

The Unity of the Church in the Third Article of the Creed

Susan K. Wood, SCL

Regis College, Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto

The third article of the Nicene creed affirms 1) the Holy Spirit as the source of life and unity, 2) the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and 3) one baptism as a shared sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. Together, these articles provide an exegesis of Eph 4:4: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” These affirmations are not isolated but form a coherent vision of unity. Specifically, the Spirit gathers the church. Baptism initiates believers into this Spirit-filled community, and the church is unified through this shared baptismal sacramental life.

Baptism

Baptism is the foundation of ecumenical unity because one becomes a member of the new people of God established by the new covenant ratified in Christ through baptism. The Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of this people as in a temple.¹ All those who constitute the people of God are “temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) or “temples of God” (1 Cor 3:16, 17; 2 Cor 6:16) and members of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:13, 27). The Catholic Church describes this people as a communion, a seed and sacrament of saving unity.² Within this communion all the baptized possess an equal dignity prior to any differentiation of state of life or ministry. The unity and communion formed in baptism makes the people of God one in grace with the Father, Son, and Spirit, and one with all other Christians baptized in water in the triune name. There is but one baptism and one communion as attested to in Ephesians 4:4-6.

A significant ecumenical agreement has been achieved on the meaning of baptism and the bond of unity it establishes, to which the 1982 Lima Statement bears witness.³ Many churches agree on its institution (#1), its meaning as participation in Christ’s death and resurrection (#3), as implying conversion and conveying pardoning and cleansing (#4), as a sign of the kingdom of God (#7), as a gift of the Spirit (#5) which incorporates us into the body of Christ (#6). This unity precedes the unity of the churches, ecclesial unity finding its basis in the sacramental and soteriological unity of baptism. The unity of Christians in one baptism is not the result of ecumenical efforts but is a gift to be received and recognized prior to those efforts. We do not achieve one baptism when we will have achieved mutual recognition of one another’s baptisms because that unity exists now because there is only one Lord and one event of his saving death and resurrection. Our unity is in Christ. Consequently, the burden should be to account for our

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §9.

² Ibid.

³ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

disunity rather than to account for our unity.⁴ This disunity is most obvious as the disunity among ecclesial communities.

Incorporation into the body of Christ in baptism is inseparable from entrance into an ecclesial community. That community is where the faith is professed, the community which receives the baptized, and where the eucharist celebrates and proclaims the presence of Christ sacramentally within the community. The rites of initiation are unthinkable outside of a local community. The local churches throughout the world are where the one Church of Christ is present and manifested.⁵ The relationship between the church universal and the local churches is simultaneous as there is a mutual reciprocity between the two. Thus, we are baptized both into the church universal and a local church. One only occurs in and through the other.

From an ecumenical perspective, however, one enters a divided church through baptism because one enters simultaneously into the one body of Christ and into a particular communion that is not in communion with other ecclesial communities of the baptized. This results in the paradox of Christians being in communion with each other in baptism and at the same time finding themselves in a state of ecclesial disunity. The unity established in baptism does not extend to the visible elements of communion such as the common celebration of divine worship, and the bonds of ecclesiastical governance (LG 14, UR 2), or—from the Roman Catholic perspective—the recognition of other ecclesial communities as churches.

Because of this, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism, says that baptism is only a beginning, a point of departure, which is directed toward a complete profession of faith, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation, and complete integration into eucharistic communion (UR 22). Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to claim that there is one koinonia established in baptism and another in the Eucharist. Even though the text in section 22 says that the beginning represented in baptism is directed towards a unity complete in the visible elements of unity represented in a “system” of salvation and Eucharistic communion, the following paragraph speaks of the ecclesial communities separated from us lacking “the fullness of unity with us which flows from baptism,” implying that this later completeness itself flows from baptism. Participation in the death and resurrection of Christ signified in baptism finds ongoing sacramental expression the eucharist.

Baptism leads directly to the eucharistic table and deposes the Christian people to eucharistic worship. Both baptism and the eucharist are sacramental celebrations of the one paschal mystery of Christ’s dying and rising, one employing the real symbolism of womb and tomb, rebirth and dying and rising with Christ, the other the real symbolism of his body broken and blood poured out for us and our salvation.⁶ We might say that the eucharist is the birthright of the newly baptized because baptism deposes us for public worship in the church and gives us our place (*ordo*) in the eucharistic assembly. This is the reason why in the Order of Christian

⁴ See Susan K. Wood, “I Acknowledge One Baptism for the Forgiveness of Sins,” in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 189-201 at 193).

⁵ Joint Working Group, *The Church: Local and Universal*, §2.

⁶ See Jean Daniélou, “Le symbolisme des rites baptismaux,” *Dieu Vivant* 1 (1945). Translation by Robert Taft, S.J., and cited in Robert Taft, S.J., *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding* (Washington, D.C., : The Pastoral Press, 1984), 11.

Initiation catechumens are dismissed before the Liturgy of the Eucharist since they have not yet received this deputation.

Reframing Recognition of Ecclesial Communities

So how can we be united in baptism while being separated at the eucharistic table? The problem is not soteriological, but ecclesial, and ecclesial especially at the level of the local community that baptizes in view of the division experienced by these local communities. The lynchpin is apostolicity. We do not admit the baptized to our eucharists because we do not recognize their communities as churches. From the Catholic side, we have traditionally assessed the status of these communities based on the status of their ministries in such a way that recognition of an apostolic ministry leads to the recognition of an apostolic community as well as a judgment on their eucharistic liturgies.

Ecumenical work on apostolicity has complexified what was once presumed with the result that an assessment of apostolicity now requires reframing. Traditionally, apostolicity was seen as consisting in an apostolic succession represented by the laying on of hands in the rite of episcopal consecration/ordination. This succession of the laying on the hands is certainly a sign and instrument of apostolicity as well as a conferral of the responsibility to maintain the church in apostolicity, but it is not in and of itself a guarantee of apostolicity except under very specific conditions when the church teaches infallibly. Furthermore, as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Dei Verbum*, attests, the whole church—and not just the ministry—is a bearer of apostolicity as the church transmits to every generation all that it believes “in its doctrine, life and worship.”⁷ Consequently, a more correlational approach is now needed to assess apostolicity, one that correlates ministry and church. We are called to discern evidence of apostolicity in one another’s churches, which will also give us a new perspective in assessing one another’s ministries that oversee that apostolicity. This necessitates an assessment of how these communities live as baptismal communities that follow the pattern of Christian living in Acts 2:38-47: reception of the apostolic testimony, repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sin, reception of the Holy Spirit, life in accordance to the apostolic teaching, prayer and the breaking of bread, generosity to those in need, and praise and thanksgiving.

Baptism not only requires a reframing of how to assess the apostolic status of other communities; it also necessitates a reframing of divisions of status within a particular ecclesial community, especially the relationship between ordained members and the laity. Because a baptismally based ecclesiology emphasizes what is shared in common before considering what is distinctive, as compared to, for example, a eucharistic ecclesiology with its focus on ministry and the ordained in the eucharistic liturgy, it bypasses the binary pair “hierarchy-laity” to consider the community as a whole and then, secondarily, the roles of the distinctive charisms and ministries within it, what Bruno Forte identifies as the binary “community-charism/ministers.”⁸ The first model emphasizes the distinction between the laity and the clergy even though they are fundamentally united in baptism. The second model highlights the unity of the baptized without denying the variety represented by the charismatic gifts of the Spirit and the ecclesial repositioning established by the sacrament of Holy Orders—a subtle but important difference.

⁷ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, §8.

⁸ Bruno Forte, *Laïcat et laïcité* (Paris: Médiaspaul, 1986), 116 and *The Church: Icon of the Trinity: A Brief Study*, trans. Robert Paolucci (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1991), 38-61.

Unity comes before distinction. Baptism establishes the communion of the Christian faithful who are equal in dignity before any division in status, all called to holiness.⁹

This diminishes neither the importance of the ordained ministry nor the importance of the Eucharist but is a recognition that all ministry is first baptismal, the minister being neither above nor outside the community of the baptized, but a member of the baptized. This is illustrated by Augustine's comment, "What I am for you terrifies me; what I am with you consoles me. For you I am a bishop; but with you I am a Christian. The former is a duty; the latter a grace. The former is a danger; the latter, salvation."¹⁰

Neither does the equality of dignity established in baptism result in a monochromatic community. Nor does it presuppose a democratic egalitarianism along political lines. A baptismal community is a differentiated community, an ordered communion, with each person occupying a particular *ordo* in the eucharistic community, some of whom are ordained and therefore occupy the *ordo* of presider over the eucharistic assembly.¹¹ The diversity of the gifts of the Spirit and subsequent sacraments that confer status such as ordination and matrimony ensure a rich variety of functions and responsibilities.

Baptism and Synodality

In synodality, baptismal communion becomes a lived reality. Ecclesiology in a baptismal key highlights the charismatic dimension of the entire People of God. Each person is endowed with charismatic gifts for the upbuilding of the church, all sharing according to their different gifts and ministries in the priestly, prophetic, and servant kingship of Jesus Christ. This diversity of charismatic gifts along with the basic equality in dignity conferred in baptism constitutes the theological and soteriological foundation of the structures and practices of synodality in the church. The "sense of the faith" shared by all the baptized allows them to be attuned to the promptings of the Spirit, to contribute to the church's understanding of the faith, and to discern the signs of the time and how the church can best carry out its mission in its contemporary context.

Synodality entails the people of God walking together in a shared journey of faith with the "full, active, conscious participation" (SC14) of all the baptized in the mission of the church, not just the clergy. Here, the principles of good liturgical participation become the principles of participation in the life of the church.¹² Thus, the participation of all baptized persons, including those at the peripheries, engaged in deep listening to one another and in intentional, courageous speech is a necessity for the church. Each person has a role in the church's mission and, in Pope Francis's words, is a "missionary disciple."¹³ All are responsible for evangelization through witness to the faith through a gospel-oriented life. Each person actively contributes to the mission of the church. The teaching church is no longer set against the learning church, for all

⁹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §9.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Serm.* 340, 1 Pl 38, 1483.

¹¹ See Nicholas Afanasiev, *The Church of the Holy Spirit* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 24; John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1997), 216.

¹² See Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy], §14.

¹³ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel], 24 November 2013, §§24, 120-121.

teach by speaking from their Spirit-inspired faith experience and all learn through deep, mutual listening. In this way, those responsible for making a final decision—whether that be at the local, regional, or churchwide level—does so in communion with and informed by all the people of God. In this way, synodality is an expression of the catholicity of the church.

Synodality represents a broadening of the collegiality of bishops by strengthening the bond between episcopal leadership and the community through mutual discernment and consultation that inform episcopal decisions, but it does not take away the governing function of pastors. The Synod on Synodality distinguished between “decision-making” and “decision-taking,” the first the result of broad participatory discernment and the second the final decision of the final responsible party.¹⁴ This is similar to the distinction between consultative and deliberative votes but gives more weight to what mere consultation might otherwise be. In a synodal process, the community tries to attend to what the Spirit is saying to the church through the Word of God, through attention to the signs of the times, and through the eyes of faith within an attitude of prayer.

Synodality is not just an institutional process or institution of governance, but is an expression of the church’s nature, form, style, and mission. It is a modality of being church.¹⁵ It mirrors the primordial synodality of the Trinitarian communion of Father, Son, and Spirit, who, living in perfect unity and mutual love as a model of dialogue and mutual listening, become the theological foundation for the church’s communal discernment and shared mission.¹⁶ Thus, synodality is appropriately an outgrowth of the Nicæan confession of faith: catholicity in terms of its inclusivity, oneness in terms of the unity of communion forged in baptism, holiness because it is the work of the Trinity and is made holy because of the grace of Christ. The church is both a communion of holy people and a communion made holy in the sacraments (*communio sanctorum*). Finally, the synodal church is an apostolic community because it hands on the apostolic teaching in its life, teaching, and worship and in its missional proclamation of the saving mercy of Christ.

Baptism “For the Forgiveness of Sin”

¹⁴ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session (October 2023), 52.

https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf

¹⁵ Francis, “We are Church Together,” Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, September 18, 2021, in Dicastery for Communication, *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023), 151-63 at 152.

¹⁶ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018,

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html. See also Robert Józef Woźniak, “Dialogical Nature of the Synodal Church.

Toward a Trinitarian Consideration of the Theological Roots of Dialogical Synodality,” *Annales Theologici*, 2022,

https://www.academia.edu/101290922/DIALOGICAL_NATURE_OF_THE_SYNODAL_CHURCH_TOWARD_A_TRINITARIAN_CONSIDERATION_OF_THE_THEOLOGICAL_ROOTS_OF_DIALOGICAL_SYNODALITY.

It is not insignificant that “forgiveness of sin” is associated with the work of the Holy Spirit, baptism, and the unity of the church. Baptism is associated with the forgiveness of sin from the earliest days of Christianity. In Acts 2:38 Peter tells the Israelites to “repent and be baptized everyone one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (NRSV). Romans 6 interprets baptism as a baptism into the death of Christ Jesus so that we will walk in newness of life, be united in a resurrection like his, and be freed from sin.

Even apart from baptism, forgiveness of sin is associated with the Spirit, for in John 20:22 in the scene where Jesus appears to the disciples who are locked in a room, shows them his wounds in his hands and side, and breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit saying, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (NRSV). With the gift of the Spirit, Christ commissions his disciples—all of them and not just ordained ministers—to unbind their fellow human beings, to set them free from everything that enslaves them, and to forgive them. This injunction to forgive occurs throughout the scriptures where we are given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19) and where we are forgiven as we forgive even to seven times a day (Lk 6:37; 17:3-4).

Forgiveness restores broken communion—communion with God, with other people, within factions within a community, with other communities. In short, forgiveness is essential for the unity and communion of the churches, not to mention also for the catholicity and holiness of the church. As long as we are divided—acknowledging that all sides are to blame—we are not fully catholic within the historical, concrete reality of our churchly lives. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “The ruptures that wound the unity of the church . . . do not occur without human sin” even though “one cannot church with the sin of the separation those who at present are born into these communities. . . and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ.”¹⁷ These divisions among Christians prevent the church from realizing in practice the fullness of catholicity.¹⁸ While these divisions occurred historically, sins today against unity that harm catholicity include certain exclusions which seriously harm fraternal charity, refusals to forgive, pride, an unevangelical insistence on condemning the “other side,” or a disdain born of an unhealthy presumption.¹⁹ Thus, the path to ecumenical unity is one of repentance, forgiveness, and conversion.

Forgiveness in baptism extends beyond the once-for-all forgiveness of sins in the person being baptized or even the forgiveness of someone who has wronged us. Although baptism is an event in the life of a Christian and the church, Christian initiation is a process introducing a person to a Christian lifestyle of ongoing conversion and life in the Spirit. The sequence of Christian initiation in broad strokes can be summarized as consisting in formation in the faith, baptism in water, and participation in the life of the community, essentially following the pattern of Acts 2:41-41: “So those who welcomed his [Peter’s] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers” (NRSV). Conversion is not a one-time event at the moment of baptism, but baptism is initiation into a lifetime of conversion.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§817, 818.

¹⁸ Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §4.

¹⁹ John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, §15.

Conclusion

Our shared confession of one baptism and one church is not just a line in the Creed—it is a living call to unity and mission. In baptism, we are joined to Christ and to one another, forming a communion that no division can erase. Yet, we know the reality: this unity is wounded by our separations, and the church struggles to show the fullness of her catholicity. The good news is that baptism gives us a starting point and a promise. It reminds us that unity is not something we create—it is a gift we receive. Our task is to make that gift visible through dialogue, forgiveness, and a spirit of synodality, where all the baptized walk together, listening to the Spirit and to one another.

In a world fractured by conflict and isolation, the Church's unity is a sign of hope. When we live our baptismal call—sharing in Christ's mission, practicing mercy, and working for reconciliation—we become what the Creed proclaims: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. This is not an abstract ideal but a concrete witness that the Spirit is still at work, healing wounds and drawing us into communion for the life of the world.