

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1. THE CHURCH

(Catechism nn. 748-810)

I believe in the holy catholic Church (Catechism 748-810)

In this chapter we reflect on the place of the Church in God's design, the Church which is the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

The word 'church' (Catechism n.751), like the German 'kirche', derives from the Greek 'kyriake' ('belonging to the Lord'). The Church is the community of disciples of the 'Lord', the Risen Christ. The Greek word for Church is 'ekklesia' (Catechism n. 751-752), which derives from the Greek 'kaleo' (to call), with the prefix 'ek' (out of). Through his Son, Jesus, God is 'calling' everyone 'out of' darkness into light, drawing everyone to Christ. The Church is the community of those who have heard the call and responded.

'As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. She is taken up by him also as his instrument for the salvation of all, the universal sacrament of salvation, by which Christ is manifesting and bringing about the mystery of God's love for all people. The Church is the visible plan of God's love for humanity, because God desires that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built into one Temple of the Holy Spirit' (Catechism n. 776).

In view of the centrality of the Christian teaching of God as Trinity (see Chapter 13), we should not be surprised that the Church is considered in its relationship to God (the People of God), to Jesus of Nazareth (the Body of Christ), and to the Spirit who is the Love that unites Jesus with God (the Temple of the Holy Spirit).

The People of God (Catechism n. 753; 781-786)

The Catechism speaks of the Church as the 'People of God' – an expression favoured by the Second Vatican Council. There is one God who 'wills everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4), and God has chosen to do this through Christ. It follows that God is drawing everyone into the fulness of divine communion. Those who respond to this calling belong, or are connected in some way and to some degree, to the Church, consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly. We will have more to say on this later.

Like the Assembly of Israel, the Church is the People that belongs to the Lord, chosen in love by God, the Bridegroom:

'Your Maker is your husband, YHWH of hosts is his name;
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.
For YHWH has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off, says your God.
For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says YHWH, your Redeemer' (Isaiah 54:5-8).

'I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know YHWH' (Hosea 2:19-20).

The Body of Christ (Catechism 787-796)

The Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964) is the most important source for our reflections on the church. It states:

‘By communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers and sisters of his who are called together from every nation’ (LG 7).

Paul speaks of the Church as the ‘Body of Christ’:

‘God has put all things under the feet of Christ and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:22-23).

It is Jesus’ self-offering, culminating on Calvary, that gathers his disciples together as a community of love:

‘He has now reconciled you in his body of flesh by his death’ (Colossians 1:22).

‘We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (Hebrews 10:10).

We recall the words of Jesus at the last supper:

‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’ (1Corinthians 11:24).

It was their communion with the Risen Christ that nourished the community as the Body of Christ:

‘We who are many are one body, for we partake of the one bread’ (1Corinthians 10:17).

The communion we have with the Risen Jesus is a communion in love. Jesus likened himself to a bridegroom (Catechism n. 796; see Luke 5:34-35). John the Baptist uses the same image when he declares that he is happy to see his disciples going to Jesus, for ‘he who has the bride is the bridegroom’. Jesus is the bridegroom, John is the bridegroom’s friend (John 3:29-30).

The Book of Revelation invites its readers to the wedding feast of the Lamb, the crucified and risen Lord, who is taking the Church into his embrace:

‘Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready’ (Revelation 19:7).

‘I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (Revelation 21:2).

Paul writes to the community in Corinth:

‘I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ’ (2Corinthians 11:2).

In his Letter to the Ephesians (5:21-33), Paul compares the relationship of the church and Christ to that of a wife and husband. Throughout its history the Church has cherished this image of itself, highlighting as it does, the mutual commitment and love-communion that binds the Church to Christ (Catechism n. 757).

Temple of the Spirit

An early witness to this tradition is Ambrose (died 397) who wrote:

‘As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross (*In Luc* 2, 85-89; Catechism n. 766).

The Church is the sacrament of Christ’s abiding presence in the world. It recognises that Christ’s all-embracing love extends beyond the visible boundaries of the Church as he draws everyone to God. There are people in every culture who, knowingly or unknowingly, are responding to Jesus and are mediating grace to each other. This includes, of course, non-Christians who are drawn to respond to grace and experience communion with God through their religions, some more effectively than others. At the same time as the sacrament of Christ’s abiding presence in the world, the Church wants to offer all its fulness to anyone who is seeking, and to welcome them and their gifts if and when they decide to freely and consciously join the community.

The Temple of the Holy Spirit (Catechism n. 756, 797-798)

The Church is the ‘Temple of the Holy Spirit’. Those belonging to the church are able to commit themselves to Jesus and to his self-offering because they are empowered to do so by his Spirit. The church is the ‘Body’ of Christ because it is his Spirit that gives it life:

‘By one Spirit we were all baptised into one body’ (1Corinthians 12:3).

The Catechism (n. 797) quotes from Irenaeus:

‘Where the Church is there also is God’s Spirit. Where God’s Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace’ (*Against the Heresies* 3.24.1).

It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now, raised to the fullness of life by his Father, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus – the Spirit of love that binds him to the Father – that fills all things, giving life wherever it is welcomed. The sacrament of this Spirit, the place where Jesus’ Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus’ body, carrying out the will of God and bringing about on earth the reign of God’s love (see Colossians 1:19 and 2:9). The Vatican Council says:

‘The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only arousing in them a desire for the world to come, but also animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end’ (GS n. 38).

The local Church

In line with the teaching in the period prior to the Second Vatican Council, when the Council speaks of ‘the Church’ it is thinking primarily of the Church universal. However, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, picks up a position that came up on the floor of the Council:

‘The Church of Christ is truly present in all lawfully instituted local communities of the faithful who, united with their pastors, are actually called “churches” in the New Testament itself. They are a new people called by God

each according to its own locality in the Holy Spirit and in the fullness of 'utter conviction' (1Thessalonians 1:5). Through the preaching of the gospel of Christ the faithful have been gathered into the local communities'(LG 26).

The Church is missionary

Empowered and inspired by Jesus' Spirit, the Church carries on Jesus' mission. In the words of the Catechism (n. 767):

'The Church by its very nature is missionary, sent by Christ to all the nations to make disciples of them'(see Matthew 28:19-20).

Paul writes of the mission of the Church:

'Of this gospel I, Paul, have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power ... to bring to the Nations the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord'(Ephesians 3:7-11).

The Second Vatican Council highlighted the Church as a sacrament of salvation for the world. It is here that we find the key that connects two basic truths that at first sight could appear irreconcilable: the truth that the Church is necessary for salvation; and the truth that people who do not belong to the Church can be saved. The Church is the fundamental sacrament of a grace which, precisely because it is offered to all, presses forward to express its sacramental significance in history, even where the sacrament of baptism has not been conferred. Its power extends everywhere. Precisely because the Church is the sacrament of salvation for the world, she is also the promise of grace to it.

From his deathbed, Pope John XXIII had this to say:

'Today more than ever, certainly more than in previous centuries, we are called to serve mankind as such, and not merely Catholics; to defend above all and everywhere the rights of the human person, and not those merely of the Catholic Church. Today's world, the needs made plain in the last fifty years, and a deeper understanding of doctrine, have brought us to a new situation, as I said in my opening speech to the Council. It is not that the Gospel has changed: it is that we have begun to understand it better.

A Church for All

‘Those who have lived as long as I have were faced with new tasks in the social order at the start of the century; those who, like me, were twenty years in the East and eight in France, were enabled to compare different cultures and traditions, and know that the moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead.’

On the nature and purpose of the Church, the Catechism (n. 772) quotes Paul:

‘The Church is to bring all things together in Christ’ (Ephesians 1:10).

The Church is ‘Christ in you, your hope of glory’ (Colossians 1:27).

The Catechism goes on to remind us (n. 782):

‘One becomes a member of the People of God by being ‘born anew’, a birth ‘of water and the Spirit’, that is, by faith in Christ and Baptism ... The mission of the People of God is to be salt of the earth and light of the world. This People is a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race.’

God’s offer of salvation for everyone

The Church has always believed that ‘God wills everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Timothy 2:4). The Church has always believed that, as Christ’s Body in the world, it has a necessary role in continuing Christ’s mission of drawing everyone to truth and to salvation. Up to the Second Vatican Council this was traditionally expressed in the axiom: ‘Outside the church there is no salvation’. Prior to the discovery of the New World in the late fifteenth century, Christians in Europe thought that everyone had heard the Gospel and that those who did not accept baptism into the church were guilty of rejecting God’s offer of salvation. The realisation that whole continents existed that were ‘outside the church’ through no fault of their own, and the insight that people who have heard the Gospel might well reject it, not through their own fault, but because it was badly presented to them, or because they failed to understand what was being offered to them, has led in modern times to a more inclusive understanding of the relationship of the church to God’s saving grace.

While believing that the fullness of God’s saving grace ‘subsists’ in the Catholic Church in communion with Rome, the Church knows that members of this Catholic Church belong only to the extent that they truly believe and live as Jesus’ disciples. There are degrees of belonging. The Church also knows that baptised Christians who are not members of the Catholic Church also belong, to some degree, to the Church, and that God offers them salvation through their own churches and communities. It is only those who know that they are being drawn into full communion and stubbornly reject the call who are ‘outside the church’, and so risk missing ‘salvation’.

Moreover the Church has come to see that God’s Word is revealed everywhere, and God’s Spirit is working everywhere, through non-Christian religions, and through every aspect of human living. In adhering to God’s Word, people are implicitly adhering to God’s Word-made-flesh who promised: ‘When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself’ (John 12:32).

In other words, they have not rejected Christ, even if they might think they have. Science has shown us that everything in the universe is inter-connected and inter-dependent. Consistent with this idea is the belief that in adhering to Christ they are open to the graces that come to them through the church's prayer and the lives of Jesus' followers. We recall Jesus' parable about God's judgment. Some of those invited into heaven were surprised. They did not remember ever satisfying Jesus' hunger or thirst, or visiting him in his need. His reply: 'Whenever you did it to the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me'(Matthew 25:40). People can be responding to grace without knowing it.

The teaching of the Vatican Council challenges everyone who has received the gift of belonging to the church. It challenges us to grow in grace and to continue Jesus' mission of living and proclaiming the Gospel with a view to bringing everyone to fullness of faith in Jesus. How could we know him and not want to share him? At the same time we are not impelled into mission through fear that those who are not explicitly and consciously members of the church will miss out on salvation. God is drawing them into love from within their own situation. The impulse to mission is the longing that everyone will come to know what Jesus revealed: the amazing love of God that we have seen in the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross. The teaching of the Vatican Council is found in the following texts.

Speaking of non-Catholic Christians, the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) n.3, states:

'The brethren divided from us also carry out many of the sacred actions of the Christian religion. Undoubtedly, in ways that vary according to the condition of each church or community, these actions can truly engender a life of grace, and can be rightly described as capable of providing access to the community of salvation. It follows that these separated churches and communities, though we believe that they suffer from defects already mentioned, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.'

As regards non-Christians, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (1964) n.16, after speaking of Jews who 'remain most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts he makes nor of the calls he issues (Romans 11:28-29)', and after speaking of Moslems, states:

'Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is this God who gives to all people life and breath and every other gift, and who as saviour wills that all people be saved (cf 1Timothy 2:4). Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do God's will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.

Lumen Gentium continues:

‘Nor does divine providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to God’s grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the church as a preparation for the gospel. The church regards such qualities as given by him who enlightens all people so that they may finally have life.’

In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), we read:

‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone’(n. 1).

‘Linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, the Christian will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope. All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all people, and since the ultimate vocation of every person is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to everyone the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery. Such is the mystery of the human person, and it is a great one, as seen by believers in the light of Christian revelation. Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us. Christ has risen, destroying death by His death; He has lavished life upon us so that, as ‘sons’ in the Son, we can cry out in the Spirit ‘Abba, Father’(n. 22).

‘The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only arousing in them a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end’(n. 38).

In the years following the Council Paul VI continued to teach this optimistic view of salvation being offered to all. At the same time he insisted on the duty of Christians to continue proclaiming the Gospel to the world. In his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the modern world (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975), he wrote:

‘It would be useful if every Christian and every evangeliser were to pray about the following thought: people can gain salvation also in other ways by God’s mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what Saint Paul called “blushing for the Gospel”(Romans 1:16) – or as a result of false ideas we fail to preach it?’

That would be to betray the call of God, who wishes the seed to bear fruit through the voice of the ministers of the Gospel; and it will depend on us whether this grows into trees and produces its full fruit' (n. 80).

Pope John-Paul II's teaching is found especially in his encyclical on The Mission of the Redeemer (*Redemptoris Missio* 1990). He wrote:

'The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation' (n. 10).

Behind this statement lies the Christian conviction that the risen Christ is pouring the Spirit of his love into and throughout the universe. Pope John-Paul II continues:

'The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the "seeds of the Word", to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God himself ... The Spirit is at the very source of people's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of what it is to be human ... "The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end"(GS 38). It is the Spirit who sows the "seeds of the Word" present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ'(Redemptoris Missio n. 28).

'We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart'(n. 29).

'God does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors ... The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people'(n. 55).

Human and Divine

‘Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills’(n. 56).

If we wish to see the Church in the full beauty of its communion with the Trinity as the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit, we must look at those members of the church who embrace it with all their hearts and whose lives are lived according to the principles proclaimed by the community. Do not judge the Church by those of us whose judgments, attitudes and actions fall short of what the Church teaches. Human sin can so easily obscure for us the true nature of the Church, and the gift the Church is to the world.