia*. The Christian understanding of *koinonia* is from the Greek philosophers, such as Plato, who understood it as a life-giving participation in the eternal truth. So, deeply seated in the notion of communion is spiritual participation and common sharing.

Communion is God's common good, for it flows from the Trinitarian union of self-giving and mutually shared love of God. Communion is God's common good available through Jesus Christ for all God's creatures to share. So, *koinōnia* invites the members of the community to participate freely in the divine nature of God through Christ by a sharing of his body and blood in the ritual worship of God. The *koinōnia* injunction further calls the members to share in others' sufferings and to share their material goods with others. Nowhere in the NT is *koinōnia* used as a tool for exclusion. Rather, the Gospel injunction and the notion of *koinōnia* ultimately call for radical hospitality and inclusion.

When the Church calls herself communion, she understands herself essentially as a sacrament. The Church as communion, then, is a sacramental sign of God's grace freely available to all God's creatures everywhere in the world. The human boundaries – colour, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, physical impairment, opinion, ideology, and even physical distance – all dissolve away in communion, for in Christ all are transcended and united. Communion breaks down human boundaries.

Communion was countercultural in Paul's time and is still fiercely countercultural today. The most challenging countercultural scene to the world is encountered before the altar, where men and women, old and young, learned and ignorant, rich and poor, straight and gay, white and black, all kneel right next to each other to receive the body and blood of Christ. In this act wrought with paradox, the dignity of every individual is lifted and restored. In a world where marginalisation and exclusion are accepted as a necessary measure for social order, the Church as genuine communion stands as a sacramental, countercultural, and prophetic challenge to that world.

The centre of communion is in Jesus Christ. There is one and only rock upon which communion stands. In his Incarnation, God in Jesus Christ surrenders himself to all human creatures. The shocking challenge of the Christian faith is that Christ is in my enemy as well as in my friends. To condemn my enemy is to condemn Christ in my enemy. I cannot condemn just the person and not the Christ in him, for Christ permeates through his every fibre and vein. Christ is the life-giving essence of every human being. In his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus surrenders himself to the Father. Communion is where we dare to share in Christ who surrenders himself to us, and we, in turn, surrender ourselves to Christ in a new wholeness in him. The Church is genuinely and authentically one, holy, catholic and apostolic, when she is deeply and firmly rooted in communion, God's common good for all God's creatures.