

## The Roots of Catholicism

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*Catholic*

Words rarely have invariant meanings and the range of connotations evoked by the word ‘catholic’, from the Greek *katholikos*, is no exception. It derives from the Greek *kath* ‘holou’, ‘according to the whole’ or ‘universal’. The term is particularly applied to the ‘Catholic Church’, sometimes called the *Roman Catholic Church* to distinguish it from other churches which do not accept the authority of the Papal office. (All churches would claim to be ‘catholic’ in that they express and convey Christ’s role in uniting human beings with God and with one another.) For these churches, and also for the Catholic Church which is the focus of this study, ‘catholic’ signals the triple quality of *universality, unity and completeness* and this is its core meaning in the Christian tradition. These three connotations can be interpreted thus:

- The *universality* of the Church means that it is open to all and understands itself to be of significance to all human beings in their relationship with God
- The *unity* of the Church means that it brings its members together in an identifiable unity of belief and practice as an expression of their communion with God
- *Completeness* means a wholeness or integrity of Christian faith and teaching that excludes partiality, factionalism and selectivity.

The catholicity of the Church can be understood as *the gathering of all into a realised unity of faith and life*, in which, using the Biblical image, there is a single flock guided by a single shepherd, Christ (Jn 10.16). In the discussion which follows, we will distinguish three terms:

- *Catholicity*: the quality of universality and unity common to all Christian churches and expressed differently according to their tradition and character
- *Catholicism*: the project of gathering the whole human race into a realised unity in the light of the religious significance of Jesus Christ
- *Catholic Christianity*: the focus of the project of Catholicism and its central expression in the Roman Catholic Church.

*Catholicism*

Because of its suffix (ism), Catholicism may seem to be a system of ideas to be set against, for example, those of Protestantism or Gnosticism, or to be compared with intellectual movements such as empiricism or Marxism; it has been common since the Enlightenment to approach religious and intellectual movements through a schematic taxonomy of their ideas. There is something to be said for this, of course, in that there are characteristically Catholic ideas and themes which will be discussed here, but we should be cautious: a religion cannot be reduced to the ideas it uses and produces without being distorted. Religions are ways of life that mediate across generations bodies of traditions and teachings, ritual practices and symbolic actions, cultural expressions (art, music, literature), insights and prescriptions for individual and social behaviour, in addition to offering intellectual interpretations of God(s), the world and human life. Durkheim on religion (‘a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things’) and Berger (‘the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established’) offer better introductory

approaches to Catholicism than Whitehead's view that religion is 'what the individual does with his own solitariness'. Only a modern thinker would judge that religion is a personal thing, and when Henri de Lubac describes Catholicism as 'essentially social', he is, in part, protesting against the post-Enlightenment tendency to consider religion as the exploration of the introspective self.<sup>1</sup>

We will consider Catholicism in these terms:

*Catholicism is the project and endeavour at the heart of Christianity to form a unified community that signals and mediates Jesus Christ's significance for human beings in their relationship with God and with one another.*

The central and visible realisation of this project is the Catholic Church composed of those whose unity is expressed through a spiritual and sacramental communion with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope or Father of the whole Church. It is, on its own modest estimate, the 'Great Church' that springs from Christ's ministry, visibly signalling the oneness, apostolicity, universality and holiness proper to the Church of Christ. (It is also, no less truly, a Church of sinners.) Its life is characterised by normative sources of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, Creeds from the early Church and teachings from Popes, Bishops and Councils; it conducts its religious life through prayer, worship and sacraments; it is regulated by authoritative offices; it is constantly enlivened by spiritual gifts and it is directed towards Christ's universal mission, the Kingdom of God and the life of the world to come. We will begin by considering five interpretations of Catholicism that come from its own traditions because Catholicism, being 'catholic', is susceptible of no one single definition.

#### *The Church from Abel*

The project of Catholicism has, according to its own interpretation, boundaries that are not given to human beings to know. Particularly since Augustine, Christians have debated the scope of Christ's significance: is it restricted to some in identifiable ways (through baptism) or does it extend to all perhaps in different ways? As a generalisation, the Protestant tradition, more faithful to Augustine's later writings, is inclined to favour the former option, and Catholic Christianity the latter. When Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of Catholic Christianity, considers whether Christ is 'the Head of all,' and not just Christians (*ST*, 3a, 8, 3), he answers that Christ is Head of all, but in different degrees:

For first and principally He is the Head of those who are actually united to him by glory; secondly, of those who are actually united to him by charity; thirdly, of those who are actually united to him by faith; fourthly, of those who are potentially, but not yet actually, united to him; fifthly, of those who may potentially, but in fact will not, be united to him.

We can imagine Aquinas' account as a series of circles around Christ: in the innermost circle are the saints in heaven; then a circle of those who love Christ and are not separated from him by mortal sin; the third, those who have faith in Christ but imperfectly, because they are not in a bond of charity with him. Then a circle of those who will come to be united with Christ (and we can never know who they are) and finally a circle of those who do not come to union with Christ (again, we can never know who they are.) It's a simple description of the catholicity of humanity in relation to Christ, the dynamic movement of human beings, in all their difference and weakness, coming to union with Christ and moving from ignorance to faith to love, then finally coming to share in his resurrection.

Aquinas also deals with the question of the boundaries of the Church in a significant way: he says that ‘the body of the Church is made up of people from the beginning to the end of the world’ and writes of the ‘fathers of old’ (the righteous Jews of the Old Testament):

by observing the sacraments of the law, they were borne to Christ with the same faith and love by which we are borne to him. *The ancient fathers therefore belonged to the same body of the Church as we do.*

This statement may be strange to us, but not to earlier generations: when Michelangelo carved his sculptures of Moses and David, he regarded them, as did all Christians, as saints of the Church; the Roman Eucharistic prayer used for centuries at Mass identifies Abraham as ‘our father in faith’ and draws Abel, the victim of the first murder outside Paradise, and Melchizedek, a shadowy pre-Israelite ‘priest of God Most High’ (Gen 14.18) and one of the group that Daniélou calls the ‘holy pagans’ of the Old Testament, into the Church’s prayer of thanksgiving.<sup>2</sup>

What could be more natural than to think of the Church as springing from Christ’s ministry in Palestine? But for Aquinas and the Catholic tradition he represents, this perspective is modified by the view that the Church begins in the prehistory of humanity interpreted and narrated in the early chapters of Genesis. There is, in Sertillanges’ phrase, ‘a Church before the Church’.<sup>3</sup> The Church begins with Abel, the shepherd whose offering to God leads to his murder at the hands of Cain, making Abel the ‘type’ or pre-figuration of Christ, the Good Shepherd whose self-offering to God leads to his death on the Cross. The tradition of the *ecclesia ab Abel*, not taught in the New Testament but formulated in the early Church, is given classic expression by Augustine who viewed history as split between the city of God (those who love God) and the city of the devil (those are evil):

[The Church’s] troubled course began not merely in the time of the bodily presence of Christ and the time of his apostles; it started with Abel himself, the first righteous man slain by an ungodly brother; and the pilgrimage goes on from that time right up to the end of history, with the persecutions of the world on one side, and on the other the consolations of God.<sup>4</sup>

This ‘catholicity in time’ – the other dimension of the more common ‘catholicity in space’ – means that this one community incorporates from the beginning to the end of time all who by faith and love are carried by grace to union with Christ.<sup>5</sup> Entry into the Christian Church is, traditionally, through the rite of baptism, but the Catholic tradition has long recognised that, because God’s action in human beings extends beyond the boundaries of the Christian Church, there can be an effective *baptism by desire*, an entry into the blessings brought by Christ available to those with no formal contact with Church or Gospel.<sup>6</sup> So the Catholic tradition is aware that the catholicity of its mission (the gathering of all into a realised unity) is set in an antecedent framework of God’s action in relation to all human beings.

The *ecclesia ab Abel* is the ‘Great Church’ that God alone creates and over which no one exercises proprietorial rights, and when Catholic Christianity thinks of itself as the ‘Great Church’, it is evoking this vision and thinks of itself as the sacrament or visible sign of the dignity and destiny of all under divine grace. The insight carried in the idea of the *ecclesia ab Abel* – and this will be our first interpretation of Catholicism – is this: *humanity is touched by a single stream of grace from beginning to end, by which a community is formed of those who have faith and love according to the measure and character of God’s gift.*

*Foundational insights*

We turn now to how Catholicism attempts to express this religious vision of *all humanity united in Christ* in ways drawn from the emerging Christian community of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE. The religious insights of early Jewish Christianity exercise a deeper impact on the character of the project than anything that happens later: it is another modern misconception to think that Catholicism is defined primarily by how it differs from Protestantism. The Judaisms of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE form the matrix in which the project of Catholicism comes to self-definition, and it is in the interpretative twist given to Jewish identity that the ‘deep grammar’ of Catholicism is formed.<sup>7</sup> (A small and common indication of this is that Jews and Catholics often understand one another intuitively and see in one another a refracted but recognisable image of their own identity.)

Two foundational themes from this period pervade Catholicism’s subsequent sense of itself, *body of Christ* and *Temple of God*, and two centres of early Christianity, Antioch and Jerusalem, centres respectively of bold innovation and conservative adjudication, become significant paradigms within Catholic Christianity. As the discussion develops, we will offer four additional interpretations of the character of Catholicism.

### *Body of Christ*

‘Christianity was founded,’ says Michel de Certeau, ‘upon the loss of a body, the loss of the body of Jesus Christ’ after his burial.<sup>8</sup> Three Jewish women grieving by Christ’s tomb on Easter Sunday are told by an angel, ‘He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him’ (Mk 16.6). The women and those who also come to believe in Christ’s resurrection lose not only the body of Christ: though Jewish, they come to lose their place within the body of Israel as their belief in Christ’s resurrection comes to be incompatible with the development of Torah-centred faith in Pharisaic and Rabbinic Judaism. They will be eventually excluded from membership of the body of Israel as Israel consolidates the corpus of oral Torah (eventually becoming the Mishnah and Talmud) that comes to replace the Temple (destroyed in 70CE) at the centre of Jewish life and separates itself from those Jews who see Jesus as the climactic moment in God’s direction of Israel. Loss, absence and exclusion from Israel are the obverse of the religious creativity that bursts forth from this dynamic Jewish sect that becomes Christianity.

Because the body of Christ is lost in the resurrection, de Certeau suggests, the early believers in Christ are pressed to recover, find, construct a body that will be the focus of their newly emerging religious identity. In one of the great creative moments of self-definition in world religion, this community of Jews will establish the conditions of its survival by creating another body, the body of the Church, that is configured as the spiritual body of the physically risen Christ. Like the Rabbis around them, they will transform their own corpus of oral teaching into a normative set of foundational documents (the New Testament). No longer needing the rituals of the Temple because Christ himself is now their Temple (Jn 2.21; 1 Cor 3.16), they will construct their life as a body of believers around a *baptismal ritual* that they interpret as a symbolic immersion into Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6.3; 1 Cor 12.13) and an *atonement ritual* that is a sharing in the body and blood of Christ which he offered to God on the Cross. Within a few decades of Christ’s death, Paul can write: ‘the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (1 Cor 10.16-7). The Church is constituted by its ritual participation in Christ’s life, death and resurrection and the subsequent Catholic concentration on the sacramental celebration of Christ’s presence flows from the sense that both the Church and its Eucharist are modes in which the (absent) body of Christ is present.

It should be no surprise that this first-century Jewish community creates *texts* and *rituals* that come to shape subsequent generations of believers: what the rabbis did for Torah-centred Judaism, these Christ-centred Jews did for the Church. These nascent communities which define themselves in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, are isomorphic, sharing analogous patterns of identity: membership of *Israel* is matched by membership of *Christ*; entry into Israel's covenant by *circumcision* gives way to entry to the Church through *baptism*; *Passover* extends to include the ritual of Christ's *Last Supper*; God's covenantal gift of *Torah* is rivalled by God's unsurpassable mediation in *Christ*; the defining moment of *Sinai* is matched by the deepened and renewed covenant of *Calvary*; the *Day of Atonement* is fulfilled in Christ's priestly offering on the *Cross*, and so on. (As we shall see, it is only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century that Catholicism begins to appreciate again what the earliest Christian Jews knew instinctively: that a living tie to Jewish faith is essential to the Church's identity.)

So, the first insight that reverberates through Catholic Christianity is that the resurrection means that Christ now has a two-fold presence among human beings: as the body of the Church and the sacramental body in the Eucharist. Both Church and Eucharist are *Corpus Christi*, and this insight lies at the heart of our second interpretation of Catholic Christianity's self-understanding: *Catholicism is the body of humanity becoming the Body of Christ through Christ's Eucharistic presence, in a cohesive, social and visible form through which Christ's redeeming and sanctifying presence is focused and channelled in the human family until the end of time.*

### *Temple of God*

The early Jewish believers in Christ bequeath to Catholic Christianity a second important self-interpretation deriving from what Christ intended in his ministry: the Church sees itself as the Temple of the last days, the focus of divine presence in Israel and the locus of salvation for all. This springs from Christ's cryptic saying, attested in all the Gospels and the basis of the legal charge that leads to his death, the enigmatic 'Temple Riddle': 'Destroy this Temple and in three days I will rebuild it' (Mk 14.58). In the first limb of the riddle, Christ expresses his prophetic conviction that the Jerusalem Temple will be destroyed in the impending tribulation coming upon Israel; in the second limb, he presents himself as the builder of the definitive Temple that God will erect in the last days, namely, the restored messianic community of Israel, the sanctuary to which all the nations of the world will come and find mercy (Is 2. 2-4).

Behind the riddle is Nathan's oracle to David, in which God speaks of a son of David, standing in relation to God as son to Father, who will 'build a house (Temple) for my name' (2 Sam 7.14ff). In its original context, it refers to Solomon, the builder of the first Temple, but it underlies Christ's sense of himself as the Son and Master-builder of the sanctuary of the end-time, the gatherer of the living people of God. Jesus Christ summons Israel to be the dwelling place to which righteous and sinner are called, to become 'the city set on a hill' that will be the light to the nations (Mt 5.14), the focus of pilgrimage for 'many from east and west' (the dispersed of Israel and the Gentiles) who will come to sit down in the house of God (Mt 8.11).<sup>9</sup>

The Temple theme underlies, too, the most hotly disputed text in later Reformation controversies about the Papacy, Christ's words to Simon at Caesarea Philippi: 'You, Simon, are the rock (Greek: *Peter*) and on this rock I will build my church (*ecclesia*) and the gates of Hades will not prevail against you' (Mt 16.16). Behind this saying is an ancient mythical cosmology in which a rock, like a stopper, is thrust by God into the hole at the top of the hollow mountain rising above the chaos of the primeval flood; according to a rabbinic midrash, from this rock, the navel of the world, creation unfolds:

Just as the belly-button is positioned in the centre of a man, thus is the Land of Israel positioned in the centre of the world, as the Bible says, 'dwelling at the very navel of the earth' (Ezek 38.12), and from it the foundation of the world proceeds... And Jerusalem is in the centre of the land of Israel, and the Temple is in the centre of Jerusalem, and the Great Hall is in the centre of the Temple, and the Ark is in the centre of the Great Hall, and the Foundation Stone is in front of the Ark; and beginning with it, the world was put on its foundation.<sup>10</sup>

Below the rock and threatening it are the waters of chaos, the ever-threatening force of disruptive evil; on it is the security of the divine presence. This holy mountain, and the rock that makes the world secure against evil, is the centre of the world, the world's navel, heaven's gate, the rock of the Temple itself, the stone set into Mount Zion (Is 28.16) that becomes a secure foundation for the divine presence. In the imaginative geography of the Rabbinic tradition, the sacred moments in Israel's history from creation onwards become transferred to this rock. Ben Meyer summarises some of the themes which cluster around this theme in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE:

[The cosmic rock's] peak was the world's topmost and centremost point, offering access equally to Hades and to heaven. To the rabbis, the cosmic rock was the site of creation, of Paradise and the tree of life, source of the rivers of the world, proof against the Deluge. Here was the altar on which Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac; here, too, was the altar

of Melchizedek; here, the house and throne of God and the destined locale of the judgment of the world.<sup>11</sup>

A paraphrase of Christ's words to Simon adds to this, 'Here, built on Simon, is the definitive convocation of Israel, the *ecclesia*, the living and unsurpassable community of God that, replacing the Jerusalem Temple, will be the focus of the pilgrimage of the Gentiles to the God of Israel. No evil force in the world will ever destroy it'. If the Rock/Foundation Stone of the Temple is now Simon, what Christ does in gathering his church evokes a second and definitive re-ordering of the creation.

From these traditions, Catholic Christianity will foster a strong sense that it is the living Temple intended by Christ during his ministry. It will view his ministry as deliberately *ecclesial*, directed towards the composition of a single community, summoning first the house of Israel and then Gentiles, to be the dwelling place of God and the light to the world. It will think of itself as the flowering of what Christ intended: first of all, a convocation from the body of Israel (*ecclesia ex circumcissione*) and then, on an equal basis, a convocation from the nations of the earth (*ecclesia ex gentibus*). Hence the visual representation of the Church in the mosaics of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome, in which two dignified matrons represent the equal participation of Jews and Gentiles in constituting the community of final salvation. With great respect for Jewish tradition and identity, the Catholic Church cannot but see itself as springing *from Israel for the sake of the nations and from the nations for the sake of Israel*. It is the confirmation of God's promises to Israel and their extension to Gentiles because Christ's ministry extends to both groups (Rom 15.8-9).

Drawing on these insights, we can offer our third interpretation of Catholic Christianity: *Catholicism understands itself as the definitive community of divine grace and presence, established by Christ, secure against death and evil, and called to a fullness of identity in which it simultaneously fulfils God's purposes for Israel and extends the divine presence to the whole world.*

#### *Priestly character*

Catholic Christianity inherits a third legacy from the earliest Jerusalem community, again concerning the Temple. Although the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70CE was decisive in altering the religious landscape of both Torah-centred and Christ-centred Jews, within both traditions there were already lines of interpretation and practice which prepared both groups, antagonistic siblings with a common heritage, for their subsequent development. Both communities were already rethinking the spiritual and metaphorical meaning of Temple in relation to their situation. The Pharisees, the forerunners of Rabbinic Judaism, proposed the sanctification of Israel by its faithful observance of all the prescriptions of Torah, thereby embodying the holiness and separation proper to the Temple itself: this prepares the way for the Torah-observant fidelity of holy Israel without benefit of Temple cult.<sup>12</sup> Christ-centred Jews, on the other hand, guided by Jesus' spiritual and moral radicalisation of Torah-observance (loving not only neighbours but enemies) and his disregard of aspects of Torah-observance touching on purity and separation, draw instead upon the cultic and sacrificial cult of the Temple worship for their interpretation of the death of Christ.

The nascent Christian community – surely the mother church of Jerusalem of the 30s and 40s CE – was pressed to reach an understanding of how the crucifixion of Christ as a blasphemer and political criminal could have a saving purpose intended by God. In a creative interpretation of decisive significance for later Christianity, the community came to understand that the events on

the Mount of Calvary should be interpreted in the light of the priestly atoning ritual on the Mount of the Temple.<sup>13</sup> The implications of this insight will reverberate through all subsequent Catholic Christian life which will be marked by a sense of accomplished, atoning finality in the history of grace.

The earliest testimony to this insight probably comes in Paul's quotation from an earlier, presumably Jerusalem, tradition: he speaks of 'Messiah Jesus whom God put forward as the expiation (*hilasterion*) in his own blood for the remission of sins committed in the time of God's forbearance' (Rom 3.25). The Greek word *hilasterion* translates the Hebrew *kapporeth*, the 'mercy seat', the golden lid of the of the ark of the covenant (Lev 16.15-19) that is sprinkled with blood by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. It is where God is: 'I appear in the cloud above the mercy seat' (Lev 16.2).

In Paul's dense formula, the implication is clear: the blood of the crucified Messiah on Golgotha is to be viewed as the blood shed in the presence of God for the atonement of sins. The crucified Messiah, who has entered behind the veil of creation into God's presence, is now the mercy seat, the true locus of expiation, prefigured in the atoning rites of the Temple. It is only a short step from this to the rich themes of the Epistle to the Hebrews which explicitly presents Jesus as the High Priest who enters the divine presence, taking with him his own blood as an offering to God, there to be received by God and to become the source of the world's final atonement.

One will not understand Catholic Christianity unless one sees it as a conscious affirmation and transformation of the features of the religion of the Second Temple. The Jewish legacy is not abandoned but re-worked and reinterpreted in relation to Christ and his continuing presence in the Church. Catholic Christianity retains a stronger legacy of Biblical and 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish religion than Rabbinic Judaism which focuses on Torah-study, prayer and works of charity as ways in which Jewish life without a Temple was to be lived. The religious category of priesthood and High Priesthood, redundant in post-70 Judaism, is boldly revived by Christian Jews who apply these roles to Christ himself, even they know that he is not of a priestly family (Heb 7.14). Christ's self-offering in death comes to be seen as the unique and unrepeatable priestly atonement at the heart of human history, endowing all human beings with mercy.

The category of priestly status is subsequently extended and democratised to include the whole community of Christian believers: the first Epistle of Peter invites its readers (Gentile Christians in Asia Minor!) to be 'a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet 2.5). No less boldly, Catholic Christianity revives cultic terminology in applying the category of 'priest' also to those who minister liturgically and pastorally in the church as presbyters, co-workers with bishops.<sup>14</sup> Like Christian life as a whole, ministry in the name of Christ comes to be seen as a 'ministerial priesthood', a participation, centred on the Eucharist, in Christ's priestly work.<sup>15</sup>

The effect is to flood the practices and imagination of Catholic Christianity with religious categories drawn from the Temple: the Eucharist becomes indelibly sacrificial; a spiritual participation in Christ's atoning sacrifice for sins becomes a core feature of medieval and baroque spirituality; priestly mediation, intercession, a ritualised pattern of worship, blessings, sacred space and cultic ministry come to characterise Christian ministry; it retains in its churches an altar (not a table) on which the sacrifice of Calvary is re-presented; medieval piety will develop a worship of the Blessed Sacrament, the sanctified bread of the divine presence, and revere it as the presence of the Risen Christ in ways which evoke the Biblical Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies. Catholicism's later resistance to the non-cultic, non-priestly, book-centred religion proposed by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformers owes much to the depth to which categories drawn from

the Jerusalem Temple become embedded in Catholicism's sense of itself. Hence our fourth interpretation: *Catholicism is the culmination of the religion of Biblical Judaism in which priestly access to the divine presence is extended to all by their Eucharistic union with the sacrifice of Christ.*

#### *Jerusalem and Antioch*

For our fifth interpretation, we turn to two cities that become decisive for the complex identity of Catholicism: *Jerusalem*, the locus of authority and conservative practice for the sake of the Gospel among Jews and *Antioch*, the locus of adaptation and innovation for the sake of the Gospel among Gentiles. Catholic Christianity will accommodate both paradigms and live with a tension between its universal mission and its problematic tie to Judaism.

Jerusalem is the centre of the earliest form of Christian identity, a Torah-observant 'Christian Judaism' under the leadership of James, the brother of the Lord. A small indication is that when Paul goes to Jerusalem, he is told, 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for Torah...' (Acts 21.20) As the locus of authority in the decades after the death of Christ, the Jerusalem church upheld the tradition that *Gentiles entering the Church entered covenantal Israel at the same time*. Maintaining a high degree of Torah-observance in order to witness to Jews that the temple-community founded by Jesus was truly 'restored Israel', it was no less universalist than Paul and sent missionaries to promote a Torah-observant Gospel aimed at both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>16</sup> In the Jerusalem perspective, the observance of Torah fulfilled and interpreted by Christ (Mt 5.17-9) is required first of Jews and then of Gentiles, and so the paradigm of Jewish (and its fulfilment in Christian Jewish) identity was to become normative for Gentiles too.

Antioch, by contrast, develops another approach. 'It was at Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians' (Acts 11.26), to be distinguished in Roman eyes from Jews. Antioch, 'the first great city of the ancient world in which Christianity gained a foothold,'<sup>17</sup> is important for two reasons: firstly, it is the place of the first outreach to Gentiles by Christian Jews who taught that Gentiles may enter the community without adopting Jewish covenantal identity (through circumcision and dietary and ritual observances). So the first steps towards moving the Church towards becoming a universal religion without the traditional signs of Jewish particularity take place here. Secondly, Antioch creates the decisive paradigm of ecclesial unity in which the distinctions between Jew and Gentile dissolve and both, equally and inclusively, constitute the people of God. Paul's words to the Roman community are the fruit of Antioch's lived experience: 'for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, and is generous to all who call on him' (Rom 10.12). The Adamic distinction of gender ('male and female'), the Abrahamic distinction of membership of Israel's covenant ('Jew or Greek'), and the hierarchical distinction of social status ('free or slave') (Gal 3.28) are to count for nothing in this composition of this community which is, simply and sufficiently, 'in Christ'. (The subtext of Paul's insistent phrase, 'in Christ' is 'not in Torah-centred Israel'.)

What options for the universal project of Catholicism did these cities represent? If Jerusalem's position had been accepted, the features of the *ecclesia ex circumcissione* would have become the template for the *ecclesia ex gentibus* and normative Catholicism would have come to be Torah-observant, i.e., more in touch with emergent Jewish practices.<sup>18</sup> If we use as a starting point Rabbi Norman Solomon's helpful description of Judaism as '*a universal religion with a prototype people*', the question facing the first believers in Christ, and by the Church in all subsequent generations, is *how to estimate the status of the prototype, Israel, in the new universal context created by Christ and the spread of the Gospel to non-Jews*. Is Torah-observant Israel, clearly the

Scriptural prototype of God's election of a people for his service, to be the prescriptive template of the universal 'Church of God' (Gal 1.13)?

The answer at the first 'Council' of Jerusalem was to refuse that option and separate entry into the Church from entry into the body of Israel. The Church's relation to Israel then becomes an unresolved and troubled feature of Catholicism's sense of itself. It cannot ignore that it *belongs within the dynamic of Israel's election by God* and therefore, in spite of its predominantly Gentile character, the vigour of its theology and spiritual traditions, its creativity in engaging with a broader context of human experience, it has an organic, living connection with covenantal Israel composed of Abraham's (physical) descendants. Israel is the archetypal 'elder brother' (John Paul II's phrase) from whom the project of Catholicism becomes separated shortly after its birth. The presence of recurring anti-Jewish currents within Catholic Christianity express, in part, a resentment of this unfinished business.

Antioch's innovation was accepted as the pattern of the universal religion, and the consequence was that a Torah-free *ecclesia ex gentibus* shortly became detached from its Jewish source and moved *against* it in intolerant competition; the distinctive character of the *ecclesia ex circumcissione*, the mother church with strong ties to Jewish life which eventually became marginal to the Church's development, became a memory distorted in the telling. The later Church's image of the Jerusalem community ignores its zeal for Torah, and treats it as a prototype of monastic common life (even 'early communism') in that 'they had all things in common' (Acts 3.44). That this foundational community was composed of Torah-observant Jews came to matter little for Catholic Christianity.

So what begins as a movement that first interpreted itself as the culminating convocation of Israel to which Gentiles would come and enter fully into 'restored' Israel's worship of God becomes – and here we summarise too rapidly a complex development whose details are only imperfectly known to us – a movement of primarily Gentile membership that, once detached from the defining symbols of Jewish identity and vocation, sets itself on a different, non-Jewish, and increasingly anti-Jewish, path. The character of Catholic Christianity, for good and ill, springs from the implications of that decision at the first 'Council' of Jerusalem.

Hence our fifth interpretation of Catholicism: *Catholicism mediates between its roots in the Jewish experience of God and the demands of its mission to present the Gospel of Christ to all. Able to abandon neither, it will always be discomfited by the question of the status of Israel and will always live with a tension between its inherited Jewish traditions and its need to accommodate cultural change.*

The five interpretations offered here show the complexity of elements which feed into the character of Catholicism. Three of them (*body of Christ, definitive temple of God and universal, priestly access to the divine presence*) compose the central core of Catholicism's image of itself and nourish the conduct of its religious life: they are centripetal in character and form the *fonds commun* of the Church's spiritual and religious life. The other two (*the Church from Abel and the dialectic between Antioch and Jerusalem*) highlight the fluid boundaries of the project in relation to the whole of humanity and to the Jewish people: they are centrifugal, and press the Church towards an openness towards all aspects of human life.

Catholicism is no one single thing: it is an intrinsically complex project that cannot be properly interpreted or realized if it is reduced to only one of its features, such as for example, Papacy or expansiveness or tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> H.de Lubac, *Catholicism* (Burns & Oates, 1950), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic medieval sculptures abound of children 'in the bosom of Abraham' as an image of the Church. Cf. Y.Baschet, *Le sein du père: Abraham et la paternité dans l'Occident médiéval* (Gallimard, 2000)

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Y.Congar, *Etudes d'ecclésiologie médiévale* (Variorum Reprints, 1983), III, 97.

<sup>4</sup> *The City of God* XVIII, 52 (Penguin, 1984), 835.

<sup>5</sup> This universalist perspective stands in tension with other ways of considering membership of the Church and it counterbalances the tendency to view the Church exclusively in formal institutional terms. 'After the Reformation, some Roman Catholic apologists... began to define the Church primarily in institutional terms, putting the accent on the divinely established hierarchy, and in this new approach it was no longer meaningful speak of a Church in pre-Christian times'. A.Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford, 1985), 89. By contrast, Vatican II says that the Church 'transcends all limits of time' (*Lumen Gentium*, 9).

<sup>6</sup> Modern Catholic theology will develop Aquinas' idea that in addition to the visible mission of God's Word in Christ, there is also an invisible mission of God's Word and Spirit (divine truth and love) in the minds and hearts of all. Not all can come to know God's Word in Christ, but through the inner presence of Word and Spirit, God acts to make divine love accessible to all in ways that only God knows.

<sup>7</sup> In what follows, the reader should bear in mind that there was a rich diversity within Jewish religion in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The shape of 'normative Judaism' is crystallised only after c.200CE.

<sup>8</sup> M.de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* vol 1, (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (SCM, 1979).

<sup>10</sup> Tanhuma: Kedoshim 10; quoted in J.D.Levenson, *Sinai & Zion: Entry into the Jewish Bible* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 118.

<sup>11</sup> Meyer, 185-6.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Pharisees already possessed a comprehensive programme for social and religious identity which did not require the temple. The Pharisaic activity, which has been summarized as *the recreation of the Temple in the home or at table fellowship, while using temple imagery*, did not require a Temple as such.' (J.A.Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: the Social World of the Matthean Community* (Fortress Press, 1990), 35-6 (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> In my opinion, this insight goes back to Jesus' own understanding of his death as the definitive atonement for the sins of the world: M.Barker, *The Risen Lord* (T.&T.Clark, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> *1 Clement*, 42 (Rome:c.96CE) sees the order of Temple worship as prefiguring the order of Christian liturgical ministry, 'a tendency that will develop...until the bishop, presbyters and deacons are pictured as the Christian high priest, priests and levites, centered around their role in the eucharist as the Christian sacrifice'. (R.E.Brown & J.P.Meier, *Antioch and Jerusalem: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 171.

<sup>15</sup> Against the Protestant insistence on a 'priestly people' rather than a 'priestly ministry', Catholic Christianity will affirm both 'common priesthood' and 'ministerial priesthood', the former exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace, and the latter as a means by which Christ builds up his Church. Cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 1547.

<sup>16</sup> These missionaries challenge Paul's Torah-free mission to Gentiles and provide the setting for his intemperate letter to the Galatians. A sermon preached by Torah-observant Christians to Gentiles is imaginatively re-created by J.L.Martyn in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (T.&T.Clark, 1997), 20-4.

<sup>17</sup> M.Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (SCM, 1979), 99.

<sup>18</sup> Brown identifies four varying types of Jewish/Gentile Christianity: 1/ full observance of Mosaic Torah; 2/ no requirement of circumcision, but some Jewish observances; 3/ requiring neither circumcision nor observances; 4/ those who 'saw no abiding significance in Jewish cult and feasts'. Brown & Meier, *op.cit.*, 4ff.