

Catholic AND Christian

There's a scenario I encounter occasionally which looks something like this: A stranger holding a Bible sits down next to one of our fellow Catholics on a bus or train. The stranger opens up his bible to read, and as the Catholic peers over and takes notice, the stranger looks up and asks, "Are you a Christian too?" And the response which comes back is one that makes me want to tear my hair out: "No, I'm a Catholic." Aaaaaaah! We must be clear about this matter: **To be Catholic is to be Christian.** We proclaim Christ Crucified and Risen from the Dead, and we claim the Church as our inheritance from Christ and the depository of Christian Faith.

Originally the word catholic was written with the small "c" and used as an adjective to describe the Christian Church. In fact, just as the disciples were first called "Christians" in the ancient city of Antioch, so too the first recorded use of the appellation "catholic" was written by St. Ignatius of Antioch in the year 107, (very close to the Apostolic period!), in his letter to the Smyrneans wherein he wrote that "Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic Church." As we all learned in our basic Catechism, the word means "universal," and it is one of the "four notes" which describe the nature of Christ's Church: It is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."

By the fourth century, St. Augustine seems to indicate that the word was the most appropriate name to apply to Christianity over-against the many heresies of his day. St. Augustine asserts the following: "We must hold to the Christian religion and to communication in her Church which is Catholic, and which is called Catholic not only by her own members but even by all her enemies" (The True Religion, 7, 12).

For about a thousand years the Christian Church was the Catholic Church: This was so until the "Great Schism" between the Greek-East, and Latin-

West in 1054, whereupon the Eastern Church became known as the "Orthodox" Church, ("true teaching"). And, approximately 500 years later, the great split occurred within Western Christianity known as the Reformation: This development dramatically fragmented Christianity into multiple groups or "denominations" and continues to do so up to this day. This development gives us the tripartite division of Catholic-Orthodox-and Protestant, (although Anglican/Episcopal often occupies its own category). Within all of this, the small "c" in Catholic becomes a big "C."

In our day we experience another phenomenon in non-denominational churches (often Evangelical or Biblical-Fundamentalist). There are those within these movements who assert that Jesus did not found a single, unified Church with any discernible structure or hierarchy: They claim that the Church was always, from the beginning, small, independent groupings of Christian believers. These movements often do not identify with any "denomination," nor do they believe in "denominationalism," (Catholics don't either!). However, they have convinced many that they are "THE Christians" in some more pure sense. How they square this with Matthew 16:18 or the writings of St. Paul to Timothy and Titus is beyond me. These and other Bible texts clearly indicate a hierarchy and structure in the Church.



In short, it is my exhortation to you not to make this terrible mistake of dissociating "Christian" from "Catholic:" We are both! We understand the Church to be a visible testimony to Christ's active work in and through our world wherein we are prepared for the culmination which is the fullness of his Kingdom come.