

Imaging the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” Church

172 *Christ Enthroned Among His Apostles*, apse mosaic in Church in Santa Pudenziana, Rome, ca. 400

The far sides and bottom of the mosaic were drastically altered during renovations undertaken in later centuries.



173 *Socrates with Six Wise Men*, mosaic in Apamea, Syria, 4th c.

Prior to the legalization of Christianity the persecution of Christians had acted as a unifying factor for the Church which was spread out over the entire Roman Empire. Differences among Christians paled somewhat in the face of oppression. But with legalization differences in beliefs — especially over the all important issue of the nature and identity of Jesus Christ— came to the surface and constituted a serious threat not only to the unity of the Church but also to the peace of the empire. The problem had to be dealt with and so Constantine the Great, and subsequent emperors, facilitated the coming together in Church councils all the bishops from across the empire so that differences could be resolved.

Throughout this turbulent time the Church gradually began to systematically describe how the Church founded by Christ could be recognized in contrast to heretical groups. Basic characteristics of the Church had been alluded to by the earlier fathers of the Church including Ignatius of Antioch.¹⁸ But, as an antidote to certain heresies that had developed in the 3rd and 4th centuries the First Council of Constantinople (381), after reaffirming and elaborating on the creed of the Council of Nicaea (325), listed the identifying characteristics of the Church as doctrine. The true Church was “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”¹⁹

Not surprisingly, imagery that advertised this doctrine began to appear in the 4th and 5th centuries.

The earliest extant image appearing as part of a church decorative program is an early 5th century mosaic in the Church of Santa Pudenziana in Rome.[172] The composition is a stunning dogmatic statement of the marks of the Church. The generic title for such compositions showing Christ instructing his apostles is *Christ Enthroned Among His Apostles*. Often, especially if the figures are standing, the title is *Christ Commissioning His Apostles* or *traditio legis*, “the handing down of the law.”

In the Pudenziana mosaic a bearded, haloed Christ dressed in a gold tunic edged in a red-orange color sits regally upon a huge gem-encrusted throne. His hand is raised with fingers positioned in the classical Roman manner of a great teacher or orator. Arrayed to his right and left are the apostles. Christ, as a great philosopher, instructs his followers in

the new philosophy —the new law— and, like any ancient philosopher, he will send out his followers to propagate his ideas.[181] Indeed, there are numerous examples of ancient images that depict ancient philosophers and their students, colleagues or followers in somewhat the same fashion as Christ appears with his apostles in the Pudenziana mosaic. Philosophers were very important in late antiquity. A mosaic of about the same time shows Socrates seated in a semi-circle of seated sages.[173] Parallels between Christ and Socrates in ethical teaching and in acceptance of an unjust death were common among the early Christian apologists.²⁰

The Pudenziana apse mosaic with Christ seated among his apostles is directly above where the bishop sat with his clergy during the Liturgy. A not too subtle message that the bishop claimed the right to speak for Christ.²¹



174 The Council of the Gods, from the Roman Vergil, 5th c., Vatican

High back thrones were reserved for the gods, for divinity.

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) p103

175 detail from 172

176 Sella Curulis

Seat used by the Roman emperor and magistrates.



Some see in the imagery of an enthroned Christ the adoption of the imperial imagery of the Roman emperor. The Roman emperor, however, did not sit upon a high back throne but rather a folding stool-like seat called a *sella curulis*. High back thrones indicated divinity and were usually reserved for the Roman father god Jupiter (Zeus in the Greek pantheon).

The Church is 'holy'

In the mosaic Christ is seated on a very impressive throne[175] one normally reserved for images of gods and goddesses especially Jupiter (Zeus), the father of all the gods.[174] He wears clothing of gold and has a halo, indications of divinity. The symbolism is significant. First, it signals that this new law is from the one true God of the Christians. It is the ultimate or final law that supersedes all other laws or philosophies. Secondly, it stands in contrast to the heresy of Arianism which denied to Christ equality with the Father. Thirdly, as the Church is the Mystical Body²² of Christ it follows that the Church is *holy*. Through the Incarnation —in which God assumed human flesh and sanctified it— and through



the sacrament of Baptism, Christians are made sons and daughters of God by adoption.²³ In Baptism we “*enter into fellowship with Christ’s flesh.*”²⁴ Made holy by God the faithful are sent into the world to make the world holy.

Only the true Church is founded on Christ. Only the true Church is holy. Only the true Church can sanctify the world.²⁵

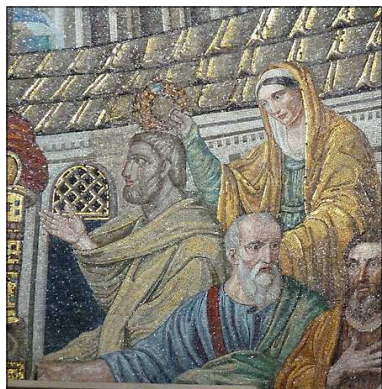
The Church is 'one'

By the same token, the Church is *one* because all are united in one body, the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ.²⁶ All share in one Baptism²⁷ and one Eucharist and, even though there are many particular Churches spread

out over the empire, there is no division of belief but rather a harmony of true doctrine.²⁸ As the twelve apostles remained united in charity and teaching while separately spreading the gospel and establishing particular Churches throughout the empire, so also their successors, the bishops, remain united in charity and doctrine, devoted to Jesus Christ.

In the Pudenziana mosaic we can see two figures holding crowns of wreaths and standing, one behind Peter[76] and, the other, behind

177, detail from 172



Paul. Wreaths as crowns in ancient Greece and Rome were awarded, among other reasons, to those who were victorious in some event or who had overcome a great challenge.²⁹ In Christian art wreaths symbolize martyrdom and the martyr's faithfulness in the face of a tortuous execution.³⁰ Used in this mosaic they no doubt refer to the fact that the two apostles had been martyred at Rome. Because of this fact Rome, in everyone's eyes, was known as the foremost of

the ancient Patriarchal Sees. It had the very best lineage and was admired as an exemplary Church³¹ against which any other Church could be compared for orthodoxy in practice and doctrine. There were other Churches that were excellent examples as well, but Rome could claim its founding by Peter and Paul, the two greatest apostles. For a particular Church to be part of the *one* Church of Christ it had to be *like* Rome —*in agreement with Rome*.

Unity in the Church, in the first three centuries of its existence had primarily meant unity with the whole church from Adam and Eve onwards. It had also come to refer to the communion or oneness the Church on earth felt with the martyrs in heaven; a *vertical* unity. In addition, a sense of *horizontal* unity existed in that all shared one Baptism and one Eucharist.

Another sense of oneness had also existed from the beginning and was anchored in the office of the episcopacy —the bishops. Through *synods* (meetings) of bishops and through the charitable care of Churches for each other Christians could sense unity.³³ Persecutions, however, made it difficult to implement a formal institutionalization that might more thoroughly reflect upon doctrinal issues and be able to offer definitive rulings in the case of divergent views.³⁴ With legalization and the help of imperial patronage came the establishment of a more formal *horizontal* unity within the Church of the *oikoumene* (ecumenical) or *inhabited world* as the Romans called their empire.³⁵

Already ca. 202, Irenaeus had suggested that the Church at Rome was the ideal example of a true Church (1) "*in view of its preeminent authority*", (2) having been founded by Peter and Paul, (3) its antiquity, and (4) its fame.³⁶ It was normal for disputes all around the empire to be submitted to the Roman pope for an opinion that was, in actuality, accepted as a decision. The honored position held by the Roman See was demon-

strated at the outbreak of the Christological controversy ca. 430 when the two opponents —Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria and Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople— separately submitted their cases to Rome for resolution.³⁷ Celestine, pope of Rome, was even called the ‘*archbishop*’ of the whole world by Cyril.³⁸ In 416, Augustine of Hippo wrote three letters to Pope Innocent I for the Church in Africa in which he said the Pope had a pastoral authority over the entire Church, an argument which he found a basis for in scripture.³⁹

The popes’ claim to an institutional or constitutional primacy was pretty much established throughout the Western Church by the middle of the 5th century, but that had all been brought about mostly through the efforts of the Roman popes themselves pressing the case and not by theologians or other influential bishops arguing in their behalf.⁴⁰ The Eastern Churches in particular, while showing the popes of Rome immense deference and setting great store by their pronouncements, never understood the See of Rome to be the institutional or jurisdictional center of the Church or to have any more of a moral or doctrinal infallibility than any other of the great Patriarchal Sees (Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem).⁴¹

So, in looking at the Pudenziana apse, *oneness* has an organizational and institutional look to it when viewed by Westerners. As we mentioned above, such apse mosaics appeared directly above where the bishop sat with his clergy during the Liturgy. The institutional message was clear. To be ‘*one*’ was to be *in communion with* (in agreement with) the local bishop, who spoke for Christ. It is not a stretch of the imagination to also read into the mosaic the message that the unity of the worldwide Church could be expressed through the communion of all the world’s bishops with the bishop of Rome —the pope, the vicar of Christ, seated in the midst of his bishops, the successors to the apostles.

The Church is ‘catholic’

178 and 179 details from 172

We know the city in the background is Jerusalem because a jeweled cross was erected at the site of the crucifixion by order of Constantine. As a result of the redemptive passion and death of Jesus Christ, however, the city now symbolizes the “new” Jerusalem of the Church.



There is another aspect to the emphasis placed on Peter and Paul in the Pudenziana mosaic. Peter was known as the apostle to the Jews; he carried the Gospel primarily to the Jews.⁴² Paul is called ‘the apostle to the Gentiles’⁴³ preaching first to the ‘God-fearing’ Gentiles who attended the synagogues and then to the Gentiles of

the wider pagan world. The Gospel was carried to the Jews, first, and then to the Gentiles or, in other words, to the whole world. The prominence given to Peter and Paul in the mosaic is symbolic of the *catholicity* of the true Church. The Church is universal for it extends throughout the whole world and gathers into the Church —depicted as the city of Jerusalem in the

background of the mosaic[178]— people from all parts of the world, of every rank of society, every type and temperament.⁴⁴ The *new* spiritual Jerusalem of the Church replaces the *old* Jerusalem of the Jews, the leaders of which conspired against the Savior.⁴⁵ The conspiracy is symbolized by the cross in the Pudenziana mosaic.[179] But the cross depicted is encrusted with jewels indicating that although it had been the instrument of rejection by the few it became the means of salvation for the many.⁴⁶

The term *catholic* originally meant ‘universal or ‘general’ and stood in contrast to the Jewish or Gentile character of local, particular congregations. The Catholic Church included both. Certainly, by the latter half of the 2nd century, the term designates the true Church in contrast to heretical ones. It is the “*fold within which Christ’s sheep are safe from the wolves.*”⁴⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem contrasts the Catholic Church with particular sects like those of the Marcionites and Manichees.⁴⁸ The Catholic Church possess the whole truth and teaches it everywhere in the world, whereas sects teach strange doctrines and flourish in particular localities, in doctrinal isolation from (and in opposition to) the rest of the Church.⁴⁹

The Church is ‘apostolic’

Christ and his apostles dominate the composition of the Pudenziana mosaic for the true Church is the one founded by Christ and entrusted to his apostles. The earliest authoritative sources of the early Church were

180 Sarcophagus, Christ Enseignant, 4th c. Musée du Louvre



181 Jesus as Teacher, from the Catacomb of Dmitillia, 4th c., Rome

The International Catacomb Society.
<http://www.catacombsociety.org/index.html>
 Photo: Estelle Brettman



Christ himself, of course, as he walked the earth, and the Hebrew (Old Testament) scriptures from which he quoted. In the following apostolic period scriptural authority continued to rest in the Old Testament but now the apostles, individually and together, exercised the authority given them by Jesus.

What the apostles taught was passed on to their successors, the bishops of the Church. The collective teachings, writings, sermons, liturgical practices and prayers of this group -and of the theologians who commented on their work- formed what is called Christian Tradition. Included in the Tradition is the canon of the New Testament which gradu-

182 Winged Bull –Symbol of the Evangelist Luke, (detail) from 172

This is the symbol of St. Luke the Evangelist, one of the four writers of the Gospels, the others being Matthew (winged man), Mark (winged lion), and John (an eagle).



ally developed during this time period. (The New Testament is represented in the sky of the Pudenziana mosaic by the four figurative symbols of the four writers of the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, [182] and John.)

The pattern of designating authoritative successors in sequence, in the same Sees or cities, continued and became known as *apostolic succession*, a lineal succession extending back to the original 12 apostles. In this way the Church continued to be taught and guided, in a sense, by the apostles and Christ himself. Any bishop or group that could not be traced back through apostolic succession could not claim to be part of the Apostolic Church and could not claim conformity to the Lord and his apostles.

The four basic marks of the Church —one, holy, catholic, and apostolic— were clearly defined, doctrinally, in Church statements, and promulgated in Church art in the 4th and 5th centuries. Apostolicity, however, is the easiest mark to identify in the Christian art of the period. In a sense, the other three marks depend upon the very concrete practice of apostolic succession. Without the proof of apostolic succession it is very difficult to guarantee the unity, holiness, or catholicity of a Church. For this reason, the succession —apostolicity— comes to mind whenever we see an image of Christ sitting or standing in the midst of his apostles.[180, 181]

In the Pudenziana mosaic the enthroned Christ holds an open book which reads “*Dominus conservator ecclesiae Pudenziana*” (I am the Lord, the preserver of the church of Pudenziana.)[175] Any Church that could demonstrate apostolicity in belief, practice, and succession could rightly display an image with Christ holding an open book with a similar text, substituting only the name of the church.

¹⁸ N.D.J. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised Edition, (New York, Harper Collins, 1978) p 35

¹⁹ Kelly 402

²⁰ Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) p 109

²¹ Mathews 113-114

²² Kelly 413

²³ Kelly 404

²⁴ Kelly 409

²⁵ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (San Francisco, Ignatius Press), English translation for the United States of America, United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1994 –Lireria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City

²⁶ Kelly 403

²⁷ Kelly 402

²⁸ Kelly 402

²⁹ Mathews 161-63

³⁰ Mathews 164

³¹ Kelly 418

³² Andrew Louth, Later *Theologians of the Greek East of The Early Christian World*, Vol.1, Philip F. Esler, Editor, (London, Routledge, 2000), 04 October 2010 at 18:55 <http://www.verujem.org/maksim_ispovednik/LATER%20THEOLOGIANS%20OF%20THE%20GREEK%20EAST.pdf> p. 1

³³ Louth 1

³⁴ Louth 1

³⁵ Louth 1

³⁶ Kelly 192

³⁷ Kelly 407

³⁸ Kelly 407

³⁹ Kelly 419

⁴⁰ Kelly 419, 420 Men like Damasus (366-384), Siricius (384-99), Innocent (402-17) and their successors. Leo the Great (440-61) gathered together all their arguments and gave it all a final shape.

⁴¹ Kelly 407

⁴² Gal 2:7-9

⁴³ Acts 9:15

⁴⁴ Kelly 401

⁴⁵ Kelly 401

⁴⁶ Constantine the Great had a jeweled cross erected atop of the site of Christ's crucifixion in Jerusalem. It may have been the source for the appearance of numerous such jeweled crosses throughout the history of Christian art.

⁴⁷ Kelly 401

⁴⁸ Kelly 401

⁴⁹ Kelly 413