

A Theological Reflection on Francis A. Sullivan's Ecclesiology in the Context of the Church of the Poor

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I. INTRODUCTION

Do I really know the Church where I belong? Am I convinced that the church which I am following and obeying represents the true church of Christ?

I never bothered myself asking questions about the church, my faith and my being a Roman Catholic. After all, I never had the chance to select any religion. I was born a Roman Catholic. I was accustomed to it already. All the while I thought that everything was arranged in their rightful places. This belief was reinforced and strengthened during my school days. In my religion classes, I was taught that there are four marks of a true church, they are ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC and APOSTOLIC and only the Catholic Church has these four marks. This teaching has been with me ever since but I never had the chance to fully understand it nor had the guts to question it until this moment. After all, I was taught to be obedient and subservient to the church and its' authorities.

It is the purpose of this paper text to give answers to my questions. I am aware though that my answers may have some limitations because Ecclesiology or the study of the church like the doing of Theology is progressive. It is not static rather it is historical. It is constantly moving and developing.

I want to explore further why the Catholic Church is considered as the true church solely because of its four marks, that of being one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Secondly, it is my desire that I could possibly understand the church that I am following and obeying by presenting the traditional understanding of being one, holy, catholic and apostolic of the church. On the other hand, I will also present the contemporary understanding of these four marks of the church. Thirdly, it is my desire to connect this contemporary understanding to its pastoral implications. I believe that this contemporary understanding of the church

must be related and be seen from the vantage point of the poor. I cannot be happier if I see the church which claims to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic becomes the church of the poor. The church of the poor must represent a positive response to the struggle to overcome oppression and unjust poverty.¹ It must not only offer encouragement but would rather give practical support to the faithful to overcome oppression.² The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991 has to highlight the remarkable disparity between the rich and the poor. The stated conciliar document had this to mention: "The poverty and destitution of the great mass of our people are only too evident, contrasting sharply with the wealth and luxury of the relatively few families, the elite top of our social pyramid...Power and control are also elitist, lopsidedly concentrated on established families that tend to perpetuate themselves in political dynasties."³

Lastly, it is my prayer that in writing this paper, I may be able to build a solid foundation on my faith because I have possibly understood the church where I belong.

II. THE CHURCH WE BELIEVE IN

The church we have accustomed to believe in is hierarchical in structure. The power emanates from the pope, to the bishops, to the priests down to the believers who are at the bottom of the pyramid. Although this is the set-up, we are accepting the church as a part of the total objects of our Christian faith. "We are professing our faith that the church is not purely human institution, but is a work of God, a part of God's plan for the salvation of the world."⁴

Our understanding of the church is that it has four marks, that is being one, holy, catholic and apostolic. First Vatican

¹ Donal Dorr, *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power and the Church*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 55.

² Ibid.

³ *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 12. See also: Jose M. De Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, Inc., 2003), 26.

⁴ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 6. This book was specifically chosen by the author because it is an ecclesiology textbook establishing theological grounds for ecumenism. Ecumenical progress, then, calls for the effort to reach a common understanding of the faith we profess. Theology has an important role to play here, because theology is defined as "faith seeking understanding." Ecumenical dialogue is most fruitful when it is a concerted effort, on the part of people coming from different theological traditions, to seek a deeper understanding of the creed in which they already profess a common faith, in the hopes that such a deeper understanding will get beneath their differences to the common ground where they are at one.

Council in 1870⁵ presented the church as the mystical body, but this was strongly criticized on the grounds that the church was not something mystical but was rather a visible, hierarchical structured society.⁶

If we see clearly, we recognize the dichotomy between the church of faith and the church of experience; between the mystical body and the institutional church.

Moreover, the church is a complex reality made up of divine elements as well as human elements. Divine elements would refer to “divine grace” which point to God as its source and human elements would refer to the people of God. This is the “mystery of the church”. Some aspects of the church can only be grasped by faith, while others are a matter of experience.⁷

However, despite of this complex reality of the church, it remains as one church which is the object of our experience and object of our confession of faith, just as for the disciples there was but one Jesus, whom they could see to be a man like themselves, but whom they also came to believe in as their Lord and their God.⁸

III. THE CHURCH AS ONE

According to traditional ecclesiology, there is only one true church of Christ because only the Roman Catholic Church has these categories of a church being one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The traditional understanding tells us that it is in the Catholic Church alone that the church of Christ is found. In Roman Catholic traditional understanding, oneness means being subject to the same teaching magisterium wherein the culture of the people or the believers is disregarded. However, this traditional understanding of the Church has been refuted and contested by the theologians after Vatican II because they believe that there is at least something of the church that is beyond the limits of the Catholic Church.

⁵ See: <https://www.britannica.com/event/First-Vatican-Council>. First Vatican Council. First Vatican Council, 20th ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church (1869–70), convoked by Pope Pius IX to deal with contemporary problems. The pope was referring to the rising influence of rationalism, liberalism, and materialism.

⁶ Sullivan, 15.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibid., 20.

“The unity which Christ bestowed on his church is something she can never lose indeed it “subsists” in the Catholic Church. To fully recognize the church of Christ is to see it exclusively within the context of the Roman Catholic Church.” (UR 4)

Indeed, many elements of sanctification can be found outside the church’s total structure and that these are things properly belonging to the church of Christ.⁹

The Second Vatican Council¹⁰, however has given us a fresh understanding of the dimension of Christ’s Church. First, the recognition of the nature of the church as communion of particular churches; Second, the recognition that outside the limits of the Roman Catholic Church, there are not merely “elements of Church” but there are “churches and ecclesial communities”. Third, the recognition that there exists a real, though imperfect, ecclesial communion linking these churches and ecclesial communities with the Catholic Church.¹¹ We can say therefore that, the church of Christ is not identified exclusively with the Roman Catholic Church as the traditional understanding claims to be because the Roman Catholic Church has her own limitations and weaknesses.

IV. THE CHURCH AS HOLY

The traditional understanding of holiness was that only the Catholic Church has the means to obtain and attain holiness. This claim is due to the complete and well-organized structure like the seven sacraments.

Moreover, the Catholic Church has produced many saints who were examples of holiness.

With this argument, it follows that the faithful or the followers of the Catholic Church must look up to the saints who have lived a holy life and must be obedient to the leaders of the hierarchy.

The Second Vatican Council puts it this way, “The church is marked with genuine holiness as a consequence of its “eschatological nature” and marked with imperfect holiness as a

⁹ Ibid, 30.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Vatican-Council>. Second Vatican Council, 21st ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962–65), announced by Pope John XXIII on Jan. 25, 1959, as a means of spiritual renewal for the church and as an occasion for Christians separated from Rome to join in search for reunion.

¹¹ Sullivan, 62.

consequence of its being a “pilgrim church”.¹² F. Sullivan has this to say on being a “pilgrim church”:

“...as a people on pilgrimage to its final home, the church has to struggle against the forces of evil from without and against her own weakness from within. The time of earthly pilgrimage is a time when the ultimate victory has been won by Christ and is guaranteed to the church, but when there is no assurance of victory in every skirmish that must still take place along the way. The gifts that Christ has bestowed on his church cannot be lost, but they can be obscured, diminished, imperfectly realized. There is need of constant effort to maintain them, foster them, renew them.”¹³

The holiness of the Church is always due to God’s initiative. It is God’s gift to the people and being a gift it also calls for a response on the part of those who are called into a closer relationship with God: The church is called to a duty to live up to the calling of leading a holy life. If the church is really the people of God, its holiness cannot be independent of the holiness of the men and women who are its members. The church holiness is indefectible, but it does not consist of immunity from weakness and sin as Second Vatican Council puts it:

“Moving forward through trial and tribulation, the Church is strengthened by the power of God’s grace promised to her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not waver from the perfect fidelity, but remains a bride worthy of her Lord. That moved by the Holy spirit she may never cease to renew herself, until through the cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting.” (LG 9)

Stressing the nature of the Church as “pilgrim people” brings out the fact that the church consists of real people who throughout their earthly pilgrimage have to struggle with temptation and the weakness of the flesh.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 66. The Church is eschatological. She is not the center of human history because the center is the realization of the kingdom. The Church is a humble servant. She is called to serve all peoples not merely the faithful. The Church should be a community of dialogue. She should be an open Church seeking constant dialogue with the world. Finally, the Church is dynamic, being part of history and having to adapt herself constantly to the new conditions of the world in rapid change. See also: Wostyn, Lode L. Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology: Church and Mission Today* (Quezon City, Phils.: Claretians Publications, 1990), 49.

¹³ Ibid., 223.

¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

V. THE CHURCH AS CATHOLIC

The traditional understanding of the catholicity of the church was seen in terms of numbers. It was judged and perceived numerically. The greatest must be the church with the greatest number of members. With the arguments, since, the Catholic Church has many members spread all over the world, it follows that it is catholic. Moreover, the traditional understanding of what the church is that “There is no salvation outside the church”. This axiom was often being used with reference to Christians who have separated themselves from the “Great Church”. – The Catholic Church by joining some heretical or schismatic sect.

The basic meaning of Catholic is universal as used by the Greeks when they refer to goodness or beauty. Catholicism embraces all that is proper to the Catholic Church, while catholicity is one of the four properties that practically all Christians attribute to the church of Christ. The Church that subsists in the Catholic Church is catholic, but catholicity is not found exclusively in Catholicism.¹⁵

“Catholic” is not simply synonymous with geographically universal. It connotes further idea of oneness, uniqueness. To be truly “catholic” it has to be one Church throughout the world.¹⁶ This traditional understanding continued for a long time. The Jesuit missionaries however, hold a more optimistic view and believed that there’s got to be another way to be saved other than explicit Christian faith and actual membership in the church. There are many people in the world whom the church does not reach. If we have reason to believe that there is only one economy of salvation for the whole of humanity, and that it is consistently “sacramental”, then we ought to expect that where the ecclesial means of salvation are not available, God will make use of other created realities as channels of His grace. God will make use of other persons, such as good parents, good teachers, and good community leaders to exert a wholesome influence especially on the younger generation. He will make use of the positive elements in cultures to instill ideals of justice and loving care for the young, the poor, the sick, and the aged.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 85.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 129.

It is certain that God's sacrifice will include all the millions of people who belong to one another of these religious. Catholicity therefore, is to look at it as a motive which the church will always have to continue its effort to bring the message of the gospel to those who have not yet received it. The church can never limit its ministry to its own members. Catholicity is a gift to the church but it is also a mandate; to strive energetically and constantly to bring all humanity under Christ as its head.¹⁸ The church therefore is called to broaden her concept of salvation, so that besides the "vertical dimension" of reconciliation with God it also includes the "horizontal dimension" of reconciliation of people with one another through the overcoming of systems of oppression and the establishment of a just social in the world, recognizing this also as an indispensable foundation for achieving of durable peace.¹⁹

VI. THE CHURCH AS APOSTOLIC

The traditional understanding of the Apostolicity of the Catholic Church was that, apostolicity is owned by the hierarchy. With this argument, it follows that only the pope and the bishops are the successors of the apostles of Jesus, hence they alone are apostolic. Being apostolic, is limited with the privilege of belonging in the hierarchy.

The Second Vatican Council provides a clearer understanding. The New Testament church was apostolic because of the importance of the role which the apostles played in the life of the church. The apostles received their mission from the risen Lord. They became apostles only after the Easter Experience.

According to Paul there are two (2) kinds of Apostles: First, the "apostles of Jesus Christ" and second, the "apostles of the churches". The former speaks of those who have seen the risen Lord, those who have received from him a mission to preach the gospel and those whose ministry have been confirmed by their fruitfulness, by signs and wonders and by their sufferings for the sake of the gospel. The latter are envoys or messengers sent by one or another local church.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁹ Ibid., 150.

²⁰ Ibid., 154.

Paul understood that his calling and mission was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles in regions where Christ was not yet known. He saw the confirmation of his calling in the fruitfulness of his preaching, manifested in the formation of the Christian Communities over which he continued to devote his pastoral care.

Timothy and Titus are to follow the pattern of apostolic ministry that Paul had laid down, teaching the sound doctrine they had heard from him; exercising the same pastoral care that they had witnessed. While they were not apostles, not having received their mandate directly from the risen Christ, they were “apostolic men” and the churches under their pastoral care have every right to be called “apostolic”.²¹

We can speak of the apostolic mandate as having been shared collegially: first, among the original apostles, then with their co-workers, and then with all those who were called and appointed to pastoral ministry in the churches. Towards the end of the second century, Orthodox Christians recognized their bishops as the successors to the apostles, with a special responsibility and authority for maintaining the apostolic tradition of faith. The church is apostolic because it lives the faith of the original apostles, continues the mission given by Christ to them and remains in the service and way of life testified to by these apostles.

Hence, the apostolicity of the church means its continuity in the permanent characteristics of the church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith.²²

VII. BECOMING ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC IN THE CHURCH OF THE POOR

We must deconstruct our traditional understanding of the Catholic Church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. On the other hand, we must reconstruct and build our contemporary understanding of what the church is because only the Church of Christ which goes beyond the visible limits of the Catholic Church can claim oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. These four attributes are a gift, a task and a promise. Institutionally, the local Church has become convinced of the necessity to become

²¹ Ibid., 164.

²² Ibid., 197.

a “Church of the poor” which “will courageously defend and vindicate the rights of the poor and the oppressed, even when doing so will mean alienation or persecution from the rich and powerful.”²³

We used to think that the church is a building, a place of worship and a place where we can go to offer our petitions and ask for miracles in our confused life. Being Christians means going to church on Sundays and holy days of obligation and giving a few amounts of money to the collection and to the poor outside the church. Our motive in performing these acts of charity was to obtain personal salvation. We thought of the Catholic Church as the true church because we thought that it was the biggest church.

It is now the time that we change our vision of church and salvation. The church must no longer be seen as a mere institution. We need a church today that is participatory where the laity and all the believers take up responsibility and where the church becomes a sign of the kingdom of God.

THE CHURCH IS ONE

We must understand that unity is based on the one and the same God who through Jesus in the Holy Spirit has gathered us into one people of God. Unity or oneness must be experienced first in the local community through our fellowship, camaraderie and solidarity. We should live the dictum “Unity in diversity”. We are different people with different cultures and traditions yet we must respect those pluralities. Our unity or oneness must be based on the Gospel of Jesus.

The source of our unity is the Eucharist which sustains our community. We come from different places yet we come to gather at one table every Sunday for the Eucharist. Just as in the Eucharist, Jesus who is the bread was chosen, blessed, broken and given, we too, who have been chosen to be members of the church are blessed must be willing to be broken and be given for the community especially the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. We can see the concrete faces of these poor in our society, they are the peasants, the workers, the slum-dwellers, the street children, the persecuted and the tortured.

²³ *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 50.

As Jon Sobrino puts it “The basic unity of faith will only become a reality if the poor have truly entered the church as active not as passive subjects.”²⁴

This unity is also a challenge for us Filipinos to work for unity or oneness, to seize every chance to remove anything that divides us.

THE CHURCH IS HOLY

The formal model of holiness is found in God Himself. The church is holy because it is God who makes it holy and because it is holy; it can never give up the struggle against its own sinfulness, or give up the practice of penance and purification.

The holiness of the church is not initially the holiness of her members or her cultic assemblies; it is the holiness of Christ who acts on sinners. Christ sanctifies his church by justifying it. Consequently the holiness of the church lies in his sanctifying activity.”²⁵

We should recognize our failures and frailties. The church as holy should not restrict us to look for holiness within the confines of the church. It should instead propel us outside, since we are called for service, to work for justice, to be in solidarity with the poor and to become poor. As Jürgen Moltmann states “The Church’s holiness is its holiness in poverty.”²⁶

The church is therefore sanctified whenever it participates in the lowliness, helplessness, poverty and suffering of Christ as reflected in the life of the Filipino people. Her glory is manifested through the sign of poverty. When believers take up their cross, the Kingdom of God is manifested to the world. Indeed, the church is sanctified through her involvement and participation to solve the poverty, suffering and oppression that envelope our Filipino people.

THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC

Catholicity means related to the whole. Being catholic is supposed to be a gift received in the death and resurrection of

²⁴ Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1984), 102.

²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1977)

338.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 341.

Jesus. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Church is made related to the whole but not yet the whole. Our catholicity should be manifested in our mission which has a universal scope, to bring the Good News to all strata of humanity, and to transform humanity from within, making it new.

*"The church's catholicity is determined by the universal, all uniting presence of Christ... the church is not universal, general and related to the whole in itself, but solely in and through Christ. Hence, whenever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church"*²⁷

The Catholicity of the church which aims to be universal must start from below where the poor are situated. She must work hard for the upliftment of the poor and to bring back their dignity and rights and lead them to their rightful places in the church. This process could enable them to be seated side by side with the other faithful. To put this concretely, the church must uplift the situation of the street children struck down by poverty, mental and physical deficiencies. She must also consider the situation of the Filipino people who are disoriented and discouraged because of unemployment and underemployment. Moreover, she must pay attention also to the cries of our Filipino laborers here and abroad because they are ill-paid, maltreated, raped and even put to death unjustly.

The church must strive to become present in every place where the gospel is still unknown.

As Jon Sobrino puts it, "The catholicity of the church is not simply universalism nor the concrete application of universal principles but rather mutual responsibility within the church. It is the mutual bearings of burdens within the church and the active cooperation of each as it gives what it has to offer to the building of the universal church."²⁸

In order for the church to be truly catholic, she must side with the poor not because they are the majority nor they are right but because they have no one to turn to, they are neglected and abandoned. Like a good mother and father, the church protects the little.

²⁷ Ibid., 348.

²⁸ Sobrino, *The Church and the Poor*, 115.

"The church must accept real poverty, must become poor itself in an act of solidarity with the poor, and must actively defend the causes of the poor. Poverty, powerlessness and persecution constitute the real and material conditions for a church in keeping with the will of God to arise and for the possibility of an experience of God within such an ecclesial channel to take place."²⁹

THE CHURCH IS APOSTOLIC

To see the Church as apostolic is to include the whole people of God and not only the pope and the bishops as traditional understanding dictates. To trace its historical development the word apostolic does not actually appear the New Testament. It was first used by the Church Fathers to express the link between the apostles of Christ and their own communities. It is the faith of the early Christians as exemplified by Peter that a close connection could be established between them and that of the Christians in succeeding generations. It is in Peter's faith in Resurrection that he was addressed as Rock by Christ and not to his persons that the Church's authority is grounded. He was entrusted with authority on account of his faith.

An apostle is one who is a witness of the Risen Lord and is commissioned for missionary preaching. As direct witness of the Risen Lord, an apostle cannot have successor. Bishops could not be the successors of the apostles. There was no bishop yet in the early history of Rome. The Christian community during those periods were still ruled by the elders. As witnesses of the resurrection, the apostles were the first hand proclaimers of the Good News. Some of the m became founders and leaders of the Christian communities. Their direct experience with Jesus in his ministry remains always unique hence, nobody could claim to have the same following.

However, all of us can be apostolic in undertaking the apostolic task of service to humanity. The church remains apostolic by being faithful to the witness of the first apostles and continuing the task of proclamation, prophecy and service. It is to testify by means of word, deed, and fellowship to the liberating Lordship of Christ.

Jürgen Moltmann states that "Mission does not come from the church; it is from the mission and in the light of mission that the

²⁹ Ibid., 137.

church has to be understood.”³⁰

The church’s mission must be for the liberation of the poor which is accompanied by conflict and persecution for whenever the church has taken the poor seriously whereby they become also the privileged recipients of the good news then the church becomes apostolic. The church must accept real poverty, must become poor itself, and must actively defend the causes of the poor.

Hence, we can say that one, holy and catholic are eschatological concepts. They are a promise for the future but received by the church as a gift and a task. Apostolicity is a historical designation pointing to the church’s mission which will end when the Church is glorified in the kingdom. Through her apostolic mission, the church will be one, holy and catholic.

As Jürgen Moltmann states, “The one church is the unifying church. The holy church is the church that sanctifies or makes holy. The Catholic Church is the peace giving, and so that all-embracing church. The apostolic church is – through the gospel – the liberating church in the world.”³¹

The challenge for us is that, we who are members of the Catholic Church and are called Disciples of Christ must work for the upliftment of the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez has these challenging words to say:

*“Discipleship means above all, an openness to the gift of God’s love and a preferential solidarity with the poor and oppressed; it is in this context, and in this context alone, that it makes sense to choose a life of poverty. Real poverty is, after all, not a Christian ideal but a condition required today of those who seek to be in solidarity with the really poor, with the unimportant folk—that is, those who lack the necessities of life, which their dignity as human beings and children of God requires. Poverty is, according to the Bible, an evil, a situation not intended by the God of life, an acceptance of means seeking to eliminate the injustice that causes the spoliation and mistreatment of the poor.”*³²

We must take responsibilities towards the street children, the peasants, the laborers, the slum-dwellers, the self-confessed drug addicts, the old and the dying. We must go out from our “comfort zones”, or the world of glamour, fame and riches. We must not

³⁰ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 360.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

³² Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*. Matthew J. O’Connell, Trans. (Makati, Phils.: St. Pauls, 1994) 121-122.

stay silent and uncaring to other members of the church, instead we must be involved to cater the needs of the poor. Only when we involve ourselves can we contribute to liberate them from the bondage of oppression, marginalism, injustice and inequalities. When everything will be attained, then we can say that the church we believe in is really one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This way the church that we believe in as one, holy, catholic and apostolic will make us fully human, wholly Christian and truly Filipino. Now, shall we take the challenge?

SOURCES

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