

Ecclesia – Eglise –Igreja—Iglesia

Church?

Captain Kirk was the captain of the fictional Starship Enterprise of Star Trek fame. When studying the etymology of the English word “church,” I discovered that the good captain’s last name is a version of the Greco-Germanic word which evolved into the word we English-speakers use for the universal Church and the local parish. And notice, from the title of this column, how different it is from all of our brothers and sisters who are speakers of the romance languages.

It seems that the most plausible theory about the origin of the word was that it came to us from the Greek word for “Lord” which is “Kyrios” and a related term “Kyriakon” which means “House of the Lord.” The more common Greek word for the Church and for a particular church was “ekklesia” or “basilike,” whence we get the Latin “ecclesia” and “basilica.”

Linguists surmise that it was the Germanic Tribe called the Goths who adopted “Kyriakon” from Greek as the primary word for church in their usage. This usage spread in Northern Europe in the Germanic, Scandinavian and Slavic countries in forms like “cerkov” (Russian), “kirikko” (Finnish), “kirche,” (German). The word probably made its way over to England by way of the Angles, Saxons, Frisians and Vikings and, ultimately, morphed into the word we use today. But, we can see a derivative in the surname of the captain mentioned above.

There are linguistic nuances between these Latin and Germanic usages: The Germanic seems to emphasize the place of the Lord’s dwelling whereas the Latin emphasis is on the people of God being “called together” or “assembled.” The former is more of an affirmation that God can and does make himself present in space and time so that we can have a real encounter with him: And since “space and time” imply particularity, we go to a particular place at a particular time to worship him. The latter term affirms the idea that, because the Lord is present, we are called together, to worship him.

It isn’t much of a leap to arrive at ideas of unity and universality when considering these terms along with the oneness of God. If the God we worship is One, we should be one. Jesus expresses this in

John 17, praying that his disciples be one as he and the Father are one.

Hopefully the reader can also discern that, properly understood, the Church is not merely a human response to the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is not as if believers of like mind and like experience simply decided to organize themselves. They are “called together.” Jesus speaks of an “ekklesia” built on the foundation of Peter, the Rock. In the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, of the usage of the same word in the Acts of the Apostles, it is said “*The singular and the plural are interchangeable. Two or more churches do not make the church, nor are there many churches, but **one church in many places**, whether Jewish, Gentile or mixed.*”

The tragic divisions which have arisen in the history of Christianity have led to differing theologies of what the Church is and what it ought to be. In our Faith, the Church ought to be a visible, unified reality gathered around such symbols as the successor of Peter and the Apostles who are also pastors and teachers. The organized structure, built around human beings, isn’t purely “man-made:” Christ commissioned human leaders and referred to an entity called “ekklesia.”



Some implications:

While the pandemic has caused people to stay away from physical gatherings around the altar; we should all prepare for the day to come when we will be free to do so again. Why? Because we are “called together.”

Scandal at the human failings of leaders should not lead to “*throwing the baby out with the bath water;*” it is an issue from the very inception of the Church and it will be with us to the end. Nevertheless, Christ willed that we contend with this problem.

There is no Church of just “Me and Jesus.”