

THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

Short reflections, eternal truths



THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

Our place in
God's plan for salvation

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The Holy Catholic Church

Each Sunday, Christians around the world stand together and profess the Nicene Creed. Among its beautiful declarations is this: “*I believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.*” But what does that mean? And how can we say the Church is holy when we know it has been wounded by scandal, division, and human failure?

Here we will reflect deeply and honestly on what we mean when we say we believe in the Holy Catholic Church - and why, despite everything, we still dare to call her holy.

What Do We Mean by “Church”?

When people hear the word “Church,” they often think of buildings, bishops, or the Pope in Rome. Others might picture their local parish or the Sunday gathering of their community. These are not wrong, but they are incomplete.

The Church is not just a structure, a hierarchy, or a place. It is, first and foremost, a people - a people called and gathered by God. The word “Church” comes from the Greek *ekklesia*, meaning “called out.” We are the ones called out of darkness into God’s light, called together to be his family, his body, his presence in the world.

Saint Paul gives us one of the most powerful images of the Church: the Body of Christ. And not just any body - the *Mystical Body*. This means that the Church is united to Christ in a mysterious and spiritual way. We are not Christ’s physical body as in the Eucharist, but we are truly his

living presence in the world. Each baptised person is a member of this body, and Christ is the head.

The Church Is Holy - But How?

It's easy to feel uncomfortable calling the Church "holy" when we know how often her members fall short. But holiness in this sense does not mean human perfection. Holiness means being set apart for God, filled with his life, and called to reflect his love.

The Church is holy because Christ is holy. He is the source of her life. Just as Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, so too the Church is both divine and human. In her divine nature, she is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In her human nature, she is made up of sinners - people like us - who are on a journey toward holiness.

This means the Church can be holy in Christ, even while her members struggle with sin. It's a paradox, but a beautiful one. The holiness of the Church is not a boast, it's a gift. It's not something we achieve, it's something we receive.

The Church as Sacrament

A visible sign of God's invisible grace

When we speak of the Church as a *sacrament*, we are saying something profound and beautiful. A sacrament is not just a ritual - it is a mystery made visible. It is a sign that does what it signifies. And the Church, in her deepest identity, is just that: a living sign of God's saving love, active and present in the world.

Just as the Eucharist is bread and wine that becomes the Body and Blood of Christ, so the Church is a human community that through the gift of God's grace is the Body of Christ in the world. She is not merely a gathering of believers, nor simply an institution with rules and roles. She is Christ's presence extended through time and space - his hands, his feet, his voice, his mercy.

A Sacrament Needs Visible Structure

For a sacrament to be real, it must be visible. It must have form. The Church, then, must have structure. She must have ministers who serve, teachings that guide, and sacraments that sanctify. These do not make her flawless - but they make her capable of carrying grace.

Think of the Eucharist again: it requires bread and wine, a priest, a prayer, and a people. Without these, the sacrament cannot be celebrated. In the same way, the Church requires her visible elements: bishops, priests, deacons, the faithful, the liturgy, the Word, and the sacraments to be the vessel of Christ's saving work.

This structure is not a burden - it is a gift. It allows the Church to be consistent, recognisable, and faithful across generations. It allows the grace of Christ to be passed on, not just in theory, but in real, tangible ways.

Christ Continues His Work

Through the Church, Christ continues what he began. He teaches through her preaching. He heals through her sacraments. He forgives through her ministers. He sanctifies through her prayer and witness.

And he does all this through us - his members. We are not passive observers. We are active participants in his mission. We are the ones through whom Christ reaches the world today.

A saying often attributed to Saint Teresa of Avila captured this truth with poetic clarity:

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
no hands but yours; no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks with compassion on the world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which he blesses.”

This is not just a lovely sentiment—it is a spiritual reality. When we live as members of Christ's Body, we become in a sense, sacraments ourselves. We become signs of grace. We become channels of God's love.

A Living Sacrament for the World

To call the Church a sacrament is, not to say she is one of the seven sacraments, but rather to say that she is God's chosen way of reaching the world. She is not the only way God works—but she is the ordinary way. She is the visible sign of his invisible grace, the place where heaven touches earth.

This means that the Church is not just for herself - she is for the world. She exists to carry Christ's love beyond her walls. She exists to be a light in the darkness, a refuge for the weary, a home for the lost.

And she does this through us. Through our lives, our words, our witness, our love. We are the living stones of this sacrament. We are the ones through whom Christ continues to bless, heal, and save.

The Church as Pilgrim People

Another image of the Church, especially cherished since the Second Vatican Council, is the Church as the *Pilgrim People of God*. This reminds us that we are on a journey, not yet perfect, but moving toward the fullness of life with God.

We walk together, across generations and continents, united by baptism and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The Church includes every baptised person who has ever lived and ever will live. She transcends time and space. She is universal – *catholic* - embracing all cultures, all peoples, all ages.

To be part of the Church is to be part of God's chosen people. It is to belong to a family that stretches from Abraham to today, from the apostles to your parish, from the saints in heaven to the faithful on earth.

God Works Through His Church

God has always chosen to work through people. He called Abraham, formed Israel, and entered into covenant with them. In Jesus Christ, he established a new covenant - a new Israel - which is the Church.

This is how God works: not by magic, but by partnership. He enters our world and works from the inside out. He chooses real people, with real

flaws, and transforms them by grace. He builds a people who can carry his love to the ends of the earth.

The Catechism, quoting Vatican II, puts it beautifully:

The Father determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ. This family of God is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history... prepared in the history of Israel... established in this final age... and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit.” (CCC 759; *Lumen Gentium* 2)

The Apostolic Catholic Church

When we profess the Creed, we also declare our belief in the “catholic, and apostolic Church.” These four marks: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, are not just poetic phrases. They are essential truths about the Church’s identity. They tell us who she is, how she lives, and what she is called to be.

What Does “Apostolic” Mean?

To say the Church is apostolic means that she is founded on the apostles, continues in their teaching, and is sent, just as they were, to bring Christ to the world.

The word “apostle” comes from the Greek *apostolos*, meaning “one who is sent.” The apostles were not just followers of Jesus - they were chosen, commissioned, and sent out to proclaim the Gospel. They were eyewitnesses to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. And they were entrusted with the mission of building his Church.

The Church is apostolic because:

- She is built on the foundation of the apostles.
- She preserves and hands on their teaching.
- She continues their mission in every age.

Built on the Apostles

Jesus did not leave behind a book or a blueprint. He left behind people - living witnesses. He chose twelve apostles and gave them authority to teach, to heal, to forgive sins, and to lead his people. These apostles, in turn, appointed successors, bishops, who continue that same mission today.

This is what we call *apostolic succession*. It means that every bishop in the Catholic Church can trace his ordination back to the apostles themselves. This unbroken line is not just historical - it is spiritual. It is how Christ ensures that his Church remains faithful, guided, and united.

The bishop, in communion with the Pope (the successor of Peter), is not just a manager or administrator. He is a successor to the apostles - a shepherd, a teacher, and a guardian of the faith

Faithful to Apostolic Teaching

The Church is also apostolic in her teaching. She does not invent new truths. She receives the truth from Christ, through the apostles, and hands it on faithfully.

This is why Scripture and Tradition are so important. The Bible contains the written witness of the apostles. Tradition contains the lived witness - the prayers, practices, and teachings handed down through the centuries.

Together, they form the deposit of faith - the treasure the Church guards and shares.

To be Catholic is to be rooted in this apostolic teaching. It is to believe what the apostles believed, to live as they lived, and to proclaim what they proclaimed: that Jesus Christ is Lord, risen from the dead, and present in his Church.

Sent to the World

Finally, the Church is apostolic because she is sent. Just as the apostles were sent to the ends of the earth, so the Church is sent to every corner of the world, in every generation.

This missionary dimension is not optional, it is essential. As we have previously noted, the Church does not exist for herself. She exists to evangelise, to serve, to bring Christ to others. Every baptised person shares in this apostolic mission. We are all sent, to our families, our workplaces, our communities, to be witnesses of Christ.

This is not about standing on street corners or preaching sermons. It is about living the Gospel with integrity, compassion, and joy. It is about being Christ's presence in the world - his hands, his feet, his voice.

Apostolic and Catholic - Together

The Church is not only apostolic - she is also catholic. These two marks go hand in hand. To be *catholic* means to be universal - open to all, embracing all cultures, all peoples, all times. To be *apostolic* means to be faithful to the original mission and message.

The Church is catholic because she is apostolic. She can go everywhere because she is rooted in something solid. She can speak to every culture because she speaks the truth of Christ. She can embrace all peoples in all times because she is united in the same faith.

A Church That Endures

When we say we believe in the Holy Catholic Church, we are saying something bold. We are saying that the Church is not just a human organisation, it is a divine reality. It is Christ's Body. It is God's chosen instrument of salvation.

And the proof? She is still here.

Despite every scandal, every failure, every persecution, the Church has endured. No merely human institution could have survived two thousand years of such trials. But the Church has not only survived - she has grown, she has flourished, she has continued to bring Christ to the world.

This is not because of us. It is because of Christ. He is the one who sustains her. He is the one who makes her holy. And he is the one who will bring her to glorious completion at the end of time.

In Summary

To believe in the Holy Catholic Church is to believe:

- That the Church is Christ's Mystical Body, both divine and human.
- That her holiness comes from Christ, not from her members.
- That she is a sacrament, a visible sign of God's grace.
- That she is a pilgrim people, journeying together toward heaven.
- That she is universal, embracing all peoples, all cultures, all times.

- That she is God's chosen way of working in the world.
- That she endures because she is founded and sustained by Christ.
- She is founded on the apostles, chosen and sent by Christ.
- She continues in their teaching, faithfully preserved in Scripture and Tradition.
- She is led by their successors - the bishops in communion with the Pope.
- She is sent to the world, in every age, to proclaim the Gospel.
- She invites every baptised person to share in this mission.

Through the Church, we glimpse the divine life. And through her, we are drawn into that life, step by step, until we see it in all its glory in heaven.



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What does it mean to belong to the Holy Catholic Church?

In this short reflection, Fr Luke explores the Church not merely as an institution, but as a living mystery - the Body of Christ, the People of God, and the visible sign of His saving plan for the world.

Rooted in Scripture and Tradition, this pamphlet invites readers to rediscover their place within the Church's mission. From the apostolic foundations to the communion of saints, from the sacraments to the call to holiness, we are reminded that to be Catholic is to be part of something eternal, universal, and deeply personal.

Whether you are seeking clarity, renewal, or deeper understanding, *The Holy Catholic Church: Our place in God's plan for salvation* offers a gentle yet compelling guide to the heart of our faith.

***“The Shepherd’s Voice”, pamphlets, booklets and devotional resources from
Fr Luke Goymour***

Fr Luke Goymour was ordained to the priesthood in 2010. He completed his studies at St Mary's College, Oscott, earning a Bachelor's degree in Applied Theology with Catholic Philosophy from Birmingham University, as well as a *Sacrae Theologiae Baccalaureum* (STB) in Catholic Theology from the *Université Catholique de Louvain*. Following ordination, he furthered his education at Heythrop College, obtaining a Master's degree in Pastoral Theology from the University of London. He currently serves as Parish Priest of St Mark's with Holy Family Brantham and St Mary Magdalen, Ipswich. He is dedicated to teaching and preaching the gospel, with a strong commitment to helping others come to know Jesus Christ in the fullness of the Catholic Faith.