

What or Who is the Church?

1. The Definition of “Church” as a Visible, Hierarchical Reality in the World

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (751-752) tells us:

The word “Church” (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, ‘to call out of’) means a convocation or an assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people, usually for a religious purpose. *Ekklesia* is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the assembly of the Chosen People before God above all, for their assembly on Mount Sinai where Israel received the law and was established by God as his holy people.

By calling itself “Church,” the first community of Christian believers recognized itself as *heir* to that assembly. In the Church, God is ‘calling together’ his people from all the ends of the earth. The equivalent Greek term *Kyriake*, from which the English word *Church* and the German *Kirche* are derived, means what belongs to the Lord.

In Christian usage, the word *Church* designates the **liturgical assembly, the local community, and the whole universal community of believers**. These three meanings are inseparable. The Church is the people that God gathers in the whole world.

She is made real, above all, as a **Eucharistic** assembly. She draws her life from the Word and the Body of Christ, and **so herself becomes Christ's Body**.

The Assembly of the Israelites on Mount Sinai is crucial to understanding the Church in the Old Testament. The people gathered with Moses are often referred to as the Assembly (Kahal in Hebrew, *Ecclesia* in the Greek Old Testament, known as the Septuagint), which is translated commonly as Church.

In Deuteronomy 5:22,

The Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, the cloud and the thick darkness.

In Deuteronomy 9:10, 10:4, 18:16 we find the inspired author referring to the encounter of the people of God with Yahweh at Sinai.

Deuteronomy 9:10,

The Lord gave me the two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them were all the words which the Lord had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the **assembly**.

Deuteronomy alone refers 13 times to the people of God as the Assembly, or in the Greek Septuagint, the *Ecclesia*, the Church.

In the New Testament, this same assembly at Sinai is referred to as the Old Covenant **Church**.

In Acts 7:38, St. Stephen refers to the people of God as the Church (*Ecclesia*) in the wilderness.

Hebrews 12:18-22 compares the Old Covenant people of God with the New Covenant people of God, showing the superiority of the New Covenant Church over the old but again, it's that same scene on Mount Sinai.

Verse 22:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the **assembly** of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking.

Notice these five crucial points:

- 1. The Church in the New Testament grows out of the Old Covenant.** Jesus establishes the Church. The Church is created out of his pierced side as Eve was created from the rib of Adam. But the Church's creation was not accomplished in a vacuum. It represents the fulfillment of the Church of the Old Covenant.
- 2. The Church is visible.** It is not the invisible church or the Protestants, most especially the Evangelicals and fundamentalists who claim the Church to be invisible, comprised of born again believers.
- 3. The Church is hierarchical.** Exodus 19, on Mount Sinai, we had Moses, who is a **type** of Jesus Christ. We have Aaron, the high priest. His sons and their offspring become the high priests and priests who would perform the daily duties in the temple. We have the Levites who were created as helpers of the priests. The Fathers of the Church, such as St Clement of Rome, AD 90, saw the typological relationship:

Old Covenant	New Covenant
High Priest	Bishop (episcopi or overseer)
Priest	Priest (presbyter)
Levites	Deacons (diakonos, servants)

- 4.** In the Old Testament, God called prophets, like Moses, would constantly call the people of God back to the purity of the covenant God established at Sinai.
- 5.** The Old Covenant people of God were established (see Exodus 19:6) as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation that would eventually become the kingdom of David with a hierarchy of its own (see Isaiah 22:15-22).

God chose to lead his people in the Old Covenant through a visible, hierarchical governmental system that included prophets, priests and kings. In the New Covenant Church, established by Jesus Christ, we see all that the Old Covenant Church was in seed form now blossomed into something the Old Covenant people of God could not have possibly imagined.

2. Jesus Sent by the Father—Prophet of Prophets

The Church cannot be understood apart from an understanding of the nature of her Lord and Savior, Jesus **Christ**. Jesus was sent by the Father as the eternal Son, Almighty God incarnate, to be the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Promised **Messiah**, to be the future and only **Prophet, Priest and King**, Savior who would save the world. He would establish the Kingdom of God on earth, the Church, as a kingdom that would have no end.

In Acts 3:22-23 St. Peter declared:

Moses said, “The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren like me (Deut 18:15-19). You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul that does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.

St. Peter tells us Jesus Christ **is** the fulfillment of that prophecy. He is that prophet, and yet he's more than a prophet, he is God manifest in the flesh.

Pope Benedict XVI tells us the key to understanding this prophecy is to understand what the future prophet being *like* Moses means. What distinguishes Moses from all the other prophets are not his miracles, though God performed great miracles through him, so did many other prophets perform miracles. Pope Benedict tells us it was **sight** that distinguished Jesus.

Deuteronomy 34:10,

There has not arisen a prophet sent in Israel like Moses who the Lord knew **face to face**.

Face to face means a unique level of intimacy. It's not the beatific vision. Exodus 33:18-23 gives us a sense of this intimate knowledge and vision that Moses had:

“I pray thee (this is Moses speaking) show me thy glory.” And he (God) said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” But, he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the Lord said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

This was a unique vision of God among all the prophets of the Old Testament. Pope Benedict points out that it would be the Messiah's sight, the Beatific Vision Christ had in his human nature that would distinguish him from all other prophets and all other humans.

Pope Pius XII taught in his encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943), paragraph 75:

But the knowledge and love of our divine Redeemer of which we were the object from the first moment of his incarnation exceed all that the human intellect can hope to grasp. For hardly was he conceived in the womb of the Mother of God when he began to enjoy the beatific vision, and

in that vision, all the members of his mystical body were continually and unceasingly present to him, and he embraced them with His redeeming love.

John 5:19, Jesus says:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he **sees** the Father doing, for whatever he does that the Son does likewise.

John 6:46, Jesus says:

Not that anyone has **seen** the Father **except** him who is from God. He has **seen** the Father.

Jesus is the unique exception who both has seen and sees the Father, therefore he is the one who can uniquely reveal him (see John 1:18 and John 3:32). Jesus had the knowledge that proceeds from his possession of the Beatific Vision.

When Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11:41-42):

Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I **knew** that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may **believe** that thou didst send me.

Jesus had **knowledge** while the others had **faith**. Because of Christ's unique person and gifts he more than a prophet, he was more than just infallible, unable to make an error. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (2824) says:

Jesus alone could say among all humans who ever lived, I always do what is pleasing to the Father (see John 8:29).

The Blessed Mother never sinned, but she did not always and only do the **perfect** will of the Father in a positive sense. Mary was human. Mary could choose between two goods and choose the lesser of two goods. Jesus did not. Jesus's every word and deed spoken represented who he was and is, the Word of God. That's why Jesus says (Luke 10:16):

"He who rejects me rejects him who sent me."

His word is God's Word. No longer do we hear:

"This is the word of the Lord which he spoke by his servant, Elijah."

"Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah." (Isaiah 38:4)

Instead, (Matthew 24:35),

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but **my words** will never pass away."

"You have heard it said ... , but **I say** unto you"

Jesus says this over and over in the Sermon on the Mount.

“You are already made clean **by the word which I have spoken** to you. (John 15:3)

Jesus' word is salvific because Jesus' word is synonymous with God's word.

Jesus does not just speak that healing word, he **is the Eternal Word** manifest in the flesh, and he makes the Church prophetic as well.

3. Jesus, the One Priest-Victim Who is Able to Save Us

The Messiah would be a king, and in Hebrews we see the Messiah's **priestly** calling:

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, “you are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 1:4)

A priest is a mediator between God and men. As 1 Timothy 2:5 says,

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the **man** Jesus Christ.

It's the **man** Jesus Christ who can fittingly reconcile men to God. But because there are two parties to be reconciled, God and mankind, it's also fitting, and a matter of Revelation that our priestly Messiah would also be God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (473) emphasizes the essential role that divine nature had to play in Christ as our one priest of the New Covenant:

The truly human knowledge of God's Son expressed the divine life of His person ... in his human knowledge Christ also showed the divine penetration he had into the secret thoughts of human hearts.

In Mark 2:8-12 Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic:

And immediately, Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier to say to the paralytic, yours sins are forgiven, or to say, rise, take up your pallet and walk?” **But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins**, he said to the paralytic, I say to you, “Rise, take up your pallet and go home.” And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God saying we never saw anything like this.

The authority to forgive sins is a prerogative that belongs to God alone. The Jews say we never saw anything like this. They had seen and understood the idea of priests acting as instruments of God's mercy (Leviticus 19:22),

And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the Lord for his sin which he has committed. And the sin which he has committed shall be forgiven him.

But never did a priest say, “I have authority to forgive sins.” There never was a priest like this.

Hebrews 10:4,

It's impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.

Thus the dramatic words of Saint John the Baptist (John 1:29),

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus is our one unique priest who is both mediator between God in men and the Savior of all men. Jesus is our high priest who offers the one perfect sacrifice that can take away the sins of the world in His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

Even a perfect humanity needs power outside of itself to accomplish the goal of being that one mediator between God and men. In other words, the humanity of Christ needs divine power to accomplish the goal. However, because the human nature has as its subject the divine person of Christ, he's not only the instrument of grace and forgiveness in his humanity, but he is, at the same time, the cause of our salvation as well. He is our priest victim who offers himself up for us is also our Savior. And Jesus our Prophet and now priest is going to establish the Church to do the same thing that he did as Prophet and as priest.

4. Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords

Messiah to be not only a priest, and not only the Prophet, but he's also to be a king.

From the very first verse of the New Testament, Matthew 1:1, to the very last chapter of the New Testament, Revelation, 22:16 Jesus is referred to as the son of David. Moreover, more than just the kingdom of David reconstituted, here we have the restoration of God's original plan of being King over his people. In 1 Samuel 8:6 we read of how the people of God said to the Prophet Samuel,

“Give us a king to govern us.”

In so doing, they rejected God who had already been their king. In Jesus Christ, we have not only the restoration of the kingdom of David, but a return to God's original plan to be the king of kings over His people. This king would be more than just a ruler over his people, but he would be a king that would save His people from their sins.

Everything Jesus does, he does to save us as Prophet, Priest and King. He rules as King of kings and Lord of lords, but he is, first and foremost, our Savior. **The true Church established by Jesus Christ functions in our Lord's place as Prophet, Priest and King in this world and for what purpose? The salvation of souls.**

For the Catholic Church, Jesus Christ was not just the Savior on the cross as most Protestants believe. Rather, he saved us from the instant of his incarnation and all through his lifetime and ministry on earth and into heaven.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (517):

Christ's Whole Life is a mystery of redemption. Redemption comes to us above all, through the blood of his cross, (Ephesians 1:7, Colossians, 1:13-14, 1 Peter, 1:18-19) but this mystery is at work throughout Christ's entire life.

All Christians generally agree on the point that redemption comes to us above all, through the blood of his cross. Look at Ephesians 1:7,

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

Here Protestants and Catholics agree.

The problem comes to when we say Christ's whole Life is a mystery of redemption. The old Protestant saying, "He did it all on the cross," is only partially true. It is true he merited infinitely on the cross, enough to save an infinite number of worlds. It's also true, according to the revelation we have been given,

"Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins. (Hebrews 9:22)

But Protestants miss the fact that Christ also merited infinitely with his every human action. From the *Catechism* (517):

Already in His **incarnation**, through which by becoming poor, he enriches us with his poverty.

The Catechism cites 2 Corinthians 8:9,

Though Christ was rich, he became poor that we might be made rich in him.

This represents the fact that from the instant of his **incarnation**, from his very first act of human existence, he merited the redemption of all.

In his hidden life, which, by his submission, atones for our disobedience.

The Catechism here references the presentation of the Child Jesus in the temple. Luke 2:51,

And Jesus went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them (his parents) and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

How could the perfect God man increase in favor, which in Greek, is *caritas*, grace? He didn't grow in the sense of moving from imperfection to perfection. St Thomas Aquinas tells us he grew in the sense of meriting for us, so that the grace of God flowed out from his fullness, as John 1:16 tells us,

And from his fullness, we all received grace upon grace.

John 15:3,

You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. But

Jesus hadn't died on the cross yet. So how could the apostles have already been made clean? Well, Jesus does not agree with Protestant theology. His word was already effectual, because Christ was already redeeming his people through the ministry of his Word.

The Catechism:

In his healings and exorcisms, by which he took our infirmities and bore our diseases. (Isaiah 53:4) Isaiah's prophesy is not only fulfilled on the cross, but also when Jesus performed his healing and exorcisms. Matthew 8:17 quotes Isaiah 53:4 when it says:

This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."

The Greek word for infirmity means weaknesses, including moral failings, coupled with the word for diseases. Christ is said to bear our sins and sicknesses in his ministry, and not just on the cross.

And in his resurrection by which he justifies us.

The Catechism references Romans 4:25,

Christ was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Christ did not do it all on the cross. He had to be resurrected yet while he was still on the cross. And yet St. Paul says he was raised for our justification.

Hebrews 7:25 tells us that he continues to save us, even now, through his intercession at the right hand of God.

Consequently, he is able, for all time, to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

The Catechism (518) continues,

Christ's Whole Life is a mystery of recapitulation. All Jesus did, said and suffered had for its end, restoring fallen man to his original vocation.

When Christ became incarnate and was made man, he recapitulated in himself the long history of mankind and procured for us a shortcut to salvation, so that what we had lost in Adam, that is being in the image and likeness of God, we might recover in Christ. Jesus. For this reason, Christ experienced all the stages of life, thereby giving communion with God to all men.

Jesus's whole life is redemptive, not just his crucifixion.

Let us see how the Church is called to be Jesus Christ extended into the world. The church cannot be God and cannot be savior in the strict sense. God cannot communicate his divinity outside of the Godhead. However, the church is called to be Christ as Prophet, Priest and King, and to bring salvation as God's instrument to the entire world.

5. The Church Sent by Christ to Act in His Place

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (830) gives an excellent definition of the word Catholic.

The word Catholic means “universal” in the sense of “according to the totality” or in keeping with the whole. The Church is Catholic in a double sense.

Most everyone knows the term Catholic in the sense of universal, but in the first meaning of the term it becomes the foundation for a true understanding of the second sense of the meaning of universal.

First, the Church is Catholic because Christ is present in her. “Where there is Christ Jesus, there is the Catholic Church” (citing St. Ignatius of Antioch letter to the Smyrnaeans) In her subsists the fullness of Christ's Body united with its head; this implies that she receives from him the fullness of the means of salvation (Eph. 1:22-23). (830)

The Church receives from Christ the fullness of the means of salvation which he has willed: correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession. The Church was, in this sense, fundamentally catholic on the day of Pentecost and will always be so until the day of the Parousia.

Jesus could not communicate his divinity to the Church – the church is not and cannot be God. Scripture makes that clear, like, for example in Isaiah 44:6,

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts. “I am the First and the Last. Besides me, there is no God.”

Or as Saint Paul says of Jesus in Titus 2:13,

We are awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is God. The Church is not. God makes clear that “My glory I will not give to another” in Isaiah 48:11.

God cannot communicate the fullness of who he is outside of the Blessed Trinity. However, the Church is called, as well as each individual member of the Church to **participate in the glory of God**, and this is very important. Romans 5:1-2,

Having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained **access** to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of **sharing the glory of God**.

This sharing in God's glory is not something only relegated to the future, but the Church is called to share even now in God's power and glory.

Indeed, the Church is a “partaker of the divine nature.” (2 Peter 1:4) This includes sharing in Christ's messianic mission to be Prophet, Priest and King, and in bringing salvation to the world.

The Church participates in Christ's threefold mission to transform the world.

Matthew 28:18-20.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always, even to the close of the age."

Notice the emphasis on the prophetic role of the Church, and because that prophetic role is so radically joined to Christ's role Jesus could say of the Church, in Matthew 10:40,

He who receives you receives me. He who receives me receives him who sent me.

This statement implies an infallible authority. Just as when Jesus spoke, he spoke in the name of his Father, the Church speaks in the name of Christ.

Unfortunately, these words in the name of have lost their essential meaning in our post reformation age of everyone speaking in the name of Jesus, with thousands of denominations, but in Scripture to speak "in the name of" means to speak with the authority of.

I have come in my Father's name, and if you do not receive me, if another comes in his own name, him you will receive. How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (John 5:43)

what a powerful text that is. But notice, if you receive Jesus, you receive God the Father. If you reject Jesus, you reject God the Father. That is the biblical sense of what it means to speak in the name of and so it is with the church in her prophetic role, All authority is given to Christ. We saw from Matthew 28:18, but then in the next breath, Jesus sends the apostles, the church right, and he sends them with his authority. So radical, again, is this authority that in a text we're going to look at in more detail in later lessons, Jesus says of His Church in Matthew 18:15, through 18, and I quote, If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you've gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector, truly, I say to you, look at verse 18. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. In essence, this means, when the church binds something on Earth, it has the power of Heaven to back up its decree to disagree with it is to disagree with heaven. Now, folks, similarly, when we examine the priestly role of the church in continuing Christ's priestly ministry in this world, there is an obvious emphasis on the conferral of authority. Saint John's Gospel emphasizes this in John 20:21 through 23 in the plainest of terms. Quote Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me, even so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained. Those words, folks really do speak for themselves, the apostles, and through

them, the church has received the power to be God's instrument in the forgiveness of sins by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then, when we talk about the kingly role, or the juridical role of the church, this seems to be particularly emphasized in St Luke's Gospel, if we examine, for example, Luke, chapter 20, verses 29 through 32 we find, as my father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom and sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren. Now we will have much more to say about this text when we get to our lessons on the papacy. But for now, notice, there's clear indication here of Christ's communication of his kingly or juridical powers to the church, specifically to the apostles and their successors, who will, as the text said, Judge the 12 tribes of Israel. And by the way, that's important, because Galatians 6:16, tells us the church is the Israel of God. In a sense, we could refer to this mission of Christ through his church as a triune mission. The roles of Prophet, Priest and King, which we've gone through in detail concerning Christ, are inseparable in Christ, but they're also inseparable in his church. In order to bring salvation to the world, and the church, my friends, is called to do just that, to bring salvation to the world. Now salvation, of course, not as efficient cause. Jesus alone is the Savior in a strict sense, right? He alone is the ultimate, the strict cause of salvation. However, the church has been gifted and empowered to bring salvation to the world as both secondary cause in some cases, such as in bringing a soul to faith in Christ, and as instrumental cause in others, such as in administering the sacraments. And we will break down in future lessons in more detail just what that means. But for now, just remember this, very importantly, whether it is a secondary cause or instrumental cause, the church is called to save souls precisely because the church is Jesus Christ extended into the world, as we saw from Ephesians, chapter one, verses 22 and 23 God Bless You. You.