

# What does it mean to belong to *this* church?

Catherine Clifford

FOR MANY OF US, the fact that we belong to one church tradition and not another, is largely the result of a choice made by our parents. This is especially so if we were baptized as infants. We were likely baptized into the Christian community to which one or both of our parents belonged. In our ecclesial family as with our birth family, it is not necessarily ours to choose the family into which we are born. Yet at some point in the course of our maturation, we make a conscious choice to embrace this family — with all its gifts and limitations, just as we make our own the decision to belong to this particular Christian community. Today many mature men and women, who may or may not have been baptized or catechized as children, make a conscious decision to adhere to a particular church tradition. Others who hear the Christian message and are attracted to it are put off by divisions within Christianity; they make a decision to follow Christ, but ask why they need to belong to a particular church tradition, and can't simply be 'Christian'.

The Scriptures of the New Testament include the letters of St. Paul, who addressed the early Christian churches in the Mediterranean region – some of which he was instrumental in founding. He writes to “the Church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), to the “churches of Galatia” (1 Gal 1: 2), to “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1), to the “saints” who are in Ephesus (1 Eph 1:1), Philippi (1 Phil 1:1) and Colossae (1 Col 1:2). The Christian church is not an abstract reality. It takes root in the concrete lives of particular peoples and is shaped and enriched by the gifts and sensibilities of diverse localities and cultures. This diversity of contexts gives rise to a legitimate diversity of spiritual traditions, ways of worship and theological approaches. The common faith of Christians has always been expressed in a rich diversity of forms.

Despite the desire of some for a 'pure' Christianity, all who

are baptized into Christ are initiated into the Church of Christ in and through a specific community, in a given context, with all of its particularity.

With many other Christians, Anglicans and Catholics recognize one another as true brothers and sisters in Christ who make the same baptismal confession of faith. When we are baptized, we say “yes” to Christ and “yes” to belonging in his ecclesial body, the church. At this fundamental level, we say “yes” to living in communion with one another. At the same time, we say “yes” to belonging in a particular Christian community with its distinctive ways of prayer, of theology, of spirituality and organizational structures.

We participate in the one body of Christ, yet belong to communities who are not fully united. At this level, we continue to experience the wounds of division.

The traditions of the Anglican Communion are derived from the Church of England, whose distinctive historical traditions can be traced to the Sarum Rite, to its unique relationship with the English monarchy, and the British system of common law. The missionary expansion of the Church of England has given rise to a world-wide Christian Communion of diverse ecclesiastical provinces which have continued to evolve within differing cultural contexts.

The Catholic Church as well is a global communion of very diverse churches. It includes the Roman Catholic Church whose traditions of worship are shaped by the Latin Rite of the Church of Rome and whose practices are deeply influenced by the Roman tradition of law. The Catholic Communion of churches includes twenty-two Eastern Catholic Churches which are in full communion with the Bishop of Rome and the Roman (or Latin) Catholic Church. These include churches whose ways of worship and self-

governance are derived from Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, Byzantine, and other traditions.

Within their own traditions, therefore, both Anglicans and Catholics recognize as legitimate a rich diversity of theological and spiritual traditions, and do not want to confuse unity with uniformity. Between our two Communion, we have not yet overcome our divisions, but are in a relationship of real but incomplete communion.

Choosing to belong to one ecclesial family rather than another, with all of its particularities, does not necessarily imply making a choice against another ecclesial family.

Families, including "inter-church" families where parents belong to different Christian communities, will still have to decide in which parish community they will celebrate their marriage, worship on Sunday, baptize their children, and so on. By recognizing and celebrating all that we hold in common together today, we can begin to prepare for a day when these decisions will not be fraught with pain and confusion, but where ministers from each church community may work collaboratively to care for their pastoral needs. We can begin today to recognize the many ways that we are enriched by the gift of one another's ecclesial family.

The unity we seek is a unity in faith, church order, and sacramental life; it is a unity enriched by the treasures of

a variety of ecclesial traditions, all of which can be seen as contributing to the catholicity of the whole church. We regret that at this present juncture of our history, we have not yet overcome our disagreement on a number of important doctrinal matters. In the words of Pope Francis, "We ...feel ashamed when we ponder the distance between the Lord's call and our meagre response."<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, we remain committed to growing together as fellow Christians, strengthened in the knowledge that our common confession of faith in Christ, the incarnate Son of the Father is greater than that which divides us, and enlivened by the same Spirit received in one baptism.

And we can dream of and work for the day when the worldwide Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church are fully reconciled with one another. We do not know what shape that unity will take, but trust that God will surprise us. It will not require that either church tradition cease to exist or renounce its distinctiveness, though some aspects of ecclesial life may need yet to be purified. It will mean saying "yes" to the one church of Christ, saying "yes" to living out our baptismal commitment, and saying "yes" to God's great desire that we be one.

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1. Pope Francis, "Discourse of the Holy Father: Meeting of the Holy Father Francis with His Grace Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury." BOLLETTINO N. 0441 - 16.06.2014

## Questions for discussion

1. Have you experienced conflict or competition between Christian denominations?
2. Have you seen how that conflict diminished our Christian witness?
3. How can we understand this in light of Jesus' prayer that all his followers may be one?
4. Do you think it matters if you belong to one Christian Community or another?
5. What does real but incomplete communion look like for Anglicans and Roman Catholics?
6. How does diversity of Christian expression add to the richness of the body of Christ?
7. Is it important that there is diversity within the body of Christ?
8. How has the Holy Spirit been at work in our histories?