

ONE CHURCH: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

PETER CHIRICO, S.S.

St. Thomas Seminary, Kenmore, Wash.

IN THE PHRASE "one Church," there is no problem in the word "one," but there is in the word "Church." Christian scholars widely agree that the Church is or should be one. But the quality of oneness depends upon the precise nature of this Church which must be one. Oneness differs as things differ. The oneness of a family is not the oneness of a bowl of vegetable soup; nor is it the oneness that unites the separate actions of the members of an orchestra while performing together. The meaning of the word "one" depends upon the meaning of that which is one. The meaning of the phrase "one Church," therefore, depends primarily upon what we mean when we say "Church."

TWO CATHOLIC CONCEPTS OF THE CHURCH

Before we take up the meaning of "Church," it would be wise to consider an important preliminary truth. All concepts of the Church are necessarily incomplete, for a number of reasons. First, every concept is incomplete in that no mental image can completely reflect the manifold dimensions of concrete reality. The concept "boy" can never adequately represent any real boy that I have known; the concept "country" can never completely portray any given country.

But this inadequacy of all concepts is particularly true of the concept "Church." For the Church is not simply a reality of this world. It is, indeed, composed of some worldly elements, but it is essentially a result of the intrusion of the divine into the creatural. Hence, the attempt to express its reality in a concept culled from the materials of human experience is necessarily doomed from the start to be at least a partial failure. Every concept of the Church—past, present, or future—is inevitably more or less incomplete.

Keeping this limitation in mind, we may now consider two of the classical Catholic concepts of the Church. The first, that of St. Robert Bellarmine, states that the Church is that society instituted by Christ, composed of those men in this life who are united by the profession of

the same faith and the participation of the same sacraments under the authority of the pope and the bishops united to him.¹

The significant features of this definition are as follows. First, it places the Church in the category of visible society: the Church is primarily a group of men on earth who are characterized by the observable norms of profession of a common faith, the reception of common sacraments, and submission to a common authority. Secondly, in this concept the Church has a relationship to Christ that is primarily juridical in origin. Christ instituted the Church by decreeing implicitly or explicitly its constituent elements: its doctrines, its sacraments, its authority. Finally, in this notion of the Church, an emphasis is placed upon those having authority, that is, upon those who teach the doctrines that are professed, who confer the sacraments that are received, and who rule in the name of Christ.

The insufficiencies of this concept have led to a second notion of the Church, that of the people of God. According to this notion, the Church is "a Spirit-filled and united community; it is a holy and worshipping community offering salvation to all; and it is a community built upon the visible unity of the Twelve and of Peter, who is their head."²

This definition has a number of advantages over the other. First, it includes a most important element neglected in the former definition: the Holy Spirit. The Church is seen primarily as a Spirit-filled community, which is in accord with the insistent emphasis of numerous biblical texts (e.g., Acts 2:33; 2:38-39; 4:23-31; 5:9; 5:32; Eph 2:19-22; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Jn 14:15-17). Secondly, this concept shifts the emphasis away from ecclesiastical authorities. The pope and bishops are recognized as essential elements in the Church, but they are seen as foundation stones upon which the whole community of the faithful is built. Thirdly, this concept brings out, as a result of the elimination of the overemphasis on authority, that the community is primarily a worshipping community. The people do not just receive doctrine, sacraments, and commandments from the hierarchy. What is important is worship, belief, and full obedience to God. Moreover, authority exists in the Church only to expedite the more important and lasting functions of the worshipping community. Finally, this concept of the Church

¹ *De ecclesia* 1, 3, 2.

² F. Norris, *God's Own People* (Baltimore, 1962) p. 75.

brings out the missionary vocation of the whole community, for the Church exists to offer salvation to all.

However, this notion of the Church also has a number of shortcomings. These can be reduced to the fact that it limits the concept of the Church to the visible community of Roman Catholics. Hence, it eliminates without qualification a number of significant groups: the angels, whose relationship to the Church is suggested in such texts as Col 1:15–20 and 2:9–10; the saints in heaven, who alone of human beings can qualify as members of the perfect Church for which Christ died; all Orthodox and Protestant Christians (though Orthodox communities are styled “Churches” and Protestant groups are now being called “ecclesiastical communities”³); and all good men who are beyond the pale of organized Christianity. In fact, all constructive human effort that is performed by non-Catholics—helping the Negro obtain his rights, making scientific discoveries that uncover the wonders of God’s world, the writing of poems and novels and plays—all such activity is irrelevant to this concept of the Church. In short, this notion of the community of the faithful built on the unity of Peter tends to eliminate from the Church a great deal of the Christ-influenced good that is evident in this world; and in so doing, it leads to the separation of Roman Catholics from other men of good will.

MORE COMPLETE NOTION OF THE CHURCH

Methodology

In the light of the foregoing considerations, we may ask if it is not possible to frame a more complete concept of the Church, a concept that would retain the truth contained in these older definitions and yet expand to embrace more of the vast reality precluded by them.

In order to frame a more comprehensive notion of the Church, several avenues are open to us. We could thoroughly investigate the usage of the word *ekklēsia* and its Hebrew antecedents in the Scriptures. This word-study method, worked out largely by Protestant exegetes and now followed by most of the world’s biblical scholars,⁴ not only leads to varying results due to the different presuppositions

³ Cf. Decree on Ecumenism, chap. 3.

⁴ But note the criticism of the word-study method and practice in James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961).

of scholars,⁵ but (and this is the important point) it leaves us at best only with the content that the New Testament writers chose to give to a single word. We have no guarantee that the total reality that we wish to designate by the word "Church" is actually contained in the sum total of the usages of the word *ekklēsia* and its antecedents. This does not mean that the essential reality of the Church is not found in the *NT*. It does mean that this essential reality is not necessarily present in its totality in the collection of passages in which the word *ekklēsia* or its equivalents appear. Hence, the word-study method, though an invaluable aid, cannot of itself guarantee a more complete notion of the Church.

On the other hand, Roman Catholics might be tempted to begin the search for this more complete notion of the Church by examining the present actuality of the Church and the present self-understanding of the Church as manifested in its official pronouncements such as the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*). Given our dogmatic presuppositions, such a method might seem most practical. However, present manifestations of Church life and present expressions of Church self-understanding are necessarily conditioned by the needs and mentality unique to our time. We would, therefore, risk formulating a concept of the Church which, though it may be true as far as it goes, will be limited only to those aspects of the reality of the Church which have special impact today.

Hence, although we do not deny the validity of either method indicated above, we prefer to utilize a third method, which will, however, incorporate the undoubted values of both. What we propose to do is to build a definition around the central theme of the Scriptures and of all Christian history: the theme of God's saving will towards man. Let us attempt to frame a notion of the Church that adequately accounts for the principal elements implied in this theme.

Principal Salvific Elements in Scripture

What are the principal elements in the theme of salvation that must be reflected in the definition of the Church, the ark of salvation? It

⁵ One need only compare the article of K. L. Schmidt on *ekklēsia* in the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* with an article on the same work in a Roman Catholic publication such as the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Louis Hartman, C.S.S.R. (New York, 1963).

appears that we can sum up these fundamental elements by attempting to answer three questions: Who saves? Who is saved? What are the characteristics of salvation?

First, who saves? Without doubt, the *OT* teaches that it is God who saves (cf. Ps 3:8; 1 S 14:39; 1 Chr 16:35; Ps 68:20; Is 33:22; etc.). The *NT* clarifies and amplifies what this means with its doctrine that salvation comes through Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, and in His Holy Spirit. We are saved now through the Spirit of God in the risen Christ. As Fernand Prat noted long ago, in the theology of St. Paul it is only the activity of the risen Christ that is coextensive with the salvific activity of the Holy Spirit.⁶ Hence, we find in St. Paul the following parallel expressions:

Justified in the Spirit	Justified in the Lord ⁷
Sanctified in the Spirit	Sanctified in Christ Jesus ⁸
Holy temple in the Spirit	Holy temple in the Lord ⁹
To be sealed in the Spirit	To be sealed in Christ ¹⁰
Joy in the Holy Spirit	Joy in the Lord ¹¹
Peace in the Holy Spirit	Peace in the Lord ¹²

This coexistence of the saving activity of the Holy Spirit with that of the risen Christ is confirmed by John and Luke. In John it is only the risen Christ who will be able to draw all things to Himself (Jn 12:32). And yet it is only after the Lord's resurrection that the Spirit will be sent (Jn 7:39; 16:7). In Luke the Holy Spirit is solemnly promised to the apostles and descends upon them with power only after the resurrection of the Lord (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:1 f.).

Secondly, who is saved? The obvious answer is: all men (1 Tim 2:4-6). However, man in this context must be considered in a sense far broader than many Christians are accustomed to view him. He is to be saved, first of all, as a unit, as a spiritual being necessarily achieving full existence only in a material body. The Hebrew mentality does not consider man as a soul weighed down with a body. Man is one; he lives as one; he thinks as one; he acts as one; and he is saved as one.¹³ Hence,

⁶ *The Theology of St. Paul* 2, 291-94.

⁷ 1 Cor 6:11 and Gal 2:17.

⁸ 1 Cor 6:11 and 1 Cor 1:2.

⁹ Eph 2:22 and Eph 2:21.

¹⁰ Eph 1:13 and Eph 4:30.

¹¹ Rom 14:17 and Phil 4:4.

¹² Rom 14:17 and Rom 5:1.

¹³ For a good nontechnical description of the Hebrew concept of man, see C. Tresmontant, *A Study of Hebrew Thought* (New York, 1960) pp. 83-114.

it is understandable why Christ was not content to bring forgiveness of sins; He also brought bodily health to the sick and even physical life to the dead. His salvation embraced the whole man; therefore, it implied the destruction of both sin and death (cf. Mk 2:1-12; 1 Cor 15:50-57).

Moreover, salvation is to embrace the whole of the unit that is man to the utter depths of his being. The men we know now may be in a state of salvation, but their salvation does not completely transform them into God's friends to the last atom of their existence. All men on earth are, therefore, still sinners (1 Jn 1:10). They are not now what they one day shall be by the saving power of Christ: a race completely stripped of sin and weakness, a race capable of fulfilling the first and the greatest commandment of complete love of God (Ap 21).

Furthermore, man is not to be saved as an isolated individual but in his relationship to his fellow man. "No man is an island," says John Donne so correctly, and no man is called to salvation as an island. This explains why love of God—which really is the state of salvation—is equated with love of neighbor (1 Jn 3:10; 4:12-20). It also explains why the figures of speech which are used to describe man's redeemed state are so often figures that imply a community salvation: the kingdom of God (Mk 4:11; 4:26; 4:30; etc.), the messianic banquet (Mt 8:11; Lk 22:18), the heavenly city or the New Jerusalem (Ap 21; Phil 3:20), the temple composed of living stones (Eph 2:19-22).

Finally, salvation engages man not only in his relationship to his fellow man, but also in his relationship to physical creation. In Paul's stirring words, "the eager longing of creation awaits the revelation of the sons of God. For creation was made subject to vanity—not by its own will but by reason of Him who made it subject in hope, because creation itself also will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God. For we know that all creation groans and travails in pain until now" (Rom 8:19-22). The full salvation of man demands the salvation of all that to which man is necessarily related.¹⁴

Hence, the salvation of man is to be all-encompassing. It is to be a salvation that reaches to the core of man's own being and to the outer-

¹⁴ S. Lyonnet, "The Redemption of the Universe," in *The Church: Readings in Theology* (New York, 1963) pp. 136-56. Cf. Ap 21.

most boundaries of his relationship with his fellow man and the physical universe.

Our third question concerns the characteristics of salvation. Regarding it, I would like to single out five characteristics that seem to be of special significance in any concept of the Church. Salvation is continuous, dynamic, selective, eschatological, and inevitable.

Salvation is continuous. It is a life, eternal life, a state of continuous relationship to God in Christ. It is not something that occurs once and then becomes frozen in eternal immobility. In a real sense we will be always being saved by God. The Scriptures convey this idea by speaking of the enduring presence of Christ (Mt 28:20), the continuance of the activity of charity (1 Cor 13), the everlasting submission of all things to the Father in Christ (1 Cor 15:22-28), the new Jerusalem lit up forever by the glory of God and the Lamb (Ap 21:23-25, etc.). To be saved definitively is to be always in the state of knowing (in the Hebrew sense of totally experiencing) the one true God and Him whom God has sent, Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3).

Salvation is dynamic. It is a process of growth¹⁵ that inevitably follows from the fact that salvation is a life of love with God. If in ordinary experience to love a great person inevitably causes growth, how much more will this be true when one loves the infinitely good God? That salvation is a growth process in the community of man and in each individual is indicated in a special way in the Gospels and in St. Paul. In the Gospels God's kingdom is described as being comparable to a seed that grows of itself (Mk 4:26-29), to a mustard seed that becomes a great tree (Mk 4:30-32 and par.), to leaven buried in three measures of flour until all of the flour is leavened (Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21).

In St. Paul this theme of growth appears especially in Ephesians:

You are now no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are citizens with the saints and members of God's household: you are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole structure is closely fitted together and grows into a temple holy in the Lord; in Him you too are being built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.¹⁶

¹⁵ See the article "Growth" in J. von Allmen, ed., *Vocabulary of the Bible* (London, 1958) pp. 160-61.

¹⁶ Eph 2:19-22.

The text emphasizes growth in the Church as a whole. But Paul also underscores salvific growth in the individual:

And He Himself gave some men as apostles and some as prophets, others again as evangelists, and others as pastors and teachers, in order to perfect the saints for a work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ . . . We are to practice the truth in love, and so grow up in all things in Him who is the head, Christ. For from Him the whole body (being closely joined and knit together through every joint of the system according to the functioning in due measure of each single part) derives its increase to the building up of itself in love.¹⁷

Salvation is selective. This means that the continuous dynamic process of salvation is one that is realized in a visible, conscious way in groups especially called by God to manifest His saving intention and in that manifestation ultimately to be the bearers of that salvation to the whole world.¹⁸ Thus, in the *OT* Abraham is called out of his own country in order that through him all nations of the earth should be blessed (Gn 12:3). Israel, despite all her falls, is continuously being chosen to a life of holiness and nearness to Yahweh, not for her own sake but for the sake of His wider saving purposes. The *anawim* of the *OT* represent an even further narrowing-down of those chosen to manifest the select saving purpose of God.

Even into the *NT* the pattern continues. There now appears *the* chosen one, the Christ, who sums up in His person the whole selective process of the past, who recapitulates in one new man all of God's saving activity and as such becomes for all men the cause of eternal salvation. He, in turn, out of all the Jewish people singles out twelve whose mission is to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), to be witnesses of Him "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the very ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). From them springs a whole community that continuously conceives itself in terms of a mission to bring the good news to all men, a community identified by its conscious, living grasp of a relationship to Christ and its continuous expression in

¹⁷ Eph 4:11-16; cf. Col 1:10; 2:19; 2 Pt 3:18; 2 Cor 10:15; Phil 1:25.

¹⁸ On this whole process of selection, see H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London, 1950). Cf. *Lumen gentium*, no 9

word and worship of that corporate identity in Christ that is meant to envelop the whole world.¹⁹

Hence, in both Testaments we are confronted with a consistent configuration of facts. All are called to be saved. But out of this "all" who are called to salvation, only a few explicitly answer the call. Their answer, however, is not just for themselves but for all those who have not made the explicit answer. In fact, the few are called apart precisely that through them others might be accorded the saving touch of Yahweh.

Salvation is eschatological. This follows from its dynamic nature. According to the Scriptures, the growth process will reach a definitive, terminal point of development at the second coming of Christ. This future stage of salvific completion is described in various ways: it is the condition in which everything will be submitted to Christ and through Him to the Father (1 Cor 15:22-28); it is the last judgment, when all will stand before Christ and the moral worth of each will be manifested (Mt 25:31-46); it is the harvest time, when good and bad elements of growth are separated by the angels sent by Christ (Mt 13:24-30; 36-43); it is the heavenly Jerusalem, inhabited only by those whose names are written in the book of life of the Lamb (Ap 21:27).

However, this eschatological aspect of salvation should not be thought of as something completely in the future. It is already present in germinal form, so that the salvation now present in the world is but the initial manifestation of the salvation that is to be. By its own inner dynamism the current salvific activity of God in Christ drives inexorably forward, and with inner organic continuity it moves toward the completion of the last days. This fact is indicated by the so-called "realized eschatology" of John, the tendency of the fourth Evangelist to speak of as already present those things which the Synoptics reserve for the end of time (Jn 3:18; 5:24-25; 12:31; 17:3). Paul points to the same phenomena several times in Rom 8:19-25. Here he describes physical creation as awaiting the final perfection of mankind with "eager longing." All creation is said to groan and travail in pain

¹⁹ See Ferdinand Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament* (London, 1965). For a brief annotated bibliography on the theology of the Christian mission, see *Study Encounter* 1, no. 4 (1965) pp. 211-16.

until now. Christians are said to possess right now "the first fruits of the Spirit," and they are described as "waiting for the adoption as sons, the redemption of (the) body." Each of these phrases implies that the salvific reality of the present moment is in organic continuity with the final phase of salvation, which will complete it in surpassing it.

Salvation is inevitable. We sometimes speak as if Christ only obtained for us the *possibility* of salvation. But the *NT* insists that because of Him salvation is inevitably assured. We have confidence that He has overcome the world (Jn 16:33). Hence, the new Jerusalem is said to descend unconditionally by the power of God (Ap 21:2). And beyond the fact that all men are called to salvation, we are told that some are elected and will be gathered together on the last day (Mt 24:22, 31; Mk 13:19-27; Rom 8:33; Ap 17:14). Hence, the salvation of the universe considered as a totality including the elect is inevitably assured.

These, then, are the elements from which we must fashion a more complete concept of the Church. This concept must recognize the salvific activity of the risen Christ and His Holy Spirit. It must indicate that it is man who is saved—man to the depths of his spiritual and material being and to the extreme limits of his relationships to God, his fellow men, and physical creation. Finally, it must indicate that salvation is a process that is continuous, dynamic, selective, eschatological, and inevitable.

More Complete Notion of the Church and Its Implications

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, I would like to propose the following tentative definition:

The Church is the risen Christ and His Holy Spirit considered in that necessarily-existing, present, dynamic, and ultimately visibly-manifested salvific relationship to men and extrahuman creation that constitutes the germinal stage of that complete union of men to God, to one another, and to all creation that will inevitably be attained on the last day.

Perhaps this concept can best be explained by drawing out a number of its implications. First, this notion implies that the Church, considered in a broad sense, is coextensive with the divine-human salvific activity of the risen Christ and His Holy Spirit. Where Christ is now, there is the Church. This means that every invitation to repentance

uttered in the heart of man, every implicit and explicit thought or desire or act that leads the least pagan toward salvation, every act that is truly saving—in a word, all those acts that can only be performed under the influence of Christ and the Spirit, even when the person involved is unaware of such an influence—pertain to the Church.

Secondly, this saving activity of Christ and His Spirit is always social or ecclesial, because it always begins the process of relating the person affected to all other men and visible creation as the initial stage of that complete saving union that will characterize the last day.

Thirdly, the ecclesial activity of Christ is realized at least partially even now in all men; for Christ is constantly acting in His Spirit upon all men in that He came to save all. Hence, the Church is present to all men to the extent that all men are being drawn by Christ to corporate salvation. Moreover, no man is totally bad. Every man at some time in his life answers, imperfectly to be sure, the salvific invitation of Christ. To the extent that a man responds to that invitation corresponds the extent of his integration into the Church.

Fourthly, the salvific or ecclesial activity of Christ is even now being realized in every sector of creation whether visible or invisible, organic or inorganic, individual or social, etc. This follows from two facts. On the one hand, the final assured victory of Christ is an integral victory that encompasses the totality of creation; on the other hand, this definitive and all-embracing eschatological salvation is already present now in germinal form.

Fifthly, this ecclesial activity of Christ reaches its most complete expression and realization in the visible Church; for that Church is not a mere assembly of a number of visible elements—a recognized hierarchy of men with varying duties, expressions of belief whether in the Scriptures or in the credal pronouncements subsequent to the age of the Scriptures, a visible sacramental liturgy—willed for the sake of themselves in an absolute manner by Christ as constituent elements of His Church. Rather, the visible Church is that social organism in which the universal ecclesial activity of Christ is concretized and made visible in expressions that manifest in a unified way the meaning of that saving activity.

Moreover, there is a vital connection between the visible aspects of the Church—the hierarchy, the liturgy, and the expressions of belief—

and the underlying saving activity of Christ. The Church is that body in which the selective purpose of God operates in so complete a manner that it reaches visibility. When an individual reaches maturity, he is capable of grasping who he is and of expressing his self-understanding in a visible, symbolic way; when an amorphous group of men becomes a society, it is capable of expressing its self-identity in visible forms. So, too, the ecclesial activity of Christ comes to maturity when the common understanding of His work among men is expressed in meaningful verbal formulations, when the common worshipful intent of those united to Him is expressed in public worship, when the common unified purpose of His total activity is expressed in the ranging of men under a visible authority. Thus the visible Church is the total Church, that which we would call *the* Church in the strict sense.²⁰

Hence, it is incorrect to consider the visible elements of the Church as mere means given to the Church to realize her end. Within the Church they are means as much as the body is a means contributing to the welfare of man. Instead, these visible elements are but the symbolization and expression of Christ's universal saving activity. As such, they have two functions. On the one hand, they manifest the meaning of Christ's saving activity in each age; on the other hand, in the very act of manifesting Christ's activity they contribute, insofar as human action under Christ can, to the growth of that salvific activity. For just as a man grows by the authentic expression of himself, so the Church grows by those visible expressions that truly manifest the saving action of Christ which is her life.²¹

Sixthly, the Church is only partially realized or manifested in the present epoch. On the one hand, no man on earth is totally under the influence of Christ and therefore totally "Churched." Every man has his sins and faults. To the extent that each man is a sinner, his activity contradicts the ecclesial activity of Christ and therefore is not of the

²⁰ The visible Church is thus the present equivalent of the scriptural elect. Hence, the members of the visible Church are those who recognize and visibly express the relationship to Christ that exists in every man. But this capacity to recognize who they are is more an obligation to make known their recognition to others than a privilege entitling them to special treatment.

²¹ It is impossible here to show that all the nonsacramental salvific acts of Christ are actually presacramental, that is, they prepare for, lead to, and are destined to be completed ideally in a sacramental manifestation. See K. Rahner, "Personal and Sacramental Piety," in *Theological Investigations 2* (Baltimore, 1963) 109-33.

Church. On the other hand, no single activity of man on earth (at least barring extraordinary cases) is totally under the influence of Christ. A work of mercy can be tinged with pride; authority can be exercised partially for its own sake and not exclusively for the sake of Christ; true teaching can be imparted in an uncharitable way; the sacraments can be administered with the same kind of devotion manifested by an office clerk at a routine filing task; the priest or minister in the pulpit may be preaching himself along with Christ crucified. Each of these activities can be partly of the Spirit of Christ and partly of another spirit. And insofar as they are not of the Spirit of Christ, they are not of the Church.

Seventhly, all truly ecclesial activity, activity in man stemming from the influence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, necessarily leads to the full realization of the Church on the last day; for where the Church is, there is Christ and His Spirit, the Spirit of unity. Neither Christ nor His Spirit can act against themselves or against their ultimate goal. Therefore, all activity in this world that is truly ecclesial must necessarily always lead to the building-up of the Church (cf. Eph 4:1-16). This, of course, does not mean that every act of a Christian or every aspect of any single act contributes to the building-up of the Church. Only that part of any activity that is truly under the influence of Christ, that is truly ecclesial activity in the strict sense, works toward this up-building.

Finally, the full realization of the Church belongs inevitably to the last day. Until that moment the concrete existence of the Church will always be shot through with non-Church elements.²² This reservation of the fulfilment of the Church to the end of time is but the final manifestation of the fact that salvation is ultimately a gift of God and it will be completed only in His own good time. The new Jerusalem is not a mere construction of man. It is a holy city that descends from above, from Him who is the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end of all salvation.

²² Really, we should speak of anti-Church elements; for there can be no neutral elements in the universe. Everyone and everything is intrinsically and necessarily destined to be of the Church. To be not of the Church, to be by one's own implicit or explicit refusal apart from the influence of Christ and the Spirit, is to be *ipso facto* against the Church. However, we must not confuse concrete individuals—Communists, liberals, fundamentalists, papists, etc.—with what is opposed to the Church. We are all, at least partially, against the Church.

What this definition and all the attendant implications reveal and express is the total unity of salvation. It is a process in which every aspect constitutes an element driving towards the total saving fulfilment of the last day. Because that final fulfilment is truly ecclesial, is truly the Church perfected, every moment of the organic process that leads to that fulfilment is also ecclesial. Hence, we can say justly that every saving activity of Christ, no matter how anonymous it may be, is an activity of the Church. Everyone, to the degree that he is saved or performs saving acts, is of the Church. At the same time, however, we are justified in restricting the name "Church" in the strict sense to those bodies that more or less perfectly express their corporate relationship to Christ; for it is only in the conscious recognition of a relationship to Christ and in the authentic expression of this recognition that the social reality of salvation attains the relative fulness possible to the human condition before the last day.

PROBLEMS RELATED TO THIS DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH

Among the many problems that any notion of the Church has to face, I would like to select three that have a special relevance to the definition just sketched: the problem of the dictum "Outside the Church there is no salvation"; the problem of the ecclesial status of Protestant "groups" from a Roman Catholic point of view; and the problem of the Roman Catholic tradition that it is *the* Church of Christ.

"Outside the Church there is no salvation." In the formulations of the Church as the people of God and as the hierarchical society, the reconciliation of two admitted facts—that there was no salvation apart from or outside the Church, and that Orthodox, Protestants, Moslems, etc., could be saved—proved quite troublesome. In the concept that we have formulated, however, the problem does not exist at all. One is saved precisely to the degree that he is united to the risen Christ and His Spirit; and this is but another way of saying that one is saved precisely to the degree that he is of the Church.

What is the ecclesial status of Protestant bodies? Can they be called "Churches"? As we have pointed out, there has been a reluctance to call Protestant bodies "Churches." Admittedly, it is quite difficult to do so if we retain the older Roman Catholic formulations of the nature of the Church. However, if we adopt the proposed definition, we can

really apply to the social and community structures of our Protestant brethren the name "Church." They deserve this title to the degree that their ministry, their worship, and their credal beliefs are true expressions of Christ and the Spirit. In our new definition of the Church, "expression" is the key concept. Protestant bodies are Churches in the strict sense to the degree that they express their relationship to Christ. That this expression, from a Roman Catholic view, is not the total expression of Christ means that these Protestant bodies are not *the* Church. It does not mean that they are no Church at all.

Finally, we must take up the thorny question of the Roman Catholic tradition that it is *the* Church of Christ. What can it mean to claim that the visible body headed by the pope at Rome is in an utterly unique sense *the* Church?

Basically, the answer can be given in a sentence. The Roman Catholic Church is *the* Church of Christ because it alone is the relatively full expression of His continuously unified, ever-in-the-present saving activity in history. It only remains for us to unfold the meaning contained in these few words. This we will attempt to do in three steps.

First, *the* Church is the expression of Christ's ever-in-the-present saving activity. This means that the visible elements that constitute the Church's expressiveness have no absolute, once-for-all value independent of His saving activity. Rather, they are daily being created and animated by Christ as the expressions of His present saving thrust into the world. Just as He saves men age by age by an invisible activity that is always in the present, so too He manifests that saving activity in a visible way by giving present meaning to the visible expressions of that salvation. If in the past Roman Catholic theologians seemed to be saying that the visible structures of the Church had some sort of independent existence permanently decreed by Christ in the beginning, this was due to a tendency that saw Christ's whole saving activity as something accomplished completely in the past rather than something forever prolonged. An understanding of Christ's saving activity as a continuing ever-in-the-present activity leads to an understanding of visible structures as the continuing visible manifestations of that activity, flowing from it and dependent upon it.

From this first point flows an important consequence: the visible elements that constitute the present expression of Christ's saving ac-

tivity *must* change; for each age is unique, and if, on the one hand, Christ's saving activity extends to the whole of an age while, on the other hand, that total saving activity is to be expressed by the visible elements of the Church, then it follows that these visible elements must change in appearance.

Changes may be due to the fact that each age has its own characteristic modes of expression that spring out of its "style" or living context. Thus, in our century the ideal verbal expression of the living word of God appears to be a short, direct, simple sermon, whereas in the past a more leisurely and more flowery presentation was more appropriate. Similarly, general directives in the celebration of the liturgy seem far more meaningful today than the spelling-out of rubrics to the last minute detail which characterized an age that is past.

However, these comparatively superficial changes in the Church's expressiveness are but the manifestations of more deep-seated factors that demand more profound external changes; for each age (and this is especially true of a succession of ages in which change is rapid) manifests an advance and a complexification of the very nature of the men who are to be saved. Thus, men today, because of increased educational opportunities and increased possibilities for a variety of experiences brought on by easy mobility and efficient communication, are far more differentiated than men of any other time were. This means that the uniqueness of the saving activity of Christ in each individual is far more marked. Consequently, if the Church is to be the expression of Christ's saving activity in the present, its expressing forms must reflect the growing complexity and differentiation in men. Thus, its teaching must be far more nuanced and qualified; its government must be far more cognizant of the uniqueness of the individual; its liturgy must be far more attuned to an age that cries for real expression of living values.

In other words, the self-understanding of each age must be reflected in the ecclesial elements which are the organic manifestations of the total saving activity of Christ in that age; for Christ is a living Christ, and He expresses Himself in a living way, reflecting a relevant contemporaneity. No one today would make public pronouncements in the Aramaic language and in thought patterns that reflect the cultural understanding of Moses and the prophets. So, too, it is not Christ's

intention to express Himself in the media of communication of a previous age. He is the living Christ and not a dead anachronism; and precisely because He is a living and contemporary Christ, the visible manifestations of His saving work change. They change not because the so-called traditional way of doing things has become tiresome or out-of-date, but primarily because their ever-existing *raison d'être*, their function of expressing in a vital way the present saving activity of Christ, demands that they change. In order to maintain their very nature as expressions, they must change.²³

Secondly, *the* Church is the expression of the continuously unified saving activity of Christ; for while it is true that the visible elements that constitute the expressing Church are ever-in-the-present manifestations of Christ, it is not true that these manifestations are so many successive new creations independent in every sense from prior manifestations of Christ. Rather, there is a basic continuity in these visible elements, a continuity that results from the initial enduring constitution of Christ's saving enterprise.

This basic continuity flows from the very nature of two interrelated factors that lie at the very heart of the Church. On the one hand, it rests on the continuously unified intentionality of Christ at work in every age to bring all men and things together into one cosmic unity in Himself and subject to the Father (1 Cor 15:22-28; Eph 1:3-10). On the other hand, it rests on the fact that the dynamic universe within which this unified intentionality is expressed is a universe in which men of every age share the same basic nature and in which changes and developments of individual men and the race as a whole never represent a complete break with the immediate or distant past but always are either its gradual evolution or its partial denial. Every man is at any moment of time the summation of all that he has ever been; he is even, in a sense, the summation of the whole race as it has influenced him. In his being and consequently in his activity, he cannot totally cut him-

²³ It is beyond the scope of this article to point out the further implications of this concept of the function of the visible elements of the Church in a changing world. Obviously, this line of thought would lead to a recognition of the need to refashion the operation of the Church's government, to restate in developed form her belief, to re-express in modern symbolic activity her liturgy. This need will be met not just by retranslating old forms but by permitting new forms to emerge from the living saving activity of Christ. Christ did not leave forms to be ever translated but a reality to be forever re-expressed.

self off from the past. Because of this, there is necessarily a continuity and, hopefully, a growth and a gradual evolution in his activity. It is to be expected, therefore, that Christ's activity, which is unified by a single saving intentionality and which is visibly manifested in men who are in human continuity with their past, will inevitably take on forms and structures that manifest this twofold underlying continuity.

To further clarify the issue, it will be well to point out the interrelationship between this factor of basic continuity and the above-mentioned factor of inevitable change in the Church. The continuity we speak of is not a mere duplication in whole or in part of the externals of the past. Rather, it is a continuity which implies that the great values of the past which were symbolized and expressed in meaningful forms of the past should now be expressed in visible elements which really incarnate for our time that continuing saving intentionality which Christ has been expressing from the beginning. Thus, the personal unifying aspect of Christ's saving activity which was symbolized and expressed by Peter and the apostles in biblical time, and by the medieval popes and bishops in subsequent centuries, must be expressed once again in persons vitally in contact with our own time. And those activities of Christ which symbolize and express the basic highpoints of His saving work—the sacraments—must express in rubrics meaningful for today that which was once expressed in the signs of other days. Finally, the basic meaning of Christ's activity—once verbally expressed in the Scriptures, the creeds, and the definitions of the magisterium, etc.—must once more be expressed in words that convey the present meaning of Christ's work to contemporary man.

In other words, there will always be changes in the visible shape and activity of the Church; and there will always be a basic visible continuity within these changes. However, this basic visible continuity is not to be provided by a succession of men, rites, and verbal formulas that are duplicates of their predecessors. It consists in the fact that the Church by her very nature continuously expresses the unified saving activity of Christ in its essential lines; and this expression, because of the very nature of man, takes on personal form (in which case we have bishops and the pope), ritual form (the sacraments), and verbal form (the Scriptures, the decrees of councils, etc.).

Hence, it is not any perennial concrete individual expression that

provides visible continuity. Instead, this continuity is furnished by the continuous existence of varying expressions—personal, ritual, and verbal—which perform in every age the basic expressive function that constitutes the Church's very existence in the world of time. There will always be men who incarnate in the present what Peter and the other apostles incarnated in the past; there will always be sacramental manifestations; there will always be living articulations of the meaning of revelation. These things will always exist because, on the one hand Christ's saving work reaches outward to the totality of man, and, on the other hand, man possesses certain irrevocable characteristics, both individual and social, which drive him necessarily to such expressions. It is the very nature of Christ's saving activity and the very nature of man, as well as the continuity of men, which demands that these expressions exist and exist in continuity.²⁴

Thirdly, at any moment in time *the* Church is only the relatively full expression of Christ's saving activity. This means that at any given instant the Church expresses that saving activity in broad and imperfect outline at best. This is inevitably true for a number of reasons. The Church, like every social expression, tends to be anachronistic, either because its members have neither the talent nor the energy to change what has always been done, or because they prefer to relax with the old rather than struggle with the new, or because they do not recognize that the old needs changing. Further, because of the strong recognition of the factor of tradition in the Church, there has been and probably always will be a tendency to identify the continuing necessity of the Church to express itself in persons, rites, and words with the concrete style of historical persons, actual rituals, and given verbalizations. The core meaning of the Petrine office has tended to be confused

²⁴ The factor of continuity accounts largely for the Church's insistence on apostolic succession, reverence for traditional dogmatic formulas, the need for ordinations by already validly ordained ministers. It is perhaps unfortunate that this continuity factor has assumed such proportions within Roman Catholicism that at times the factor of Christ's present activity in creating the Church ever anew is minimized. Thus, Protestant ministers have been considered simply as invalidly ordained because of the absence of visible continuity with the apostles. It is only recently that the factor of Christ's present expressing activity in ordinations has been given notice. See Franz Jozef van Beeck, S.J., "Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Sacraments," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 3 (Winter, 1966) 57-112. Van Beeck does not, however, appear to give sufficient weight to the factor of continuity.

with the concrete manner in which that office has been exercised in the post-Tridentine period; and now there are some who wish to identify the office with the concrete manner in which it was exercised by the Peter of the Scriptures. The sacraments are consistently and erroneously being identified with the concrete rites of some select ideal period of the past. The verbal formulations of the past (to a lesser extent the formulations of the magisterium, to a greater extent the formulations of Scripture) have more or less been confused with the very revelation of God.

Ultimately, however, the Church's personal, ritual, and verbal expressions only imperfectly fulfil their function because it is the very nature of human expression to manifest imperfectly the reality that lies behind it. Even the human expression of the most trivial of interior emotions fails to capture fully and to manifest the totality of that emotion. How, then, can one expect the Church's leaders, ritual, and creeds to manifest fully the most profound of activities, the universal saving activity of Christ?

What this imperfect nature of ecclesial expression tells us is that the Church never has been able, nor will it ever be able, to pinpoint precisely and to express perfectly the core meaning behind the office of the pope and the bishop, the symbols that are the sacraments, and the verbal formulations of revelation. That core meaning can only be more closely approximated; it will never be exactly and exhaustively defined. Hence, it will always be difficult to ascertain exactly what in the concrete existence of a visible element at a given time reflects the core meaning of that element, and exactly what reflects the necessary but accidental trappings of the age. Thus, it is easy for us to see today that the exercising of papal authority in an autonomous or arbitrary manner does not belong to the core meaning of the office; it was not so easy to see this in centuries past. Therefore, the Church will forever be engaged in the problem of seeking the core meaning of Christ's saving activity in all the concrete expressions of the past and in its own personal contact with the risen Lord in the present, in order once more to re-express that meaning in a contemporary, though imperfect, way.

We are now in a position to understand what is meant by saying that the Roman Catholic Church is *the* Church of Christ in a unique sense, since she alone is the relatively full expression of His continuously uni-

fied ever-in-the-present saving activity in history; for if one has grasped the full import of the preceding discussion, one realizes that the fulness possible to the Church in time demands a certain continuity of external expressions in persons, ritual, and verbal teaching, so that the total saving activity of Christ in the world may be made manifest and brought to completion. It is the Roman Catholic claim that, though other Churches may possess some of these expressions, in her alone are they all found in present actuality and in two-thousand-year-old continuity. She alone is the full and unified expression of Christ over the centuries. Protestant Churches of Christ lack a real continuity of expression that goes back to biblical times; and they frequently lack aspects of the personal, sacramental, and verbal orders of expression. On the other hand, the Orthodox Churches, though maintaining continuity of expression with the past, still lack in the present union with the one who is the chief personal expresser of Church unity, the pope.

If one has accepted the drift of this discussion, however, it will become apparent to him that the distinction between the Church as it exists in Roman Catholicism and as it exists in other Christian communions is not as sharply differentiated as we have been accustomed to think; for other Churches at least possess these visible elements in part. Moreover, in some of these Churches the visible elements actually possessed may express a deeper union with Christ and a firmer adherence to His will than the corresponding visible elements in the Catholic Church of the same period. In fact, it is possible for a non-Catholic Christian Church of a given place or time to possess, through a limited number of the enduring visible elements, a closer union with Christ than is possessed by the contemporary Roman Catholic Church which has all these elements. To say that Roman Catholicism alone exhibits relative fulness of expression because she alone has always had all of the essential visible elements, and to add that she consequently has the advantages accruing to the expression of all values, is not to say that her members are necessarily more attached to the values underlying these expressions than are the members of Churches not possessing all these expressions. Catholics may and should be more attached to these underlying values, but this obviously has not always been the case. Expression is only a great help to the possession and

growing appreciation of a value. It does not infallibly guarantee that possession or appreciation.²⁵

In a more biblical pattern of thought, what we are saying is that the visible Church consists of those who without any merit on their part have been selected by God to manifest His saving purpose to the nations. Among those so selected, those within the framework of Roman Catholicism express in a uniquely complete way the existence and broad significance of that saving work. Thus Roman Catholics are in a unique sense *the* people of God and *the* Church. However, their unique degree of election, like the more general election of other Christians, is not primarily a token of special worth or privilege. Rather, it implies that they have an obligation to ground their external selection ever more deeply in an internal commitment; for their call is not simply for their own sake but for the sake of the rest of God's children. They are to draw others to Christian understanding and life. However, an empty expression without interior substance inevitably fails to fulfil this drawing function. Hence, their election as members of *the* Church means essentially that they are continuously obligated to be truly what they express. Their call to *the* Church does not found their salvation; rather, it more deeply grounds their obligation to attain salvation.

THIS NOTION OF THE CHURCH AND THE MEANING OF ONE CHURCH

With this notion of the Church in mind, we are now ready to ask what is meant by the phrase "one Church." Or, to put the question in other terms, what is meant by Church unity? We might briefly summarize the implications of the term "one Church," in the light of the concepts advanced in this paper, under four headings: the one Church is all-embracing, though expressed visibly in varying degrees; it is necessarily unfulfilled; it is demanding; it is destined inevitably to completion.

First of all, the one Church is all-embracing, though visibly expressed in varying degrees. Its oneness is based ultimately on the oneness and the unifying quality of the saving activity of Christ in His Spirit, an activity that fills the whole world. The one Church includes

²⁵ In the past, the Roman Catholic teaching has generally been that there is never any objective justification for one trained in the Catholic faith to depart from her. We suggest, though we have not time to develop the matter, that this problem can and should receive a far more nuanced answer through the application of the concept of the Church and its expressions advanced here.

all that is truly good, for all that is truly good is the Lord's. It eliminates neither Jew nor Gentile nor Moslem nor pagan, neither culture nor government. Within it every good aspect of this world finds a home; within it each person and thing realizes its own uniqueness precisely to the degree that each realizes its union with all other persons and things in Christ.²⁶

But this unity in Christ, which is the hallmark of all that is good in the world, is realized and expressed in varying degrees. In some areas of the world, where the gospel has not been preached, it is not expressed at all. In Protestant Churches this ecclesial activity of Christ is partially manifested and made visible. In the Roman Catholic Church alone (from her point of view) there exists the fulness of the visible expression of the one saving activity of Christ. He acts in her in a way that He does not act in others, precisely because in her He visibly manifests the meaning of His whole activity; thus He can be said to "subsist" in her alone.²⁷

Yet the sum of the varying expressions of Christ's saving activity in Protestant Churches and in the Roman Catholic Church can be said in a real sense to constitute "one Church." For these expressions are one in that they proceed from the one ecclesial saving activity of Christ, and they are one in that their expression of Christ's saving activity necessarily promotes, all other things being equal, the visible expression of that underlying unified activity.

From this flows our second point. The one Church is necessarily unfulfilled. In the era between the Resurrection and the Parousia, the Church necessarily exists in an imperfect form. Its unity is incomplete, at times seemingly nonexistent. Men who are conscious of their relationship to Christ and truly, if partially, influenced by Him are capable of working against one another. Other men expressly deny Christ, though in the depths of their beings there are hidden aspects which move with Him and for Him. Societies and organizations—whether

²⁶ What we have said here is really what a number of modern theologians on secularism are saying with an entirely different point of reference. See the publication of the Division of Studies of the World Council of Churches called *Study Encounter* 1, no. 2 (1965). The whole issue deals with secularization and conversion. Pages 106-8 contain an annotated bibliography on the subject of secularization.

²⁷ We do not claim that this is the meaning of the word "subsists" as it is used in *Lumen gentium*, no. 8. It seems to us that what we have said is consonant with the usage in no. 8, though it goes beyond that usage.

ecclesiastical or not—duplicate, oppose, and restrict one another, despite the fact that Christ is salvifically active within them. In short, if it is true that the Church is in a real sense everywhere, it is also true that anti-Church elements are also everywhere. There is no age and no aspect of any age before the Parousia in which the one Church of Christ is truly all in all. Because of these non-Christ and non-Church elements, the true over-all unity of one Church is not manifested to the world.

Thirdly, the one Church is demanding. Although the universe is destined to be completely subject to God in Christ (to be completely Church, to be perfectly one), that destiny is but partially realized in the present unfulfilled state of the Church. Yet every man is entrusted by God with freedom, that he might build up the Body of Christ to its mature measure.²⁸ The imperfect condition of the Church and the present imperfect manifestation of its unity constitute a constant challenge and demand placed by God upon man's responsibility. In every area—in ecclesiastical organizations, in the relationships of the various world religions, in the dealings of one nation with another, in the contact of man with man and even of man with spouse—there is ever a challenge toward a deeper contact with Christ and one another in Him. The one Church can never realize its unity perfectly until every aspect of the universe is incorporated into that unity.

Finally, the one Church is destined to inevitable fulfilment. This beyond all else is the object of Christian hope. The great promise of Christ, that all will be one, cannot be made false. In a true sense He died and rose for that one perfect Church (Eph 5:25-27).

To sum up what we have said about the one Church, let us set two statements alongside one another. On the one hand, when we say "one Church," we are speaking of a priceless gift of God in Christ which exists even now in the world in an incomplete state. On the other hand, we are also speaking of an unpossessed richness and completeness for which we are bound to strive in unshakable hope.²⁹

²⁸ See K. Rahner, *op. cit.*, "Freedom in the Church," pp. 89-107.

²⁹ It will be obvious to the reader that we owe a debt to such works as the following: K. Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (Freiburg, 1963); E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York, 1963); O. Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* (2nd ed.; Frankfurt, 1955).