Catholicity
Its Challenge for the Church

Richard Lennan

In order to seek a convergence between our proclamation and our experience, we need to clarify what “catholic” actually claims for the church. Then we can identify some implications of catholicity for the church’s mission and life today.

Definitions of faith are a beginning as well as an end; they raise questions as well as provide answers. If, therefore, the creeds and doctrines of the church are to contribute to the dynamism of our faith, rather than to its deadening, we need to be alert to the questions they evoke. Such questions arise either from a generic need to understand—“What does this mean?”—or from a particular need to bridge the distance between present-day believers and the sources of their traditions—“What does this mean for us here and now?”

One aspect of ecclesial faith that could benefit from such questioning today is the designation of the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic,” the “marks” that have been part of the Creed since the Council of Constantinople in 381. If the proclamation of these marks is not to contradict our lived faith, reception of them must involve coming to terms with any gap between their intent and our experience. This requires, for example, grappling with what it might mean to affirm that the church is one and holy when we experience it as divided and sinful.

In the case of the church’s catholicity, in order to seek a convergence between our proclamation and our experience, we need to accomplish a prior task: to clarify

Richard Lennan, a priest of the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle in Australia, is professor of systematic theology in the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College. Among his published works are The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner (Oxford University Press, 1995) and Risking the Church: The Challenges of Catholic Faith (Oxford University Press, 2004). He has also contributed to The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner and The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church.
what “catholic” actually claims for the church. Having done so, we will be in a position to determine how the church might live its catholicity more authentically. Accordingly, the next section will explore the basis for claiming catholicity as a mark of the church. From there, the paper will identify some implications of catholicity for the church’s mission and life today.

**Grounding the Catholicity of the Church**

Although “catholic” might appear most often in relation to the church, it does have an application outside the explicitly religious realm. In an “everyday” sense, it has to do with wholeness and fullness, with breadth of vision and of taste. That sense is also primary to the theological interpretation of the term, but more is required if we are to grasp not simply how the notion applies to the church but how it might imply the possibility, even need, for change and growth in the church. As is proper for Christian theology, the starting point for such an exploration needs to be not the church, but God. God’s trinitarian life and God’s relationship to creation provide the basis for the use of “catholic” in theology.

First, in God as Trinity there is both unity and the distinction of persons. The latter, however, does not give rise to competition, nor, as Karl Rahner reminds us, would God be “simpler” without the distinctions (Rahner 1982, 228). Rather, the distinction between persons manifests what love makes possible: “Love is the desire for unity of those who are distinct, and the realization of communion in a perfect exchange while at the same time maintaining the identity of those who love” (Beinert, 467). Accordingly, the wholeness of catholicity involves unity without abolishing differences: the differences remain, are not divisive, but, paradoxically, contribute to unity and to richness.

Second, in creation, God’s life moves outward, “pulsates through many subjects, draws them together, and brings them into union with their source and good” (Dulles, 167). What God’s relationship to creation illustrates is that catholicity is not simply multiplicity, is not simply “the empirical experience of universality . . . be it spatial or temporal or cultural” (Beinert, 456–457). Rather, catholicity implies “a sense of exceeding limits, of penetrating all dimensions of existence, and of transcending natural or social divisions between people as well as the boundaries of time and space to the always beyond” (Wong, 464).

As impressive a profile as the focus on the Trinity and creation gives to catholicity, the resonances of the term become richer still when we turn to its Christian and ecclesial aspects. Indeed, it is possible to describe the incarnation itself in terms of catholicity: God’s revelation in Jesus Christ was not a private or narrowly conceived religious manifestation, but an event in which God “has made known to us the mystery of his will that . . . he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth” (Eph 1:9-10).
God in Christ, then, has a catholic worldview and a catholic presence. As the evangelical theologian Kam Ming Wong notes, “the unsurpassable relation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ constitutes him as the truly catholic place in all space and time, where God encounters humankind in its actuality of existence and humankind finds fellowship with God in his unique divine being” (Wong, 471–472). Consequently, the incarnation, the “mystery of plenitude and reconciled opposites,” can be characterized as God’s full union with the cosmos in its rational, physical, chemical, vegetative, and sentient levels (Dulles, 3–4). In short, as those of us catechized in a more sectarian era learned at an early age: Jesus was catholic.

The further element needed to ground the church and its catholicity is the event that completes the revelation of God as Trinity and launches the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ to all people: the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, as the description of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-13 highlights, brings about “the restoration of communication among estranged people”; it is the reversal of the incident at Babel (Gen 11:1-9) (Dulles, 173). More specifically, Pentecost marks the emergence of the church that exists to be, in the words of Vatican II’s Lumen Gentium (LG), “the sign and instrument of union with God and the union of all humankind” (LG 1; Tanner, 2:849). Through the Spirit, the church comes into being as sacrament of the reconciliation that God has achieved in Christ.

Through the Spirit, the church comes into being as sacrament of the reconciliation that God has achieved in Christ. The sacramental identity of the church has two implications for the catholicity of the church’s life and mission. First, since the church has its foundation in God, so too is God alone the source of the church’s fulfillment. The church, therefore, can witness to its trinitarian foundation, and to its mission to serve the full realization of God’s reign, only by being in relationship with all that is, with all that God has created and redeemed. This requirement is articulated well by Wolfgang Beinert: “If the mission of the Church is to give, as a gift of love, the catholicity of God in Christ reconciled to the catholicity of God’s creation, then the Church must be catholic” (Beinert, 470).

Second, as a sacrament of God’s revelation in Christ, the authenticity of the church depends on faithfulness to the Holy Spirit, the means by which we are drawn into relationship with Christ. The Spirit is a gift to the church, but also forms the project of the church: to become the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church that the Spirit brings into being. This ongoing project reminds us that the church’s sacramentality does not insulate it against either failure or mediocrity.
Indeed, that sacramentality can be manifested not necessarily “in [the church’s] adequacy but precisely in its penitential sinfulness as a particular showing of the great drama of redemption” (Murray, 88). In other words, a truly sacramental church is open to its own need for conversion.

Reference to sacramentality, mission, and conversion underscore how contemporary interpretations of catholicity differ significantly from those that prevailed through the long post-Reformation era, when catholicity was a battleground for disputed versions of what constituted the “true” church (Dulles, 17–20). What is most evident about the broader understanding of catholicity just outlined is the centrality it gives to the church’s mission. In order to illustrate that further, the following sections of this contribution will focus on the implications of catholicity for the church’s engagement with the world.

**Catholicity and the Mission of the Church**

It is noteworthy that much of the contemporary writing on catholicity emerges from those whose primary theological concern is either the theology of mission or social ethics. This is surely a healthy development, a reminder that the marks of the church are not tools to be employed in ideological struggles over identity but a means to attune us more finely to the church’s purpose. More specifically, missiologists and social ethicists have focused on catholicity because it offers a creative alternative to what they assess as the flawed vision and practice of globalization.

The critiques of globalization are vast in their canvas: they highlight its tendency toward aimless innovation, the undirected pursuit of efficiency, and an uncritical technical rationality that can be profoundly dehumanizing (Schreiter, 9–10). The critiques highlight, too, the fact that globalization seeks to homogenize us by rendering irrelevant local identities and traditions, while absorbing us all into a “hyperculture” based on consumption (Schreiter, 10). In addition, globalization, especially via the information technology that has been in its vanguard, has a negative impact on our sense of time—“Time becomes a present with an edge of future, reminding us of the constant obsolescence of the past” (Schreiter, 11). Similarly, our relationship to space is redefined: “Our sense of space is also compressed, symbolized in the computer chip (Schreiter, 11).

Although the theological critiques of globalization are sweeping, they are also nuanced, alert to the social as well as the economic outcomes of globalization. This awareness enables the critics to bring into relief some of the ironies of globalization. Thus, Vincent Miller recognizes that the homogenizing tendency within globalization is likely also to generate its opposite: “strategies of defense, closure, protection, and purification” directed toward the survival of the particular in the face of the
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Drift to homogenization (Miller, 414). This process, which Miller refers to as “heterogenization,” is a mixed blessing: it preserves the particular, but introduces the risk that groups—including religious groups—will circle the wagons, excluding all that is “other,” in order to assert and defend their particular identity (Miller, 416–417). Consequently, “identity” becomes an absolute that not only fuels a combative “sectarian impulse” but is often “deterritorialized,” shorn of any direct relationship to a local community (Miller, 417–419). Here, then, is the manifestation of irony: the presumption that “we are all the same,” all part of a global culture, giving birth to groups focused on a belligerent defense of their particularity.

For their part, on the other hand, missiologists and social ethicists seek to avoid succumbing to either a homogenized sense of “the global” or a constricted sense of “the local.” Thus, they challenge the idea that the realization of the global, the universal, can come only at the expense of the local and particular. In so doing, they are applying to the social sphere the principles of catholicity that an earlier section of this paper examined: that God’s presence generates, rather than abolishes, differences; that the incarnation brings together divinity and humanity, without the obliteration of the latter; that the church is the product of the Holy Spirit and human freedom, a freedom that the Spirit promotes rather than stifles.

The alternative to catholicity, to an embrace of difference, of otherness, is a caricature of unity that produces “a weakening of the identity of the particular resulting in the same bland possibilities for experience. In contrast, catholic space allows human individuals to identify themselves as who they are in all their particularity” (Wong, 467). In order to be faithful to its vocation to catholicity, therefore, the church needs to challenge the homogenizing impact of globalization, seeking to replace it with “solidaristic practices where the ‘other’ is respected as other” (Mannion 2005, 212–13).

It is important to stress, however, that in affirming the local and particular, catholicity also challenges any tendency to isolation or hostility to relationship. If homogenization is un-catholic, so too are the types of heterogenization that result in communities, religious ones included, becoming “enclaves of the like-minded” that exclude difference (Miller, 420–421). The particular identity of a group, therefore, is not meant to be a shibboleth to keep out the other, but rather a platform from which to launch into dialogue with the other.
The theological principle that underpins the commitment to both unity and difference is the church's faithfulness to the catholic impulses of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit neither flattens out the particular nor quarantines specificity from otherness. In thus seeking to maintain the tension between the local and the universal, between catholicity and unity, the church needs to reappropriate constantly the conviction that “the reach of God's love is neither divisive nor oppressive but gathers up genuine difference in an inclusive wholeness” (Gaillardetz, 35).

Although the theological critics of globalization are trenchant in their condemnation of its flaws, they are far from being anarchists content to shake an angry fist at a G-20 gathering or Luddites basking in their ignorance of the difference between a BlackBerry and a blueberry. Rather, in seeking both the humanization of the world's economic system, so that it might become genuinely inclusive, and the commitment of the church to those who are the present victims of that system, the theological critics are articulating the implications of God’s reign for the church’s engagement with the world.

The church, therefore, is to witness to the primacy of God’s reign, which defies reduction either to fulfillment of our present desires or to the triumph of the market with its preference for efficiency via acceptable levels of collateral damage, downsizing, and outsourcing. The authentic mission of the church in the context of globalization is well expressed by John Fuellenbach:

If globalization could grow into global solidarity and cooperation also with the poor and marginalized, then it would mean greater unity among the peoples of the earth and a greater respect for the person, who is created in God’s image . . . in contrast to a society of competition and success, [the church] will understand itself as being on the side of those who drop out of this process since they can neither produce nor consume. (Fuellenbach 2002, 202)

Catholicity in the Context of Cultural Pluralism

As significant as the economic and social impact of globalization is, it is not the sole formative factor on the church’s mission today. Another major test arises from the fact that members of the church are immersed in the contemporary pluralism of religions and worldviews. How ought the church to respond to this development? Does it require, for example, that the church stop declaring the particularity of its own faith? Alternatively, does it suggest that the church ought to focus on converting others to its faith as a means of overcoming pluralism?

In what follows, those questions will be explored through the church’s encounter with cultural pluralism. More particularly, the endeavor will be to discuss the church’s response to pluralism in the light of the theology of catholicity that underpins this paper. The particular mechanism for doing so will be the Second Vatican Council’s commitment to what Karl Rahner named the “world-church.”
Rahner regarded Vatican II as making an axial shift in the life of the church, a shift equal to that expressed in the launching of the mission to the gentiles in the first century and the linking of Christian faith to Hellenistic-European civilization from the fourth century (Rahner 1979, 83–84). Each of those changes he attributed to a “secret instinct of the Spirit and of grace” (Rahner 1979, 85). As the basis for including Vatican II’s commitment to the world-church in his triad of church-defining moments, Rahner interpreted the term as meaning that the church of the future would not simply be composed of the whole world, but would accept responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel in a culturally and religiously diverse world. The expressions of this preparedness Rahner recognized in the council’s affirmation of God’s universal salvific will, its endorsement of religious freedom, and in its embrace of ecumenism (Rahner 1979, 81–82). Support for Rahner’s analysis would come also from three other aspects of the council’s teaching: its promotion of “communion” as fundamental to the church’s self-expression in history; its commitment to episcopal collegiality; and its encouragement of, in the formulation of Gaudium et Spes (GS), “a fruitful interchange . . . between the church and various cultures” (GS 44; Tanner, 2:1098).

The appeal of a church thus engaged with its own time and its own world, however, has dimmed for many in recent years as cultural pluralism has become more complex than anyone could have imagined in 1965. Indeed, concern at the potentially harmful effects of this pluralism has even promoted a tendency both to regard the Council’s presentation of the church-world relationship as naïve and to draw tighter lines of demarcation between “the church” and “the world.” In that trend, there are echoes of the move toward the constricted forms of heterogenization we explored above.

If there is to be an alternative to both the loss of identity that can result from pluralism and to efforts to bolster identity by stigmatizing diversity, we need to reframe the church’s relationship to culture in the light of catholicity. Here, three points can be made. First, as Richard Gaillardetz argues, the church has never possessed its own “autonomous faith culture” (Gaillardetz, 68). As a result, the need for inculturation is inseparable from authentic proclamation.
of the Gospel. While there have certainly been periods in which the church acted as what Rahner calls an “export firm,” dispatching a single vision of ecclesial life to all corners of the world, pluralism subverts the possibility that such a strategy could succeed today (Rahner 1979, 78).

A consistent application of the catholic worldview in a pluralist age is inseparable from the conviction that every culture, our own included, is a space that offers possibilities for reception of the Gospel. True, some cultural forms might seem to be more immediately sympathetic to that reception, but the catholic instinct recognizes that the Gospel “cannot be exhausted in just one culture, one structure, one organizational form” (Beinert, 474; original emphasis). This means that all sharing of the Gospel is other than the imposition of a monoculture. It is, rather, “an act of intercultural dialogue,” in which the Gospel both celebrates and critiques cultures (Gaillardetz, 71).

This openness to dialogue with culture ought not to exclude a priori even those cultures that seem subjectivist, which is, of course, the characterization most often applied to present-day western cultures. Such an exclusion would limit the capacity of the Holy Spirit to effect openness to the Word of God in every culture.

If, however, we understand proclamation of the Gospel as dialogue, what is required of its agents is, as James McEvoy puts it, the willingness to “engage intelligently with their interlocutors’ frame of meaning; condemning the culture as intrinsically subjectivist would deny interlocutors the opportunity to hear the gospel in words that make sense to them” (McEvoy, 894). The existence of the church as a “dialogical sacrament,” to use Walter Kasper’s designation, presumes the willingness to learn about, and from, the self-understanding of the “other,” rather than simply to impose our worldview (Kasper, 140).

Nor is dialogue tantamount to succumbing to relativism. Those who proclaim the Gospel need not abandon their recognition of God as the ultimate truth of human life; indeed, they might even appropriate that truth more deeply as the lives of the others with whom they are engaged in dialogue reveal the Spirit to them in new ways (McEvoy, 901–902). Dialogue, then, “provides a way to discover the fullness of our own faith, so that, paradoxically, we can offer it to others with a bolder humility and a humbler boldness” (Bevans and Schroeder, 379–380).
Second, the catholic worldview, with its emphasis on Christ in relation to all dimensions of life, is not merely alert to the need to counter injustice, but is also able to rejoice, as Avery Dulles expresses it, “in everything good and wholesome, no matter by whom achieved” (Dulles, 177). In particular, the church has a basis for a strong relationship with what Dulles, in a paradoxical phrase, names “partial catholicities”—philosophy, science, politics, economics, art, and recreation—as these too underscore the multiple dimensions of human living (Dulles, 178). Fostering a relationship with these other “catholic” realities can be a way in which the church witnesses to its conviction that the reign of God is already at work in our world. The church’s openness to all manifestations of the Spirit, its willingness to cultivate “all that is true and beautiful and ‘of good report’” can be a means “to persuade non-believers that religion itself is no dusty, morbid relic of the past, serving only guilt-ridden neurotics” (Rist, 320). Accordingly, an authentically catholic church will understand its mission in regard to God’s kingdom as being “to ‘sniff it out’, raise people’s awareness of it, and celebrate it where it makes itself present” (Fuellenbach 2001, 237).

Third, if the church is to witness authentically to the newness and possibility of God’s reign, which is not culturally specific, but able to be expressed in every culture, we must be alert to our need for conversion as a church, alert to where we are called, individually and communally, to a holiness that does not simply mirror existing social values. Accordingly, as Shawn Copeland argues, “we must repudiate all exclusionary symbols, values, criteria, and practices . . . we must support creative initiatives in the development of new symbols and practices, in the articulation of new values and criteria for a life of human flourishing” (Copeland, 22).

Catholicity and Dialogue within the Church

The mission to dialogue with a culturally pluralistic society, no less than the mission to solidarity in a global world, is a mission that must also shape the inner life of the church. This requires the bridging of divisions both between churches and within each church. Although there is obviously much that could be discussed about the prospects for, and obstacles to, growth in communion between churches, the focus of this final section of the paper will be on relationships within the Catholic Church, on the possibility for a greater realization of the catholic spirit that is a sine qua non for openness to other Christians. More particularly, the emphasis will be on both the diversity intrinsic to catholicity and the dialogue necessary to ensure the maintenance of a proper tension between that diversity and the need for unity.

Diversity is no less evident in the church than it is in the world. If the diversity of peoples and cultures in the world can be understood as expressing the breadth
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Dialogue embodies the catholic reach of the Spirit in the church.

Dialogue, however, is also hard work as it requires engagement with disagreements and differences. Consequently, it is easier, as has often happened in the church, to reject the challenge “to display towards others within, just as to those outside, that very Christian love that is meant to characterize the Christian life” (Mannion 2007, 150).

Dialogue within the church does not mean that there will be immediate harmony in the relationship between local churches and the church as a whole, between the pope and the bishops, or between the bishops and the rest of the faithful, nor will it necessarily ensure the disappearances of differences concerning the meaning of ordination, let alone whether gender ought to be determinative of access to ordination. Nonetheless, dialogue embodies the catholic reach of the Spirit in the church. It is dialogue with those with whom we differ within our family of faith that opens the possibility that what Johann Baptist Metz refers to as our “oh-so-certain discourse about God” might well open up into “helpless discourse with God” (Metz, 28). Dialogue, in short, can encourage us all to mind the gap that exists between God and our ideas about God (Dalferth, 22).

The alternatives to dialogue all tend toward the polarization that we experience too often as Catholics. Polarization might leave us with the comfort of being surrounded by those of our own party, but it is not only unproductive. In fact, it is the negation of catholicity. The fact that polarization manages to be simultaneously sterile and destructive, that it undermines both unity and charity, is captured well by Nicholas Lash, who defines polarization as “the dramatized simplification of disagreement to the point where there appear to be two and only two approaches possible (and these two locked in mutual incomprehension and distaste)” (Lash, 231).
An authentically catholic church will be one whose members canonize neither polarization nor “stagnation and the peace of the graveyard” (Rahner 1970, 54; my translation). Such a church will be messy, as its members struggle to discern God’s desire for their life and mission. Catholicity, however, is not a synonym for neatness or for what Metz names “a mythical realm of tensionless harmony and questionless reconciliation with ourselves” (Metz, 68). On the other hand, catholicity is a synonym for richness, as the diversity of creation, to say nothing of God’s trinitarian life, attests. As such, it remains, irreducibly, a gift of the Spirit. Our constant task, then, is to be alert to that Spirit, who forms us as saints, as people “in whom there has taken place the discovery of a grace-given individuality in a selfless opening of the innermost kernel of the person’s being towards God and so towards all spiritual persons” (Rahner 1969, 139). A church of such saints, which is what the Spirit enables us all to be, would be truly catholic.

References


