

Ask Fr James

In the Creed we pray: “I believe in the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.” What does this mean?

One, holy, catholic and apostolic is the four marks of the Catholic Church expressed in the Nicene Creed. These four marks are inseparable and are intrinsically linked to each other. Jesus Christ in founding the church marked it with these four marks. First, the Church is One, meaning, the Church was founded by Christ on the perfect unity of the three divine persons; the Trinity. “Holy” means “the church was set apart for special purpose that Christ wanted.” Jesus is the source of all holiness and Christ sanctifies the church. The church is also catholic meaning it is universal. Catholic because Jesus said to the Apostles; “Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28: 18-20). And Apostolic mean that the Church's origin and beliefs are rooted and continuing in the living Tradition of the Apostles of Jesus Christ.

Thus, to profess that: "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" mean we believe that the “Catholic” Church was directly founded by Jesus Christ himself, two thousand years ago in Palestine and this makes it holy and that this church was propagated around the world by the Apostles when they met the Risen Christ before his ascension when the fundamental commission to go to the ends of the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

The church is apostolic because the content of the faith was received from the apostles. The deposit of faith was handed down by them within the communities they founded through sacred scriptures and sacred tradition (Acts 2: 42) which were contained in Scriptures, creeds, confessional writings, doctrines, liturgies, celebrations of the sacraments and morals. Christ founded the church and entrusted it to his apostles, the first bishops. He entrusted St. Peter with special power as the first Pope and bishop of Rome.

This holy catholic and apostolic church was confirmed by Christ on Pentecost Day (Acts 2:1-11) with the outpouring of the Spirit and the apostles ministered in the power of the Spirit. The Apostles worked hard to spread the faith like Christ did. This is why we can say that the church was founded on the blood of Christ and the blood of the apostles and martyrs. Apostolicity calls us to uphold the faith and tradition handed down by the apostles. The Pope and the bishops are the successors of the apostles and the apostolicity of the Christian tradition is set in terms of absolute adherence to the teachings handed down by the Apostles and as interpreted by the magisterium (the teaching office of the Catholic Church).

There are on-going talks between the Roman Catholics and the other Christian denominations at the international level in the frontiers of ecumenism with a focus on how ministry in church continues the ministry of the Apostles. These talks have been sometimes very difficult because of the question of apostolic succession (that is, that the bishops derive their authority through a direct line of laying on of hands from the apostles), and consequently, implications for ministry and ordination. However, no matter the difference between Catholics and all other churches, there is a foundational commitment to the notion of “one holy catholic and apostolic Church made of all believers (Eph. 4: 4-6).