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DT 101 – Catechism of the Catholic Church I
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For a member of the Christian community, a correct understanding of the term Church is essential to full participation in the Church founded by Christ. Since the earliest days of the Church, four essential elements have been identified to properly call the Christian community Church. Indeed, the presence of all four of these are so important that their absence prompted The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2007 to issue a clarification noting that many protestant denominations could not properly be called “Churches” (Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church, June 29, 2007). These four essential elements or marks of the Church are found in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Each of these subsists in the Catholic Church in unity with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope (Lumen Gentium, 8).

The Catholic Church is one. God, who is One in its fullest sense, decreed and founded His Church to be one when, through the Son, he founded the Church on earth. The Son, Jesus Christ, is himself the basis of the Church’s unity. He prayed, “that they may all be one” (John 17:21, NAB). Clearly, the intention of Christ in founding his Church was that it should be in unity. The apostles understood this clearly as the bible was being written, also. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, writes the following.

I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a
manner worthy of the call you have received, with all

humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

(Ephesians 4:1-6, NAB)

Since it's founding, the Church is meant to be one on the foundation of the Pope and built on the cornerstone that is Christ. The Church, springing from a single saving event and united message is meant to be one in the world. This unity subsists fully in the Catholic Church. This can even be said to include a right understanding of the nature of salvation from the Church, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. While it is certainly possible that members of protestant ecclesial communities or non-Christians may be saved through the grace of God, that salvation still flows from that participation they may, consciously or unconsciously, have in the Catholic Church. The Catechism states that, "they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse to enter it or to remain in it" (CCC 846, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 14). Here, the Council Fathers and the Catechism make clear that the unity of the Catholic Church is the source for salvation for the world, and salvation outside the Church comes from that unity that does exist with the Church and her graces. It is prudent to reiterate that this unity — this oneness — is subsistent in the Catholic Church, not in some invisible unity of all Christians, as some would assert. This is best stated by Henri de Lubac quoting Karl

Barth, “If we seek to solve the question of unity of the church by appealing to an invisible church, we speculate as Platonists instead of listening to Christ” (de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*).

The Catholic Church is holy. Before discussing the ways in which the Church is holy and maintains that holiness even in the wake of scandal and sin as she does in the modern world, it is important to understand the meaning of the word holy. Holy — *kados* in the Old Testament, *hagios* in Greek, or *Sanctus* in Latin — is, at its root, simply that which is set aside from the profane or common. To be holy, the Church is set aside for the worship of the one true God. It is important to note that the holiness that is in the Church stems from God Himself, not the members of the Church. This detail is important to remember in the wake of the scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church in the last decades. It is true that they are not the first scandal that she has had to weather, nor are they likely to be the last, but they are the most recent in the minds of most. The Church, although she is made up entirely of sinful men, and except for her founder, has been since her foundation and will continue to be until the return of Christ. Paul VI explains the holiness of the Church succinctly and eloquently: “The Church is therefore holy, though having sinners in her midst, because she herself has no other life but the life of grace” (Credo of the People of God). In essence, the Church is holy because of her share in the grace of Christ and claim to Christ who is “holy, innocent, and undefiled” (CCC 827) as her head.

The Catholic Church is catholic. The term catholic, meaning universal, was first applied to the Catholic Church by Ignatius of Antioch in the first century of

Christianity. The Catechism notes that the Church is catholic in two senses. First of all, she is Catholic because Christ is present in her. The fullness of Christ's will for his Church, "correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession" (CCC 830). In this manner, the Church was catholic from its first moments on Pentecost, and it will continue to be so until the end of time. The second way in which the Church can be said to be catholic is in its missionary character. In The Great Commissioning, Christ commissioned his disciples to, "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" (Matthew 28:19, NAB). In this, Christ assigned his Church to be universal in a practical and temporal sense. The Catholic Church is called to embrace all peoples in the world and shine to them the light of Christ. It is important, however, to avoid mistaking this universality for a mere geographic question or question of the number of Catholics. The Church is catholic, all-embracing, and missionary from its first moments, and will continue to be so whether its visible membership is the entire human race or only a few persons.

The Catholic Church is apostolic. The idea of the Church being apostolic very simply means that it is founded on and by the apostles. The apostolic succession from the foundation of the Church to modern times is key to the priesthood, the continuity of the Catholic Church, and that full sacramental life that makes her one, catholic, and holy. Indeed, one could say that it is on the foundation of the apostles that the Church is one, holy, and catholic; that is to say, without being apostolic, she would not be able to claim to be any of the other three marks in a significant way.

Sadly, apostolicity is the mark that is most often lacking in the ecclesial communities arising since the beginning of the protestant movement. In contrast, the Catholic Church, since her foundation, has built on the Traditions and teachings of the apostles and maintained continuity of apostolic succession to fully share in the claim to be apostolic. The apostles, in the foundation of the church were, “witnesses, messengers, and authorized representatives of the crucified and risen Lord” and they served as “teachers, preachers, founders, and leaders” (Lupinetti, lecture notes). In the same way, the ordained ministers of the Catholic Church through the ages and to this day fill those same roles by virtue of their ordination and apostolic succession.

Clearly, since the beginning of the Church, even before they were formally stated as four essential characteristics or marks of the Church, the Apostles and Church Fathers were aware of these four markers. The Church was built from its very beginning to be, in the fullest sense of the words possible, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. To test the meaning of Church in history or the modern world, one must only measure any claimant against these four essential characteristics.