

The Trinitarian Essence of the Church

The previous descriptions, that attempt to define what the Church is, can all be summarised into one great magnificent truth: The Church is essentially part of the Blessed Trinity. This statement needs some clarification.



The Church as a community of believers in Jesus Christ is part of his Mystical Body. But Jesus himself has been sent by God the Father to save us (Jn.3:16), “You will die in your sins if you do not believe I am he” (Jn.8:24) and “I have given them the teaching you gave me .. and know fore certain I came from you” (Jn.17:8), and because Jesus is intimately linked to the Father “Before Abraham was I am” (Jn.8:58) and “The Father and I are one” (Jn.10:30) and “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn.14:10), then we too are intimately linked with the Father through Jesus. **The Father is the essence of the Church as Jesus is its source and origin.** But the Church is also **filled with the Holy Spirit**, which is its life-force. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee Jesus promised that his Church would always be divinely inspired and guided “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you for ever, the Spirit of Truth” (Jn.14:16).

Jesus himself stresses the Trinitarian nature of his Church when he said to the apostles “When the Spirit of Truth comes .. he will glorify me since all he reveals will be taken from what is mine and everything the Father has is mine” (Jn.16:14).

The Church as Sacrament and Sacramental Essence

Once the essential Trinitarian nature of the Church is recognised then it follows that the Church effectively acts as a channel and source of all the graces bestowed by God, acting through the personhood of the Holy Spirit. This is expressed not only in the Pentecostal event in Acts but also in St. John’s Gospel when Jesus came into the presence of the disciples after his resurrection and breathed this power on them through the Spirit (Jn.20:22-23). These acts sealed the Church itself as a sacrament, that is an outward visible sign of grace and a transmitter of that grace through its liturgical actions and the individual sacraments.

The truth that the Church has a fundamental Trinitarian and Sacramental nature does not mean it is a perfect institution. As an organisation and community of believers its members have human weaknesses as well as virtues, its abundance of good deeds and charitable works are sometimes overshadowed by acts of evil, it is composed of saints, good people and sinners. But this should not surprise us. After all, it is also a **Pilgrim People**, still journeying to the fullness of its Trinitarian home.

Our Catholic Faith

17. The Holy Trinity as the Essence of the Catholic Church

- A Forgotten Sacramental Reality?



Questions for Reflection

1. Is it correct to say that the Catholic Church is fundamentally different from other Christian Churches?
2. What is meant by the Church as the Mystical body of Christ?
3. In what way might the Church be called a sacrament?

What is the Roman Catholic Church?

The word 'Church' is generally understood as:

- A building for Christian worship
- A generic term for a group of worshippers who adhere to particular religious beliefs.



However, our 'Roman Catholic Church', whilst obviously having many places of worship and certainly conforming to the second definition, is theologically also understood in many other, much more important, ways which are outlined below.

The Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic

The Creed states the Church is **One** because it has its source in Jesus Christ, its founder, and forms part of his body (Rom.12; 1 Cor.12) It is **Holy** because of its identity with Christ and as such is the source through which God's grace comes. It is described as **Catholic**, or universal, both because Christ is everywhere in her, and because it has a mission of evangelisation to all of humanity. Finally, it is **Apostolic** in that its foundation from Christ was continued through his apostles and their legitimate successors, and has been, and will always be, guided by the Holy Spirit ever since the event of Pentecost.

Each of these prime characteristics of the Church have been expanded by scholars to provide different models of its nature:

1. The One Church as both People of God and Children of God

Just as the Jews were the chosen people in the Old Testament, now Christians are to be the new chosen people (1 Pt.2) foretold by Jeremiah (Jr.31). This aspect of the Church as the **People of God** is emphasised in the Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium (ch.2), of the Second Vatican Council. In fact, Christians are more than a new people; we can also legitimately now call ourselves **Children of God** (Rm.8; 1Jn.3). We are, then, in a real way part of God's **Family**

2. The One Church as Communion or Community

As a group of believers united together around Christ, there is a special bond between us all. We are not just a loose confederation of likeminded people, but a close community or communion, uniquely welded together wherever we may be (Jn.17), particularly when we receive the very Body and Blood of Jesus (Jn.6).

3. The Holy and Catholic Church Contains Christ's Holiness and is, therefore, a Blessed Community

Everything has been placed under the control of Christ (Eph.1). All grace is dispensed by Jesus through his Church which is His Body (Eph.2). Thus the Church is the **Holy Mystical Body of Christ** and, as such, it is a **Blessed Community** (Eph.5:27-30), consisting both of the living, like the branches of a vine (Jn.15), a community made holy and blessed by the prayers of Jesus himself and by his wish for his followers to be united in him (Jn.17), and by the souls of those who have died, those in Purgatory and those united in Christ.



4. The Catholic Church, by Evangelising, is Both Herald and Teacher of the Truth

Jesus' command was for his disciples to witness throughout the world (Mtt.28; Acts 1). Thus, the Church must always be a **Herald of the Truth of Salvation** and seek to evangelise the whole world so that everyone may come to love and serve Jesus. It also has an ongoing teaching role to all who constitute the Church, in order to deepen their understanding of the Faith and bring them even closer to Our Lord Jesus (1 Cor.12)

5. The Catholic Church Exercises its Teaching Ministry Through its Apostolic Roots

Jesus gave authority to his apostles "to go forth and make disciples of all nations". He also gave to St. Peter a leadership role (Mtt.16) and the power "to bind and loose", and the same power to all the apostles (Mtt.18, paralleled in John's Gospel "whose sins you shall forgive .." (Jn. 20). This apostolic root is continued in the Church's **institutional** and **hierarchical** aspects.

6. The Apostolic Church both as Servant and Suffering Beacon of Truth

Jesus showed to the apostles that the nature of their calling was not only to evangelise and lead but **to serve** as well. This is best demonstrated by his example of washing the feet of the apostles (Jn.13) and his command for them to act likewise. He also emphasised that, in following him, they should expect to undergo suffering just as he would suffer (Jn.15:18f).