



Holy Church

The fourth of a series of columns
on the "Marks" of the Church

Each Sunday we confess our faith in one "holy" Church. "Holy" means to be set apart *for* God; yet we often set ourselves apart *from* God by our sins. How can the Church be "holy" if it is filled every Sunday with sinners like ourselves?

The Church is holy because her Lord is All-Holy, and He came to make us sinners holy too. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" to sanctify us through the sacramental life he established in his Church. In the sacraments Jesus comes to meet us personally in this world of time and space in order to transform our deep-seated reluctance to be "set apart for God" into the freedom to "live no longer for ourselves but for Him."

Christian holiness originates sacramentally. It begins with baptism, our "adoption" as "children of God," as St. Paul puts it. And that adoption has an immediate consequence: inheritance. For if we are children of God, then we are "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ." Baptized into adoption in Christ, we inherit *all* the riches He won for us by his suffering, death, and resurrection. In the words of the First Letter of Peter, "we have been born anew . . . to an inheritance which is imperishable "We share the imperishable baptismal inheritance with all Christians, for there is only "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Since Protestant Christians are fellow heirs to the entire

Christian inheritance, Catholics feel a deep familial respect for the holiness of their exemplary Christian lives. Clearly the grace of baptismal adoption flows through the Word in their hearts and comes to life in the work of their hands. Yet growing respect for Protestants brings a deep longing as well: the longing that "they may be one" with us in laying claim to the *entirety* of their baptismal inheritance.

We Christians are all equally heirs, it is true, but Catholic Christians come into their baptismal inheritance in its fullness: seven sacraments; the Word of God in Scripture; a two-millennial Tradition of doctrinal and moral teaching; public veneration of the Mother of God and the saints; visible, organic union with the successors of Peter and the Apostles. Non-Catholic Christians treasure some or many of these elements, but only the Catholic Church claims them *all* as the rightful, irreducible baptismal inheritance of every Christian.

The Prodigal Son asked for his share of the inheritance that would come to him. He got what he asked for, but he didn't ask for enough. When the young man arose at last in his far-away country and made his way home, his father's wordless embrace told him what his elder brother was soon to hear: "Son, . . . *all* that is mine is yours." The father's mercy opened the door for his son to come into his inheritance in full.

We can see from this parable that the baptismal inheritance of sacramental life is ours for the *receiving*—but not for the *taking*. For baptismal adoption, like legal adoption, cannot be coerced. I cannot declare myself to be legally adopted, for example; nor can I

pronounce myself to be somebody's heir. Rather, I must *be adopted* by others; I must *be made* their heir. I cannot force their hand.

Which of His human creatures can force the hand of the Almighty Father? Who can take the living water in hand and *compel* Him to adopt in baptism? Which of us could *insist* that he be given the baptismal inheritance won by the Father's only Son? We are heirs to sacraments freely given to us by Christ through the hands of His Body, the Church. No one baptizes himself. No one confirms himself. No one absolves himself. No one ordains himself priest. We are always on the receiving end of the holiness that flows from the sacraments entrusted by Christ to the "one, holy, catholic" Church. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides on the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me," Jesus tells us. "I am the vine; you are the branches . . . [and] apart from me you can do nothing." Once more we come back, by a different path, to St. Peter's decisive question: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."