The Nature of the Church Part IV: The Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic

The Church is One (Unity): The Holy Spirit brings into unity all who receive the Spirit’s gifts; the gifts are intended for the benefit of all (I Corinthians 12:17) for the building up of Christ’s Body (Ephesians 4). The Spirit makes the believer a part of Christ’s Body. The Spirit also creates the unity of this body which consists of many members with different gifts (I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 2:17-22). The Spirit is a principle of unity. The Spirit makes us one.

This unity is a mystery for it is not one of fusion, but one of communion. Unity was not understood to mean uniformity. Rather, unity in faith in Jesus allowed for diverse and pluralistic communal expressions (see above and recall the myriad of divergent communal articulations and experiences of the Jesus Event which mark the apostolic communities). In Scripture, the Holy Spirit is always characterized by words which connote motion: breath, wind, fire, living water, flying dove, tongues, etc., and is characterized by new beginnings, freedom, and openness to others.

Such unity has been a concern of the Church from its beginnings, for it is believed to mark a basic concern that Jesus had for His followers (see John 17:1-26). Consequently, from the time of the early Church throughout the ages, foundational practices and structures were emphasized so as to promote unity: baptism, the Eucharist, creeds, bishops, councils, the canon, etc.

The Church is Holy: The Church is human and divine for all who are baptized are united to Jesus Himself. The Spirit ensures the Church’s holiness, not the human members which comprise it and who are responsible for the Church’s sinfulness. Therefore, holiness is sometimes evident, sometimes not. Yet there are not two Churches; there is only one. The consistent picture of holiness proffered in the Bible is one that reveals that God alone is holy and that all holiness derives from Him; God makes things holy by taking the initiative and setting them apart (see Deuteronomy 7:6). Thus holiness is a gift from God, but it is also an imperative which demands a response of obedience (see Leviticus 19:1-4, Romans 12f, and I Peter 1:1-16).

The Church is holy in its objective formal elements introduced by Christ and the Spirit: word, sacraments, charismatic, and hierarchical gifts. They are holy for they are of derived from divine initiative. The Church, therefore, is indefectibly holy in these divinely appointed gifts.

The Church is more than these formal elements; it is the people of God. To be holy requires that the faithful be holy. The Bible speaks of both persons and nations being set apart/chosen by God for holiness (see Exodus 19:5-6 and I Peter 2:5-9).

Vatican II (see Lumen Gentium #’s and 10) speaks of the Church’s holiness via regeneration of the Holy Spirit via the sacraments. The ontological character imparted by baptism, confirmation, and orders ensure the permanency of holiness despite any infidelity to one’s calling.

While holiness is God’s initiative and gift, it calls for a response from those who receive it (see Lumen Gentium #40).
Therefore the Church’s holiness is **imperfect**; some possess the Spirit while others are deprived sanctified grace if they remain in a state of grave sin, yet their holiness via baptism remains. Thus the holiness of the Church is compromised by those who live in sin; it is not eradicated (see *Lumen Gentium* #8 and *Unitatis Redintegratio* #4).

There exists an imperfect and indefectible holiness—holy in a way that can never fail.

Hence indefectible holiness does not mean the lack of defect/imperfection, but the permanency of holiness (see *Lumen Gentium* #14); i.e., the Church will never lack members who live a life in the Spirit and charity.

This belief rests upon:
- the belief that Jesus’ sacrifice enables the Church’s holiness
- the Church is united to Christ as His bride
- the Church is endowed with the perpetual presence of the Holy Spirit

**The Church is Catholic:** The Spirit ensures the Church’s catholicity, i.e., its universality. The word *catholic* expresses a dynamic reality, the power of the Spirit enlivening the faithful and facilitating the outward spread and expansion of the Gospel message in ever-expanding spheres of influence. Catholicity (see *Lumen Gentium* #’s 13-17 and 35):
  - reflects the Triune nature of God
  - ensures the universality of Christ’s salvific life
  - is a unity via diversity (given the diversity of pneumatological gifts)
  - calls for a relationship with all of humanity (universality, solidarity, and inculturation)
  - involves the *consensus fidelium*

**The Church is Apostolic:** The Church is sent forth to the world to give witness to Jesus. Apostolicity:
  - facilitates catholicity
  - facilitates unity unto diversity
  - facilitates the universal sharing of the faith via promoting unity which embraces diverse and pluralistic expressions of the faith/Church for it is only if the Gospel is rendered meaningful and viable in each and every context that the mandate given unto the Church by Christ to go forth to the whole world can be actualized

Early on, apostolicity attached itself to particular communities where the seeds of the Gospel were planted: the New Testament faith communities and the great Pentarchy—Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople.