

Ten After Ten Session 40: I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church

748 “Christ is the light of humanity; and it is, accordingly, the heart–felt desire of this sacred Council, being gathered together in the Holy Spirit, that, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature, it may bring to all men that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church.” These words open the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church...The Church has no other light than Christ’s; according to a favorite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun.

749 The article concerning the Church also depends entirely on the article about the Holy Spirit...The Church is, in a phrase used by the Fathers, the place “where the Spirit flourishes.”

750 To believe that the Church is “holy” and “catholic,” and that she is “one” and “apostolic” (as the Nicene Creed adds), is inseparable from belief in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

751 The word “Church” (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek–kalein*, to “call out of”) means a convocation or an assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people, usually for a religious purpose... In the Church, God is “calling together” his people from all the ends of the earth. The equivalent Greek term *Kyriak*, from which the English word Church and the German Kirche are derived, means “what belongs to the Lord.”

752 In Christian usage, the word “church” designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. “The Church” is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body.

Symbols of the Church

753 In Scripture, we find a host of interrelated images and figures through which Revelation speaks of the inexhaustible mystery of the Church. The images taken from the Old Testament are variations on a profound theme: the People of God. In the New Testament, all these images find a new center because Christ has become the head of this people, which henceforth is his Body.

754 The Church is, accordingly, a sheepfold, the sole and necessary gateway to which is Christ. It is also the flock of which God himself foretold that he would be the shepherd, and whose sheep, even though governed by human shepherds, are unfailingly nourished and led by Christ himself, the Good Shepherd and Prince of Shepherds, who gave his life for his sheep.

755 The Church is a cultivated field, the tillage of God. On that land the ancient olive tree grows whose holy roots were the prophets and in which the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles has been brought about and will be brought about again. That land, like a choice vineyard, has been planted by the heavenly cultivator. Yet the true vine is Christ who gives life and fruitfulness to the branches, that is, to us, who through the Church remain in Christ, without whom we can do nothing.

756 Often, too, the Church is called the building of God. The Lord compared himself to the stone which the builders rejected, but which was made into the corner–stone. On this foundation the Church is built

by the apostles and from it the Church receives solidity and unity. This edifice has many names to describe it: the house of God in which his family dwells; the household of God in the Spirit; the dwelling-place of God among men; and, especially, the holy temple. This temple, symbolized in places of worship built out of stone, is praised by the Fathers and, not without reason, is compared in the liturgy to the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. As living stones we here on earth are built into it. It is this holy city that is seen by John as it comes down out of heaven from God when the world is made anew, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

757 The Church, further, which is called 'that Jerusalem which is above' and 'our mother,' is described as the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb. It is she whom Christ 'loved and for whom he delivered himself up that he might sanctify her.' It is she whom he unites to himself by an unbreakable alliance, and whom he constantly 'nourishes and cherishes.'

759 The eternal Father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life, to which he calls all men in his Son. "The Father... determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ." ...Established in this last age of the world and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time.

760 God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the "convocation" of men in Christ, and this "convocation" is the Church. The Church is the goal of all things, and God permitted such painful upheavals as the angels' fall and man's sin only as occasions and means for displaying all the power of his arm and the whole measure of the love he wanted to give the world.

761 The gathering together of the People of God began at the moment when sin destroyed the communion of men with God, and that of men among themselves. The gathering together of the Church is, as it were, God's reaction to the chaos provoked by sin. This reunification is achieved secretly in the heart of all peoples.