

Why do we pray for “your holy Catholic Church” and say we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church when we are not Catholics? We are not under the Pope. We are Protestants.

Many people in churches where the Nicene Creed is said have puzzled over the same thing, thinking it referred to the Roman Catholic Church. But the denomination the Pope heads does not have a monopoly on the word “catholic.” It was used by all (orthodox as opposed to heretical) Christians long before there was a separate Roman Catholic Church.

Our English adjective “catholic” is a transliteration of the Greek adjective *katholikos*, which meant “general” (as opposed to particular). *Katholikos*, in turn, was derived from the adverb *katholou* (composed of the preposition *kata* “concerning” + the noun *holos* “the whole”), which meant “on the whole, generally.”

So “catholic” meant “as a whole” (as opposed to individual component parts), and then “universal, everywhere.” Early Christian writers such as Ignatius of Antioch (the first Christian

to use the word *katholikos* to describe the Church) seem to use “catholic” with the meaning of “universal, everywhere,” as opposed to the heretical churches that constantly were cropping up in various places but did not represent the opinions of the vast majority of Christians across the world (the Church-at-large).

Another word which the Great Church used to describe itself was “orthodox,” meant simply “doctrinally correct” (literally “straight/correct opinion”), as opposed to the heretical Christians.

Both words were used by the entire Catholic/Orthodox Church in the early centuries. But when the Western and Eastern parts of the Church drifted apart slowly over centuries for many reasons, the word “catholic” was “picked up” by the Western, Latin-speaking Church centered in Rome, while the Eastern churches chose the word “orthodox” for them-

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selves to distinguish themselves from the (as they saw it) break-away Latin Church, which had adopted some beliefs and practices which the Eastern Church disagreed with.

So the word “catholic” has two meanings. It refers to the church under the Pope. It also refers to the entire Christian Church across the world (but not the heretics).

When the Nicene Creed was written (in 325, revised and expanded in 381), the Christian Church was still whole and undivided, and there wasn’t yet a separate Roman Catholic Church. So the Nicene Creed is not referring to the Pope’s Church but rather the second (actually earlier) meaning of the universal, whole Church everywhere.

One concluding thought: when the Nicene Creed was written there was truly one, united Christian Church that shared the same beliefs though there were regional differences in practices. Christian unity was real in that all Christians whether in Spain or Greece

or Ethiopia considered themselves part of one, big, universal (catholic) Church. In our day, Christianity is divided into many churches, many of which do not recognize people in other churches as being in the True Church or as being real Christians. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, there are 34,000 separate Christian churches/denominations in the world today. Christian unity today is greatly impaired by these divisions, to say the least. When we speak of God’s “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church,” we have to content ourselves with giving those words a “spiritual” sense (one in spirit, we would hope) because practically many Christians have “written off” other groups of Christians and will not acknowledge them as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have separated into our exclusive, private enclaves of True Believers and made the unity of the originally undivided catholic (universal) Church a dim memory unlikely ever to be regained.

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