

# THE SPIRIT BLOWS WHERE IT CHOOSES

## Simone Weil, the Church and Vatican II

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WHEN POPE JOHN XXIII threw open a window to let in the fresh air, he was pointing out the Church's crying need for renewal, for a new lease of life.<sup>1</sup> And he was evoking in this way a powerful symbol. Air is the very breath of life. But it is significant that as a symbol of the Spirit it is always in motion, whether as a mighty wind or a gentle breeze. Karl Barth used the same imagery for the breath of the Spirit in his last lectures in the United States, in the year that the Council began. He seems to put into words Pope John's own thoughts that year when he warned us against 'unspiritual theology':

The Spirit departs when theology enters a room whose stagnant air automatically prevents it from being and doing what it can, may and must be and do ....

He, the Holy One, the Lord, the Giver of Life, waits and waits to be received anew by theology as by the community.<sup>2</sup>

In his speech convoking the Council, John XXIII called on all Christians to join him in his prayer to the Holy Spirit: 'Renew your wonders in our time, as though in a new Pentecost'.<sup>3</sup> For, as Barth affirms, 'Only where the Spirit is sighed, cried and prayed for does he become present and newly active'.<sup>4</sup>

This insight was shared by Simone Weil, a young Frenchwoman of Jewish descent who, twenty years before the Council, was deeply conscious

<sup>1</sup> See *Wit and Wisdom of Good Pope John*, edited by Henri Fesquet (London: Harvill, 1964), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 56–57.

<sup>3</sup> John XXIII, *Humanae salutis* (1961). English translation at <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/humanae-salutis.pdf>, accessed 24 March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 58.

of how much the Church and the Church's theology needed renewing for the sake of the world. The Spirit can only touch hearts that are open and thirsting to receive it. In her meditations on the 'Our Father', her profoundly Christian instinct reaches out for the Kingdom of God, which to her means,

... the complete filling of the entire soul of intelligent creatures with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit bloweth where He listeth? We can only invite him ... purely and simply, so that our thought of him is an invitation, a longing cry. It is as when one is in extreme thirst ... the image of water is like a cry from our whole being.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of the renewal of ecclesiology achieved by Vatican II, and indeed of all the Council's renewals, one might almost say that it was Simone Weil's vocation to bear a kind of prophetic witness to the need for such renewal.

Never having been baptized, Weil was not formally a member of the Church. But her extreme sensitivity to the Church's deficiencies, which kept her from asking for baptism, seems to indicate that at heart she was a true child of the Church. Hers was not the destructive criticism of the hostile outsider (nor of the heretic some have judged her to be). She did not believe that we should dispense with the Church and go directly to God, for the incarnation and all that it implies were essential to her view of Christianity. Many discerning members of the Church—including both popes of the Council, John and Paul—have greatly valued her thoughts as an inspiring and positive contribution to Christian spirituality.

On the eve of Vatican II, Pope John was praying for a new Pentecost, and he must surely have recognised in Simone Weil's critique of the Church a similar cry of thirst for the renewing Spirit. This was the whole point and purpose of the Council: the renewal of the Church for the sake of the world. But which Church? And what world? Perhaps the most significant renewal achieved by Vatican II was that of the Church's own self-understanding. It was not so much that a clearer outline emerged. Rather the idea of the Church gained new dimensions and depths as its reality was acknowledged to transcend our grasp of it: the defined limits within which it had previously been presented seemed to dissolve and melt at the edges. At the same

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<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil, 'Concerning the Our Father', in *Waiting on God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010 [1951]), 85.

time the world to which it is sent began to reveal strange properties of light and grace, so that the sending could almost be seen as a two-way process. Could it be that the Spirit was in the world as well, and not the exclusive property of the Church? As *Gaudium et spes* reiterates:

Christ is now at work in the hearts of men through the energy of His Holy Spirit, arousing not only a desire for the age to come, but by that very fact animating, purifying and strengthening those noble longings too by which the human family makes its life more human ....<sup>6</sup>

This truth of the Spirit's presence and action in humanity everywhere was one of which Simone Weil was passionately convinced. 'God's wisdom', she writes, 'must be regarded as the unique source of all light upon earth'.<sup>7</sup> She even goes so far as to say that 'Every time a man has, with a pure heart, called upon Osiris, Dionysius, Krishna, Buddha, the Tao, etc., the Son of God has answered him by sending the Holy Spirit'.<sup>8</sup> It is the same truth that lies behind the Council's openness to the world, and its readiness to learn from the signs of the times, as well as its new attitude of reverence and respect towards other Churches and other religions. By its teaching that 'all men are called to this union with Christ' and 'all men are called to salvation by the grace of God', the Council says, in effect, that, by the very fact of being born a member of the human race, everyone is at least potentially part of the Christian community and, in terms of grace, belongs to it by his or her acceptance of the call.<sup>9</sup> From as far back as she could remember, Simone Weil was conscious of this in her own experience of grace.

One of the most consoling developments in the teaching of the Council is the understanding of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. The Church had for too long been thought of primarily in its visible and human aspect; theology had described it in juridical terms as an institution, a perfect society. But it is not only, or even primarily, a reality of this world but, much more, a mystery of divine grace present in history: 'one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, translated by A. F. Wills (London: Routledge, 2002 [1953]), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 8.



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*Council Fathers walking in St Peter's Square*

Rather than presenting the Church as something static, a hierarchically organized society in contradistinction to the world, the Council preferred to speak of it as a living, growing reality of grace, 'a community of faith, hope and love', 'a communion of life, charity and truth', with limitless horizons and open to the world: 'a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race'.<sup>11</sup> Its membership is far from being an exclusive elite: 'there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation'.<sup>12</sup>

It has been said that at Vatican II, for the first time in its history, the Church had to take account of all the implications of its catholicity. This widening of horizons would have rejoiced the heart of Simone Weil. For, paradoxically, it was Simone's belief in the very catholicity of Christianity that kept her outside the visible Catholic Church: her burning conviction that all the riches of truth and love to be found in other religions and in the whole course of human history were fruits of the one Spirit of Christ and should therefore find a place within the universal fold of the Church.

The post-Tridentine ecclesiology current in Weil's day seemed intent upon excluding all who did not conform to the institutional Church in its external confession. She felt that such rigid exclusivity contradicted the very heart of the Christian gospel of God's universal love, and her whole being protested against it. The concrete form her protest took was to

<sup>11</sup> *Lumen gentium*, nn. 8–9.

<sup>12</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 13.

remain a Christian outside the Church. 'The possibility of there being such a vocation', she wrote, 'would imply that the Church is not Catholic in fact as it is in name, and that it must one day become so, if it is destined to fulfil its mission'.<sup>13</sup>

Of course Weil knew quite well that the normal Christian vocation finds completion in baptism and sacramental incorporation in the visible Church as the manifest sign of faith. But it seemed to her that God did not require this of her yet. She did not think her inhibition could be simply a protest from her own spirit, for what held her back was 'no less strongly to be felt in the moments of attention, love and prayer than at other times'.<sup>14</sup> If she was refusing something God wanted of her, she would surely have had some consciousness of this. Instead,

Up to now, although I have often asked myself the question during prayer, during Mass, or in the light of the radiancy that remains in the soul after Mass, I have never, once had, even for a moment, the feeling that God wants me to be in the Church. I have never even once had a feeling of uncertainty.<sup>15</sup>

In her early years Simone was ready to live as a Christian, but she was not so sure that she could accept Christian beliefs. She wrote to her friend the Dominican Fr Perrin:

Of course I knew quite well that my conception of life was Christian. That is why it never occurred to me that I could enter the Christian community. I had the idea that I was born inside. But to add dogma to this conception of life, without being forced to do so by indisputable evidence, would have seemed to me like a lack of honesty.<sup>16</sup>

Though she would not hold religious beliefs, she could not avoid religious behaviour. And in giving her convinced allegiance to Christian virtues, she was already admitting the existence of a transcendent domain beyond this world. Later on, when she grasped Christianity more explicitly, she said that there was no question of opting for this world only. Because of God's offer of grace, all humankind was inescapably in a supernatural

<sup>13</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter I: Hesitations concerning Baptism', in *Waiting on God*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', in *Waiting on God*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', 13.

situation: 'The Christ is that key which locks together the Creator and creation .... there is no possibility of a profane or natural life being innocent for man here below. There is only faith, implicit or explicit, or else betrayal.'<sup>17</sup>

It was Fr Perrin, as she says, who helped her 'to see intellectual honesty in a new light'. She wrote to him: 'your words made me think that perhaps, without my knowing it, there were in me obstacles to the faith, impure obstacles, such as prejudices, habits'.<sup>18</sup> Although faith is primarily our response to the hidden God—'present in secret',<sup>19</sup> as Weil puts it—revealed in the depths of our hearts and drawing us to Godself, it also has an objective content which is given in the historical revelation of Christianity. In Jesus' life and death and resurrection, and in the words of the gospel, God reveals him as our Saviour. Writing to another priest, Père Couturier, from New York, Simone could say:

When I read the catechism of the Council of Trent, it seems as though I had nothing in common with the religion there set forth. When I read the New Testament, the mystics, the liturgy, when I watch the celebration of the mass, I feel with a sort of conviction that this faith is mine or, to be more precise, would be mine without the distance placed between it and me by my imperfection. This results in a painful spiritual state.<sup>20</sup>

The catechism of the Council of Trent, setting forth doctrinal truth as a collection of propositions to which the believer must give intellectual assent, gave a distorted impression of the nature of faith, which continued to affect the thinking of the Catholic faithful for centuries. Vatican II, however, in its constitution on Divine Revelation, restores the fuller understanding of faith—as seen by Paul and John—in which it is the response of the whole person to God, who 'out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself'.<sup>21</sup> It is not mere truths, however transcendent, that God reveals; God reveals and communicates Godself through the mystery of grace. Faith, therefore, is,

<sup>17</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1957]), 196.

<sup>18</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', 17.

<sup>19</sup> Simone Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', in *Waiting on God*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Dei verbum*, n. 2.

... an obedience by which men and women entrust their whole self freely to God .... If this faith is to be shown, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God.<sup>22</sup>

Twenty years earlier, Simone Weil was writing very much the same kind of thing:

There is no salvation without a 'new birth', without an inward illumination, without the presence of Christ and of the Holy Spirit in the soul .... true faith constitutes a very different form of adhesion from that which consists in believing such-and-such an opinion. The whole notion of faith then needs to be thought out anew.<sup>23</sup>

Again twenty years before the Council, Weil pointed out the need for a readiness to see even in the atheist someone of good will. Rather than condemning atheists, she tries to understand their mentality:

As the Hindus say, God is at the same time personal and impersonal .... As in the West the word God, taken in its usual meaning, signifies a Person, men whose attention, faith and love are almost exclusively concentrated on the impersonal aspect of God can actually believe themselves and declare themselves to be atheists, even though supernatural love inhabits their souls.<sup>24</sup>

The Council document *Gaudium et spes* not only tries to distinguish between various forms of atheism but also to understand what has caused them. Further, it identifies among the causes of atheism the unchristian way of life and behaviour of some of those who are professed believers in God and Christ:

To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion.<sup>25</sup>

This, of course, is typical of the whole pastoral mood of the Council, open and alert to the signs of the Spirit in every human outlook on life,

<sup>22</sup> *Dei verbum*, n. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 19.

religious or non-religious: 'Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.'<sup>26</sup> Or, as Simone puts it, 'If He rewards those who seek after Him, He also gives light to those who approach Him, especially if they earnestly desire the light'.<sup>27</sup>

Simone Weil certainly had the right to the name of Christian. But it seemed to her that Christianity had come to her not from the Church alone but from her whole experience of life and the whole range of her extensive reading and study of the riches of the human spirit:

You can take my word for it too that Greece, Egypt, ancient India, and ancient China, the beauty of the world, the pure and authentic reflections of this beauty in art and science, what I have seen of the inner recesses of human hearts where religious belief is unknown, all these things have done as much as the visibly Christian ones to deliver me into Christ's hands as his captive. I think I might even say more. The love of those things that are outside visible Christianity keeps me outside the Church.<sup>28</sup>

What frightened Weil was the Church 'as a social structure .... the Church patriotism which exists in Catholic circles'.<sup>29</sup> She could not love the Church that had approved of the Crusades and the Inquisition; the Church that excluded so many good, valuable and beautiful things simply because they blossomed in religious traditions other than Christianity, and thus belied its own claim to catholicity; the totalitarianism implicit in the use of the words *anathema sit*: 'It is that also which prevents me from crossing the threshold of the Church. I remain beside all those things that cannot enter the Church, the universal repository, on account of those two little words.' She concluded:

Christianity should contain all vocations without exception since it is catholic. In consequence the Church should also. But in my eyes Christianity is catholic by right but not in fact. So many things are outside it, so many things that I love and do not want to give up, so many things that God loves, otherwise they would not be in existence.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter VI: Last Thoughts', in *Waiting on God*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter II: Same Subject', in *Waiting on God*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', 17.



The Church that Simone Weil claimed not to love was the all-too-human institution, with its faults and imperfections. This is undeniably the true Church, for the Church is always a particular group of people in a particular time and place: a this-worldly institution. As it moves through history its sinfulness can be more or less glaring, and its holiness more or less evident; its preaching may be more or less true to the gospel, its words more or less true to the Word it serves. And yet she must have glimpsed the whole reality, with its divine and human elements inextricably bound together, to suffer as she did from the sight of its imperfections. One might even say that it was her love of the true Church that caused her such distress at not being able to bring herself to enter it. And she suffered even more that so many others were excluded from entering it:

***Divine and human elements inextricably bound together***

I cannot help still wondering whether in these days when so large a proportion of humanity is sunk in materialism, God does not want there to be some men and women who have given themselves to him and to Christ and yet remain outside the Church. In any case ... nothing gives me more pain than the idea of separating myself from the immense and unfortunate multitude of un-believers.<sup>31</sup>

While others were suffering, anywhere in the world, Simone could not but participate in their suffering. And when that suffering consisted in a separation from the community of God's grace, it was even more impossible for her to allow herself to escape it.

If Simone could not love the Church as a social structure, it was because of the constant danger of sectarianism which goes with social structures, and of the kind of 'Church patriotism' that was like attachment to a terrestrial country. She wrote:

The children of God should not have any other country here below but the universe itself, with the totality of all the reasoning creatures it ever has contained, contains, or ever will contain. That is the native city to which we owe our love.<sup>32</sup>

What Simone was discerning was the sign of the times presented by the increasingly felt need for universal brotherhood, fellowship and unity between nations and peoples. Human solidarity in the one family of humankind precedes any national or religious grouping. But it was

<sup>31</sup> Weil, 'Letter I: Hesitations concerning Baptism', 3.

<sup>32</sup> Weil, 'Letter VI: Last Thoughts', 27.

principally the universality of God's saving love in the grace given to all that implied for her our obligation to catholicity:

The combination of ... the longing in the depth of the heart for absolute good, and the power, though only latent, of directing attention and love to a reality beyond the world and of receiving good from it—constitutes a link which attaches every man without exception to that other reality. Whoever recognizes that reality recognizes also that link. Because of it, he holds every human being without any exception as something sacred to which he is bound to show respect .... Whatever formulation of belief or disbelief a man may choose to make, if his heart inclines him to feel this respect, then he in fact also recognizes a reality other than this world's reality.<sup>33</sup>

It was at Vatican II that the Church eventually recognised the fundamental human right to religious freedom in a clear and unambiguous statement:

This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs.<sup>34</sup>

This principle is based on the dignity of the human person, which John Courtney Murray calls 'the basic ontological foundation, not only of the right to religious freedom, but of all man's fundamental rights'.<sup>35</sup> In the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Council affirmed, 'all the faithful, clerical and lay possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and of thought, and the freedom to express their minds humbly and courageously about the matters in which they enjoy competence'. Above all,

Theologians are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the men of their times. For the deposit of faith or revealed truths are one thing; the manner in which they are formulated without violence to their meaning and significance is another.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Simone Weil, 'Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations', in *Selected Essays, 1934–1943: Historical, Political, and Moral Writings*, edited and translated by Richard Rees (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 219–220.

<sup>34</sup> *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 2.

<sup>35</sup> John Courtney Murray, 'The Declaration on Religious Freedom', in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 1966), 572.

<sup>36</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, n. 62.



*Vatican II in session*

It was precisely this that Pope John proposed as the guiding principle of the Council in his opening speech on the first day.

Of course Weil was ready to acknowledge signs of hope in the Church of her own time which, she affirmed, 'today defends the cause of the indefeasible rights of the individual against collective oppression, of liberty of thought against tyranny'. But it needed to demonstrate change explicitly:

In order that the present attitude of the Church should be effective and that she should really penetrate like a wedge into social existence, she would have to say openly that she had changed or wished to change. Otherwise who could take her seriously when they remembered the Inquisition?<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Weil knew that the Church did not take the dictum 'outside the Church there is no salvation' in its narrowest sense, but it seemed to her that the ecclesiology of her time, in all its rigidity, just did not fit the Christian gospel of good news for everyone. Although her own understanding of the nature of the Church was far from perfect, she could feel that theology was giving an inadequate and misleading presentation of its true nature. Writing to Père Couturier (later to be a pioneer of ecumenism) she spells this out:

<sup>37</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', 20.

In particular, the belief that a man can be saved outside the visible Church requires that all the elements of faith should be pondered afresh, under pain of complete incoherence. For the entire edifice is built around the contrary affirmation, which scarcely anybody today would venture to support. No one has yet wanted to recognise the need for such a revision .... Unless the Church recognises this need soon, it is to be feared that it will not be able to accomplish its mission.<sup>38</sup>

But the Holy Spirit is the true and only source of perpetual renewal, and the Spirit blows when, and where, it will. Long before Vatican II it had been stirring up springs of renewal within the Church as well as outside it. The revival in patristic studies, with its return to early Christian sources, was leading theology towards a fuller understanding of the Church, seen in Pauline terms as the Body of Christ living by the Spirit, and not merely as a juridically organized society. This growing development in ecclesiology was sanctioned in 1943—the year Simone died—by Pius XII in *Mystici corporis*, though its further flowering in the Council's document *Lumen gentium* would go well beyond the restricted terms of this encyclical.

Simone herself had been aware of the current of ideas about the Mystical Body of Christ as an image of the Church, but she thought she saw in them not much more than another form of insular society:

Our true dignity is not to be parts of a body, even though it be a mystical one, even though it be that of Christ. It consists in this, that in the state of perfection, which is the vocation of each one of us, we no longer live in ourselves, but Christ lives in us; so that through our perfection Christ in his integrity and in his indivisible unity, becomes in a sense each one of us ....<sup>39</sup>

The Church is not a club or a sect, but a sign of the unity of the whole human race. In so far as it was regarded as a society separated from the rest of the world, it ceased to be this sign. So Simone wanted to dissociate herself from that kind of Church. The emphasis she preferred is in fact the one more true to St Paul, and the one chosen by the Council Fathers twenty years later. It is through the union of each one of us with Christ that we are formed into his likeness:

By communicating His Spirit to His brothers, called together from all peoples, Christ made them mystically into his own body. In that

<sup>38</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', 20.

body, the life of Christ is poured into the believers who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered and was glorified.<sup>40</sup>

If popes, bishops and theologians before, during and after Simone Weil's lifetime were aware of the need for renewal, it was precisely out of what was her own concern: that the Church should accomplish its mission. Catholicism was being misunderstood by many people of good will because of deviations in teaching and practice within the Church right up to Vatican II, and no doubt after it too. As Bishop Huyghe said at the Council: 'One even meets men who know and love Christ but do not recognise the Church. Moreover it even happens that the Church, far from bringing men closer to Christ, drives them away.'<sup>41</sup>

For this reason, especially in the post-war years, French and German theologians, in particular, were rethinking traditional theology so as to make it more intelligible to the men and women of their day—theologians such as Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu and Henri de Lubac. Their work was to have considerable influence in the shaping of the council documents, though initially it brought them trouble with the Holy Office.<sup>42</sup> As de Lubac says in *Catholicism*, the theologians were simply pushed to this rethinking by the renewal of Christian living in all the great movements springing up from among the people, proofs of the Church's perennial vitality: 'the theologians themselves, the interpreters of the living tradition, are urged forward by a revival which is reflected primarily in events because it springs from the very depths of the Catholic conscience'.<sup>43</sup>

For renewal was already making itself more and more manifest, in the liturgical movement, in lay apostolates such as the Young Catholic Workers, in Catholic Action, in the awakening of social concern, in ecumenism. In France, Cardinal Suhard, who was archbishop of Paris from 1940 to 1949, by his openness to the Spirit at work in his clergy made possible a great missionary renewal carried out through the Mission de France and the Mission de Paris. He wrote in terms astonishingly similar to those of Simone:

<sup>40</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Kaiser, *Inside the Council: The Story of Vatican II* (London: Burns and Oates, 1963), 211–212.

<sup>42</sup> Cardinal Suhard is reported to have said to Père Chenu in 1942, when his work had been put on the Index, 'Dear Father, don't worry. In twenty years everyone will be talking like you.' (Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Un École de théologie: le Saulchoir* [Paris: Cerf, 1985], 8.)

<sup>43</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, translated by Landelot P. Sheppard (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 321. (The French original was first published in 1938.)

The Church is not a party, nor a clan, nor a faction. She is simply the true, the only family of mankind. She would be stifled in anything that confined her to a territory, a country, an epoch or a culture. She is at ease only in the bounds of the wide world .... You will only transform souls and society by social justice and charity. Then, and only then, will you show the true face of the Church.<sup>44</sup>

**The Church  
as a sign of  
salvation for  
the world**

It is significant that the Council's Decree on Missions affirms that it is 'acting out of the innermost requirements of her own catholicity' that the Church proclaims the gospel.<sup>45</sup> And, for the Council, catholicity implies that legitimate diversity should be seen as an enrichment of the Church's unity, which is not to be obtained by imposing uniformity, whether on the numerous local churches that make up the universal Church or on the individual members of the Church. Real unity grows from within, from the one life of Christ lived in loving service of our neighbour. This kind of Church is less the organized social structure Simone so much feared, with a hierarchy of authority—popes, bishops and clergy—issuing directives to a passive laity, than a living communion, in which each individual is a realisation of the whole mystery of the Church as a sign of salvation for the world.

Simone Weil's contention that Christianity should be truly catholic and contain 'absolutely everything in itself .... Except, of course, falsehood', does in fact lead to the same conclusion as the Council reached, that 'The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature'.<sup>46</sup> God's plan for humankind is precisely that the whole human race should form one people of God. At the end of the world, 'from the four winds the Church will be gathered like a harvest into the kingdom of God'. In this text, the 'Church' surely means not only (or, for that matter, all of) the visible Church, but the Church in terms of grace, including all those 'things ... outside it' that are of value, that 'God loves'. This is why the Council is at pains to point out that 'whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God' should be restored to Christ. 'And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples ... is not lost.'<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel-Célestin Suhard, *The Responsible Church: Selected Texts of Cardinal Suhard* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1967), 153.

<sup>45</sup> *Ad gentes*, n. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', 18; *Ad gentes*, n. 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ad gentes*, n. 9.

For Simone, 'If ... salvation is possible outside the Church, individual or collective revelations are also possible outside Christianity'.<sup>48</sup> Her conviction that all religions may be found to contain intimations of Christianity in their teaching and tradition is echoed in several Council documents. The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions encourages us to reverence and foster the spiritual and moral goods in other religions which 'often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men'.<sup>49</sup> The missionary enterprise accordingly becomes not so much a matter of bringing Christ to where he is not as of discovering Christ's grace in other religions and cultures,

... gladly and reverently lay[ing] bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden .... that they themselves may learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth.<sup>50</sup>

The Council does not pursue the implications of texts such as this as far as Simone herself develops the truths in them. She is willing to ask whether the sacraments of non-Christian religions could not be real sacraments, and their revealed scriptures real revelations. By a real sacrament she means 'possessing the same virtue as baptism or the eucharist and deriving that virtue from the same relation with Christ's Passion'.<sup>51</sup>

In the years since the Council, theologians have discussed similar questions left open by its documents, for instance the possibility of the history of religion being understood as a single history of revelation. Karl Rahner notably argues from the texts of Vatican II to 'the necessary and universal character of revelation in every age'.<sup>52</sup> He further concludes:

The heathen in his polytheism, the atheist in good faith, the theist outside the revelation of the Old and New Testaments, all possess not only a relationship of faith to God's self-revelation but also a genuine relationship to Jesus Christ and his saving action.<sup>53</sup>

When Weil goes so far as to argue that 'It is therefore useless to send out missions to prevail upon the peoples of Asia, Africa or Oceania to

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Ad gentes*, n. 11.

<sup>51</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 16, *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, translated by David Morland (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 198.

<sup>53</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 16, 220.

enter the Church' it is, of course, the abuses connected with the Church's missionary action that she is really rejecting: 'Missionary zeal has not Christianised Africa, Asia and Oceania, but has brought these territories under the cold, cruel and destructive domination of the white race, which has trodden down everything'.<sup>54</sup> She allows that it is the way in which mission has been conducted that is bad: 'The missionaries—even the martyrs among them—are too closely accompanied by guns and battleships for them to be true witnesses of the Lamb'.<sup>55</sup> And she is ready to acknowledge that there have been exceptions, such as the Jesuits in China, who were 'carrying out the words of Christ'.<sup>56</sup>

It is quite true that evangelization has occurred alongside colonialism, which was not condemned by the Church until fairly recent times. But as nations in the developing world began achieving independence, their Churches were able to become more indigenous and less encumbered with European characteristics and practices. Contemporaneously with Simone Weil, Henri de Lubac was as passionately convinced that true evangelization should not simply seek to substitute Western institutions and thought patterns for the cultures and traditions of those being evangelized:

And if it is once understood that the work of conversion consists, fundamentally, not in adapting supernatural truth, in bringing it down to human level, but, on the contrary, in adapting man to it, raising him up to the truth that rules and judges him, we must especially beware, as of blasphemy, of confusing ourselves, its servants, with it—ourselves, our tastes, our habits, our prejudices, our passions, our narrow-mindedness and our weaknesses with the divine religion with which we are so little imbued. We must give souls to God, not conquer them for ourselves.<sup>57</sup>

As for the growth of the visible Church by means of mission, Simone would have been less doubtful of its possibility if she had witnessed the astonishingly rapid expansion of Christianity in the developing world up to our own day. The universality of the Church is more evident today than it ever was, and it is one of the characteristics that make mission an element that is of its essence: 'By reason of it, the Catholic Church strives

<sup>54</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 8–9.

<sup>55</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Lubac, *Catholicism*, 301.



energetically and constantly to bring all humanity with all its riches back to Christ its Head in the unity of His spirit'.<sup>58</sup> While the Spirit was preparing the way for an ecclesiology of communion in the documents of Vatican II, it was also—and is still—blowing most powerfully in the lives of the whole people of God so as to bring forth new ways of being Church and give flesh to this emphasis on communion. Today, as throughout the history of humanity, the Spirit clearly finds more room to manoeuvre and breathe in the hearts and lives of the poor and dispossessed.

And so it is particularly in the growing Churches of the developing world that numberless small, local groups are springing up in which people share their resources, their faith and their problems, interpreting their lives by means of the gospel in the light of the Spirit given to each individual in a unique way. These 'basic communities', spontaneously germinating among the laity, were recognised by the Extraordinary Synod in 1985 as offering 'great hope for the life of the Church', as 'a true expression of communion and an instrument for fashioning a more profound communion'.<sup>59</sup> The principle at the root of such communities



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*Veneration of the cross and procession attended by members of five basic ecclesial communities in the Philippines*

<sup>58</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 13.

<sup>59</sup> *The Extraordinary Synod—1985: Message to the People of God* (Boston: St Paul, 1985), 60.

is that each person shares in the life of Christ in a unique way and is called to make this life more and more fruitful in any and every human situation. The Council devotes an entire chapter of *Lumen gentium* to the universal call to holiness: a holiness that grows in the measure of one's response to grace and that of itself bears Christian witness 'by showing everyone through their earthly activities the love with which God has loved the world'.<sup>60</sup> Basic communities are the development in praxis of these fundamental truths of the Council's ecclesiology.

In the years since the Council, it has been more and more widely recognised that true religion, as Simone Weil saw, has to do with nothing other than justice and love:

The Gospel makes no distinction between the love of our neighbour and justice .... Only the absolute identification of justice and love makes the coexistence possible of compassion and gratitude on the one hand, and on the other, of respect for the dignity of affliction in the afflicted.<sup>61</sup>

'The love of Christ impels us', said the Council fathers. 'Hence, let our concern swiftly focus first of all on those who are especially lowly, poor and weak ... those who still lack the opportune help to achieve a way of life worthy of human beings.'<sup>62</sup>

It is out of the demands of justice and love that the Church's preferential option for the poor emerged, an option required by its union with Christ, who identified himself with the poor and powerless, and was crucified for his witness to love and truth. In the 1970s it was the bishops of Latin America who first made this option their own, in solidarity with the vast majority of their people, struggling against the unjust structures of society which kept them in misery and destitution, deprived of human rights and dignity. The bishops could not fail to recognise that this was not a wrong that could be left to politicians to redress: the Church has to take responsibility too. As they said in Puebla in 1979: "A muted cry wells up from millions of human beings, pleading with their pastors for a liberation that is nowhere to be found in their case" ....

<sup>60</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 41.

<sup>61</sup> Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', 49.

<sup>62</sup> 'Message to Humanity', 20 October 1962, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott (Piscataway: American, 1966), 5.

Today it is loud and clear, increasing in volume and intensity, and at times full of menace.<sup>63</sup>

Solidarity with the poor involves joining in their struggle for liberation and working for social justice, but it also implies the relinquishment of all power structures and authoritarian domination in order to be a Church whose presence in the world felt as that of the Christ who said: 'I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27). As Karl Rahner explains, it is only in modern times that,

... society's situation is no longer merely a *given* for human beings and their life .... No, today this societal situation and its transformations have themselves become an object of human activity and human reflection ....

What we mean, then, when we place the word 'justice' along with faith at the head of our agenda, is that we have a task in society to cooperate responsibly in shaping that society's structures ....

We must confess ... that we are the beneficiaries of unjust structures that signal a task, a challenge, and an obligation for the Christian who would make a commitment to justice.<sup>64</sup>

In a capitalist society which enjoys and grows in wealth at the cost of the poor, both at home and in underdeveloped nations whose resources and labour are exploited unjustly for our benefit, we are inescapably responsible for definite social sins. Simone Weil was very conscious of the existence of such social sins: 'Among our institutions and customs there are things so atrocious that nobody can legitimately feel himself innocent of ... diffused complicity. It is certain that each of us is involved at least in the guilt of criminal indifference.'<sup>65</sup>

It has sometimes been said that the Church should not take part in work for social or political justice, since these are secular concerns, but should confine itself to specifically 'religious' activity. Simone demonstrates that, on the contrary, the Church's response in this area is crucial: it is at the heart of Christianity. But in order to be a truly religious response it

<sup>63</sup> *Puebla and Beyond: Documentation and Commentary*, edited by John Eagleson and Philip J. Scharper, translated by John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 134. The quotation is included from the bishops' conference at Medellín, 1968.

<sup>64</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 273, 274, 276.

<sup>65</sup> Simone Weil, 'Additional Thoughts on the Love of God and Affliction', in *Gateway to God*, 87.

must arise in some sense from a genuinely personal identification with the poor and afflicted:

Affliction is essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity .... The man who sees someone in affliction and projects into him his own being brings to birth in him through love, at least for a moment, an existence apart from his affliction ....

Charity like this is a sacrament, a supernatural process by which a man in whom Christ dwells really puts Christ into the soul of the afflicted. If it is bread that is given, this bread is equivalent to the host.<sup>66</sup>

It was surely Simone's own preferential option for the poor and afflicted—an option made from her earliest days, which influenced all her choices and decisions in life—that led her unerringly to the very centre of Christianity. It was also what lay at the root of her paradoxical vocation as a Christian outside the Church: 'merging into the crowd and disappearing among them'.<sup>67</sup> She was not disowning Christ, since she was



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carrying out his precepts and spreading his Spirit abroad. Rather, she gave prophetic witness that true fraternity extends to every other human being and must never be confined within the limits of the Church

This was the spirit of the Council as Pope John conceived it, and to some extent it has influenced all the Council documents as well as the changes in the life of the Church since Vatican II. The latter may seem desperately slow and halting at times, but the Spirit is clearly and powerfully at work in restoring

<sup>66</sup> Weil, 'Additional Thoughts on the Love of God and Affliction', 94, 95.

<sup>67</sup> Weil, 'Letter I: Hesitations concerning Baptism', 3.

the fundamental dimension of communion, especially in the basic Christian communities, which continue to flourish and multiply among the people of God. It was Bishop Butler who said that Vatican II was the promise of inspiration for the whole people of God: 'The layman must claim his share, the lion's share in it. It is he who explores those frontiers between professed belief and professed unbelief that are ever summoning the Church to new adventures and new techniques of apostolate.'<sup>68</sup> Simone Weil conceived her own vocation in a way that was a paradigm of such lay involvement. Her idea of Christianity took it beyond the sphere of the personal and into the social dimension in a way that is remarkably consonant with the gospel understanding of today's Church of the poor and for the poor.

In his whole teaching and life, in the theology of his parables, in his seeking out of the sick and the afflicted, his association with sinners and the lowly and powerless, Christ incarnates God's predilection for the poor. This preferential love represents so vital and urgent a need of God's heart that God does not merely stoop down from above, as it were, to bestow blessings. Christ emptied himself and identified himself personally and wholly with those who were farthest from God, whether in terms of poverty, weakness or sinfulness, to the point of submitting to the injustice of evil and accepting a criminal's death (Philippians 2:6-8).

And this is why the word of God to humankind is above all good news for the poor. If the Church is to be a credible witness to the Word of God, it must preach the gospel as Christ did, not merely bestowing charity on the poor and afflicted, or sympathy on those struggling against unjust and oppressive social or political structures, but living with them in their poverty, sharing their joys and sorrows, joining actively in their struggles for liberation. But it must always do so as Christ did, not using force, but by a courageous witness to truth and justice, and to the transforming power of love and compassion.

The whole of Simone Weil's life and writing, and the paradox of her prophetic stand 'at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity', was witness to the truth of God's love: a love which goes out of itself, out of the living communion in the Trinity to those outside, at the greatest extreme of affliction and powerlessness, to share

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Butler, 'The Constitution on Divine Revelation', in *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, 53.

its own being with them.<sup>69</sup> Her personal witness is only one of countless ways in which the Spirit is continually urging on the renewal of the Church, a Church never perfectly conformed to Christ, whose body it is. The work of Vatican II is another. And this renewal is daily being accomplished in the myriad anonymous members of Christ outside the visible Church.

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<sup>69</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Her Spiritual Autobiography', 18.