

Introduction

Michael J. Daley

A few months ago, on successive evenings, I was out with two friends. During the course of our conversations, they both asked if I was working on any writing projects. “Yes,” I replied, “I’m working on a book about the marks of the church.” Polite nods followed but they didn’t appear to have any idea as to the nature of the project. In an attempt to give my friends an understanding of the book I was working on, I offered them the word “one.” On both occasions it was met with a long, confused pause. Then I said “holy.” Looking at them I could tell that they were trying to make the connection between the phrase “the marks of the church” and the words “one” and “holy.” To no avail. By “catholic” it clicked though. They were able to finish it out and end with “apostolic.”

More than likely we’ve all said them (or grew up saying them)—“one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” They are the traditional and classic marks of the church. After a lifetime of repetition, though, these words, and with it the whole of the Nicene Creed, have lost some of their meaning for many people in the church. (See Luke Timothy Johnson’s piece on the Church as creedal, beginning on page 100.) Perhaps we’ve fallen victim to the importance of valuing memorization over lived faith. Maybe familiarity has bred contempt or, at least, indifference. Whatever the case, the marks’ present “sleep-inducing” quality is unfortunate. There is so much potential for the marks to challenge and form the church. Recognized as such or not, they are said each Sunday in the recitation of the Nicene Creed during the liturgy. Similarly, they are affirmed during celebrations of the sacrament of baptism with family, friends and community. With this present state in mind, it is high time to retrieve the significance of the traditional marks of the church. Likewise, it is also time to explore other marks that characterize or should characterize the church today.

The goal of the book, then, is to offer a picture of the church that is broad, inclusive and relevant to our situation in the twenty-first century.

Prefaced by a historical grounding of the four traditional marks, Part One examines the four classic marks of the church and explores their meaning for us today. In Part Two the contributors to the book identify additional marks that either already characterize (describe, or are descriptive of) the church or should characterize (prescribe, or are prescriptive of) the church as it moves into the future. By including a description of both classic and contemporary marks of the church, *The Many Marks of the Church* should be a book that encourages a wide readership to reflect on the responsibilities of “being church” in the third millennium.

Already but Not Yet

For those generations schooled by the teachings of the *Baltimore Catechism*, it went without saying that the Catholic Church was the one and only church founded by Christ, for it alone possessed the fullness of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.¹ Following the division of the Western Church at the time of the Protestant Reformation, the marks of the church became batons whereby each church—Catholic and Protestant ones—trying to prove that they were the one true church, beat the other into submission. Usually this was done theologically, though tragically, at times, it was done literally.

As theologian Richard McBrien indicates,

given so many different churches vying for recognition and making various claims for themselves, defenders of the Catholic faith, known as apologists, appealed to the four marks in order to distinguish the true Church from the false churches. The supposition was that the marks would be visible to all and easy to verify, and that they would be present only in the one, true Church of Christ. The problem was that the description of the notes tended to be drawn in such a way that they would fit the Catholic Church, and the Catholic Church alone.²

One needs only to be reminded here of the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine’s definition of church in *Disputations about the Controversies of the Christian Faith Against the Heretics of this Time* (1588) in the midst of the Catholic Reformation following the Council of Trent (1545-1563). According to him,

the one and true Church is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and participate in the same sacraments under the authority of legitimate pastors and especially of the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff....The one true Church is as visible and palpable as the Kingdom of France or the Republic of Venice.

Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici corporis* (1943) built upon Bellarmine's definition, going so far as to identify the mystical body of Christ exclusively with the Catholic Church. This understanding of church changed, however, at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). There, in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium* #8), one reads that the church of Christ “subsists in” the Catholic Church, rather than “is” the Catholic Church.

More recently, many, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, choose to speak of an “already, but not yet” quality with respect to the marks of the church. As much as we may want to talk about the marks being fulfilled, it must be humbly admitted that there is still a ways to go. One need not look far for evidence. Anyone who reads the newspaper today, even on an irregular basis, is tempted to begin with the “anti-marks” of the church: divided not one; sinful not holy; parochial not catholic; and, confused not apostolic.³

Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish Lutheran theologian of the nineteenth century, argued for a similar starting point in his own day when speaking of oneself as a Christian. According to Kierkegaard it was self-delusional and dishonest to do otherwise:

Imagine someone who aspired to be a millionaire but as yet had managed to earn only three dollars. Were he to call himself a millionaire because he was trying, would we be foolish enough to go along with his use of language? Would it not be better for him—simply to keep him awake and alert for the exertion—to say to himself, “I am not a millionaire.” By saying it to himself in this way, would he not guard against becoming a fool?

The point is this: if there is to be any meaning to it, if it is at all permissible to take the name of something simply because you are striving toward it, then you must at least resemble what you are striving toward. In order to hide the fact that Christianity simply does not exist we say in the New Testament sense, “I am not a Christian, but I am trying.” Having said that, or taking care to say it every Sunday year after year, or hearing it said, one concludes that one needs to do nothing. We are, after all, Christian.⁴

That being said, theologian Denise Lardner Carmody asserts that there is still something to be gained by looking at the church as “half-full” rather than “half-empty.” She writes:

The church itself has sometimes been idealistic, raising its gaze above the hurly-burly of its actual, empirical existence to remind itself of what it is more substantially in the creative design of God. The traditional

marks of the church express this idealism. In substance, according to the creative design of God, the Christian community is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Regardless of its fracture and sin, its provincialism and historic change, the church has always managed to be these good things for people of faith—people willing to grant it the prejudices of love.⁵

Whatever our starting point, though, this tension between what the church is and what it shall more fully be will always exist.

If We Image It, It Will Be

Though I saw *A Field of Dreams* some years ago, if there ever was a line that summarized the heart of a movie, it was, “If you build it, he will come.” Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, hears these words one night while walking through his cornfield. Over the course of several days, fighting through his disbelief, he asks himself, “Build what?”

Then one afternoon he has a vision—a baseball field with Shoeless Joe Jackson, the disgraced Black Sox player of 1919, on it. Build a baseball field in the middle of an Iowa cornfield though? It was foolish to even give it much consideration, a sure sign of insanity to implement it. Plagued by worries that life is passing him by, that he’s taken no risks and always played it safe, Kinsella throws caution to the wind and decides to bring the vision to life. He begins to build his dream.

The next day he’s out plowing up his corn, his main cash crop. From a distance his neighbors watch with curiosity. Eventually, they all pretty much agree that he’s a “damned fool.” When Kinsella finishes building the park, he takes it all in, and says, “I have just created something totally illogical.” To which his wife responds, “That’s what I like about it.” Then he asks her, “Am I completely nuts?” “Not completely,” she replies. “It’s a good baseball field.”

Yet, the field remains empty. One night, facing considerable financial hardship, Kinsella decides it’s time to get rid of the field. His fantasy has lasted long enough. Just then his daughter comes into the room where he and his wife are seated and says, “Daddy, there’s a man out there on your lawn.” Shoeless Joe Jackson had come. The dream had become a reality.

As I watched the film it got me thinking: if we can image it—the church—it will be. Perhaps some of the apathy, frustration, anger and resignation many feel toward the church today is due to a lack of vocabulary—a crisis of imagination, if you will. When suggesting any number of initiatives that the church needs to take to meet the demands of our time, so many of them are seemingly stopped cold with phrases like, “The church is not a democracy,” or, “That doesn’t sound very traditional to me.”

Yet words shape our reality. Some would say they create it. We do or don't do things because of the power of words. As descriptive as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" are, surely there are other words that capture what the church is and what it is called to be. We only need to have the courage and freedom to speak these words. "If we image it, it will be." Some of these words, or marks, as one envisions the church, may seem incongruous, consoling, invigorating, aggravating, or even humorous. This is only to be expected in a faith community that is marked by such diverse theologies and spiritualities—one where Catholic Workers and Catholics United for the Faith, Missouri Synod and Evangelical Lutheran Church of America members, High Church and Low Church Anglicans, fundamentalist Southern Baptists and progressive Methodists, and still others, all seek communion with the living God in Jesus Christ.

There is a story that I think communicates the formative power of words well.⁶ After a family had gathered around the table, the father asked for a moment of silence. In traditional words of thanks he said grace: "Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive through thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord, Amen." As the food was being passed around though, the father was far from grateful. In fact, depending on the dish, it was either too cold or too hot, too dry or too runny.

At one point during the meal, his young daughter asked him a question. "Daddy," she asked, "is it true that God hears all we say and sees all we do?" "Why, of course, it is, my dear," he replied. "Then God must have heard your blessing," she said. "Why, yes, God did," the father responded. "And he must also have heard your complaints?" she said hesitantly. Again the father said yes. "Tell me then, Daddy, which did God believe—your prayer or your complaints?"

In the church today, we may choose simply to complain or to imagine new possibilities for the church. Our hope is that this book will help people to affirm what is already good and true, and to envision that which is yet to come.

In this vein we believe this book can respond to the needs of a variety of different audiences. For general readers, this book can serve as an introduction to what the church has been or is. For high school and college students, this book can be used in conjunction with another text in the area of ecclesiology (the study of the church) to provide a more personal and narrative perspective on the marks of the church. Finally, for adult education classes and faith sharing groups, this book can provide characteristics that feed the imagination and encourage the articulation of one's own vision of church.

Of course, this book doesn't tell the whole story concerning the marks of the church. Surely, we've left out one characteristic that should have been included, another perspective that would have captured the dynamism of the church. In this sense, we see the book as a starting point to more serious study about one's understanding of church.

It goes without saying that as editors we did some but not all the work. Though the idea for the book may have been conceived by us, it became a reality due to the generosity of the contributors. A heartfelt thanks to all of them for their participation in the project. As a group, they speak with such conviction as to what the church is and, more so, what it is called to be. In the end, through their reflections, the book is truly an expression of hope rather than an exercise of despair.

We are also grateful to our respective academic communities, which continue to be such fertile grounds. We would also like to thank Twenty-Third Publications and our editors, David Lysik and Mary Carol Kendzia, for their acceptance of and support for the project. Finally, as with all projects, those closest to home bear the burdens of our time spent working on them. Thanks to our families for providing us the time, space, and encouragement needed to see this project to completion—Marsha, Katie, and Sarah; June, Cara, Brendan, and Nora.