Church Communities Gather

Teacher Background

The literal meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words, rendered in English as ‘church’, is assembly. Gathering or assembling together is a key element in any understanding of what it means to be ‘church’. Over time, the word ‘church’ has come to be used exclusively of the gathering of those who are followers of Christ. By association then, the physical place where Christians gather to worship is also designated in English by the word ‘church’. The church building is more than a simple meeting hall. It is architecturally symbolic and so tells us much about the Christian community and what it means to gather as Christians.

Identity – Catholic Christian

In early times, followers of Jesus were simply known as Christians. Communities came to be known by their geographical location: the Church in Ephesus, the Church in Rome. By the fourth century, however, disagreements arose about the meaning of key doctrines of faith. Heresy divided the Church. Those in error came to be known as Arian Christians or Monophysite Christians. After the Reformation it was no longer possible for people to identify their church membership as simply Christian. Those Christians who remained in communion with the bishop of Rome became known as Catholics.

Catholics share the broad Christian tradition with their fellow-Christians of other denominations: belief in the incarnation, salvation through Christ and the sacraments. There are some sharp identifying differences, such as the role of the Pope. But Catholic identity is not simply a matter of distinctive beliefs. Rather, it is a tradition: centuries-old ways of believing, worshipping and living the Christian faith that is quite unique. One theologian uses the example of national flags to explain. Many flags are made up of red, white and blue stripes. It is the different patterns formed with these that distinguish the British, French and American flags. So too, Catholics have distinctive patterns of Church teaching and practice that shape personal faith and a distinctive approach to God and the world.

The Church – a special place for gathering

For the Jewish people, the Sanctuary and later the Temple were sacred places for religious assembly and worship. They were set apart through a solemn ritual of consecration to be used exclusively for the worship of God. At first, Christians continued to worship at synagogues and the Temple and to celebrate Eucharist in their homes. But as communities grew and the Church became more structured, buildings were set aside for worship. Christians continued the Jewish tradition of consecrating the building with prayer and anointing and of reserving it exclusively for religious affairs. The focus of any church building is the sanctuary or area set apart for celebrations, although the whole space is considered the liturgical space. There are three essential furnishings here. The altar is the centrepiece of the church and the focus of the gathered community. Traditionally, it was made of stone, to symbolise Christ, who is the foundation stone of the living Church. It also recalls his sacrifice on the cross, which is re-presented there in the Mass. Covered with a cloth, becomes the Lord’s Table from which Christians, gathered together, are fed with the Eucharist. With this post-Vatican II emphasis on meal rather than sacrifice, the altars of many modern churches are wooden, rather than stone.

The ambo or reading table is the place reserved for the proclamation of the Scriptures and the homily to the congregation assembled. Vatican II reminds the faithful that at Mass they are nourished at the twofold table of the Lord’s word and body. The chair is reserved for the presider. It
reminds members of the congregation that they gather as a community for worship, not just as individuals. Through the ordained minister, Christ continues to lead his assembled people.

In Catholic churches, the Eucharist is usually reserved to be available for taking to the sick, thus alerting those gathered for worship that their community includes others who are not able to gather in the church building but who are nevertheless an integral part of the church community. Over time a strong tradition of private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament developed. The Eucharist is kept in a secure cabinet, the tabernacle. A lamp burns nearby to alert people to the Lord’s presence. In modern times, a special chapel or area is set aside for Eucharistic reservation and prayer, rather than the previous practice of it being on the sanctuary.

Other features of the church include a cross, which recalls the mystery of Christ’s saving death. The baptismal font, with the Easter candle nearby, is a reminder that we all share in Christ’s resurrection through baptism. There may be statues or icons of Mary and the church’s patron saint and other saints. Stained glass windows not only beautify the building, but also have a purpose in instructing the faithful and reminding them of key aspects of their religious tradition.

The Church – Beginnings and Growth

Jesus laid the foundations of his Church through his ministry, choice of the apostles and sending of the Holy Spirit after his death and resurrection. At first, Christians continued to pray in the synagogues and bring the Gospel to the Jews. Soon the mission to the Gentiles began and, especially through Paul’s preaching journeys, the faith spread far abroad. Hostility and persecution quickly isolated the Christians who formed their own communities or local churches. Meetings and celebration of the Eucharist was usually in private homes and often in secret.

Structures gradually emerged. The founding apostles left local churches in the care of appointed leaders and soon the leadership pattern of bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons became common. Doctrinal struggles within the Church were evident from the beginning. Church leaders gathered in Council to discuss and reach decisions about issues of church doctrine. The special leadership role of Peter’s successors became established in Rome. And after the freedom granted by the emperor Constantine, the Church became a fully institutionalised religion with its own buildings, laws, authority structure and public worship.

The Church – Mystery and People of God

Vatican II issued a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. In it, a blueprint was laid out for a renewed understanding of the Church. This constitution gave primacy to an understanding of the Church as mystery: Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church also speaks of the Church as the People of God. Just as the Covenant at Sinai had established Israel as God’s chosen people, so the covenant sealed on Calvary forms the followers of Jesus into the People of God. Salvation comes to Christians not merely on an individual basis, but through the community gathered around Christ, the Christian Church. This understanding of Church brings into sharper focus people in their relationship with God and with one another. The understanding of church as People of God emphasises the building and strengthening of relationship in Christ. Authority and institutional structures, necessary for the proper governance and sustenance of the Church, are seen to be at the service of nurturing relationships and building Christian community.