

THE CHURCH, THE SACRAMENT OF THE WORLD

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IN THE CONSTITUTION *Lumen Gentium*, the term which is first used to define the Church is sacrament. Though the word is used only *en passant*, in the first section, it is one of the key-concepts in the constitution's exposition of the mystery of the Church. We might say that it was chosen as the point from which the Council sought to elucidate as clearly as possible the very nature and mission of the Church: 'since the Church is, in Christ, a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of the whole human race . . . she intends to set forth more precisely to all her faithful and to the entire world the nature and universal mission of the Church'.¹

Such language is startling. It is quite obviously something new in the official teaching of the Church. It is only in recent times, during the last ten years or so, that certain theologians, Germans for the most part, such as Karl Rahner and Otto Semmelroth, have sought to introduce the notion of sacrament into ecclesiology, and have referred to the Church as the original sacrament, *ursakrament*.

How did this terminology come to be accepted, and take precedence over that other, 'the mystical body of Christ'? Did not the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, inform us that 'to describe this true Church of Christ . . . there is no name more noble, none more excellent, none more divine than the mystical body of Jesus Christ'.² The reason would appear to lie chiefly in the attempt to solve, in a way more in keeping with theological principles, a puzzle which lies at the very heart of the mystery of the Church – the *crux theologorum* of all ecclesiology.

There are two constitutive elements in the Church: first a visible institution, which is a social reality made up of the community of the faithful and the whole complex of visible means which give that

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

² *Mystici Corporis Christi*, 13.

community its structure; secondly an invisible reality which is the grace of Christ and that common possession of divine life between the faithful, Christ and God which grace inaugurates through the holy Spirit.

What is the interior connection between these two elements? Should we not think of it as analogous to the Word incarnate? Since the Church is the body of Christ, is she not the depositary of grace, the unique place of communion with God, even as Christ here below in his body of flesh was the unique source of salvation for the human race, with the result that man cannot find union with God except through Christ's visible mediation?

This would appear to be the traditional statement which Pius XII echoed in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* and repeated in *Humani Generis*. It was already the classical thesis incorporated into every treatise on ecclesiology and finding expression in that somewhat uneasy formula, 'no salvation outside the Church'.

Every attempt to define the exact content of this truth as handed down to us appears to land the theologians in difficulties: it is hard to reconcile theologically this proposition with another which is just as certain and as well documented by the Church's *magisterium*: that not only is grace present and active beyond the frontiers of the ecclesial community, but salvation is also possible for the pagan who has no visible bond with the Church.

Theologians strive to resolve this apparent contradiction by affirming that every grace which of itself gives an orientation towards the Church to every man who accepts it, is ecclesial in character. Yet this, surely, is a dogmatic statement which does nothing to solve our problem. It does not in fact explain how this grace emanates from the visible Church, and how it happens to be a saving grace for someone who does not bring to reality the orientation implicit in this grace which justifies him, by becoming visibly united to the Church. If we try to apply the thesis 'no salvation outside the Church' literally and rigorously, we shall find ourselves in the company of the Boston group, who claimed that no one is assured of salvation unless, before the end of his life, he enters that harbour of eternal salvation which is the Catholic Church. The *magisterium* of the Church has certainly condemned this error by having recourse to the theory of 'implicit desire of the Church', but this has not provided a satisfactory explanation. At the root of this claim, that the visible Church is the sole dispenser of salvation, there would appear to be some misunderstanding of the real nature

and function of the Church. It would appear that the source of this misunderstanding lies in an untimely identification of the visible Church with the mystical body; or, to use a more biblical term, of the Church with the kingdom (reign) of God. For if the Church in her visible manifestation is in fact identified with the kingdom of God, she must inevitably see herself as the sole point of reference for salvation; the centre of a sphere, whose destiny is to bring all things under her power of universal attraction. It is this notion of the Church which has been criticized, and with good reason, by some theologians, and was subjected to a bold frontal attack at the second Vatican Council.

Two things had been happening at the same time. In the light of sacred scripture, theology had rediscovered that the Church, in her relationship with Christ, must always be understood as derived from him and subordinate to him; and secondly there had emerged a more accurate notion of that symbol of 'body' used by St Paul to express the nature and function of the Church. In biblical thought, the body is just as much the manifestation of a person as the instrument of that person's action in the world. By linking the visible community with the glorified Christ, its permanent head, the apostle was pointing to the community as the 'epiphany' of the Lord and the instrument of his salvific action in the world. And if it is true that the visible community is the sign of Christ in his redemptive activity, the sign which brings about what it signifies, then surely the most suitable theological notion to express this adequately is that of sacrament. For a sacrament is essentially the sign of a grace which it confers effectively in the act of signifying it.

The achievement of the constitution *Lumen Gentium* is that it has succeeded in shifting the focus: we now see her in a perspective which does greater honour to her Lord. It has also set apart the term sacrament to give us a new and more accurate understanding of the Church's place and mission in the work of salvation. In adopting this terminology, the constitution defines at the outset this reality of grace which the Church manifests and confers. It is more precise in its definition than those theologians who simply speak of the Church as the sacrament of Christ.

The text we have quoted above¹ tells us that this grace is 'the intimate union with God and the unity of the whole human race'. In order to grasp the meaning and scope of this formula, which

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

comprehends the whole work of redemption and its effects, we must first of all understand clearly what we mean by the grace which Christ brings to mankind by his person and his saving action. This grace is designated by the constitution most explicitly as 'communion'.

Following St Paul, the constitution reminds us that God's plan is to gather together all mankind in the communion of the divine life. It was for this purpose that he created them in unity in the beginning and predestined them for adoption as sons. When they sinned, he did not leave them without resources towards their salvation because of Christ, the redeemer who was to come.

By his incarnation, the Son, the first-born of all creation, has become the very source of the movement which gathers together the sons who have been scattered far and wide. By his redemption he has accomplished this work of re-unification. Hence the human race finds its unity in Christ, and in him alone it has the way of access to the Father. 'All men are called to this union with Christ, the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our journey leads us'.¹

To further this gathering together of men in God, already begun by his saving action, Christ founded for himself here on earth a new people to whom he sends his Spirit. This new people, the universal Church, finds the source of its unity in the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit, and has as its mission 'to bring all humanity with all its riches back to Christ its head in the unity of his Spirit'.² It is remarkable how the theme of unity and unification recurs as a *leit-motiv* throughout the whole constitution as characteristic of the work of both Christ the redeemer and the Church.

The union of mankind with God is already accomplished in Christ, but it must be realized in the life of each individual through the free acceptance of the divine gift. In order to bring this about, Christ raises up the Church, so that she may be the proclamation in the concrete of the unity which is given in himself, and the instrument of its realization in the lives of men. The constitution draws on the Epistle to the Ephesians for the main lines of its presentation of the mystery. We have already noticed that the idea of 'body' applied to the Church has the meaning of manifestation of the head, Christ, who is henceforth invisible and glorious.³ This same idea is expressed more precisely in the third chapter of the epistle. Here it is

¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ Eph 1, 20-23.

said of the Church that her role is 'to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery¹ hidden for ages in God who created all things, and to make known to the principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God',² who predestines Christ to be our assurance and our way of access to the Father.

The notion of *pleroma* (fulness) is complementary to that of 'body' and gives it a cosmic scope. Indeed, it denotes the Church as the spatial extension of the plenitude of divine life, coming from Christ and destined to fill the universe. After speaking of the growth of Christ to 'mature manhood', the epistle tells us that it is the business of the Church, through her ministers, to advance this growth in the world until the entire universe is joined together with the head who is Christ.³ Hence, because of her very nature as body of Christ, the Church is the visible and active presence in history of a universal salvation already accomplished, since in Christ God has reconciled men to himself, and offers them, through Christ, his love and forgiveness.

Previously this aspect of 'epiphany of salvation' already acquired by humanity had not been given any particular prominence in the theology of the Church. There was a tendency to judge the Church, like any other society, in terms of her activity, — one might even say her effectiveness rather than of her being. Such sociological criteria were applied to the Church as her numerical increase and the christian vitality of her numbers. This was tantamount to reducing the Church to some sort of co-operative society for salvation which benefits only its own members: even if it is open to all, it has no effect except on those who join it.

The enlightenment which the term Church-sacrament brings is far more significant. First and foremost the Church is not some sort of bursar of salvation, but rather the proclamation, the proclaimer of the good news that humanity is already saved, and that God is present amongst men in order to make them, in Christ, sharers in his life and happiness.

The terms proclaiming and proclamation do not primarily indicate the work of evangelization or the ministry of the word. By the very fact of her existence, the Church is a sign, and she sends out her signal to every man by manifesting what she is in her essence, *viz.*, the communion of men with God in Christ. It is here, in the effective

¹ Mystery here denotes our adoption as sons in Christ. Cf Eph 1, 5.

² Eph 3, 9-12.

³ Eph 4, 13-16.

witness which the Church gives, that we see the pre-eminence of this sign of unity which St John emphasizes so clearly in his gospel.¹ The constitution mentions this explicitly in one of its finest passages, where it treats of the people of God: 'God has called together in one assembly all those who look upon Jesus in faith as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and has established them as the Church, in order that for each and all she may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity'.² It is this unity of believers, a unity rooted in love, which is the sign, above all other signs of the coming of God's kingdom and of his saving presence in the world.

This conviction is as old as christianity itself. In Acts, Luke returns to this idea constantly in his 'summary reports' of the life and spreading influence of the christian community at Jerusalem. The first sign of the credibility of the *ecclesia* as the coming of the kingdom, the universal sign, is fraternal communion, whose source is interior union and which finds its visible expression in actual 'togetherness' and the sharing of material possessions. 'And all who believed were together and had all things in common'.³ 'Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common'.⁴

Times have changed, but the sign has lost none of its validity. It may take various forms, but it is in and through this fraternal charity that the Church remains, even in the twentieth century, the sign and the sacrament of God for all men. An unfeigned mutual love, which is not based only on natural affinities, nor simply on fellow-feeling with the rest of humanity, and which moreover goes far beyond earthly horizons and temporal tasks, bears within itself the point of reference towards a reality transcending the merely human, and opens out on a mysterious reality in which it finds its justification and its source. When this love succeeds in creating a stable community between men from all parts of the earth, no matter what their differences of race, culture or social condition may be, it shows that it has not its origin in their own hearts, but is the seal and reflection of that primal love which is at work in them in order to unite them.

This sign is universal and holds good for all men: for all those who believe that the perfect unity of all mankind in love is the end for which every man yearns in his inmost heart as the final fulfilment of the human community, the Church manifests herself as the anticipa-

¹ Cf Jn 17, 21.

² *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

³ Acts 2, 44.

⁴ Acts 4, 32.

tion, the sacrament of this unity of the human race. This is what the constitution *Lumen Gentium* says to us, in other terms: 'this messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and frequently has the appearance of a 'poor little flock', is nonetheless a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race'.¹ The Church is this sacrament of the unity which is to come, first of all by her communion. But she is not herself this communion, except in so far as she is the union of the faithful with Christ, and through him with God. We must now examine this christological aspect of the Church-sacrament.

The Church is the sacrament of unity only in so far as she is the sacrament of Christ the redeemer, whose work she continues visibly here on earth. This is what the constitution sets before us, in the text which follows immediately on the one just quoted: 'Established by Christ as the fellowship of life, charity and truth, the people of God is also used by him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and is sent forth into the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth'.²

This work of redemption, which we have described as the gathering together of humanity in God, has many aspects. First of all, it is the reconciliation of the human race with God: an interior sanctification effected by the destruction of sin and the communication of divine life. Then it is a sharing in the intimate life of God, effected by acts of knowledge and love, and presupposing a revelation by God of his mystery and his will. Christ accomplished this work in accordance with the triple function which tradition recognizes as his, that of priest, prophet and king. As priest he reconciles us with God through his sacrifice and gives us grace; as prophet he reveals to us the mystery of God; as king he communicates to us his loving will. The mission of the Church is to prolong this triple ministry of Christ, but in a sacramental way.

The sacerdotal office is the first in order of importance and dignity. Hence it is not surprising that the constitution gives it a privileged position, in describing the new people as a holy priesthood.³ The fundamental activity in which this priesthood is exercised is undoubtedly the eucharist; for the eucharist is the hub of the sacramental activity of the Church. It is the act in which the Church makes present and effective the sacrifice of the saviour, and by uniting herself with his body, immolated and glorified, reinforces

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

and intensifies in the faithful that unity and charity which are the sacrament of his presence.

The other sacraments are in their own way expressions and instruments of this sacramental structure, either because, like baptism, they make people members of this structure, or, like holy orders, constitute them as ministers; or again, like marriage, they dedicate people in a state of life, or strengthen them in situations where their christian life is particularly vulnerable, like confirmation, penance, and the anointing of the sick.

But the priestly functions of the faithful are not restricted to the one act of offering the eucharist: their christian life as a whole is the material of their sacrifice. The constitution gives us a timely reminder of this: 'The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the holy Spirit, are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood. Thus, through all those works befitting christian men, they can offer spiritual sacrifices . . . Therefore all the disciples of Christ . . . should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God'.¹

The truth is that the whole Church is called to prolong mystically in her members the spiritual sacrifice which Christ made of himself and his life to the Father for the salvation of the world. In this way the members of the Church are to co-operate actively by the holiness of their lives in spreading abroad that redemption of which they are the sign and the instrument for all mankind. We see here that the prophetic function is derived from the priestly function, to which it is closely linked. Christ was indeed the prophet of the most High when he revealed God to us by his holy life, even before he did it by his words. His whole message consisted in bearing witness to the truth of the Father who is in heaven and who, in him, has made himself accessible and close to us. It was in the very person of Christ and in his deeds that the transcendence of the kingdom he announced found its primary reflection.

So too with the Church. The kingdom of God which she proclaims after the example of Christ is first of all mirrored in the holy life of her faithful. It is not necessary that this holiness reach an heroic degree in everyone. It is sufficient that their genuine life of faith and charity be transparent enough to allow the mystery of him who has called them to be discerned, and give a glimpse of the reality of that eternal life of which they are effective witnesses in this world.

¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

But the mission of Christ and of the Church is not confined simply to bearing witness to the kingdom which is coming; it includes also the work of preparing for that coming by leading men to seek it and to establish it here on earth by the perfect fulfilment of the will of God in the concrete circumstances of this life.

This is the crown of the redemptive action which is accomplished by the royal function of the saviour. Christ is king by being our guide, our way towards God in the daily round of our human existence. The Church fulfils this task by acting as the guide, through her ministers, of the faithful in their-day-to-day lives, and of humanity as a whole in its continuing march towards God.

However, she is such a guide only in so far as she herself is guided by the Lord. So too the various ministries, like the sacraments with which they are most commonly associated – holy orders for sacred ministers, baptism and confirmation for the laity – are organs through which Christ himself builds up his community and makes provision for the accomplishment of his mission. Every type of ministry is first and foremost a service of Christ and a service of the brethren in Christ. Every ministry is a mediation of the *diaconia* of Christ, directed towards the spiritual good of the community and its work in the world; the etymology of the latin word *ministerium* implies this.

A ministry can never be a dignity sufficient to itself. The Council has clearly shown how every sacred ministry in the Church, be it that of the pope, the bishops, priests or deacons, has its roots in Christ and is directed towards a pastoral end. But it has gone even further by making us aware of a new dimension in the ministry of the Church herself towards the world: the Church is the humble servant of a humanity groping its way towards its proper end through its temporal tasks.

This ministry of the whole Church is in a most special way the proper work of the laity. Hence it is not surprising that the Council has devoted an important part of its work to the laity and their mission, not only in the fourth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, but also in the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, and the decree on the apostolate of the laity.

We are indeed dealing with a work of the Church. Contemporary theology is daily discovering that it is not possible to separate the mission of the Church from the work of creation. The redeeming Christ comes to save the world which he created. His work is not to destroy creation but to consecrate it. He accepts creation with all its structures; and he safeguards its autonomy and liberty, but at the

same time he purifies it, elevates it, harnesses it to serve its own redemption.

Every temporal task here on earth contributes its own share to the work of preparing for the kingdom of God which is in process of becoming. This means that the Church, which founds this kingdom in the world, must be open-hearted towards this temporal work; it must respect it, and direct it towards the final end of humanity, which is the unity in love of all men in God. She can do this only by projecting on to the universe, created in perpetual evolution, the light of the risen Christ, the light of Tabor; by this light the world, in which eternal life is coming to birth, will gradually be transfigured. This is the real task of the laity, whose vocation is to 'seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs . . . in order to illumine and organize these affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop, and persist according to Christ's mind, to the praise of the creator and redeemer'.¹

This work of spiritual transformation, which the Council has presaged in all its immensity rather than defined, cannot be measured against any statistical criteria as though it belonged to the world of visible phenomena. On the outside it hardly shows at all, but we know that this is the really important work, that its influence is deep lasting and universal. We know this as long as we believe the word of the Lord, who told his own that they were the salt of the earth.

It is evident that at the second Vatican Council the Church came to a better understanding of what she is and what her mission is; she renewed her vision of her own sacramental nature. It now remains for her to reduce the formulae to practice, and to apply them in her apostolic attitudes and methods. One thing is sure: the Church knows that she is called, through this new awareness, to strip herself of her temporal privileges in order to become more transparent to the mystery of the dead and risen Christ which she contains, and to correspond more and more perfectly to this sign raised up among the nations. What is being asked of the Church today, as she stands on the threshold of a future dark with uncertainty is that she should enter more deeply on the way of poverty and persecution through which the Lord worked out redemption. Her task is, 'to announce the cross and death of the Lord until he comes, and show forth in the world the mystery of the Lord in a faithful though shadowed way, until at the last it will be revealed in total splendour'.²

¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

² *Ibid.*, 8.