

A GLIMPSE AT THE WHOLE CHRIST

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REAT love is measured by its selflessness. Love worthy of the name takes upon itself the condition of the beloved. Impatient with aloofness and mere well-wishing, it overflows into protestations. This usually entails placing one's self on the plane of the one loved. Sometimes this means lowering one's station, at least, temporarily. The lover even experiences delight in putting on the poverty of the other so as not to be in the slightest out of harmony with the surroundings of his love. "Friendship," says St. Thomas, "is based upon some fellowship of life 'since nothing is so proper to friendship as to live together.'"¹

If one could surmise to the unimaginable degree of the infinite, one would approach the motive force behind the love which the august Trinity had for man that the Second Person, the Word, would descend from Heaven to assume the flesh of man. Never before was there so world-shaking a moment in history as when the Trinity bent earthwards to conceive in the womb of Mary the immaculate Christ. Never was there so great a manifestation of love. As is recorded in the books of the Old Testament, God had called some man to lead a tribe out of sin, but through the Incarnation God Himself was the instrument. St. Thomas clearly calls Christ the conjoined instrument of the divinity.²

Christ did not plead the cause of humanity before the bar of divine justice as a lawyer. Such action did not suit the plan of Divine Providence. Conceived by the Holy Ghost, His flesh taken from the womb of the Virgin Mary, Christ condescended to hide His Divinity, as it were, so as to be the real victim of sin. He was no professional bailiff. He identified Himself with human nature and shouldered the entire guilt of man's crime.

The thought of such tremendous love as is shown forth in the Incarnation staggers man's mind. So extraordinary a thing leaves the mind helpless in imagining. Theologians call the Incarnation the Hypostatic Union, that is in Christ there were two natures, the Divine and the human, yet only one personality. All the actions belong to the Person of the Word.

¹ ST. THOMAS, *Summa Theologica*, II II Q. 25, a. 3.

² *Ibid.* III. Q. 64, a. 3.

"The Word is one with the Father by identity of Nature; by His Humanity we are united to Him and He is united to us. Christ, the Word Incarnate, is the bond of union between the Divinity and the humanity, existing at the same time in both, in Himself like unto both, in spite of the vast distance between one and the other—God one with God the Father by the Divine Nature; Man one with man by a true human nature."³

Christ took upon Himself freely all the infirmities and indispositions common to man. The sinless Christ lived a normal human life. He had to walk when he wanted to go up to Jerusalem. When he had walked far, he had to rest. He had to eat to keep Himself alive.

The physical life of Christ was conditioned by time and circumstance. There would be a day, known by the Father, when He would die. As the hour of that last day approached, he promised his nearest friends and followers He would not leave them orphans. He would come again. His parting words contained the pledge that He would send One Who would be with them until the last sunset of this world.

As unprecedented and unparalleled was the coming of Christ, equally poignant was His departure. For the paltry price of a potter's field His purchased death became the medium from which life came to all subsequent generations.

The Mystical Body of Christ is the prolongation of the Incarnation. In a sense, it is the application of the Redemption to men living twenty centuries after His physical presence. Christ died to break down all barriers separating man from God and to effect reunion and incorporation into Himself. The precedent of the infinite bending down of the Trinity, the Incarnation, is in some respect seen again. The ineffable tryst of God with man is consummated in the Mystical Body of Christ. Grace sufficient to make all men sons of God was the prize won by Christ. St. Thomas tells us that the grace of Christ was not for Himself. As our Saviour and Redeemer he has as His proper office to confer grace on men. Yet the tremendous treasure of grace realized by the Passion of Christ is of no avail to man unless man can come in contact with the source. Knowing that a limpid spring exists is not satiating thirst. Rather such a situation makes the mouth dryer.

St. Paul, contemplating the magnificent economy of grace and the closeness and intimacy by which men in various degrees are united to Christ, thought the analogy to the human body best suited to impress this dogma upon those he wished to instruct. The analogy seems

³ ST. AUGUSTINE, *De Unitate Ecclesiae*, ch. 4, t. 43, col. 395.

to be Pauline, but that the same dogma is expressed by other figures can be seen in the Synoptic Gospels and quite prominently in the "Vine and the Branches" mentioned by St. John.

The human body comprising a myriad of cells has two lives: an individual cellular existence and also a common life wherein the cellular vitality is absorbed by its contribution to the whole activity of the person. For this reason, the cells are caught up into a higher life. It will be seen how this physiological phenomenon has been adapted by the Church to express the reality of a dogma.

The pattern for the Mystical Union of the members with the Head was the Incarnation. Christ, now reigning in triumph in Heaven again, identifies Himself with the same humanity from which was fashioned His physical body. Once again the divine and human meet in a unique union. The union of each member with Christ is the closest conceivable union, for man is incorporated into Christ as real parts of His Mystical Body, forming with Him one supernatural whole. Christ's Mystical Body is neither like a mere corporation of stockholders bound together by the common incentive of financial gain nor like a union formed from the common consent of the people, as are these United States. The union between the mother and the child during the period from conception to birth approaches the intimacy between Christ and the members of the Mystical Body. Head and members are moulded into one supernatural organism which is nurtured and grows by the vitality breathed out from the Holy Ghost, the heart, through the hidden impulses of grace.

On that day when St. Paul was struck from his horse and interrogated for his persecutions of the Church, he was not accused of breathing out threats against some social group. Christ in this instance identified Himself with the Church. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? Who said; "Who art thou, Lord? And he: I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."⁴

In the human body if the toe stubs a stone, the pain is felt throughout the whole frame and the head cries out. Again, in a race although the legs carry the runner down the course and across the tape to victory, it is the head which is crowned with the laurels of triumph. St. Thomas says that man constitutes with the Incarnate Word one mystical Person.⁵ So absolute was St. Paul's certainty of his union with Christ in the Mystical Body that he exclaimed: "And I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me."⁶

⁴ Acts of the Apostles, 9, 4 and 5.

⁵ *Summa Theologica*, III Q. 19, a. 4.

⁶ ST. PAUL, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 2, 20.

Throughout this exposition one point must be remembered. Figures of speech and metaphors have been used and were first used by the apostles to delineate for readers a real dogma. Never must it be forgotten that the figure is not the dogma. As close as is the similarity between the human body of man (the figure) and the Mystical Body (the dogma), there are great differences.

In the human body the head is in some respect dependent upon the other members of the body. The head of the human body could not walk to the corner drug store and leave the fatigued legs sprawling in an easy chair at home. However, Christ is in no way dependent upon the members of the Mystical Body; he is self-sufficient. The Church safeguarded her children from misconceptions of error on this point when, at the Council of Orange, using the metaphor of the "Vine and the Branches," She declared: "The branches are in the Vine in such fashion as to bestow nothing upon the Vine, but from the Vine they receive that whereby they live. The Vine is in the branches in such fashion as it supplies them with vital nourishment, not that it takes nourishment from them. Wherefore, to have Christ in them and to abide in Christ profits His disciples, but not Christ. For if the branch is cut off, another can spring forth from the living root, but that which is cut off cannot live without root."⁷

To be chosen as a leader, to stand unrivaled at the head of men so as to inspire respect and obedience, usually presupposes inherent superior qualities of mind or body. That Christ should have this ascendancy and superiority of headship over all members should be expected. In Him resides the plenitude of grace. His splendor of stature radiates a brilliancy that throws deep shadows over all the surrounding constellations of men and angels. St. Thomas, in his introductory article on the Church, explains the convenience of Christ's Headship over the Mystical Body by a comparison to the distinctive attributes found in the human head: order, perfection and power.⁸ Because of His nearness to God the source of grace participates more fully than any member in the font of grace.⁹ Grace was conferred on Him, writes St. Thomas, "as the universal principle for bestowing grace on human nature."¹⁰ Again, the leadership is fitting to Christ for His fullness of grace is not for Himself alone but for others.¹¹

The contemporary unjustified emphasis upon the importance of the color of one's skin or the place of one's origin has cut fissures in

⁷ DENZINGER, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, No. 197.

⁸ *Summa Theologica*, III Q. 8, a. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Q. 7, a. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Q. 7, a. 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Q. 7, a. 1 et 9.

the structure of the modern state. Race and blood are badges of royalty. Christ's whole "social doctrine" was universal in tenor. In His physical life, Christ was not equally loving to all. He had his favorite friends, but no one was banned entirely from His friendship. Unequivocally the Scriptures testify, ". . . the publicans and sinners drew near unto him to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying: This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them."¹² And what shows forth the broad sweep of His universal love better than his acceptance of the genuine tears of Mary Magdalen, the outcast of society? Christ alone had the courage and patience to look beneath the surface of skin and into the heart. He alone issued the challenge when He said, "Come to me."

Man's redemption was the work of a single Person, yet its reverberations were manifold. Often the membership in Christ's Church, His Mystical Body, is wont to be considered exclusively filled out by those who occupy a pew at Sunday Mass. These are the visible members. They have been formally initiated, born again of the Holy Ghost, through the Sacrament of Baptism. But there are others, those who are imperfectly joined to the Head of Christ in His Mystical Body.

Who compose the full membership in the sheepfold of Christ? No one but the Trinity Itself can say who are not members. St. Thomas thought that practically every man of good will has some place in the Mystical Body. The members of the human body are members merely for the span of years reaching from birth to death. Since the flood of grace that was unleashed by the Passion and the Cross sweeps back through the Old Testament and up in the future to the death of the last man, the limitations of time have no place in the Mystical Body. Again, not all members, as is the case in the human body, are equally joined to the head.

There are two general classes into which St. Thomas says all men fall. Either a man is actually this day united to Christ or he is capable of being united actually to Christ. The stockbroker with a summer villa at the seashore and a residence in the city, the sandwich sign man, our enemies at war, all these are not cut off from membership.

Christ is principally the Head of the saints in Heaven, who are united to Him in glory. Here on earth He is actually united to those in the state of grace who have a share in Divine Life. Also they are united to Him who have let the fires of divine charity burn out in

¹² Luke 15: 1 and 2.

their hearts, but who are still attached by the cords of faith. The latter are less perfect members, because sin has erected a dam before the flow of grace from the Head. St. Thomas in his two potential categories counts those who are not members today either by the ties of charity or faith but who are destined in the future to actual membership, and those who are capable of membership but who will never be actually caught in the divine net.¹³

Commonly, carpers taunt that the Mystical Body of Christ is too technical, it has no basis in fact, it is for the mystic or the theological seminar. Peculiarly, the apparent ethereal aspect of the name blinds many to the reality of this simple doctrine. To the member in the state of grace, the influence of Christ is more intimate, more close and more vital than the breathing of air. Unfortunately, the realization of this closeness and nearness of Christ is often dispensed with the same platitudinous casualness as respiration.

Prompted by the groanings of love from the Trinity, the Father sent His Eternal Son to earth Who dignified inestimably every human person through the Incarnation. The end of the physical life of Christ is but the finish of the first chapter of love. Christ again, as the glorified Person of the Trinity, seated at the right hand of the Father, extends His embrace to humanity. In this mystical caress Christ has drawn man so close to Himself that the apostles and evangelists, striving with all resourcefulness, could find no better analogy to express the extraordinary life of the Mystical Body than the familiarity existing between the head and the members in the human body and the inseparableness of the vine and its branches.

¹³ *Ibid.*, III Q. 8, a. 3.

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