



Catholic Church

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

What does it mean to choose to be *Catholic* in a world with all sorts of religious options?

The word "catholic" comes from two Greek words which mean "according to the whole." As the Church spread throughout the Roman Empire, it became increasingly necessary to distinguish the Christian God and the Christian way of life from pagan gods and pagan practices. Early Church Councils settled these fundamental questions decisively. They did so "according to the whole" world of Christianity at the time. African, Spanish, Italian, and Greek bishops looked across and around the Mediterranean Sea to learn what Christians in other lands thought about the faith and how they practiced it in daily life and worship. Bishops came together in Councils and debated how to preserve the Apostolic inheritance in the face of burning new questions that came to light in their day. Over the centuries their Spirit-guided labors produced the Creed we profess each Sunday at Mass and the Sacred Scriptures all Christians revere, as the Church determined which writings belonged in the Bible and which did not.

Africa alone could not decide the faith of the Church; nor could Spain or Greece. Since Jesus had sent his Apostles to "make disciples of *all* nations" and to teach them what *he* had commanded, no single nation could determine the teaching of the Church by itself, in isolation from the rest of "the

whole." Recipients alike of Christ's promised Spirit of unity, the leaders of the Church needed each other to be true to themselves; they had to be co-workers in the truth. They had to be Catholic.

It was not easy. Fierce and violent disagreements marked those unity-shaping centuries. How could bishops and ordinary believers be sure a controverted teaching was truly universal, truly catholic, and not merely provincial or partisan?

The answer lay waiting in the words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church." When the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome, confirmed the teaching of a Council, that made it *Catholic* teaching. To stand in union "according to the whole" – that is, in union with every other bishop and the flock of believers in union with him – was to stand with Peter, the Bishop with whom all other bishops needed to maintain communion to be *Catholic*. To step out of communion with Peter was to depart from communion "according to the whole." It was to cease to be Catholic.

To maintain communion with the pope is to assent to Jesus' forceful confirmation of Peter's profession of faith in Him as the Christ and to take one's stand upon the rock of unity which the Risen Jesus entrusts to the Spirit for the building up of his Church. Every Mass we attend anywhere in the world testifies to this Catholic unity when we pray in union with "Francis, our pope" and with the local bishop in union with him. If these men are not mentioned by name, the Mass is not celebrated "according to the whole." In the ancient Church, communion with Peter in the person of the pope confirmed catholicity. It did then and it does now.