

# A HOLY CHURCH

By WALTER J. BURGHARDT

**I**BELIEVE in the holy Catholic Church'. Part and parcel of Catholic belief, a fundamental article of faith, is: the Church of Christ is holy. This proposition, a commonplace on Catholic lips, raises a serious problem in Catholic minds. The problem is fashioned of several facets: one is theological, another is historical, a third is existential.

On the theological level, what I confess in the Apostles' Creed (and in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as well) is an essential property of the Church, a holiness inseparable from her structure, as much part of her as is her unity, her catholicity, and her apostolicity. The holiness which I avow is not limited to certain periods, specific stages, in her historical development: the moment of her birth from the lanced side of Christ, or a brilliant flowering in an age of saints, or the hour of decision when the wheat will be sifted from the chaff. Far from being a lost innocence or an eschatological yearning, it is a holiness to which we wake each morning. It is a reality in Ghana and on Guam, in England and on the Continent. It is not a historical accident, like the union of throne and altar under Francis I; nor is it a matter of positive law, like the wearing of a cassock on the streets of Rome. No; holiness is an attribute which wells up from the Church's inmost being. Without it, she would not be the Church of Christ. The theological problem is: How am I to define this sort of holiness?

The theological problem has repeatedly been intensified by the historical. Time and again, on the basis of this article of faith, on the grounds of a holy Church, the Church as it exists in the concrete has been rejected. Time and again, a new church has been set up, and of it men have said: This is the genuine Church of Christ, this is the holy one of God. In the third century, Tertullian angrily renounced a Church of adulterers and gluttons, of sinners who forgave sins; he founded his own sect, whose members were 'Spirit-filled', angels on earth, vowed to asceticism. The Novatians could not abide a Church that was lenient towards christians who had lapsed under persecution. Montanism, at least in Jerome's time, closed the Church's doors to almost every sin. The fourth- and fifth-century Donatists tied the validity of a sacrament to the

holiness of its minister, demanded a Church of saints, found the bride of Christ in Donatism alone, insisted that only Donatist Africa breathed forth the sweet odour of Christ: 'the rest of the world stinks'. The Middle Ages had their Cathari and their Joachists, heard the Hussite doctrine that the one holy Church was exclusively the totality of the predestined. Even the sixteenth-century Reformers, despite their insistence on man's essential corruption, paradoxically rejected the Catholic Church for her corruption. Nor was the corruption invented, for in 1522 Pope Hadrian VI could write: 'God permits this persecution to assail His Church because of the sins of men, particularly priests and the Church's prelates. We know that for some years now there has been much to detest in this Holy See – abuses in spiritual matters, excesses on the level of administration; in fine, a general corruption. As far as We are concerned, you have Our promise that We will bend every effort to reform, before all else, this Curia, which is perhaps the source from which all this wickedness has come forth'.<sup>1</sup>

The historical is reinforced by the existential, the facts of the past by the experience of the present. What strikes contemporary man is not so much a holy Church as a Church of sinners. What the outsider so often sees is a middle-class, comfortable Christianity. He sees a double standard: preaching of austerity by men who refuse to live austere; church-going christians without the virtues of the pagans; scandals among those vowed to perfection; the sacred profaned or performed without reverence; faith severed from love; love limited by race. And this in a Church which claims to be divine, which proclaimed in the First Vatican Council that in her 'exceptional holiness' she is herself 'a ceaseless motive of credibility', is 'irrefutable evidence of her divine mission'.<sup>2</sup>

## I

The solution is not simple. And because the answer is complex, it is best to approach it in several stages. In the first place, I suggest that post-Reformation theology has slighted the basic holiness of the Church. Apologetic needs have forced on ecclesiology an inordinate emphasis on holiness as a 'note' of the Church. I mean, the demands of defence and attack have compelled theologians to

<sup>1</sup> Instruction to the Legate Francesco Chiericati for the Reichstag at Nuremberg (1522): in C. Mirbt, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des römischen Katholizismus* (4th ed., Tübingen, 1924) p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, (Ed. 32) 1794.

stress those aspects of the Church's holiness which are visible, are more easily recognisable than the true Church herself, distinguish her from sects that are not Christ's, and mark her out as the sole societal form of religion instituted by the God-man. Oh yes, these visible aspects of the Church's holiness are real, are highly significant; but the stress on the visible has obscured a more radical holiness, the holiness which is the root of all else that is holy in her. In a word, the Church is holy because she is the Body of Christ.

This approach to the Church's holiness finds its spring-board in Scripture. The New Testament calls a place or a thing holy if it is splendidly sacred by reason of God's presence, its consecration to God, or its origin from God. And so the New Testament sees as holy the earthly Jerusalem<sup>1</sup> as well as the heavenly,<sup>2</sup> the Temple<sup>3</sup> and the Mount of Transfiguration,<sup>4</sup> the vocation of christians<sup>5</sup> and their kiss,<sup>6</sup> and the ground on which Moses stood before the burning bush.<sup>7</sup>

Here, I submit, lies the primary holiness of the Church. She is holy because, as the Body of Christ, she has her origin from God, is consecrated to God, and has God uniquely present to her.

The Church owes her origin to God. Her founder is the God-man, who gave her being and life, and established her essential structure. In fact, the Fathers of the Church insist that the Church was born from the side of Christ on Calvary. That is why they see in the fashioning of Eve from the flesh of Adam a mystery of the Church's origin. The Church, as the New Eve, was structured from the side of the New Adam as he slept the sleep of death on the cross. St John Chrysostom is splendidly expressive:

'Just as Eve was produced from the side of Adam, so too we from the side of Christ. This, you see, is the meaning of the phrase, "from his flesh and from his bones".<sup>8</sup> That Eve was produced from the side of Adam, this we all know . . . But that the Church took shape from the side of Christ, where could we find proof of this? This too Scripture reveals. For after Christ was lifted up on the cross, was nailed thereto, and died, "one of the soldiers came nigh and pierced His side, and there came forth blood and water".<sup>9</sup> From that blood and water the whole Church has its being and existence . . . In point of fact, we are born through the water of baptism and we are nourished by his blood. Do you see how we

<sup>1</sup> Mt 4, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Apoc 21, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 24, 15.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Pet 1, 18.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Tim 1, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Rom 16, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 7, 33; cf. Exod 3, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Gen 2, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Jn 19, 34.

are from his flesh and from his bones, we who have our birth and our nourishment from his blood and from water? Just as the woman was fashioned from Adam in sleep, so the Church was formed from the side of Christ in death'.<sup>1</sup>

The Church is consecrated to God. If each church is consecrated, that is, set apart for the worship of God, much more so the Church. Nothing she does finds its purpose or fulfilment in man alone; nothing she does but has its relation to God. She is a community of salvation. From God's saving act on the cross was she born; this saving act it is hers to prolong through time and space. She dares not be, she may not be, simply another ethical-culture society, or a centre for wholesome recreation, or a lobby for better housing. Even when she creates, as she must, a new world where men may live in human fashion, she is creating the conditions where man may worship God in decency. The task for which she is set apart is salvation, the oneness of man with God in the God-man.

Most importantly, the Church is holy because God is present to her, present within her. There is a union between Christ and the Church which is unique. St Paul saw it as a body, called it the Body of Christ: Christ is the Head, christians are the members. What Paul reveals to us is a oneness impossible to raw human nature, a oneness that demands the divine; a oneness that is more than collaboration, more than co-operation; a oneness that communicates to men the existential humanity of Christ, in such fashion that attributes which are Christ's can be truly predicated of men, so that in humility and truth the Church can say, 'I am Christ'.

The Fathers of the Church, building on St Paul, stressed the idea of one Person formed of Christ and christians, and quickened by the Holy Spirit. In the moving language of Gregory the Great: 'Christ with his whole Church . . . is one Person. And as the soul is one (soul) which gives life to the various members of the body, so the one Holy Spirit quickens and illuminates the whole Church. For as Christ, who is the Head of the Church, was conceived of the Holy Spirit, so the holy Church, which is his Body, is filled by the same Holy Spirit that it may have life, is fortified by his power that it may subsist in the structure of one faith and one love'.<sup>2</sup>

Neither Scripture nor christian tradition rests content with the

<sup>1</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Quales ducendae sint uxores*, 3 (PG 51, 229).

<sup>2</sup> St Gregory the Great, *In septem psalmos poenitentiales expositio: Ps 101* (PL 79, 602).

body metaphor; the Christ-Church relationship is too rich to be exhausted by one idea, too vast to be imprisoned in a single line of thought. The Church is a bride, and her Bridegroom is Christ; for the Church is wed to Christ by a mutual love even unto death, by a submission that flows from love, by a loving protection that keeps her from harm, by a total sharing from the impulse of love. Christians are branches, and Christ is the Vine; for from him flows into them the life that makes them one with him and with one another. The Church is a house, and God dwells therein; the Church is a temple, and the God it enshrines is the Holy Spirit.

This is the basic holiness of the Church: ontological oneness with God through the humanity of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This Body of Christ, fashioned by him and consecrated to him, is indescribably one with him – so much so that St Augustine could speak of the whole Church, Head and members, as ‘one Christ loving Himself’.<sup>2</sup> In his commentary on this phrase, Mersch waxes lyric: ‘For Christians, there is only Christ. The love of God for us, our love for Him, the love of each for all and all for each; in short, the very plenitude of charity: not one of these is outside the fullness of Christ. All the effusion of the divinity into our humanity, every real good that is done in the depths of the individual soul, throughout the whole expanse of the earth and down all the ages: all this is one life, immanent as all true life is immanent, and as limitless as eternal Life; one Christ, who builds up His own Body; one Christ, who knows Himself and who loves Himself wholly and entirely’.<sup>3</sup>

## II

There is a second facet to the Church’s holiness. Because she is the Body of Christ, because her reason for existing is salvation, because her primary purpose is holiness, she has within her the power to make men holy, to make them one with God. The Church

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting and instructive to find that early Christian usage tended to attach ‘holy’ to the Church not primarily on the grounds of moral purity, but because of her relationship to God; cf. P. Nautin, *Je crois à l’Esprit saint dans la sainte église pour la résurrection de la chair* (Paris, 1947) p. 62. In fact, Nautin claims in the same work that the earliest formulation, in Greek, of the third article in the baptismal creed at Rome had ‘the Holy Spirit in the holy Church’, thus defining the Spirit’s sphere of operation: the Church is the place where the Spirit resides; the Church is a holy Church because the Spirit within her is the Holy Spirit. This reading of the pertinent article has been disputed, for example by Dom Hugh Connolly in the *Downside Review* 65 (1947) 279-82.

<sup>2</sup> St Augustine, *In epistolam Ioannis ad Parthos* 10, 3 (PL 35, 2055).

<sup>3</sup> Emile Mersch, *The Whole Christ*, tr. John R. Kelly (London, 1949) p. 440.

is holy because she is a sanctifying Church, possessed of sanctifying powers – not pretty appendages to her structure, but essential elements of her being. She has a doctrine and a law, a sacrifice and sacraments.

The Church's doctrine is holy, for it stems from God, tells of God, and leads to God. On the basis of a divine self-disclosure, it tells of God in his secret life, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit thrill to one another in eternal ecstasy. It spells out the midpoint of history, the night God became man to make men gods. It tells of a cross that was not a tragic mistake but God's plan for recapturing man's love. It tells of a sacrifice that is not just a Sunday obligation but the re-creation of Calvary. It tells of a Church that is not another power organization but the continuation of Christ through the centuries: Christ teaching, Christ ruling, Christ sanctifying. It tells of grace, not as an airy, unsubstantial mystery, but as man's share in God's life. It tells of a death which is life, breathless and ceaseless, the consummation of a oneness with God that transforms human life even on earth.

Strange as it seems, the Church's law is holy. Not that every regulation of ecclesiastical authority is woven of wisdom; not that power has never corrupted the sacred. Rather that law in the Church is a participation in Christ – not only in the King to whom 'All power in heaven and on earth has been given',<sup>1</sup> but also in the Shepherd who 'goes before [his sheep]; and the sheep follow him because they know his voice'.<sup>2</sup> And the Church's law is holy because the purpose of her law is the purpose of her sacrifice, her sacraments, and her doctrine: to link a human being with his Lord, and to keep him one with God through all the bittersweet of earthly living. In the last analysis, beneath every canon of the Code and every commandment of the Church, beneath every regulation from Rome or censure from a bishop, lies a single law, the law of love. The way of God to which the Church turns a man's steps with her laws is simply this: that he will come to love the Lord with his whole heart and mind and soul and strength, and love every human being as Christ has loved him.

The Church's sacrifice is splendidly called 'the Holy Sacrifice'. It is holy because it is what it is: the Son of God offering himself to the Father through the hands and lips of men. And it is holy because it does what it does: it brings God down to men, and men up to God.

<sup>1</sup> Mt 28, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 10, 4.

In this connection the Secret prayers of the Mass are instructive. They tell us that, as often as this sacrifice is celebrated, 'the work of our redemption is carried into effect';<sup>1</sup> it 'works in us [God's] salvation in wondrous wise'.<sup>2</sup> Through it God is asked to 'work' his 'sanctification' in us,<sup>3</sup> for these mysteries can 'sanctify us in the life we lead now and lead us to joys without end'.<sup>4</sup> This sacrifice placates God and is the source of forgiveness;<sup>5</sup> at Easter time it is offered 'to expiate the sin of the reborn and to hasten heaven's help';<sup>6</sup> it should 'cleanse our weak persons from all evil'<sup>7</sup> and can 'set us free from the chains of our sins'.<sup>8</sup> It lessens 'our yearning for the things of earth', makes us 'learn to love the things of heaven'.<sup>9</sup> Through it God 'makes us share in the one supreme divinity',<sup>10</sup> can make of us 'an eternal gift' to himself.<sup>11</sup> It should 'give us life always'.<sup>12</sup>

The Church is holy because her sacraments are holy. The sacraments are holy because they are the acts and gestures of Christ.<sup>13</sup> This traditionally Catholic insight was pithily asserted by Augustine: 'Should Peter baptize, it is Christ who baptizes; should Paul baptize, it is Christ who baptizes; should Judas baptize, it is Christ who baptizes'.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the sacraments are holy because these acts and gestures of Christ are instruments of holiness, are the normal means whereby men achieve holiness, are the most effective channels through which the life of God is communicated to men. Water is poured on a child, and he is transformed into the likeness of his risen Lord, a new creature, all alive with the life of God's Son. Oil is touched to a young man's brow, and power pours into him to live that life even to crucifixion. If he loses God's life, for an hour or for years, his Lord's absolution restores it. At an altar rail that life is fed, and the words of Augustine come true: 'If you have received worthily, you are what you have received'.<sup>15</sup> A man and a woman kneel hand in hand at an altar, and at their

<sup>1</sup> Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.

<sup>2</sup> Third Sunday of Advent.

<sup>3</sup> Tuesday after the Second Sunday of Lent.

<sup>4</sup> Eighth Sunday after Pentecost.

<sup>5</sup> Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

<sup>6</sup> Friday after Easter.

<sup>7</sup> Fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

<sup>8</sup> Wednesday after the Second Sunday of Lent.

<sup>9</sup> Third Sunday after Easter.

<sup>10</sup> Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

<sup>11</sup> Trinity Sunday.

<sup>12</sup> Sexagesima Sunday.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A.-M. Roguet, *Christ Acts through the Sacraments*, tr. Carisbrooke Dominicans (Collegeville, Minn., 1954).

<sup>14</sup> St Augustine, *In Ioannis evangelium* 6, 7 (*Corpus christianorum*, series latina 36, 57).

<sup>15</sup> St Augustine, *Serm.* 227 (PL 38, 1099).

whispered yes they give each other the wedding gift of grace – a little more of God's life. And as the shadows lengthen and evening comes, an anointing speeds a human being to life with God days without end. This is not magic; it is the touch of Christ.

### III

There is a third facet to the Church's holiness: the goodness, the virtue, the morality of her members. In one sense, all christians are holy; for baptism forges an indestructible link with God, a consecration that cannot be cancelled, a sealing deathless as heaven or hell. That is why, for St Paul, the churches of christians are 'the churches of the saints',<sup>1</sup> and, in the Acts of the Apostles, the christians of Lydda are 'the saints living in Lydda'.<sup>2</sup> More dynamically, however, this initial holiness works itself out in a living love. On broad lines, this love has three levels. There will always be a high percentage of the Church's members who live at least the essence of love, who do not offend their Beloved on serious issues, who are not severed from God by sin, who offer the sacrifice and receive the sacraments, who mirror the affirmation of Christ: 'He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me'.<sup>3</sup> There will always be a fair number of Catholics who mount a significant step higher in holiness, who live the logic of love, who are not content not to offend but are impatient to please, who in kitchen or cloister, in office or monastery, image the Christ who could affirm: 'The things that please my Father I do always'.<sup>4</sup> And there will always be the relatively few – the Ignatius of Antioch and the Vincent de Paul, the Thomas More and the Maria Goretti – who are dissatisfied with the essence of love and its logic, who choose the folly of love: crucifixion with Christ, heroic holiness, self-giving till there is nothing left to give.

It is on this facet of the Church's holiness, however, that the paradox appears. This holy Church is also unholy; it is a Church of sinners. Karl Rahner has set the paradox in bold relief:

For 'Church' in the dogmatic concept is the visibility, the sacramental symbolism, the abiding presence of God and His grace in the world; it means the historical presence of Christ in the world until the dawn of His second coming and His manifestation in His Godhead. 'Church' is the human

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 14, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 9, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 14, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 8, 29.



thing which is bound up with the Divine, distinct from it certainly, but united. And the 'sinner' in the Church is here not the man who on occasion falls short of the code of penal law, which can happen to the best of us. Rather the sinner [here] is the man who really lacks the grace of God, who strays far from Him, whose destiny works itself out with fearful consequences to perdition. And it is *this* kind of sinner that belongs to *this* kind of Church. He is not merely registered as it were in her parish files; he is a part of her, he is a small bit of the concrete embodiment of God's grace in the world, a member of the Body of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

From this paradox several ideas emerge which are of high importance for an intelligent christian spirituality. The first is somewhat startling: the holy Church is a sinful Church. Not in the sense that she ceases to be the Body of Christ, ceases to be ensouled by his Spirit. Not that her doctrine and her law have ceased to reveal God's mind and his will. Not that her sacrifice is no longer Christ offering, her sacraments no longer his acts and his gestures. Not that godlikeness and goodness, virtue and heroism, no longer light her face. If we look at the Christ in her, the Church is sinless; she shares in the holiness of her Head. She is without sin because there is a unique oneness between Body and Head that cannot be ruptured; because, at any given moment, the Church can say: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me';<sup>2</sup> because sin in the Church does not flow from her substance, from her union with Christ, but is a betrayal of her being, treason to all for which she stands.

But the Church of Christ is not some ideal reality floating serenely and sinlessly in some distant empyrean; it is the congregation of the faithful. And so the other pole of the paradox endures: this concrete Body of Christ is not without spot, not without wrinkle; sinful members make for a sinful Church; the sins of men speckle the Church of God.

A second idea is a humbling realization: not only the sins of others, but my sins too, spot the Body of Christ, slow the process of human sanctification. Redemption works itself out through the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, 'The Church of Sinners', tr. William F. Gleeson, *Cross Currents* 1, no. 3 (Spring, 1951) p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Gal 2, 20.

Church; and in this application of Calvary to men the Head has need even of the foot. My sinfulness can be a hindrance to others' sanctity – the pride of pastor or bishop, the unchastity of husband or wife, the disobedience of monk or nun. Not simply because they are a scandal, but primarily because they inhibit the free flow of grace from one member of the Body to another.

A final insight is crucial for Catholic spirituality: it is within and through this holy, sinful Body that sinful man achieves holiness; it is within and through this imperfect community that man moves to perfection. It is in the Body of Christ that I touch Christ; it is within the Church of Christ that I am influenced by the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who is Holiness Itself. For a Catholic, then, there is no authentic asceticism that is purely personal, no genuine spirituality that is sheerly individual, divorced from the Church. Divorced from her scandals, yes – from the constant sin that mars her face. But never divorced from the Church herself, from the Body that is holy with the holiness of Christ, the Body that ministers the grace of Christ, the Body that links man to God in the humanity of Christ. 'I believe in the holy Catholic Church'.