

CHURCH WITHOUT CHRIST?

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IN 1799, Pius VI, his body worn out by the treatment to which he had been subjected but his spirit alive with righteous indignation, shut out from his sight the latest scene of persecution come to enkindle anew the spirit of Catholicism. He died, away from Rome, a prisoner of arrogant Napoleon. And men were heard to whisper: "This is the last Pope; Catholicism is dead. The French Revolution, ushering in a new era of reason and light for mankind, has killed the old superstition."

The Catholic Church thrives on persecution. Indeed, the ages of conflict compose the most illustrious pages of her history, as witness the humble beginnings of mother Church when no less than ten violent scourges drove her and her infant brood into the very bowels of the earth. The darkest days have seen the lamp of faith burning more brightly, while the young Church grew strong on the blood of martyrs.

But why all this opposition? Christ Himself gives us the reason. "If the world hate you, know ye that it hath hated me before you. The servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."¹ And again: "They will put you out of the synagogues: yea, the hour cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doth a service to God."² Christ, then, is the object of all these attacks, and His Church, precisely because she is His Church, must suffer persecution even as He. She cannot be overthrown because her roots are buried deep in unending truth—the truth that Jesus Christ is God. A wave of persecution, sometimes long, sometimes short, may presage victory for the enemies of the Church but in the end they must ever go down to ignominious defeat because He Who founded the Church and continues to direct her is divine. It is a wonderful paradox that the Catholic Church suffers persecution and gains unfailing victory for one and the

¹ *John*, xv, 18-20.

² *John*, xvi, 2.

same reason, namely, because Christ and His Church are one. They suffer as one, triumph as one, *live* as one!

The apparent defeat of Pius VI, therefore, is not something new. Recall another scene laid many, many years before. Certain Jewish rulers had witnessed the death of Jesus and had seen Him buried. Said they: "This is the end. All is over with Him." And so they hoped! But in vain, for when His followers came to the sepulchre on that first Easter morn they faced the angel's question: "Why seek you the living with the dead? He is not here, but is risen."³

The pregnant thought of Cardinal Newman, so beautifully expressed and so utterly true, comes to us at this point. His Eminence wrote: "She (the Church) shall be always worsted in the warfare with Protestantism; ever unhorsed and disarmed, ever running away, ever prostrated, ever smashed and pounded, ever dying, ever dead; and *the only wonder is that she has to be killed so often*, and the life so often to be trodden out of her, and her priests and doctors to be so often put down, and her monks and nuns to be exposed so often, and such vast sums to be subscribed by Protestants, and such great societies to be kept up, and such millions of tracts to be written, and such persecuting Acts to be passed in Parliament, in order thoroughly and once for all, and for the very last time, and for ever and ever, to annihilate her once more."⁴

Just what is the relation of Jesus Christ to His Church? This question brings us face to face with the beautiful and, we venture to say, little-understood doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. We shall now proceed to present a few reflections on this central point of Christian life.

The sin of Adam closed heaven and it was not to be opened again until satisfaction had been made to an offended God. This work of love and self-abasement was undertaken by none other than Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of God, Who alone could make an adequate atonement. This He did by taking human flesh, becoming like to man in all things, sin alone excepted. Christ had the glory of His Father in view and this attitude motivated all His actions. His sole purpose on earth was to lead men to salvation and for this end He founded His Church, ratifying that foundation by His passion and death. This saving

³ Luke, xxiv, 5-6.

⁴ *Present Position of Catholics in England*. Lecture I.

act of Christ wrought man's Redemption. St. Gregory of Nyssa, in a striking passage, describes the Incarnation of the Son of God as "producing contraries by contraries: by death, life; by dishonor, glory; by sin, righteousness; by a curse, blessing; by weakness, power. The invisible is made manifest in the flesh, He redeems captives, Himself the Purchaser and Himself the Price."⁵

The mystery of Christ's Incarnation and man's Redemption is inseparably bound up with the mystery of His Church. The Church is the extension of the Incarnation and Redemption. Christ died for all men of all time but the merits which He acquired have to be applied. This He does through the Church by means of which He prolongs Himself through time and space. Other great doctors there have been who live today in the minds of men by their teaching and example. But Christ has gone to the limit in perpetuating Himself for all time. Christ is more than a mere memory; He is a *reality*; He *lives* with men today!

That Christ was divine is amply proved by His miracles, above all by His Resurrection. It cannot reasonably be maintained that Christ merely *participated* in divine powers, for to no man is it given of his own power to light and extinguish the spark of life. It is a work proper to God alone and not even His Immaculate Mother Mary was excused from this universal law of nature. Being Master of life and death, Jesus Christ proved Himself to be God.

It follows, then, that the Church which He established is divine—divine by reason of its origin and the guidance it receives from Him Who said: "Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."⁶ But Christ ascended into heaven forty days after He rose from the tomb, not to come again except in great power and majesty—as Judge. Christ is now in heaven. How, then, is He with the Church on earth? Putting aside for the moment His Eucharistic Presence on our altars, we say that He is here in a new Body which He took from humanity, His creature, even as He took His physical Body from His Virgin Mother. This new Body is not His physical Body, for that is in heaven; rather is it a social Body. *His new Body is His Church of which He Himself is the Head and*

⁵ *Homily on the Canticle of Canticles.*

⁶ *Matt. xxviii, 20.*

the faithful the members. Christ and the members of His Body are not united by a union merely of their minds and hearts; no, the union is of a far more intimate character. The bond of unity is the Holy Ghost Who is the Soul of the Church. In order to express this unity, entirely above the physical order, long standing usage has canonized the term *the Mystical Body of Christ*.

Now, when we speak of *mystical*, the mind is inclined to think of something nebulous, intangible and unreal. But here, where we are concerned with the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, nothing could be farther from the truth. We call it *mystical* because it is supernatural; hence it is above the powers of our limited intelligence to grasp. But by no means does that argue against its reality. The Fathers of the Church, in pointing out this doctrine, chose their language designedly. The union of Christ with His members is entirely supernatural; consequently, the term *physical* would not be advisable because it might easily be inferred that the union was merely of the natural order. *Mystical*, on the contrary, signifies something that exceeds in fulness and reality, natural objects. We speak of the Sacrifice of the Mass, for example, as the same as that of the Cross. At the same time, we know that Christ died but once in a real and bloody manner; in the Mass He offers Himself in a *mystical* manner. Yet who will say that the Mass is not a real and true sacrifice?

No one was better acquainted with the intense reality of the Mystical Body than St. Paul who, in his miraculous conversion, was taught it by Jesus Himself. "And as he (Paul) went on his journey, it came to pass that he drew nigh to Damascus. And suddenly a light from heaven shined round about him. And falling on the ground, he heard a voice saying to him: Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? Who said: Who art thou, Lord? And He: I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."⁷ When the foot is stepped on, it is the tongue, the head, that speaks in pain or resentment. Paul had been persecuting the Christians and by so doing had struck at Jesus the Head. And Jesus spoke in defense of His own. St. Paul is the foremost exponent of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, and the Fathers and Doctors, particularly St. Augustine, are assiduous in following his terminology. The Evangelists too give it a prominent place

⁷ Acts, ix, 3-5.

in their history of Christ. It is one of the doctrines that clearly stands forth in all of the New Testament.

St. Thomas Aquinas was a devout disciple of St. Augustine and he was thoroughly familiar with St. Paul and St. John, on both of whom he commented in detail. In the building of his whole theological structure, St. Thomas took great care never to lose sight of this cardinal point of Catholic dogma. It is the enthusiastic opinion of Abbé Anger that St. Thomas' most finished work, the *Summa Theologica*, which represents the crystallization of his more mature thought, is built around one central idea, namely, the Mystical Body of Christ. At any rate, throughout the third part, where he treats of Christ, one finds no end of references to this intimate union of Christ and His Church.

Sacred Scripture speaks of this doctrine under various comparisons and symbols. The words of our Lord: "I am the vine; you the branches,"⁸ clearly shows the direct dependence of the human branches, the faithful, on Him. If they are to grow and bear fruit, they must draw strength from Him the true Vine. The figures of the building and its foundation, and of the bridegroom and his spouse are drawn to bring out the selfsame doctrine in different lights. But the comparison with the human body is the one most easily grasped. It is the favorite analogy of St. Paul and, following him, St. Thomas writes: "As the whole Church is termed one Mystical Body from its likeness to the natural body of man, which has its diverse acts because of the diversity of its members, so likewise Christ is called the Head of the Church from a likeness with the human head."⁹ A body must have a head, a soul and members. If the head or soul is lacking, the body ceases to live; missing one or more of its members, which it should have, it is abnormal.

Christ is the center of unity. He alone rules the Church, for two or more heads would indicate a monstrosity. What, then, of St. Peter and his successors? That is not difficult to explain and St. Thomas does it in a few succinct words. "The interior influence of grace is from none other than Christ Himself Whose humanity, because it is joined to His divinity, has the power of justifying. But the influence on the members of the Church as far as the external government is concerned can be given to others. It is in this sense that others can be called

⁸ *John*, xv, 5.

⁹ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 8, a. 1.

the heads of the Church, but not in the same way as Christ."¹⁰ The Pope is, of course, but the *Vicar* of Jesus Christ. Since Christ has ascended into heaven, there must of necessity be some *visible* head to direct the external workings of the Church. This function is discharged by the hierarchy of the Church—the Pope and bishops together with the pastors under their direction. The office was committed to Peter with the charge: "Feed my lambs; feed my sheep."¹¹ Peter's choice as Vicar of Christ followed upon his threefold avowal of love for the Master, a pledge corresponding, and giving the lie, to his previous triple denial.

The Church is not only an invisible kingdom but also a *visible* society. It is of the very nature of the Church that it be capable of being seen by all men. At this point the Catholic Church parts company with Protestantism. According to Protestant theology, the Church is essentially an invisible society only, for the Church of Christ exists only in its sanctified members and these are guided directly by God. Faith alone suffices; there is no need for the ministry of the Church, no need for any priesthood to come between Christ and the soul. But the Catholic concept never did maintain that the Church intervened, that is, acted as a barrier, between Christ and the soul. How could it? The Church in a sense *is* Christ!

Christ understood human nature so very well. Humanity was His creature and, having embraced that very humanity to effect its own salvation and restoration to the friendship of the Father, He saw fit to lead men to the invisible gifts of grace and glory through the instrumentality of another of His creatures. And so He gave to His Church seven sacraments, sensible signs producing grace in the souls of men. These are the channels by which the merits of His passion and death are poured forth to flood the soul—a lava of Redemption. "Baptism is a sacrament of the death and passion of Our Lord inasmuch as by it, man, through the power of Christ's passion, is regenerated in Christ. The Eucharist is a sacrament of the passion of Christ, inasmuch as by it man is perfected in a union with Christ Who has suffered."¹² The ministers of the Church administer these sources of divine help on the authority of Christ the Head. The very first of these sacraments, Baptism, is absolutely necessary

¹⁰ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 8, a. 6.

¹¹ *John*, xxi, 15-17.

¹² *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 73, a. 3, ad 3.

for entrance into the Church and, consequently, into eternal life. With the reception of Baptism, man is incorporated into the Mystical Body, the wellspring of grace is let loose from the Head, and the soul of man is vivified anew. This is what it means to be redeemed, to be a Christian, "for in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body."¹³

It is the Sacrament of the Altar, though, that brings us to the life of the Mystical Body. This is the divinely conceived plan by which Christ communicates this unifying life to His members. Here it is that we find the pulsating heart of Christ Himself. True, all the sacraments give grace but the Holy Eucharist gives the very Author of grace. Just as the physical body must have food to restore its lost energy and to preserve it in being, so also the cravings of the Mystical Body for spiritual nourishment must be satisfied. "It is clear that we are obligated to partake of the Holy Eucharist, not only by virtue of a commandment of the Church, but by the precept of Christ Himself."¹⁴ The Angelic Doctor supports this teaching by Christ's own words to His followers when first He broke bread with them the night before He died: "Do this for a commemoration of Me."¹⁵ Christ's gift of Himself to His creatures to be their spiritual refectio is so staggering a reality in its import that mere man could never have conceived of it and only God could have effected it. The Eucharist "recalls the passion of Christ, fills the mind with grace and gives us a pledge of future glory."¹⁶ No symbol is more eloquent of the joy of the life hereafter. It embraces the Object of our eternal happiness, and even here below gives Him to us for our enjoyment. Truly can Christ's mystical members cry out with St. Paul: "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me."¹⁷

The doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ forms the groundwork for the Catholic teaching on the Communion of Saints. This dogma is concerned with the mutual relationship which exists between the living and the dead. The faithful on earth, the blessed in heaven and the souls in purgatory are all integral parts of Christ's Mystical Body. He is Head of the faithful on earth, commonly known as the Church Militant, for

¹³ *I Cor.*, xii, 13.

¹⁴ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 80, a. 11.

¹⁵ *Luke*, xxii, 19.

¹⁶ St. Thomas, *Office of the Blessed Sacrament.*

¹⁷ *Gal.* ii, 20.

He is sharing His own divine life with them by constantly pouring upon them the grace of His sacraments. He is the Head of the Church Suffering in purgatory by preserving in each member the supernatural life of grace. Finally, He is Head of the Church Triumphant, the Saints in heaven, by bestowing on them the happiness of the vision of God. This life of grace infused into the soul by the Holy Ghost is shared in by all the faithful, living and dead, making them one communion, one fellowship, intimately and really united with Him Who is the Head of this Communion of Saints. "If one member suffer anything, all the members suffer with it; or if one member glory, all the members rejoice with it."¹⁸

What may we conclude from these few, very brief considerations on the Mystical Body of Christ? It is a vast subject and we have but scratched the surface. What we have tried to do is to indicate the stupendous importance of this mighty truth. What, then, is our practical conclusion? It is this. *Without Christ there can be no Church.* Without the Vine, the branches wither; without the Corner Stone, the building falls; without the Bridegroom, the spouse languishes; without the Head, the body dies. Men seek long life and happiness. Both are to be found in Christ and He is with His Church. The true solution for the problem of human happiness is to be found in the acceptance of Truth. The members of Christ's Mystical Body have much for which to be thankful, for He feeds them with this very Truth which is Himself. Is it not strange, though, how many rise so frequently from the table of Truth, and it never occurs to them to say grace?

¹⁸ *I Cor.*, xii, 26.

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