

European catholicity?

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ABSTRACT

After the Reformation, the part of the Church that remained loyal to the pope and Rome continued to consider itself as Catholic, which is to say universal. However, reconfigurations of its geography forced it to examine this universal dimension, for while European Christianity was amputated of almost the entirety of the Germanic, Scandinavian, and British worlds, it grew with new mission lands in America and Asia. On the European continent, it was faced with dual competition during the early modern period, namely the expansion of Islam in the East and of Protestantism in Europe. It reacted with a missionary impetus in all directions.



Guided by Christ and the Virgin Mary, Peter (the pope) holds the rudder of the ship carrying the apostles and saints. The Doctors of the Church propel the ship toward reconquered Constantinople, while the saints of the Counter-Reformation, led by the archangel Michael, defend it against ancient (Arius) and modern (Luther and Calvin) heresiarchs. In the four corners are scenes evoking the expansion of Christianity, the Crusades, and martyrdom. Painted in Mexico, this allegory of the Counter-Reformation Church was inspired by Italian engravings. Anonymous painter of the seventeenth century, *The Ship of Mystical Contemplation (The Triumph of the Catholic Church)*, Tepotzotlán, Museo Nacional del Virreinato. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

“Catholicity” generally refers to the spiritual, institutional, and political solidarity that brings together, but without always overlapping, the Christians who remained loyal to Rome after the Reformation, the clergy subject to the

pope, and a series of geopolitical states that share this faith, chiefly in Europe.

Catholicity?

In Greek, καθολικός (*katholikos*) means “universal.” In its original meaning, the catholicity of the Church is its universality in space, time, as well as its aim to save the souls of all humanity. In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)—a text that established the original doctrine of all branches of Christianity—it is the very definition of God’s Church, as opposed to heretical and schismatic sects: the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

That is why from the sixteenth century onward, the Protestants who opposed the pope and Rome refused to call the traditional Church Catholic, referring to it instead as Roman and even papist. Its defenders retorted that obviously only the Church *sub et cum Petro* (“with and under Peter,” which is to say the pope, who is the successor of the apostle Peter) can lay claim to the tripartite catholicity of space, time, and souls. Instead, to refer to the Christian lands loyal to Rome, they preferred the medieval expression Christianity (*Respublica christiana*), which refers to the communion of Christian kingdoms from Europe and the Near East, led by the pope and (to a certain degree) the Emperor.

European?

The horizon of the Church of Rome was for all that less European than it had ever been since Constantine. Despite failures, notably in Japan, the Catholic missionary impetus of the sixteenth century toward Latin America and the Pacific continued during the seventeenth century toward Canada, Africa, and the Orthodox and Muslim Near East stretching as far as Persia and the Caucasus. This new world had little to do with the old medieval Christianity in scope, culture, or political context.

To oversee missionary action, Rome created the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*de propaganda fide*), circa 1622. Its authority stretched from the Northern European lands to be won back from the Protestants to distant missions near Christian (the Near East) and pagan (New France) populations, in addition to areas in Central Europe where the confessional division was being resolved. Only the Iberian colonies were not subject to its activity, where Rome had entrusted evangelization to the kings of Spain and Portugal in the late fifteenth century, a privilege it was subsequently unable to revoke. Papal administration thus did not make a distinction between the old European core and new mission lands. Preaching was the same in Europe and overseas, as Roman canon law was applied universally, even when missionaries wondered what to do when faced with highly different societies.

While catholicity largely surpassed Europe, it was conscious of being first and foremost European. In a 1659 directive for Tonkin, Rome warned against the exporting of European customs, instead ordering that worthy aspects of local cultures be praised. It was the search for this balance that sparked the interminable rites controversies over the adaptation of Catholic customs to non-European societies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The external danger: Islam

As in the Middle Ages, behind the discourse exalting the Crusades, relations with the Ottomans were marked by pragmatism and negotiation.

While the spirit of the Crusades was not the primary driver of the actions of princes, it nevertheless erupted at times, for instance during the Hispano-Italian campaigns against Tunis (1535), Algiers (1541), and Lepanto (1571). In Tunis, the Christian victory obscured the reality of a war of states against Ottoman corsairs, and abruptly brought back memories of the Crusades of Saint Louis. In Lepanto, the Capuchins breathed a crusading spirit into the fleet at the last moment. Pius V had the rosary recited in churches. The Turkish fleet was beaten. Even though France did not take part, and the alliance shattered before taking advantage of the victory, a common memory

took hold, that of Our Lady of the Rosary. Nobles from across Catholic Europe also continued to engage in the maritime crusade of the Order of Malta.

The calls of the pope for a Crusade by land garnered little reaction, although when the danger was imminent, Europe was galvanized. Since Louis II of Hungary's defeat at Mohács (1526), the Ottomans occupied the Hungarian plain, threatening the heart of Europe. The European dimension of major battles against the Turks varied. During the Long Turkish War (1591-1606), princes sympathized with the spirit of the Crusades, but only the pope provided substantial assistance, although Europe mobilized when the danger was reborn half a century later. The French came to the aid of Hungary at the Battle of Saint Gotthard (1663). While they did not defend Vienna in 1683, this was not out of a lack of interest, but because Louis XIV was disputing leadership over the Crusades with the emperor and the pope. In certain respects, it was no longer the Catholic solidarity toward the Reformation that was being expressed, but the old medieval Christianity that was reborn. After Vienna was assisted by the Polish King John III Sobieski, the Protestant Electors from the Empire took part in the reconquest of Hungary, alongside the pope and Catholic princes.

The internal danger: the Protestants

It is nevertheless difficult to overestimate the division caused by the Reformation in Christian Europe. It opened a new era that is difficult to name. Counter-Reformation? Catholic Reformation? The first emphasizes the survival reaction caused by Protestant attacks, while the second highlights the internal elements—both preceding and independent of Luther and Calvin—that sparked the renewed fervor of the Catholic Church. Contemporaries experienced the period as a *re-formatio*, a return to the original form. This was the idea of the Council of Trent, to end excesses in order to respond to the accusations of Protestants.

For all that, the evolutions of Protestant and Catholic societies resembled one another from the mid-sixteenth century onward: confessional identities were built, allowing the state greater control over society. The facts do not always conform to this model, including in the Germanic world where it was created. The very notion of confessionalization can be criticized, for while the *Credo* of Pius IV and Protestant confessions were referred to as confessions of faith, they were of a profoundly different nature.

An essential difference between the lands of catholicity and Protestant countries (the North of the Empire, Great Britain, Scandinavia) was the relation between the spiritual and the temporal. The disagreement between Catholics and Protestants can be brought back to a central point, the submission of Christians—both society and state—to the magisterium of the Church, and hence the pope. Paradoxically, the pope was strengthened by the Reformation. During the 1580s in particular, he asserted his intention of stripping heretical kings of their kingdoms, and freeing their subjects from the duty to obey them. This affirmation nevertheless came to a standstill in 1606, when Paul V failed to have the Republic of Venice deliver two heterodox priests.

Once coherent and disciplined societies were built around faith, and the papacy was in decline on the European political stage, the solidarity of European catholicity gradually disappeared during the seventeenth century, in favor of the early modern state. Behind this plan, which may seem simplistic, there was nevertheless a permanent reconfiguration of relations between the Church and the state, between the secular and the sacred.

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