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✠ Lecture II: The Notes of The Church ✠

A central theme of ecclesiology relates to the four ‘notes’ or ‘marks’ of the Church i.e. the four defining characteristics of the Christian Church, as stated in the Nicene Creed. The creed affirms belief in “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”. The four adjectives included in this phrase – “One”, “Holy”, “Catholic”, and “Apostolic” – have come to be known as the ‘notes’ or ‘marks’ of the Church. In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, consider each briefly.

✠ One ✠

The Church is one in faith, doctrines, and spirituality as St. Paul said, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (**Eph 4:4-5**) Our Lord said about the unity of the Church, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and **there will be one flock and one shepherd**” (**Jn 10:16**) Indeed, our Lord came that “He would gather together **in one** the children of God who were scattered abroad” (**Jn 11:52**). The Church unity (oneness) is emphasized through the following examples:

1. The Church as the body of the Lord:

- “Christ is head of the church” (**Eph 5:23**)
- “He is the head of the body, the church” (**Col 1:18**)
- “His body, which is the church” (**Col 1:24**)
- “So we, being many, are one body (Church) in Christ” (**Rom 12:5**)
- “You (as a Church) are the body of Christ, and members individually” (**1Cor 12:27**)
- “We are members of His body (the Church)” (**Eph 5:30**)
- “He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (**Eph 4:11-12**)

→ Obviously, the Lord Jesus Christ has **one** body about which it was said, “Not one of His bones shall be broken” (**Ex 12:46; Num 9:12; Jn 20:36**). St. Athanasius said that this was a sign of the unity and oneness of the Church, which is not to be divided by heretics.

→ Sometimes the word ‘church’ and ‘Christ’ are used interchangeably: “as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, **so also is Christ**” (**1Cor 12:12**) St. Paul wonders, “**Is Christ divided?**” (**1Cor 1:13**) and since “there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (**1Tim 2:5**) therefore, there is only one Church and outside its bounds salvation is impossible. “**Outside the Church there is no salvation**” (St. Cyprian of Carthage)

2. The Church as the bride of the Lord:

- “I have been sent before Him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom” (**Jn 3:28-29**)
- “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church” (**Eph 5:25**)
- “I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (**2Cor 11:2**)
- “Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready and to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the linen is the righteous acts of the saints” (**Rev 19:7-8**)

→ Christianity does not teach polygamy and since the Church is the Lord’s bride, therefore the Church is one as was written, “My dove, my perfect one, is the only one” (**Song 6:9**).

Q1. How can we speak of ‘one church’, when there are many churches mentioned in the Holy Bible?

A. The word ‘churches’ signifies the places where they were established in order to distinguish each from the other, “then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied” (**Acts 9:31**) In the Holy Book of Revelation we read about the seven churches in Asia (**Rev 1:11**) yet all these Churches are members of the One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church as St. Paul affirms, “We, being many, are **one** body in Christ” (**Rom 12:5**)

Q2. How do Protestant churches fit in this definition of the ‘one’ Church?

A. They don’t. St. Cyprian of Carthage insisted upon the absolute unity of the Church, comparing it to the ‘seamless robe of our Lord’, which could not be divided because it had been woven from the top throughout. Destroy its unity, and its identity was simultaneously devastated. (*On the Unity of the Catholic Church*) St. John said, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they may be made manifest, that none of them were of us.” (**1Jn 2: 9**) The thousands Protestant denominations are not part of the Church and it is theologically wrong to call them churches!

✠ Holy ✠

The term ‘holy’ has both a theological and a moral dimension. On the theological level, the concept of ‘holiness’ has the sense of ‘being separated’: To be ‘holy’ is to be set apart for and dedicated to the service of God. The Church members are holy because they have been separated from the world, on account of their having been called by God. The Church has been separated from the world, in order to bear witness to the grace and salvation of God.

- “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but **I chose you out of the world**, therefore the world hates you” (**Jn 15:19**)
- “I have given them Your word; and the world hated them because **they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world**. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. **They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world**. Sanctify them by Your truth.” (**Jn 17:14-17**)
- “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a **holy nation**, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of **Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light**” (**2Pet 2:9**)
- “**Do not be conformed to this world**, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (**Rom 12:2**)
- “This is the will of God, your sanctification” (**1Thess 4:3**)

To speak of the ‘holiness of the church’ is to speak primarily of the holiness of the One who called her, “For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness” (**1Thess 4:7**) “that we may be partakers of His holiness” (**Heb 12:10**). The Church is holy not only through her calling and separation from the world but also through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Sacraments.

- “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be **holy** and without blemish” (**Eph 5:25-27**)
- “You have an anointing from the Holy One” (**1Jn 2:20**)
- “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God” (**1Cor 6:19**)

On the moral level, the Church is holy because her members are holy:

- “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love” (**Eph 1:4**)
- “As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (**1Pet 1:15**)
- “Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling” (**Heb 3:1**)
- “Put away from yourselves the evil person” (**1Cor 5:13**)
- “I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person” (**1Cor 5:11**)

✠ **The Donatists Controversy:** (Adapted from ‘*Christian Theology: an Introduction*’ by Alister E. McGrath)

The Donatists were a group of native African Christians, based in modern-day Algeria, who argued that the Church was a body of saints, within which sinners had no place. The issue became of especial importance on account of the persecution undertaken by Emperor Diocletian in 303, which persisted until the conversion of Constantine and the issuing of the Edict of Milan in 313. Christian books were ordered to be burned and churches demolished. Those Christian leaders who handed over their books to be burned came to be known as *traditores* – “those who handed over”. The modern word “traitor” derives from the same root. They were immediately condemned by others who had refused to cave in under such pressure. After the persecution died down, many of these *traditores* rejoined the Church. The Donatists argued for their exclusion.

St. Augustine argued otherwise, declaring that the church must expect to remain a “mixed body” of saints and (repented) sinners, refusing to weed out those who had lapsed under persecution or for other reasons. He finds this image in two biblical parables: the parable of the net, which catches many fishes (**Mt 13:47-50**), and the parable of the wheat and the tares (**Mt 13:24-31**). The validity of the Church’s ministry and preaching did not depend upon the holiness of its ministers, but upon the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. The personal unworthiness of a minister did not compromise the validity of the sacraments. This view, which rapidly became normative within the Church, has had a deep impact upon Christian thinking about the nature of the Church and its ministers.

✠ **Comments:**

St. Paul said, “that we should be **holy** and **without blame** before Him” (**Eph 1:4**), St. John said, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (**1Jn 1:8**). St. John Chrysostom commented on the words of St. Paul saying that being ‘without blame’ is a higher level than being ‘holy’. Therefore, repented sinners striving against sin may be still considered ‘holy’ yet not ‘without blame’.

Our Lord said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (**Mt 9:12-13**). Therefore, when St. Paul said, “Put away from yourselves the evil person” (**1Cor 5:13**) he was doing that in order to lead him to repentance and when this man repented, St. Paul wrote back to the Church saying, “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love to him” (**2Cor 2:6-7**). “Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and **holiness, without which no one will see the Lord**” (**Heb 12:12**).

Holiness also applies to the doctrine and the teachings of the Church therefore, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (**2Jn 10**). The Church is holy in her life, her spirituality, her doctrines, her Sacraments, her leadership, and her people, she is holy in everything.

✠ Catholic ✠

In modern English, the term “catholic” is often confused, especially in non-religious circles, with “Roman Catholic”. Although this confusion is understandable, the distinction must be maintained. The term “catholic” derives from the Greek phrase *kath’ holon* (“referring to the whole”). The Greek words subsequently found their way into the Latin word *catholicus*, which came to have the meaning “universal or general”. This sense of the word is retained in the English phrase “catholic taste”, meaning a “wide-ranging taste” rather than a “taste for things that are Roman Catholic”. Older versions of the English Holy Bible often refer to some of the New Testament letters (such as those of St. James and St. John) as “Catholic Epistles”, meaning that they are directed to all Christians (rather than those of St. Paul, which are directed to the needs and situations of individual identified Churches, such as those at Rome or Corinth). (Alister E. McGrath: *Christian Theology: An Introduction*)

The Catholicity of the Church is highlighted in the following verses:

- “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creature” (**Mk 16:15**)
- “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all” (**Col 3:11**)
- “You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (**Rev 5:9**)
- “Behold, a great number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands” (**Rev 7:9**)

All the local Churches (Egyptian, Syrian, Ethiopian, Armenian, etc.) form the One Holy Catholic (Universal) Church that brings believers together in one faith, one Baptism and one Eucharist. The Roman Catholic Church has a different understanding of “catholicity”; they believe that their local church (Rome) represents the “catholic” church and all the other local Churches must be under the leadership of the Pope of Rome to be considered part of the Catholic Church. This view will be refuted in a separate lecture, God willing, when we discuss the alleged primacy of St. Peter.

✠ Apostolic ✠

The term “apostolic” means “originating and having direct link with the apostles” and also “keeping the apostolic faith”. We, as Copts, are proud to have St. Mark the Evangelist and the Apostle as the founder of our Church. Today Pope Shenouda III is the Pope number 117 of the **unbroken** chain of Popes; this is Apostolic Succession in its finest.

- “Having been built on the **foundation of the apostles** and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself the chief corner stone” (**Eph 2:20**)
- “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we (the apostles) have preached to you, let him be accursed. And as we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed” (**Gal 1:8-9**)

This last verse applies to non-apostolic denominations (Protestants). It is understood and expected that this statement may not please some but fortunately St. Paul provided us with a reply, “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (**Gal 1:10**)