

Apostolicity as Consummate *Nota Ecclesiae*: Seven Theses

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What is the Church that the Creed qualifies as one, holy, catholic and apostolic? It is the new Sinaitic assembly, a community of thanksgiving for the renewed covenant between God and Israel, a priestly and kingly people comprising Jew and Gentile under one Lord. It is the people who participate in the covenant in the form effected by the self-offering of God to man and of man to God in the person of Jesus Christ, the true *leiturgos* both on earth and in heaven. The Church, by participating in this offering, is the mystical body of which he is the head and the family of all those who, by adoption, share his filial relation to the Father; who also enjoy both the maternal guidance of Mary and the aid of the saints and holy angels. This they do as the society of the Spirit, through whom the image and likeness of God is being renewed and perfected. And this they do, no longer under the direction of Moses and Aaron, but under the direction of the apostles, through whom they receive from the Lord what is delivered to them. (See 1 Cor 9–15, esp. 11:23; cf. Heb 8:1–6, 12:18–29.)

Considered from the standpoint of the life of the world to come, a life already inaugurated through the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Church is a complete society, lacking nothing. As such, it has unique privileges, rights, and responsibilities even in the present world, ordering itself accordingly with the requisite canons and constitutions. Because it exists in the midst of the old order in a manner that opens upon the new, “by him, with him, and in him” it is a universal sacrament of salvation. From out of its belly, so to say—through its preaching, its sacraments, and

the witness of its martyrs and saints—flow spiritual graces that water the deserts of this passing age.

Now, all four credal marks of the Church are rooted in the Eucharist and ought to be manifest there, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians. It is in the Eucharist that the Church subsists as Church, present in and to the world as a civic assembly belonging to the new world order, performing its work of opening or closing the doors to the kingdom of God. All four notes are rooted likewise in baptism, by which each person becomes a citizen thereof. But the note of apostolicity requires us to take into account also the sacraments of confirmation and holy orders. For, through confirmation, one receives gifts of the Spirit for participation in the royal priesthood that one has entered through baptism and, just so, for sharing effectively in the Church's mission, its apostolate; through ordination, one may enter the ministerial priesthood or be consecrated for episcopal service, being directly conjoined in ministry to the apostles.

The unity and holiness and catholicity of the Church are powerfully articulated in Eph 1–4, and recapitulated by reference to the Sinaitic assembly in Heb 12. Its catholicity is neatly summarized by Cyril of Jerusalem in his eighteenth catechetical lecture:

The Church is called *catholic* [1] because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and [2] because it teaches universally and completely one and all the doctrines which ought to come to men's knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and [3] because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of mankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and [4] because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins, which are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue which is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gifts.¹

In the Apostles' Creed, the ecclesial chord is struck with these three notes only. But one can see here that catholicity already incorporates apostolicity, which in the Nicene Creed completes the chord. And how is the Church apostolic? According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church is apostolic in three ways: "[1] she was and remains built on 'the

¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 18.23, trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2 (ed. Schaff), vol. 7, rev. and ed. Kevin Knight for New Advent, newadvent.org/fathers/310118.htm.

foundation of the Apostles,' the witnesses chosen and sent on mission by Christ himself; [2] with the help of the Spirit dwelling in her, the Church keeps and hands on the teaching, the 'good deposit,' the salutary words she has heard from the apostles; [3] she continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ's return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, 'assisted by priests, in union with the successor of Peter, the Church's supreme pastor'" (§857). We may expand on this through the following seven theses.

I. The Church is apostolic because it is founded with a mandate to announce the King and the kingdom.

That is its central, though not its only, task *ad extra*, and it belongs to the essence of the Church militant. Acts 1–2 is paradigmatic here. The first ecclesial event, following from the preparatory events recorded in Matt 16:13–20, 26:26–29, and 28:16–20, moves from charismatic outpouring in the wake of the ascension—that is, from Jesus's distribution to his disciples of the holy gift and promised guide, the Spirit himself—to public declaration of his vindication and enthronement, through to baptisms, Eucharists, and communal life. Thus it is that the task of making disciples of all nations begins to be carried out. The Church is sent forth from the upper room to gather into the kingdom, which since Jesus's own baptism has been coming into reach, all those willing to receive and enter it.

The Church both is and is not the kingdom it announces. On the one hand, it is not merely a type or prototype of the kingdom. The glorified king is present in its midst through the Spirit, and it is therefore the kingdom. Yet the king is also absent, even when Eucharistically present in his true substance, until his royal parousia. Therefore the Church is not the kingdom, but the heraldry of the kingdom. The Church, both militant and triumphant, still prays that God's name be hallowed, his kingdom come, his will be done "on earth as it is heaven." Hence, it is on earth an apostolate, and only in some qualified sense the kingdom. The local *ecclesiae* are embassies or outposts of a kingdom that has come in heaven, is coming on earth, and will come with the king himself.

Wolfhart Pannenberg worries in vain about an overly-realized eschatology in Catholicism, about confusing signum with res and Church with kingdom. The Church, he insists, though the body of Christ,

“is only a sign of future fellowship in God’s kingdom.”² His worry is understandable but he is mistaken. Eucharistically the Church is both signum and res. In the eschaton it will be res only, though it will still signify in some higher sense proper to life in the world to come, for it belongs to the creaturely to signify. Of far greater concern should be the false notion, whether among Catholics or Protestants, that with time the Church can become the kingdom or bring about the kingdom even before the king comes, something Pannenberg rightly criticizes as the mistake of the Enlightenment.

II. The Church is apostolic because it has apostles, apart from whom it is not the Church.

Pentecost itself, like the preparation for it in the ministry of Jesus, is unique and unrepeatable. Witnesses to his person and to his ministry were chosen by Jesus for the purpose of Pentecost. They were given a royal commission to speak and act in his name. The Church is apostolic because, without them and their ministry, there is no Church. These apostles are not self-selecting. They were chosen after a night of prayer before the Father. They were called with paternal authority, commissioned with dominical authority, empowered with Pentecostal authority. Their names are written on the gates through which one must pass to enter the kingdom. They are not alone in their ministry, but they are foundational to every work proper to the Church, which falls under their jurisdiction. Peter, who confesses Christ both in Caesarea Philippi and in Jerusalem, and eventually in Rome, is chief among them. His act of confession is ecclesial bedrock.

It is true that the apostles themselves had a role to play in the case of Matthias, who by the casting of lots replaced Judas. Thus was it established that an apostle must be a direct witness to the resurrected Lord, one who by that same Lord has thus been chosen to give witness. The place of Paul, who was afterwards added to those who had seen the risen Lord, those who were therefore apostles along with the Twelve in a secondary sense (cf. Rom. 16:7), remains something of a puzzle. For it pleased God to make him a chosen instrument, to be a witness both “before the Gentiles and [their] kings and [among] the sons of

² Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T&T Clark; 1998), 48.

Israel" (Acts 9:15). Though he is not numbered with the Twelve, he is among those who belong to "the foundation of the apostles and prophets," the foundation of which Jesus himself is the cornerstone (Eph. 2:19ff.). And though by his own estimation the least of all, he is in certain respects made the greatest of all, being set alongside Peter in Jerusalem, Antioch, and eventually Rome (with 1 Cor. 15:9, cf. Gal. 1–2). As for Judas, he was dead by suicide before the great commissioning (Matt. 28) and had no part in Pentecost. He had been chosen with foreknowledge of his betrayal in order to compel even such great evil to serve the good determined by God. Larry Feingold appears to overlook this, while making the valid point that wicked bishops and popes do not falsify the claim that the Church is apostolic in an institutionally concrete way and that the hierarchical mediation of grace is proper to the very being of the Church.³ We may say, however, that such men are analogous to Judas in that they do not in fact receive the graces given in their calling and commissioning, or receive them only to a severe judgment, just as people who receive communion in mortal sin receive it to their judgment rather than to their salvation.

III. The Church is apostolic because these witnesses are granted authority, not only to make disciples of every nation, but also to bind and loose in matters that concern the kingdom; that is, to rule the Church in perpetuity, *cum Petro et sub Petro*.

Nowhere in the Church is it possible to posit any authority inconsistent with this authority or not derived from it. The Church is apostolic precisely insofar as it is maintained in and by the authority of the apostles. (This cannot be confined to the Scriptures they wrote or the production of which they supervised. These very Scriptures must be read together with their authors, not against them; Tradition likewise, which has no new or different source than the Spirit of God overseeing the work of the apostles themselves.) For the sake of this maintenance, it was given to the apostles to share their authority with bishops and presbyters appointed by them in every place.

This entails what is known as apostolic succession, though that is a misleading expression when untethered from the *communio sanctorum*.

³ Lawrence Feingold, *The Messianic Kingdom of Israel*, vol. 3, *The Mystery of Israel and the Church* (St. Louis, MO: Miriam, 2010), 89.

In every generation, as well as every place, there are men who share in their stewardship of the Gospel and of the sacraments, and in the power of binding and loosing that belongs to that stewardship. These men are members of the episcopal college, not substitutes for the apostles. First among them is the one who holds the Petrine office, which is rightly attached *pro tempore* to the See of Rome, where both Peter and Paul are buried. He it is who chiefly bears the burden of the keys as vicar of Peter, the vicar of Christ.

To Peter authority is given first (Matt 16:19; cf. John 21:15–19), though the whole company of the Twelve will share in it (Matt 18:15–20, John 20:21–23) and Paul also, much as the Gospel they proclaim is given to the Jew first but also to the Greek. Thinking thus, we will see that the expression *cum Petro et sub Petro* must be modestly construed, especially if it is to make sense of the New Testament and of the early Church. Even allowing for appropriate development of doctrine, it should be admitted that the notion of a papal jurisdiction both universal *and* immediate has never been universally realized. What's more, *cum Petro et sub Petro* must be applied in some sense even to the present holder of the Petrine office, for—God being the God of the living, not of the dead, and the saints and martyrs reigning with Christ in the presence of God—both Peter and the other apostles continue to be present in the Church. They do not let go of their authority when they share it with their successors.

What shall we say of Matthew 16, which most certainly cannot be ignored? “‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter [*Petros*], and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’” May we not concede with Augustine that Peter, considered in himself, is not the *petra* or bedrock on which Christ builds his Church?⁴ But

⁴ In his *Revisions*, at 1.21 (*Retractationes*, 1.20), Augustine writes: “I said of the apostle Peter in a certain passage that ‘the Church was founded upon him as upon a rock.’ This notion is also sung by many mouths in the verses of the most blessed Ambrose, when he says of the crowing cock, ‘As it crowed, he himself, the Church’s rock, washed sin away.’ But I know that later I very often explained what was said by the Lord, ‘You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church’ (Mt 16:18), in such a way that it would be

only if it also be conceded that Peter's confession, viewed abstractly, is not that bedrock either. The *petra* is Peter-confessing-Christ. Neither the man nor his confession is dispensable here.⁵ This is ecumenically crucial to any mutual acknowledgement of apostolicity. It also permits us to face the situation that arises should the holder of the Petrine office depart from a faithful confession, as Peter himself did immediately after he first made it—a far graver sin, and a far graver situation, after Pentecost than before it.

In this connection, other matters of ecumenical import should also be noted. First, that being charged with something and being faithful to the charge are two different things.⁶ Second, that the pope is vicar of Christ only as vicar of Peter, which was among his earliest honorifics, and that it is indeed possible for a pope to be unfaithful to his charge, as history sadly shows. Third, that the doctrine of papal infallibility, which identifies a key aspect of ecclesial indefectibility, extends only to that which is solemnly pronounced *ex cathedra*. Fourth, that what is pronounced *ex cathedra* is neither new revelation nor a reading of revelation inconsistent with scripture and tradition; it is merely a clarification and, as such, an advance in understanding. (Were it other than that, it would not in fact be *ex cathedra*.) Fifth, that the indefectibility of the Church does not entail the indefectibility of any given person, even the bishop of Rome, nor of Christians broadly considered. Jesus and Peter and Paul all warned us of widespread apostasy towards the end of the age. The indefectibility of the Church does, however, entail divine preservation of the perfect society that is the

understood [as being built] upon him whom Peter confessed when he said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Mt 16:16). Thus Peter, who was named after that rock, would signify the role of the Church that is built upon this rock and that received the keys of the kingdom of heaven. For it was not said to him, 'You are the rock,' but rather, 'You are Peter.' But the rock was Christ (1 Cor 10:4). This was the one whom Simon confessed (and he was called Peter), just as the whole Church confesses him. Let the reader choose, though, which of these two opinions is the more likely" (trans. Boniface Ramsey in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 1.2 [Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2010], 85).

⁵ See Douglas Farrow, "The Church's One Foundation," *Catholic World Report*, March 4, 2019, catholicworldreport.com/2019/03/04/the-churchs-one-foundation/.

⁶ See Thomas Weinandy, "The Four Marks of the Church: The Contemporary Crisis in Ecclesiology," *Catholic World Report*, February 23, 2018, catholicworldreport.com/2018/02/23/the-four-marks-of-the-church-the-contemporary-crisis-in-ecclesiology/.

Church and provision of faithful shepherds operating in unity.⁷ To posit otherwise would be to adopt a gnostic ecclesiology that sunders the earthly from the heavenly.

IV. Apostolicity, which has a vertical and a horizontal axis, is itself one, holy, and catholic.

Apostolicity, as a feature of the mystery of ecclesiality, has a vertical and a horizontal axis. "Mediation signifies the vertical order of dependence, succession the horizontal order."⁸ While the vertical (God, Christ, apostles, all the faithful) is obviously the primary axis, on which is conveyed to the apostles, for the faithful, a power at once cultic and pastoral, the horizontal is also essential to the Church, for it preserves this power in unbroken continuity throughout the age, distinguishing the Church from the sects, the authorized from the presumptuous, the catholic from the deficient.⁹

Here it must be said again that the four *notae* qualify each other; they are inseparable, since they owe themselves to the perfections of God, whose Church it is. The Church cannot have multiple divergent successions, then. Its very apostolicity is one, holy, and catholic. Where dissidence or innovation prevails, there is no true succession and no proper apostolicity, though there may be gifts arising from apostolicity and tending towards it.

But how are we to understand the relation between the vertical and the horizontal, between mediation and succession? This is no easy matter, for all of theology is bound up quite profoundly at this very intersection.¹⁰ A sound approach must be at once Christological and Pneumatological, attending both to the horizontal, institutional aspect that rests on the temporal ministry of Jesus and also to the vertical, epicletic aspect in which the Spirit effects eschatological communion with Jesus here and now, sacramentally. What is clear is that neither of these can be played off against the other without falsifying the note of apostolicity.

⁷ See Vladimir Soloviev, *War, Progress, and the End of History*, trans. Alexander Bakshy (London: University of London Press, 1915). Cf. Douglas Farrow, "Beware the Beast from the Earth: Reading *Laudate Deum* with Solovyov and St John," October 29, 2023, douglasfarrow.substack.com/p/beware-the-beast-from-the-earth.

⁸ Charles Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, trans. Victor Szczurek (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 156.

⁹ Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, 165.

¹⁰ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 180.

Zizioulas reads the vertical axis as “iconic” rather than hierarchical, such that Christ, being the image of God, is in turn imaged by the bishop as eucharistic president.¹¹ He is certainly right to point out that the bishop cannot be an *alter apostolus* except as *alter Christus*; otherwise the historical and the eschatological would not hold together. Which means that (iconically rather than existentially construed) the pneumatological communion between the pastor of a local Church and the Good Shepherd himself takes precedence over the historic succession in which the pastor stands. Yet the latter remains a precondition of the former, as Irenaeus famously suggests in the first few chapters of *Haer.*, book 3. All would agree that “the hierarchy is for the Church, not the Church for the hierarchy.”¹² It is a serious error, however, to suppose that the Church exists prior to the hierarchy.

V. The Church is apostolic as and because it is magisterial.

The *magisterium* is the authoritative teaching office or function of the Church, exercised through its bishops to maintain the integrity of the faith. That there is such a thing is linked, as the *Catechism* says, “to the definitive nature of the covenant established by God with his people in Christ.” The magisterial task is “to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error.” For that purpose, so that the people of God should know the truth that makes them free, their shepherds have been endowed “with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals” (§890).

This is a collective, not an individual endowment, though it entails individual responsibilities. Just as the magisterium is not “superior to the word of God, but is its servant” (§86), so the individual bishop is not superior to the body of bishops but is obligated to pass on what is believed in the great Tradition and is common to all, having been recognized as an authentic element or development of the apostles’ own teaching.

There is no more obvious way for a Christian community to declare itself not apostolic, hence not properly ecclesial, than to refuse what belongs to the great Tradition both in doctrine and in discipline. Yet

¹¹ See Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 132–40, 196, 201.

¹² Journet, *Theology of the Church*, 166; cf. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 66 and following.

the Tradition here in question “is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional traditions, born in the local Churches over time, which are the particular forms in which it is expressed.” The latter “can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church’s magisterium” (§83). Tradition cannot, however, be altered in substance, or it is not tradition. Tradition is that which is handed on, having been received from the source and preserved as such, with and like the Gospel itself, which “sounds forth” from those who have heard and welcomed it (1 Thess 1:8–10; cf. 2 Thess 3). Faithfully handing on the faith, without fundamental distortion or loss, whether in doctrine or in morals or in liturgical and sacramental life, is essential to apostolicity.

VI. The Church is apostolic because in all of this it participates in the divine economy; that is, in the mission of the Son sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit for the reconciliation of the world and in the mission of the Spirit sent from the Father and the Son for our redemption.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19). “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17). Such is the divine economy that renders the whole Church by “its very nature missionary, since it draws its origin from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the plan of God the Father” (Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, §2).

Within that plan, in celebration of the heavenly enthronement of Jesus and with a view to the revelation of “the glorious liberty of the sons of God” for which all creation longs” (Rom 8:19–21), gifts were given “that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11–13). Among these, apostleship is indeed first (1 Cor 12:28).

Though the apostles be few, like the young lad’s loaves and fishes, from their ministry twelve basketfuls are gathered. To that end, their partners in ministry are many, and the whole Church is rendered apostolic, for the Church is one: “So let no one boast of men. For all things are

yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's. This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 3:21–4:1).

VII. The Church is apostolic when it exercises judgment, warns of judgment, and prepares for judgment.

"It is required of stewards," adds Paul, "that they be found trustworthy." They must bear in mind that, when the Lord comes, "he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness." That is a very sobering thought, which we would be remiss to neglect. For the apostolic invitation is twofold. It is indeed an invitation to the thirsty to drink freely from the water of life. To extend that hope, Christ, having freed us from our own sins, has made his entire people, together with the apostles, "a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Rev 1:4–8). It is also a *maranatha*, an invitation directed to Christ, an invitation that elicits judgment as well as salvation: "If any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor 16:22; cf. 2 Thess 1).

So this we may say by way of ending, though we might rather have said it by way of beginning or in the middle, in thesis III: In the note of apostolicity is sounded a note of judgment, and a call to one and all to prepare for judgment. To his disciples, the same whose names are written on the gates of the city of God, Jesus solemnly declared: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28). And to the elders in Corinth Paul says: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!" (1 Cor 6:2–3). One cannot conceive of the Church as apostolic without reckoning with its juridical nature as a people to whom judgment is entrusted and from whom an account is to be expected (cf. Acts 5; 1 Cor 3–5; 2 Cor 1–7; Rev 2–3). In this way, too, the Church points to the royal parousia.

Giorgio Agamben suggests that the distinguishing mark of the apostle, as opposed to the prophet, is that "the apostle speaks forth from the arrival of the Messiah," not in prediction of the Messiah. From this distinction he proceeds to his claim that "Paul's technical term

for the messianic event is *ho nyn kairos*, ‘the time of the now.’”¹³ Of Agamben’s “and not” we should be wary, however. The mark of the apostle is that he recognizes and proclaims this now-time as the time *between* the visitations of the Christ, hence as a time of preparation.¹⁴ If the prophets spoke through the Spirit in expectation of his coming, the apostles—having been taught by Jesus how to interpret what was said by reference to himself—now speak forth from the fact of his coming, yes, and from the coming also of the Spirit whom he and the Father have sent. But they speak as well from the certainty of his return. The Church itself is apostolic because, speaking in the same Spirit, it accompanies the apostles in proclaiming that Jesus is the Lord who has come, now comes, and will come (Rev 22:20; cf. 1 Cor 12:3). “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” N.V

¹³ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 59–61.

¹⁴ See Douglas Farrow, “Engaging Agamben on the Time That Remains,” *Arc—The Journal of the School of Religious Studies, McGill University* 50 (2022): 165–204; cf. Farrow, “The Secret of the Saeculum,” *First Things*, May 2020, 27–35.