

# A HOLY PEOPLE

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*Why the re-discovery of the social structure of faith is so difficult*

WHEN THE FRENCH THEOLOGIAN Henri de Lubac in his book *Catholicism: social aspects of dogma* examined the basic concept of faith in the Catholic tradition, he did this in terms of a Christianity and a Church which had for the most part lost its attraction to modern people because of a spiritualism and individualism which could no longer be overlooked: 'How', he asked in the introduction to contemporary critics, 'can a religion which apparently takes no interest in the earthly future and human solidarity offer an ideal that is still capable of bringing together the people of today?'<sup>1</sup>

Much seems to have changed since then. In part as a consequence of Henri de Lubac's book, the communitarian character of faith has been rediscovered and taken up ecclesialogically in the Second Vatican Council in the understanding of the Church as the People of God. De Lubac's book persuasively turned our gaze once more to the first millennium of Christian tradition, which was still profoundly filled with the social character of faith.

Monotheism and trinitarian faith, for example, in the view of the Fathers, always had an anthropological and practical meaning. For them, the unity of God also determined the unity of creation and therefore the unity of the entire human race. Faith in a common Father, for them, demanded a brotherly relationship among one another and the worship of God in common liturgy. This unity of God was for them at any rate not the uniform unity of a motionless and relationless monad, but rather the dynamic and multi-dimensional unity of the overflowing fullness of the triune God, the unity of love. To be one in this fashion, as God is one, neither in undifferentiated fusion nor in mere addition, but rather in the community of unifying love: that for the Fathers is the authentic promise and the specific task of Christian faith.

In the discussion of creation also, the Church Fathers did not think first of the creation of the individual but rather of the creation of humanity as a whole. The human race for them was at the same time produced as a unique being by the hand of the Creator. Because all human beings are in the image of God, they are also one in their

inmost being. Correspondingly, sin as infidelity to the inner divine image is at the same time also a tearing apart of human unity. The harmonious whole of humanity, in which 'mine' and 'yours' are not in opposition, thus becomes a cloud of dust, as it were, of individuals in conflict with one another.

The understanding of Incarnation and Redemption points in the same direction. For the Fathers the Word of God has taken not only a human body, but also human nature. Christ bore it in its wholeness to Golgotha, he will raise it again in its wholeness, he will save it as a whole. In this way redemption is also always the winning back of lost unity and community of human beings. The gathering of all (*anacephalaeosis*) in Christ can therefore be characterized precisely as the fundamental mystery in which the entire revelation of God is gathered together.

This unification continues in the Church; in a certain way it is itself this unification. As the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit it is the universal dynamic of God's saving work in the world, the presence of his unifying power. It extends to all and draws all into the unity of a single whole, so much so that it is always personified or becomes a unified social unit as people, nation, race or tribe.

Because heavenly glory is the final unfolding of grace, the social meaning of faith also comes to fulfilment here. In the end, life is not the survival and reward of an individual soul but rather—as for example the popular image of the heavenly city indicates—common joy. *Socialiter gaudentes* ('rejoicing together'): that is the communion of the saints, a transpersonal subject if you like, in which the individual is not extinguished, but is also not left in its isolation. The common origin and call corresponds thus to the common hope in a common salvation.<sup>2</sup>

In the recent reception of this social perspective of faith, and in connection with the important social and political questions that have arisen since the 1960s in theology and in the Church, it has increasingly been accepted that faith and its promise of salvation concern the human person in his or her sociality and wholeness and is therefore also relevant for earthly history. The liturgical reforms have meant that liturgy has actually taken on a more communitarian form: it is the work of the entire gathered community. A number of new ecclesiastical institutions have been created to facilitate the sharing of responsibility amongst the whole of the People of God. In many communities, basic communities and action groups have been

formed. But with all that, has the Church become in reality what it claims to be: the holy People of God?

The meagre attraction of institutional religion in modern society, the poor ability of the major Churches to evangelize, the attraction of sects and the many discontents with the ways and means in which faith presents itself today in the mainstream Churches of the Old World, all these signal that the questions which Henri de Lubac's book attempted to answer theologically and spiritually have not yet been answered.

Two reasons above all might be responsible for this:

1. No matter how much the social character of faith might be emphasized in theology, in pastoral work and in the praxis of communities, no matter how much we in Europe try to learn from the experience of the Church in Latin America and in the Third World, nevertheless the fundamental decisions and development of the history of the western Church still have a powerful lasting effect today.<sup>3</sup> A spirituality that does not reappraise its own historical origins will never find the right way in the future.

Since the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century the papacy has defended itself against the political functionalizing of faith in the context of the theocratic self-understanding of the Christian emperor and the imperial Church. Perhaps the papacy was able to enforce the freedom and independence of the Church only through a similar religious-political activity, through the claim of a sovereignty over the Christian people, a kind of hierocracy or papal monarchy. Thereby evolved not only an ever clearer distinction between papacy and kingship, Church and state, but also an unheard of politicizing, hierarchizing, juridicizing and bureaucratizing of the Church. In the same way the old eschatological tension between Church and world sought a new expression in the context of the unity of Church and society: priests and monks became 'spiritual people', to whom the laity, who lead the life of the world, are inevitably subjected. In the liturgy, the clericalizing of the Church expresses itself in the fact that the Mass became more and more the real business of the clerics. The people were degraded to being passive spectators and could finally be left out entirely. The social and political citizenry could no longer find a place and a function in a Church so extensively clericalized both in theory and in practice. Therefore, in the late Middle Ages this citizenry (together with its monastic and clerical supporters and exponents) had to redefine the Church either spiritually or individualistically, in order to find a new spiritual home—as in the countless

practical-mystical reform movements (especially clear in the *Imitation of Christ* of Thomas à Kempis); or else it had to launch a theological and politico-practical frontal attack on the clericalized institution of the Church—as with new vehemence Ockham, Wyclif, Hieronymas of Prague, Johannes Hus and others appealed to the invisible Church against the visible one, with increasing emphasis. The Catholic Church in modern times maintained and further developed its medieval form against such attempts and then against reformation and modernity. The institutional nature of the Church willed by God, especially its hierarchical representation and leadership by bishops and the pope, became the pivot and crux of ecclesial life, along with the objectivity and obligations of faith, sacraments and commandments. In such a situation it was inevitable that the late medieval trend towards the individualizing and spiritualizing of faith came to full development. Constricted in the objectivizations of the ecclesial-hierarchical media of salvation and cut off from his social sphere, the believer is actually alone with his or her God of the hereafter. The Church furnishes, so to speak, only the media of grace whereby the soul of the believer can be saved.

Since the theological and spiritual attempts at reform of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, this individualistic and spiritual paradigm of faith has become increasingly questionable. Faith which transforms the world and manifests itself in community and solidarity consequently became one of the central pastoral goals of the Second Vatican Council.

2. But while the ancient concept of the People of God was meant to attain a new reality on the level of liturgy, pastoral care of the parish, theology and partly also canon law, there occurred a new, violent radical change precisely in those middle-European Churches which, into the 1960s, were still solidly Catholic milieux, and which, up until the present time have possessed an ecclesiasticism that was also shored up socially and politically. This change was the entry into the Church of another form of individualism which obviously could no longer be checked: namely a modern bourgeois individualism and secular pluralism.

The modern division of the social structure into specialized institutional fields with their own purposive logic has profoundly changed society. Social relations in the public sphere are now likewise highly rationalized, bureaucratized and rendered anonymous. Such a socially anonymous self is forced to seek and find its identity in the subjective and in private. What corresponds to the end of the

individual and the increasing loss of individuality in the public sphere is the complete autonomy of the individual and the solitude of each in private. Individualism corresponds to conformism.<sup>4</sup>

With the waning of the socialist ideal and the downfall of communism in the East (which with its collectivist orientation of existence had made sociality and communality its primary value), the liberal stream of modern thought (whose individualizing orientation has viewed individual freedom and self-realization as its own primary value) has experienced an extraordinary upswing in modern Western society. Demographic surveys show that today in the West there is a dramatic change in values, which began in the 1960s and whose full effects have been felt since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Especially among the young, values that on the one hand are related to the social fabric (discipline, obedience, subordination, diligence, fulfilment of duty) and values that regulate the individual self (selflessness, self-mastery, continence, fidelity, modesty, self-sacrifice, obedience) have increasingly lost their meaning. On the other hand, values with a strong emancipatory relation to society (emancipation from authority, participation, democracy, equity, autonomy), hedonistic values (enjoyment, adventure, excitement, variety, emotionality) as well as values of a strongly marked individualism (creativity, spontaneity, self-realization, independence) similarly have a greater attraction for the young. In this modern, mobile, pluralistic society this change away from the values of duty and movement towards those of self-realization and engagement has also long included members of Christian communities. A spirituality that leaves this social context out of consideration will remain similarly abstract. What therefore does 'God's holy people' mean in this situation?

*God's holy people: the reciprocal condition of individuality and sociality in the basic structure of Christian faith*

Jewish and Christian faith do not display a collectivist orientation towards existence. The witness of the Old and New Testaments conveys rather that there is an intimate connection between the history of the revelation of God and the ever clearer conception of the irreducible worth of the individual and his or her personal-spiritual dimension.

The individual therefore is no longer merely a being constrained within the system of nature nor simply a part and function of the tribe, but rather someone willed by the eternal and one God, called into a life given freely in the freedom of creation and dialogue. As an

irreducible image and sign of the Creator, each creature has an unsurpassable worth, meaning and necessity. The infinite fulness of divinity is reflected in the variety and differentiation of creatures. In the course of the Old Testament tradition there is therefore an increasing personalizing, individualizing and subjectivizing of faith.

This is however only one side. For from the same experience of God (the unity of the God of creation and of covenant), the communitarian character of humanity is at the same time strengthened. Judeo-Christian faith is therefore also anti-individualistic: it leads to an increasing differentiation, universalizing and deepening of both the sociality and the individuality of faith. Both fundamental aspects of being human are then, so to speak, in a strict relationship of correspondence. The consequence of this revelation of God is at the same time a new and higher form of sociality and a new and higher form of individuality. A good example can be found in the 'Shema Israel' ('Hear O Israel'), found in the liturgy, that expresses the basic intention of the Deuteronomist's summing up of the Torah: 'Hear O Israel! Yahweh, our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your strength' (Deut 6,4f). The relationship with God and the relationship with oneself clearly stand here in a relationship of mutual dependence. As the believer or the believing people, following the intense religious consciousness of the prophet, relate themselves and are wholly related to the unity, holiness and transcendence of the Divine Other, their self-awareness and social awareness are also concentrated and deepened towards a wholeness of heart, person and strength. And the more the believing individual or the believing people succeed in the moral effort to give their life wholeness and depth through the love of God, the more strongly also can God be recognized and experienced in his oneness, holiness and freedom. This mutual event of understanding is intensified yet again in the Christian tradition. For, insofar as believers experience God as speaking and acting and experience themselves as God's dialogue partner, called, addressed and challenged to action, in that they finally dare to address God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they come to know God from the inside and out as the thoroughly dialogical ground of reality, who alone is capable of including human beings in this divine dialogue. Precisely in this divine dialogue believers experience themselves newly constituted as a person.

From the self-understanding and actions of Jesus Christ, the community of faith at the same time learns a new understanding of

the unity of God and the community of the disciples. Insofar as the community experiences God as Father, Son and Spirit and sees these 'Persons' of Godhead turned to one another in a pure relation, being Christian can also mean nothing other than being opened in faith towards God and to one another, being a person as relation. Against the background of this experience of God, the identity and freedom of the person means, therefore, both a being loved by God unconditionally and an unconditional trust; it also means a growing in freedom and personality in solidarity and in communication with another. Against the background of this experience of God, individuality and sociality are no longer alternatives, but rather two sides of the same coin. This leads to a new concept of community and a new concept of the individual: the more socialized an existence is, the more it realizes itself as an individual, person and subject; and the more individual, subjective and personal an individual becomes, the greater is her or his capacity for solidarity, communion and community. This is the authentic fundamental purpose of Christian spirituality.<sup>6</sup>

*Towards a spirituality of the Holy People of God today*

If faith does not simply replace human individuality and sociality, but rather frees them for their authentic purpose, then what 'Holy People of God' means must be conceived and lived out precisely in the historical, present, human individual and social network of relations. The holy people of God is therefore a diverse concrete, historical fabric of relations, that extends from the believing individual to the family, to the parish, to the diocese, to the universal Church and to humanity as a whole.

The holy people of God is something quite different from a club of modern bourgeois individuals. What is so important here is self-realization, identity, personality, being a subject, fulfilled humanity, all of which also belong essentially to the presuppositions and goals of faith. In this respect the ecclesial individualism and spiritualism of the modern Catholic Church is likewise an insufficient paradigm of faith.

If, with Kierkegaard, one sees the being of the human person as constantly in danger, constituted as it is of opposed properties of being (finitude and infinity, necessity and possibility); and if one also agrees that the synthesis and the being of creatures can succeed only in a creaturely relation to God, then unbelief, as a separation from the ground of life, must turn on itself in despair; while on the other

hand faith, as being related to the ground of life, is the salvation of humanity, its possibility of being itself.<sup>7</sup> Despair at dependence on the necessities, predeterminations and obligations of life can be healed through a faith that can admit that you did not have to exist, yet were allowed to, because God has willed that you are the person you are; you do not need desperately to confer justification on your own life, because you are already accepted. Despair at the openness, indetermination and mutability of life becomes healable in a faith that can acknowledge being preserved by God himself. For through that, the other, in which I lose myself or in which I find rest can cease to have to be God for me. Despair at the infinity of life becomes healable in a faith that can acknowledge the Creator God, who has created the finite and the temporal and precisely thereby has invested its limitation with value. For then the human being no longer needs to try to be like God with an anxious denial of all finitude. Despair at finitude is curable in a faith which acknowledges God as a kindly father. Only in coming face to face with the God who reveals himself to and encounters the human being as meaning, goodness and safeness, only then does reality cease to be homeless, strange and empty. Only against the background of an absolute love behind and in all things can one let go of a schizoid fear of the world and self-isolation.

'A Holy People of God' therefore would be the community of people thus healed and saved in faith in their individuality, subjectivity and personality, in their whole humanity. Such a faith not only allows one to find oneself but also at the same time socializes the individual to a life of solidarity with others and for others. One could also reverse the perspective and say that it is the solidarity and faith of the community that allows the individual to live, hope, be happy and die consoled.

Such a self-realization in faith happens concretely at any rate in a social process that contains many tensions. It is a growing into the different communities of life which together make up the people of God (the family, the community, the diocese, the whole church, humanity), not in order to be completely absorbed by them, but rather in order truly to find oneself (individuality) and, in this finding of oneself, to lead others also towards freedom and life (sociality, solidarity). This does not take place without conflicts and tensions.

The experience of family therapy indicates that socialization only succeeds in a context of dialectical interactions of generations, which includes a co-evolution and co-individuation of all those taking part.

During the decisive childhood process of development and separation, the members of different generations, in a dialectical interaction, create and maintain a network of relationships by consensus. At first the parents, to a certain extent as representatives of the fundamental order of reality and truth, appear as the stronger, active part who set the standard, and the dependent child, still to be socialized, appears as the weaker, passive part. But to the degree that socialization and individuation progress and dialogue and discussion are required, the positions change. The socializing activity of the parents is finally successful only if they can hold themselves back, and in their communication with the child who is becoming independent allow it to develop itself further.<sup>8</sup> Individuation therefore only succeeds in the structure of a dialectical process which mediates attachment and freedom, common ground and uniqueness, conformity and going one's own way, presence and separation together. All children must, if they want to avoid a schizophrenic fate, complete a paradoxical task, which is to acquire as well as transcend certain fundamental categories and distinctions.

This vital process of exchange between parents and children is therefore difficult and dangerous. As the experiences of family therapy show, in modern society in particular this process breaks down all too often. It breaks down either because the parental reality is too strict or too weak, or because individuation is attempted only with the parents or only against them.

Only if faith is indeed the reconciliation of generations and genders is the family part of the holy people of God. Growing into an authentic sociality and individuality is not possible without conflict, opposition and tension. For sociality and individuality presuppose community and solidarity as well as difference, distance and boundaries. It can only succeed therefore in a common fundamental trust, as it is mediated in the fundamental experience of truth in faith. This foundational experience of life and truth is mediated in a particularly firm way in shared liturgy.

Believers therefore become a holy people of God not only through the praxis of faith in families, but rather in other forms also, through the common liturgy in the parish, which has its focus in the Sunday eucharist.<sup>9</sup> The specialness of this community gathered together for the worship of God can be seen at its best in the eucharistic prayer.

The eucharistic prayer, the centre and climax of the rite of the eucharist, has the form of a solemn public proclamation through the representative of the liturgical gathering, who prays in the name of

the community to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. This solemn prayer is first the praise and remembrance of the paschal mystery, that is extended backwards and forwards: backwards through the remembrance of the creative activity of God and of the salvation history of the Old and New Testaments; forwards through the recollection of the glorification and the return of the Lord. The eucharistic prayer is secondly a request for the spiritually effective presence of the Lord and his working of salvation, as well as for communion with him in the communion of his body, the earthly and heavenly Church. Through the shared liturgical act, the salvific nearness of God in the nearness of the Risen Lord and his Spirit becomes newly present. On the other hand, this is the presence of God, which gathers those who are assembled into a new unity. Such a nearness of God is only possible in the interplay of freedom: the freedom of God who has communicated himself to the world first in creation, then in the history of his people and unsurpassably in the image of his Son; and secondly the freedom of the human person, who in the witnessing word of proclamation, in the liturgical symbolic action and in the reality of their praxis in life gives this presence of God space. Therefore this liturgical action must have the form of grateful remembrance and request in one.

The parish at any rate becomes the real saving sign of God, a sign of the wholly concrete presence of God in the world which grants life and at the same time socializes and individualizes, only if it combines its liturgy, service of the world and hope for the future in one single image and sign. The community of love (a creative, living fellowship), the community of faith (the liturgical assembly), and the community of hope (of those who live in the inaugurated endtime), only these things together form that manifold sign under which the self-giving of Jesus Christ to the world wins effective presence.

Neither technological work in the world nor a practical-political commitment for the worth of the person, for justice, for responsibility and for a society of solidarity is a mere side-effect which occurs of itself or which could just as well be left out so long as the liturgy is properly celebrated according to the rubrics. Neither the liturgical gathering nor the sacramental symbolic action is a mere illustrative or indicative ceremonial addition which could just as well be omitted so long as the correct political commitment is present. Neither hope for the fulfilment of the world which comes from God alone, nor additional desire to bring about the new world is merely a special emphasis that one could leave out so long as the liturgy is properly

celebrated or the world is effectively changed. Only in the connection of all these aspects with one another and in their mutual purpose, limitation and fulfilment do they constitute the holy people of God; thereby this people becomes a sign and medium of the divine self-gift to the world, which alone can create a reconciled world and humanity.

*This article was translated for The Way by Gwen Griffiths Dickson*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> de Lubac, Henri: *Glauben aus der Liebe. 'Catholicisme'* (Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln, 1970), p 13.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp 21-118.

<sup>3</sup> Wiedenhofer, Siegfried: *Das katholische Kirchenverständnis. Ein Lehrbuch der Ekklesiologie* (Styria Verlag, Graz/Wien/Köln, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Berger, Peter L.: *The homeless mind: modernization and consciousness* (Random House, New York, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Inglehart, R.: *The silent revolution: changing values and political styles among western republics* (Princeton, 1977); Klages, Helmut: *Wertedynamik. Über die Wandelbarkeit des Selbstverständlichen* (Edition Interfrom, Zürich/Osnabruck, 1988); Klags H., Franz G. and Herbert W.: *Sozialpsychologie der Wohlfartsgesellschaft. Zur Dynamik von Wertorientierungen, Einstellungen und Ansprüchen* (Frankfurt a. M./New York, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Moltmann, Jürgen: *Trinität und Reich Gottes. Zur Gotteslehre* (Chr. Kaiser, München, 1980), English translation: *The Trinity and the kingdom of God* (SCM, London, 1981). Cf also Wiedenhofer, Siegfried: *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Drewermann, Eugen: *Psychoanalyse und Moraltheologie. Bd.1: Angst und Schuld* (Grünwald Verlag, Mainz, 1982); Perkins, Robert L. (ed): *International Kierkegaard commentary. The concept of anxiety* (Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Stierlin, Helm: *Individuation und Familie. Studien zur Theorie und therapeutischen Praxis* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Wiedenhofer, Siegfried: *Das katholische Kirchenverständnis. Ein Lehrbuch der Ekklesiologie* (Styria Verlag, Graz/Wien/Köln, 1992).