

The Mystical Body of Christ

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it remain on the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me (Jn 15:4)

A study of the Incarnation could not be complete without reflecting on the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. The Second Divine Person took flesh at one point in history, as we read in the first chapter of St. John: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). Without the incarnation, there could be no Mystical Body. The one is the source, or prerequisite, for the other. The Mystical Body exists because the Word has become man, and God has willed that the Mystical Body be the extension, or prolongation, of the Incarnation and the Redemption.

(1) The idea of Christ's Mystical Body is clearly seen in the gospels and in St. Paul. It would be well to examine just a few of these passages in order to gain a foundation for understanding later writings of the Church Fathers, the Popes and Councils.

One of the most thought-provoking passages in the Gospels is that of Our Lord telling about the final judgement. Men will be separated one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The Lord condemns those who did not give Him food when He was hungry, clothing when He was naked, or a visit when He was sick. He tells the nations "In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Here Christ is identifying Himself with mankind a very real way. He says He is present in His brothers to such a degree that it is He who is fed, clothed and visited. This is a powerful statement, and it sheds light on our understanding of Christ's Mystical Body. Somehow Christ dwells in each individual person. This is seen again in the Acts of the Apostles where St. Paul hears the words of Christ, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4-5). Paul had never known Our Lord personally. He was persecuting the Christians. Christ however stated that He Himself was being persecuted. Again, Christ is identifying Himself with men. He is joined to them, a part of them, or rather they are a part of Him.

In the priestly prayer of Christ in St. John's Gospel, Christ says, "Father, may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you...With me in them and you in me, may they be so completely one..." (Jn. 17:21-23). Not only do we see here that Christ and the Father are one, but that Christ is in His disciples. In another passage Our Lord speaks to the twelve: "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you... I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears plenty of fruit" (Jn 15:4-5). The image of the vine and the branches points to a theme that is developed in St. Paul's writings, namely, that Christ is the head, or source of His body, and we are the members. Cut off from the vine, the branches have no life.

The event that occurred on the road to Damascus made a deep impression on St. Paul, for his epistles are filled with the reality of the Mystical Body. An example of this is seen when Paul writes on marriage:

A man never hates his own body, but he feeds it and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, because it is his body and we are its living parts (Eph 5:30).

We, who belong to the Church, are the living parts or members of Christ's body. "Christ is the head of the Church and saves the whole body" (Eph 5:23). Just as Christ is the vine, He is the head of His body, giving life to the members and bringing about their salvation. Paul uses the analogy of the human body in showing that all parts must cooperate for the good of the Church: "Not you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it" (I Cor 12:27). Some members are apostles, some teachers, but they all form one body united in Christ.

Another point found in the epistles is that Christians are called by God to live their lives "in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:30). It is through baptism that this occurs, as we read in Romans: "Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" (Rom. 6:3). Paul uses the phrases "in Christ Jesus" and "in Christ" over and over again in his epistles. He stresses that there is a real bond between the baptized and Christ. Baptism is the means of incorporation into the body of Christ.

It should be stated that Paul does not use the word "mystical" when describing the body of Christ. He simply refers to it as "His body." "Mystical" was first officially used in Boniface VIII's bull, *Una Sanctam*, in unfolding the ideas put forth by Paul.

One of the most important Pauline themes connecting with the mystical body is that Adam was a type of Christ. In Adam, the whole human race fell (I Cor 15:45). As Adam was the first head of mankind, so Christ became the new Head of the entire human race through His victory over death and sin. When the Second Divine Person became man all of humanity was elevated. Christ, being both true God and true man manifested His position as Head of the whole human race. And by founding his Church on the Apostles and the Sacraments, He set up a means to incorporate people into His very life. The Church, then, is the extension of Christ in time, which reaches out to bring the Redemptive grace to all men.

According to St. Paul, only the baptized faithful are members of Christ's Body. The baptized become one in Christ Jesus: "All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28). In another passage, Paul says that it is through baptism and the Holy Spirit that we are saved: It was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5-6). At baptism, the faithful become sharers in the Divine Life of Christ.

The ideas and themes in Paul become the foundation for later studies in theology. The Church Fathers are the first to expound upon the Pauline writings and to bring out deeper and more profound insights into the doctrine of the Mystical Body. In a letter to

the Church of Magnesia, St. Ignatius of Antioch refers to the Mystery of Christ's Body by telling the faithful to have "a. union both according to the flesh and according to the spirit."

(2) Not only do they have true fraternity among themselves as Christian brothers, but they have a deeper union which comes from the Holy Spirit, Who is given to them in baptism. Irenaeus also echoes the words of Paul by referring to the "great and glorious Body of Christ."

(3) Here again, we see that the word "mystical" is not used, even though the doctrine was present in the early Church. For St. Paul and the Church Fathers, the extension of Christ's Body is a reality. According to Irenaeus, the Body of Christ is what realizes the will of the Father in men and renews them from their old way into the new life of Christ.

(4) A Pauline theme which is developed by Irenaeus deals with Christ as the Second Adam. He writes: "We have offended God in the first Adam... but we are reconciled through the obedience even unto death of the Second Adam" (*Adv. Haer.* V, 16, 3.). Adam was the head of the human race and caused its fall from grace, but Christ, the new Head, redeemed all mankind and takes His place as the Head of the Mystical Body.

St. Cyprian also asserts the union of all faithful Christians in Christ, a union which is seen in the Church. He writes that. "The Church is one, with one head and one origin... " (*De Catholicae ecclesiae unitate*, 5). This reminds us of Christ's teaching that He is the vine for the branches, that is, the Head and origin of divine life. The writings of St. Athanasius bring out a further understanding of the doctrine of the Mystical Body. He says that through the Incarnation and the Redemptive act on Calvary, all men are intimately connected with Christ. The whole human race is elevated and brought into a greater participation in the supernatural life. In his work against the Arians, Athanasius writes: "For just as the Word, having assumed a body, became man, so also, we men have been assumed to the Word through the Flesh, and are made inheritors of eternal life and bearers of God through Him" (*III Contra Arianos*, 34).

With the coming of St. Augustine, a great advance was made in theology. Our understanding of the Mystical Body was deepened by his insights and writings. For example, he said that "what the soul is to the body of a man, the Holy Spirit is to Christ's Body which is the Church."

(5) This reaffirms the teachings of St. Paul that the Church, but he goes further to state that the Holy Spirit is "the soul" of that Body. Here Augustine is speaking analogically. Both Paul and Augustine recognize that there are many analogous concepts between the human body and the Church. Based on Paul's teaching, Augustine is able to develop our understanding of the Mystical Body and unfold its deeper implications. He also writes "All men are one man in Christ, and the unity of Christians constitutes but one man" (In Psalms 39, En. 2). Again, Paul's teaching that many members make up one body is the foundation for this point made by Augustine. It should

be stated here that what Augustine is doing is not changing dogma or giving it new meaning. The essence of the teaching has been with the Church since the Apostles, as Newman has taught. But, our understanding of the doctrine can and does develop over time. This is what Newman calls the development of doctrine in the true sense.

Augustine makes an interesting statement regarding the whole Christ. He writes:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, like a whole and perfect man, is head and body... His body is the Church, not simply the Church that is here in this particular place, but both the Church that is here and the Church which extends over the whole earth; not simply the Church that is living today, but the whole race of saints, from Abel down to all those who will ever be born and believe in Christ until the end of the world, for all belong to one city. This city is the body of Christ... This is the whole Christ: Christ united with the Church. (In Psalms 90, serm.2).

Augustine uses the term "Church" in the broad sense. He refers to Her as that which extends through the entire world and that which includes all the just who ever lived and will ever live. He describes the Church as one man who reaches unto the end of time.

(6) Augustine stresses the reality that all the members of the Church make up one Body in Christ.

A few centuries later, the greatest theologian of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, builds on the teachings of Augustine. His writings on the Mystical Body of Christ and the Church are so extensive that it will be possible to mention only a few here. He writes, "The head and members are as one mystical person, and therefore Christ's satisfaction belongs to all the faithful and His members" (S.T.III, 48, 2, 1). This question brings up a recurring theme found in the study of the Incarnate Word, that is, "solidarity." Because of the vital intimacy between Christ and His members, there is a principle of solidarity present in the Mystical Body. This solidarity is a communion between two or more people. In the case of 'the Mystical Body, are joined to Christ and brought into a union with Him through baptism. St. Thomas develops the idea of solidarity between Christ and ourselves:

The members and the head are but one person. Therefore, since Christ is our Head by reason of His divinity and His superabundant fullness of grace, and since we are His members, His merit is not something outside us, but it is communicated to us or flows into us on account of the unity of the Mystical Body (In III Sent.d.18.a.6 sol.1,2.).

(7) The above teachings of Thomas Aquinas and those of Augustine and Paul are found in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* of Pius XII. Written in 1943, it has become known as one of this century's most important papal teachings since it shows the true nature of Christ's Church. This well researched document is full of scripture and the Church Fathers, and is written in a way that the modern world can easily understand. Some of the most interesting passages deal with the Holy Spirit as the "soul" of the Mystical Body.

The Holy Father quotes the words of Leo XIII who stated "Let it suffice to say that, as Christ is the Head of the Church, so is the Holy Spirit her soul" (*Mystici Corporis*, I.17). Pius XII also brings out the idea that the Eucharist is the source and symbol of unity in the Mystical Body since the Incarnate Word unites men to Himself in a real way by means of His presence in the Eucharist (II.82). He also touches on an earlier point made by Aquinas concerning solidarity, stating that the union between Christ and the faithful is not only a moral union, but a union on the ontological order as well. It is true that there is a union in the moral order between Christ and us, but a supernatural principle of unity is the more important, and this lies on the ontological level. This is the doctrine of St. Paul. It has no connection with pantheism, and the ontological union does not deny the personalities of the faithful.

The last document which will be referred to is from the Second Vatican Council: the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium, LG)*. In this constitution, the Council Fathers have chosen to call the faithful the "People of God." This does not mean that the Church has abandoned the use of the term "Mystical Body," but she merely gives us a new emphasis. Due to Christ's universal salvific will, all men are called to Catholic unity (LG II.13) and all are related to the Church in one way or another. The Catholic faithful are fully incorporated into the Church (LG II.14) and catechumens are truly joined to the Church. Non-Catholic Christians "are indeed in some real way joined to us in the Holy Spirit for, by his gifts and graces, his sanctifying power is also active in them and he has strengthened some of them even to the shedding of their blood" (LG II.15). The Council Fathers also state that those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the Church in various ways (LG II.16). Since Christ died for all men, each is given the grace to be saved. The Church tries to embrace all people to bring them into full participation in the Mystical Body. The Church, by Her very nature is apostolic. Her primary work is to bring men to the fullness of truth and incorporate them into Her Body. As the Word was sent by the Father, so the members of the Church are sent by Christ to bring all people to Him. The Church is the extension of Christ in time and is, as Pius XII teaches, equivalent to the Mystical Body of Christ. We as members of the Church through baptism and those who are saved *in voto*, are united to Christ in a very real way, so much so that Christ could say: "As long as you did it to one of these least brethren, you did it to Me" (Mt 25:40).

Notes

(1) Abbe Anger. *The Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ*, trans. Rev. John Burke, C.S.P. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1931), p. 3.

(2) *The New Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume X* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 168.

(3) *ibid.*, p. 168.

(4) *ibid.*, p. 168.

(5) *ibid.*, p. 168.

(6) Fr. M. Eugene Boylan, *The Mystical Body: The Foundation of the Spiritual Life.* (Westminster: The Newman Bookshop, 1948), p. 37.

(7) *ibid.*, p. 50.

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