

**Zeitschrift:** Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie

**Band:** 4 (1914)

**Heft:** 3

**Artikel:** What is Catholicism?

**Autor:** Roger, C.F.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403850>

### Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 31.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## What is Catholicism ?

---

Questions are sometimes put to us that reveal us to ourselves. They show us that ideas may be very real but still undefined; and often, when such are asked us and we try to answer them, we find the task of clearing our thoughts made all the harder by the fact that the expressions challenged deal with matters that touch us very nearly. We cannot be indifferent and analyse them with the detachment required for clear thought, while the problem is often still further complicated by the fact that many definitions, are already in the field. Thus if the question is asked us “What do you mean by Catholic?” we shall probably realise how vague our ideas are; it will reveal to us the fact that we are mistaking vivid and inspiring ideas, ideas that we care about, for clear ideas and ideas that we have thought out.

In such cases the first thing is to see what already occupies the ground and find out what is meant by terms in common use. This involves an examination of their history to learn what various ideas expressed themselves by them, and how those ideas have survived in the speech and thought of to-day. What, then, is the history, and what are the meanings of the word “Catholic”?

### I.

At the birth of the Church it was a common word for “universal”; people used it in speaking of history, of laws, of truths, of precepts. So, naturally, it was used quite early of the whole Church as distinguished from local communities<sup>1)</sup>. But the second century of our era saw the rise of rival bodies of semi-pagan Gnostics and of dissident Christians such as the Marcionites and

---

<sup>1)</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*. London 1889. Vol. I, p. 310. Ad Smyrn. VIII. Note ad loc. Cp. also F. Cabrol, *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie chrétienne*. Art. “Catholique”.

Montanists, and various questions were brought to the fore: "Was their teaching correct? Where did they get their ideas from? Were they the same as those which the Apostles taught, or had they broken away from tradition? Did they use the same form of confession of faith when they baptized converts? Were their books to be read? Which were genuine works? Were their officials, their bishops and their teachers, to be recognised?"; and so the big organized Church with its creed, its canon of Scripture, its apostolic tradition and ministry, its valid sacraments and common life, was contrasted as catholic with the various smaller local bodies with their unorthodox teaching, their doubtful literature, and their newly invented organization. The matter was a practical one. In times of persecution men who were asked what kind of Christians they were, "of what Church" replied "of the Catholic Church" <sup>1)</sup>. A fourth century writer could say "Christian is my name, Catholic my surname" <sup>2)</sup>. The special meaning had passed into popular use. Augustine could be confident that anyone asking a stranger the way to the "catholic church" would be directed to one where orthodox churchmen worshipped and not to that of the Donatists <sup>3)</sup>. The use of the word as a title had grown up from practical considerations.

This is not to say that it was used without reflection or theory as to its meaning. In teaching catechumens their creed Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century explained that the Church was called catholic for three reasons, because it was spread over the whole world, because it taught all things that a man needs to know, and because it met the necessities of all and delivered from all sins <sup>4)</sup>. Similarly Augustine in his manual for instruction of candidates for baptism dwells on the unity of faith and organization of the Church <sup>5)</sup>; but the interest in both cases is rather that of edification than of theology or philosophy. Such teachers wanted to help members of their flock who were not much interested in ideas. There was no call for any fundamental analysis of the meaning of catholicity, of its nature and authority. They were not

---

<sup>1)</sup> Martyrium S. Pionii. IX. *Ausgewählte Märtyrerakten*. O. v. Gebhardt. Berlin 1902, p. 103.

<sup>2)</sup> Pacian. Epist. I, 4. Ad Sempron. M. P. L. XIII, col. 1055.

<sup>3)</sup> Contra Epist. Fundamenti IV, 5. M. P. L. XLII, col. 176.

<sup>4)</sup> Catech. XVIII, 23.

<sup>5)</sup> De Fide et Symbolo, 21.

concerned to argue out why, if a thing was catholic, it had weight. Peoples, churches, and creeds were Catholic; they were there as facts, but there was no criterion by which to judge of their abstract catholicity. Even Augustine's great description of the Church as the City of God as compared with the Empire of the Romans was called out by the practical dismay of men at the fall of Rome.

A little later Vincent of Lerins stumbled on a phrase which has since become an accepted definition. He believed that what Augustine was teaching about Grace was untrue, and argued that local minorities in the Church are wrong; but since he remembered that Arianism had for a time prevailed almost universally, he added that this must be checked by noting the staying power of truth. First, said he, see what is held everywhere, *quod ubique*, and then see if it has come down unbrokenly from the past, *quod semper*, while he added yet a third criterion that truth recommends itself to the whole Christian people, *quod ab omnibus*. This wider and more historical view led him to recognise development in the expression of truth, provided that it was a real evolution of what was already involved and not a change or innovation<sup>1)</sup>. But his use of his definition was merely as an *argumentum ad hominem*, a stick to beat Augustine with, or at least with which to give him a silent dig. It is with him really little more than mere conservatism, and the idea is not followed up, as, indeed, there was no reason why it should be.

With the growth of the mediaeval Western Church its organization and power was centralised continually more and more at Rome. Christian life became more and more uniform. The absence of rivals to the Western Catholic Church,—for the East living in a different world, harassed and threatened, passed out of consideration—made analysis of Catholicity unnecessary. Every feature which existed was naturally regarded as catholic, though, it would seem, with no very particular stress on the fact.

At the Reformation, however, a sharp division was made in Continental Europe, and one which tended to grow more marked as time went on. The world was divided into Protestant and Catholic. The former was identified with all that was found in the actual Roman Church, and those who claimed the latter name branded all they disliked in that Church as catholic, using the

---

<sup>1)</sup> *Commonitorium* II, 3, and XXIII.

word as signifying something to be abhorred. The features common to both which survived in Lutheranism tended continually to disappear, and have only remained by the force of conservatism. This is still the ordinary use of the word on the Continent. So Prof. Harnack writes “the nations of Western Europe still live as Catholics or Protestants. There is as yet no third course open. Luther has created this condition of things”<sup>1)</sup>.

This conception, being in the field, is analysed by theologians. One declares that the essence of Catholicism is legalism<sup>2)</sup>. Others identify it with institutionalism. Its origin is explained as being a secularising of primitive Christianity<sup>3)</sup>. The date at which it appears is variously estimated. Prof. Harnack, who identifies it with Romanism<sup>4)</sup>, declares that in essence it is to be found in the Apostolic Church<sup>5)</sup>. M. Batiffol consequently has little difficulty in proving that, if this is so, it was the teaching of Our Lord Himself, and that to declare that it “grew automatically out of the brotherly association of the men who had found God through Jesus”<sup>6)</sup> is to import a modern Ritschlian phrase and idea into the Gospels which would have been quite meaningless to a Jew<sup>7)</sup>. Meanwhile this catholicism, which is acknowledged to be primitive, is regarded as a thing to be deplored and fought, even by men who, like Prof. Harnack, are generous in admitting that there is much to be admired in, and even learnt from, the Roman Church.

In England the Reformation took a different course. While the Romanists and Puritans maintained the mediaeval use of the word “catholic”, the one as equivalent to authoritative, the other as a term of reproach, the Church claimed the title and, fighting for her position as the old church of the land, insisted on an accu-

---

<sup>1)</sup> The closing words of his *Entstehung und Entwicklung der Kirchenverfassung und des Kirchenrechts in den zwei ersten Jahrhunderten*, Leipzig 1901. Engl. tr. *The Constitution and Law of the Church in the first two centuries*. Williams and Norgate's *Crown Theological Library*, p. 172.

<sup>2)</sup> So R. Sohm, *Wesen und Ursprung des Katholizismus*. Teubner 1909. New Edition with a reply to Dr. Harnack's criticisms, 1912.

<sup>3)</sup> A. Harnack, *Constitution and Law of the Church*, p. 254. *Dogmengeschichte*. Auf. IV, B. II, 1, S. 303—438.

<sup>4)</sup> *Dogmengesch.* B. I. S. 439—454. Exkurs. *Katholisch und Römisch*.

<sup>5)</sup> *Constitution*, pp. 250, 253.

<sup>6)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>7)</sup> P. Batiffol, *L'Eglise naissante et le catholicisme*. 5<sup>me</sup> éd., p. XIX. Paris, Gabalda. 1911.

rate terminology. She retained the word not only in her canons and official and legal documents, but also in her creeds, in her worship, in her Bidding Prayer. *Roman* Catholic to this day is the legal term for those who acknowledge the authority of the Pope. In popular use the term Catholic is no doubt used, especially by the less educated, for Roman Catholic. This is a legacy from Puritanism, which is often strengthened by the influence of German theological works. But the fact that the word was familiar in public prayer helped the Catholic revival of eighty years ago to restore the more accurate use of the word to common speech. When the Oxford Movement became popular in the second generation, the interest, which in early days had been centered on questions of doctrine and government, passed to customs of ceremonial and devotion, and men began to speak of catholic customs, catholic practices and catholic rites. The term, now well established, is often applied, with no sound reason, to what people have grown accustomed to in certain "high" churches, or even to what strikes them as new, to things seen abroad or read about at home. Some few in searching for a criterion for this catholicity have found it in the authority of the Roman See, but the majority of such "ritualists"—or "spikes", for the type is common enough to have created a slang term—<sup>1)</sup> do not care much for ideas. The authority they attribute to these customs has been felt instinctively in that they are associated with a movement that is intensely alive, and they have applied the term equally by instinct and perhaps a little indiscriminately.

There is yet another, a literary use based on the original meaning of the word. We speak of men "of catholic tastes", or "of catholic views", meaning men of liberal opinions or of broad human culture. This by a certain laxity of expression is made to fall in with popular looseness of thought and often comes to mean little more than "vague" or "indefinite". Thus there are at least four uses of the word in current English, that of students and educated people generally who know the historical meaning of the word, that of the masses who with continental Protestants and all ultramontanes identify it with *Roman* Catholic, that of "ritua-

---

<sup>1)</sup> The term is applied to the type of younger man whose zeal sometimes outruns his discretion. The idea seems originally to have been that of something narrow, sharp, and unyielding, but it is used quite good naturedly, and is not resented by those to whom it is applied.

lists" who apply it chiefly to customs and devotions on no very clearly reasoned grounds, and that of literature which has little or no ecclesiastical signification <sup>1)</sup>.

So it comes about that in discussion about catholicity we are generally all at cross purposes. We all mean different things. Is there any common feature in these four ideas that will harmonise them? Or rather, is there any larger conception of catholicity that will include and interpret them all?

## II.

"The transference of Christianity" writes Amiel "from the region of history to the region of psychology is the great craving of our time. What we are trying to arrive at is the eternal Gospel" <sup>2)</sup>. How are we to arrive at the Gospel which is eternal or catholic, and therefore has all the authority of truth?

Has not the difficulty been perhaps due to the fact that we have approached the question through external symptoms and have been content to rest in them and judge them by external standards instead of passing through them to the fundamental and unchanging facts of human nature? Is it not the case that things last, develop, grow, and become permanent, in proportion as they meet the needs of, and satisfy, human nature? that in proportion as things do this they work out in the course of ages to permanence, extent, and universality, to existence *semper, ubique, atque in omnibus*, in short, to what is catholic? This fact will explain the common features of various forms of catholic things. The primitive Church spread because she satisfied men's religious needs and instincts. She was sacramental from the first because man is body and spirit, institutional because man is *Φύσει πολιτικός*, legal because society is based on law. She framed creeds because the human intellect demands explanations of experience, because simple men needed to know the conditions of entrance into her corporate life. The Roman Church gave, and still gives, a marvellous illustration of her catholicity, not because of the accident of her centralisation at Rome, but because she is built up of many men and various

<sup>1)</sup> For a complete account of the various meanings of the word in English with historical illustrations see J. A. H. Murray's *New Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Oxford 1893. "Catholic" and "Anglo-Catholic". The latter term seems only to date from 1841.

<sup>2)</sup> Journal, Jan. 27, 1869.

races, of different orders and rival classes, who worship at one altar and say all one creed in virtue of their common humanity<sup>1)</sup>. The English high-churchman may be narrow-minded, but he is just so much more broadminded than similar men of his class in proportion as he has got hold of great elemental facts of human nature and has experienced the permanent value of symbol and custom, nay, he is just the man to find out new features of religious life that by their intrinsic authority may add to our stock of catholic truth and practice ; while in so far as scholar, Romanist and "ritualist" are catholic they are so in the literary sense because they all three are insisting on the need of something larger and broader than the narrow ideas of the natural man.

If this be the true criterion of catholicism it throws us back on our doctrine of man, and at the outset a caution is needed. A thing is not right merely because it is human. A spurious catholicism is possible, or rather, shall we say, a catholicism of evil. For the natural man is fallen. This is a fact of experience. Christianity accepts the fact, interprets it, has a philosophy as to its cause, and offers a remedy for its consequences, but the fact depends on none of these. It is there. The corruption of man's heart remains whether you accept the Christian creed or not.

Moreover the evil is intensified when men are united. By the "psychology of the crowd" as it is popularly called, the greatest common measure of a multitude of men gains irresistible force. Hegel's theory that "God is perpetually incarnating himself in

---

<sup>1)</sup> Cp. J. N. Figgis, *Churches in the Modern State*. Longmans, London 1913, p. 152.

"In practice a doctrine so deeply at variance with the facts of life (as the doctrine that the Pope is the Church) is less dangerous than appears. For human nature always goes on, even if you deny that it exists, and the actual Roman Communion, made up of many peoples, nations and languages, containing innumerable guilds and societies, and countless orders and fellowships, and embracing Churches of the most diverse intellectual and emotional climate, stretching in unbroken continuity through all the centuries—that body has within her inexhaustless springs of beauty and flowers of a rich and overflowing piety; she exhales from her million Churches a perfume as of the prayers of the saints throughout the ages, and still contains such springs of love and sacrifice, that no stone ought to be cast at her. Also, to a large extent, she remains the Church of the poor. Ultramontanism as a juristic and social doctrine is what we combat—not the actual catholic life of Spanish, or Irish, or Bavarian Christians. From all of them we have more to learn than we think."

humanity in the life of men”<sup>1)</sup> is profoundly untrue if it means that “the only true authority in matters theologic, scientific, or historical is the authority of the common reason and experience of the race”<sup>2)</sup>. In government, majorities of ordinary men constitute the worst tyranny; in judgment, they infallibly go wrong.

Just as in the Apocalypse Antichrist is set over against the Lamb, and Babylon the great Harlot over against the Church, so there will always be a counter-catholicism. “The source of great heresies of belief” wrote Richard Bagehot “lies in their congeniality to certain types of character frequent in the world and liable to be reproduced by inevitable and recurring circumstances”<sup>3)</sup>. We need some further criterion than merely that which appeals to the natural man.

Catholicism, that is, must be Christian to be authoritative. Now Christianity starts with two great assumptions, that man is capable of redemption, and that human nature has, as a matter of fact, been redeemed by Christ.

Man is capable of redemption. He is fallen may be, but he is created in the image of God. As Pascal wrote, he is “a king dethroned”<sup>4)</sup>. Christianity has no *a priori* objection to democracy or to collectivism. Men are all capable of redemption and the mass may as a whole be right. There is no necessary contradiction between Caesar and God “so long as Caesar’s self be God’s”.

And Christianity declares that Christ has, as a matter of fact, taken human nature and been crucified in it. He has risen again, and is in his people and they in Him. He has lived in the world since he ascended into heaven and the catholicizing of his teaching was due, not to its being secularised, but to the fact that He, through the men in whom he dwelt, took things that before were of this world, the learning of Greece, the law of Rome, and assimilated them and sanctified them and transformed them. Therefore in taking the opinions or experience of men in order to find out what is catholic and authoritative only those in Christ count. Now union with Christ involves being crucified with Him. Just as voluntary

---

<sup>1)</sup> V. F. Storr, *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Longmans, London 1913, p. 152.

<sup>2)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>3)</sup> *Literary Studies: “Bishop Butler”* Dent’s Everymans Library, London. Vol. II, p. 69.

<sup>4)</sup> *Pensées*. Ed. Brunschvieg. № 498.

associations succeed where state institutions fail, because they make demands on their members and put duties before rights, so the conditions of the corporate opinion of Christians having authority is that the individuals from whom it is drawn shall be picked men tested by self-sacrifice, in other words that they are incorporated into a Church which it costs something to belong to. In proportion as this ceases to be true of the Church does she lose her authority, but where Christ is working freely through human nature in her she accumulates a vast store of Christian knowledge and experience, which acquires an enormous claim on the acceptance of men. *Securus judicat orbis terrarum*<sup>1)</sup> is true of things in proportion as they fulfil this test of catholicity.

### III.

If this be a true analysis of the nature of catholicity two consequences will follow; there will be degrees in the catholicity of things; and certain features of religious life will, in spite of their late appearance in history, be able to make out their claim to be catholic.

The idea of degrees in catholicity will seem strange to anyone who, identifying catholicism with a particular Church, holds that every feature of its life is equally catholic and equally authoritative, but it is not difficult to see that there are different degrees in which things commend themselves as in accordance with human nature at its best. Some features of religion seem to be absolutely catholic and are inseparable from the life of the Church. The two great sacraments existed from the beginning and are (as our English Church Catechism says) "generally necessary"; from the study of comparative religion we see how human nature reached out for them; from the Gospels we see how Christ meets this need; from theology we learn how they harmonise both with the Incarnation and with man's double nature as body and soul. Similarly catholic are the customs of prayer and of worship; the two creeds and all that they involve, the episcopate and continuous organic life of the Church. Some features, on the other hand, are temporal and were specially called out by the circumstances of

---

<sup>1)</sup> Aug. *Contra Epistolam Parmeniani*. Lib. III, 24. M. P. L. XLIII, col. 101. Readers of Newman's *Apologia pro Vita sua* will remember the important part this phrase played in his defection from the Church of England.

the age that saw them appear; they are valid to-day only in so far as the same circumstances are repeated. Thus much that the mediaeval Church elaborated when she was disciplining the barbarous races of the north re-appears as necessary to-day in missions among savage heathen. The rules and conditions of monasticism drawn up in the fourth century need to be adapted and altered if the institution is permanent in itself and is to prove itself suited to the needs of to-day. Other features are local and national, with authority for those peoples among whom they obtain but only for those peoples. National Churches may, and must, work out their own features of religious life. What is natural and suitable for warm countries cannot be imposed on inhabitants of colder lands unless they can be shown to be inherent in human, not merely in national, character. Again, other features have been permanent and universal but only among certain classes, different ages, or of one sex. It is not necessary for every custom to fulfil all the three conditions of the Vincentian canon. There are consequently varying degrees of authority with which a truth is presented to us, and varying degrees of confidence with which we can recommend different practices. The condemnation of certain views that are put forwards for men's acceptance as alternatives for catholic Christianity is that they are not, and cannot be, intelligible to all. "Une religion purement intellectuelle serait plus proportionée aux habiles; mais elle ne servirait pas au peuple. La seule religion chrétienne est proportionnée à tous, étant mêlée d'intérieur et d'extérieur" <sup>1)</sup>). Nothing can be insisted on as absolutely catholic which is not suitable for all in virtue of their human nature. Things may be more or less catholic in proportion as they reveal the working in man of Christ the wholly catholic man, the same yesterday, to day, and for ever, at the right hand of God in his elect, *qui semper, qui ubique qui a fidelibus cunctis.*

Secondly, a thing may be catholic though not yet shown as such. It may have been kept back from expression by externals. Many permanent features of Christian life only appeared for the first time in the fourth century when the conversion of the Empire took away that which restrained them. Others may be waiting till new nations enter the Church and give some revelation of new elements of human nature. India, China, and Japan may

---

<sup>1)</sup> Pensées. Ed. Brunsvic. N° 251.

well have lessons for us in the Western world which will permanently enlarge our knowledge of what man is. Others may have appeared late with lately developed conditions of society; the mass populations of our large towns, and the increased complexity of life, are showing human nature as something more rich and varied than we had realised before. Others may depend on new discoveries; the printing press, artificial light, scientific inventions, the development of art, all open up, or have opened up, new possibilities of permanent enrichment of our conception of what human life is capable of, and with such developments may come new features of religion that "come to stay", that will ultimately establish themselves as catholic. As human nature develops we may well grow to a further understanding of all that is involved in the Christian Creeds. The Christ of experience will reveal himself more and more to us, and there will be a growing catholicity in the worship and practices of the Church if merely from the length of time that they will have stood.

#### IV.

- Certain practical conclusions are obvious. Let us notice three. The catholicity of the Church is imperfectly realised as long as any person is outside. The harm of division in Christendom is being more and more realised by men, but all who call themselves catholics have always instinctively felt the horror of schism. For it prevents the emergence of truth, and robs the world of the moral guidance it so sorely needs. Whether the fault lies with those who separate, or with those who have made separation a necessity, is always hard to say, but this at least is certain, it is only in a catholic Christianity that they can be united again.

Again, this view of catholicism must surely give a great impulse to mission work, to home-missions as well as to work abroad. For as long as whole classes remain outside, our presentation of Christianity remains imperfect. Whether it be the educated, the artistic, or the wage earning classes that are alienated, or if the Church commends herself only to one sex, the result is seen in an ignorant, an ugly, or unreal, or it may be merely masculine, or merely feminine, interpretation of life. And conversely only a catholic Christianity is adequate for all.

Finally, Catholicity is a greater thing that we have yet seen. With the development of human nature and life, with the oncoming

of new ages, with the formation of new nations, with the birth of new men that the future has in store, truth will goever continually widening and broadening, life will gain in richness and colour, as through men in whom He dwells will He be revealed who is, we believe, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

V.

This is the task before us, to prepare the highway in the desert. What part will English speaking Catholics, what part will German speaking Catholics, take in interpreting each their own peoples and so bringing nearer this end?

Clement. F. ROGERS, M.A.  
Lecturer in Pastoral Theology, King's College  
University of London.

---