

THE CHURCH: COMMUNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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THE CHURCH in the contemporary world evokes many different reactions: dismay, appreciation, resentment, gratitude, impatience—and sometimes all at once and in the same person. Modern communication makes the whole of the world-wide Church the context of our daily lives. We are confronted simultaneously with a great variety of facts and events: missionaries patiently suffering under repression; a beloved archbishop whose authority is restricted in an unprecedented manner; an episcopal commission bringing encouragement and help to religious women and men in this country; a respected moral theologian deprived of his license to teach; generous and co-ordinated efforts of lay people to serve the Church more vigorously and effectively; women asking for roles of full equality with men in the Church. The variety of reactions and events is evidence of the great complexity of the reality of the Church and the impossibility of summing it all up in one neat formula. But in order to live as a member of the Church today in freedom and love, it is necessary to have a view of the Church that sets its various aspects in proper perspective in relationship to one another.

Karl Rahner concluded one of his last essays by offering this challenge to pastors and preachers: “Can you in a relatively short span make it somewhat clear and understandable that the church is not merely an enormous apparatus of pope, bishops and pastors, and membership merely attendance at an enigmatic Sunday Mass and payment of the church tax (*Kirchensteuer*)?”¹ This challenge cuts two ways: against a superficial extrinsicism that would simply identify the full reality of the Church with its institutional structure, and against a disembodied mysticism that would fail to find the genuine reality of the Church in and through its institutional structure.

The temptation to superficial extrinsicism finds easy confirmation in what is immediately evident. The visible organization of the Church, with its ordered leadership, its sacred writings, its code of law, and its ritual of sacrament and worship, is extraordinarily imposing; it has existed for nearly two millennia, with variations and adaptations, but

¹ “‘Hierarchy’ of Truths,” *Theology Digest* 30, no. 3 (fall 1982) 229.

with a recognizable continuity. It rests essentially upon the generosity of individuals in undertaking pastoral responsibilities which are often burdensome and give little tangible reward. It functions in complete dependence on the loyalty of the men and women who make up the broad membership of the Church. Though spread throughout the world, the leaders are closely knit together in collegial co-operation. And throughout these centuries the body of the faithful have assembled each Sunday to worship and have loyally supported the Church through their voluntary financial contributions. But however inseparable all this is from the essential reality of the Church, the Church is more than this. Jeremiah once warned the people of Jerusalem: "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!'" (Jer 7:4). For they thought that the temple itself was a guarantee of divine protection, no matter how they might fail to worship God in their hearts and to deal with one another in justice and love. And Jesus is reported as reproaching some Pharisees for making clean the outside of the dish while within they were filled with extortion and rapacity (cf. Mt 23:25).²

On the other hand, some would reduce the institutional aspects of the Church to an incidental appendage or to an inconvenience imposed on us by the bodily component of human nature. People of this sort look at all that was described in the last paragraph and dismiss it as an altogether accidental, even though inevitable, development. It bears no real relation to what is within. The heart of the Church is so spiritual and interior that nothing else really counts. The institutional aspects merely stand alongside the interior depths and signal their presence. This represents a tendency toward Gnosticism that continually recurs in the history of Christianity and assumes many different forms. It was found in the New Testament in those who denied that Christ had truly come in the flesh (see 1 Jn 4:2-3). It was found in the third-century Gnostics who claimed to be "spiritual" and hence incapable of any fault and in no danger of being lost, and regarded the members of the Great Church as having merely perishable life, though they could perhaps be saved if they learned the secret way.³ It was found in some religious innovators like Jan Hus in the fifteenth century who said the Church is made up only of the

²The anti-Pharisaism placed here on the lips of Jesus may actually be a concrete adaptation of the teaching of Jesus to the situation facing the Matthean church after the Pharisaic Council of Jamnia ca. 85 A.D. See E. LaVerdiere, S.S.S., and W. Thompson, S.J., "New Testament Communities in Transition: A Study of Matthew and Luke," *TS* 37 (1976) 576-78. The theological point, however, is the same whether they are the words of Jesus himself or an adaptation of his teaching under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

³See G. W. MacRae, "Gnosticism," *NCE* 6 (1967) 525-26.

predestined, who are known and chosen by God.⁴ It is found today in those who are impatient of all symbolism and ritual, authority and structure, who regard all doctrine as ideology and all moral imperatives as legalism.

Against those, therefore, for whom the Church is first of all and most radically simply a hierarchically structured society, we must affirm that it is first of all a mystery, a work of God that escapes full human comprehension. Against those who minimize or exclude all genuine visibility in the Church, we affirm that it is essentially a sacrament, an efficacious sign through which God, in the gift of the Spirit, accomplishes His purposes in the world. Finally, against all triumphalist tendencies, we must also acknowledge that it is a human organization, sustained unfailingly by the power of the Spirit, but limited and conditioned by the frail, weak human beings who receive the Spirit with more or less openness and fidelity. From this follow the main divisions of this study: (1) the Church as mystery, (2) the Church as sacrament, and (3) the Church as a human institution. This also makes it possible to see how the same person can have many different reactions to the Church today.

THE CHURCH AS MYSTERY

The Church itself is contained in the Christian profession of faith, not merely as the group professing the faith ("We [the Church] believe . . .") but as part of the faith that is being professed: "We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."⁵ The Church is a creation of God which we can never fully understand or control. This dimension of mystery does not deny or weaken the juridical aspects of the Church, but it relates and orders them to the spiritual and to the divine life that God communicates.

The fathers of the Second Vatican Council, in dealing with "The Mystery of the Church" in chapter 1 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*, no. 4), wrote:

When the work the Father gave the Son to do on earth (cf. Jn 17:4) was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church, and that, consequently, those who believe might have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father (cf. Eph 2:18). . . . The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple

⁴ "Ecclesia autem sancta katolica, id est universalis, est omnium predestinatorum unitas, que est omnes predestinati presentes, preteriti et futuri" (Magistri Joannis Hus, *Tractatus de ecclesia*, ed. S. Harrison Thompson [Boulder: Univ. of Colorado, 1956] 2).

⁵ The original Greek and Latin formulas do not say "believe in," as though the Church were an object of ultimate trust and faith, but simply "believe," as pointing to a work of God, known only through His revealing action.

(cf. 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). . . . Guiding the Church in the way of all truth (cf. Jn 16:13) and unifying her in communion and in the works of ministry, He bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her; and He adorns her with His fruits (cf. Eph 4:11-12; 1 Cor 12:4; Gal 5:22).⁶

In keeping with this insight into the Church as mystery, the fathers reversed the order of the following chapters as originally proposed, and treated the People of God before discussing the hierarchy of the Church. For the hierarchy exists within the People of God, where all are equally members of the Church, vivified by the same Holy Spirit, before any distinctions are made and some are charged with special offices of teaching and sanctifying.⁷ God gives the Church life and being by making these men and women be the community of the Holy Spirit, who is continuously poured out on them by Christ as head. The visible aspects of the Church, including its hierarchical structure, its proclamation of the gospel, its gathering at worship, are designed to express and nourish this; this is their unique purpose. Invisible and visible form together one interlocking reality; and the visible is for the sake of the invisible, structure is for the sake of community.

Some people affirm the essential importance in the Church of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, but reduce the function of the Spirit to guaranteeing certain external or juridical aspects of the Church. The Spirit, for example, legitimates the authority of the hierarchy, binds the consciences of the faithful in obedience to church law, prevents the teaching Church from pronouncing error in solemn declarations, establishes the perennial vigor of the social structure of the Church. No doubt, these statements are true, but they do not reveal the full scope of the Spirit's presence and activity. The Spirit is not present in the Church merely to sanction certain visible forms; these visible forms are there to minister to the internal and invisible working of the Spirit in the Church, so that visible and invisible together form one incarnational reality: the Body of Christ.

Paul indicates the Holy Spirit as the source of community within the Church in the blessing with which he closes his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship [community, Gk. *koinōnia*] of the Holy Spirit be with

⁶ *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A. Flannery, O.P. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1975) 351-52.

⁷ See G. Philips, *L'Eglise et son mystère au IIe Concile du Vatican 1* (Paris: Desclée, 1967), 35-40; K. McNamara, "The People of God," in *Vatican II: The Constitution on the Church: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*, ed. K. McNamara (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1968) 103-62.

you all" (2 Cor 13:14). The Letter to the Ephesians also points to the Spirit as the source of our oneness when it exhorts us to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3).

When we seek to understand more fully the ways in which the Church is the community of the Holy Spirit, we can sum them up under three headings: community of faith, community of worship, and community of love.

Community of Faith

We are, in the first place, a community of believers, bound to one another as we together commit ourselves to God in faith in acknowledging and accepting the saving love God has shown us in Jesus Christ. This faith comes to expression as we confess that Jesus is Lord (see 1 Cor 1:2). For in saying this, we acknowledge that he has passed through life, suffering, death, and resurrection to the glory of the Father and has thereby reconciled the world to God. As the risen and glorified Redeemer, he offers us the gift of eternal life; and he gives us the Holy Spirit as the pledge and beginning of that life (see 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13-14). This faith in the Lord Jesus comes to us from those who have preceded us in this community, we share it with one another, we pass it on to those who come after. We proclaim it to the world as the Good News of the salvation of the whole human family. Everything else that we believe and profess is understood in relation to this central message, which is more than just divinely-assured information; it is the power of God for salvation for all who believe, as Paul says (cf. Rom 1:18).

The First Letter of John expresses beautifully how accepting the proclamation of faith in Jesus makes us a community: "That which we have seen and heard [the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us] we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship [community] with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:3).

This faith and this proclamation through which we are a community of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. "No one," Paul reminds us, "can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). The Letter to the Ephesians, after indicating the Spirit as the source of our unity, develops this theme by declaring: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6).

Community of Worship

The acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord forms us into a community of faith, and thereby also into a community of worship. Paul in the Letter

to the Philippians says that we confess "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11), i.e. in praise and worship. Being a community of faith is not just a matter of acknowledging certain things to be true; it is putting on Christ by being baptized into him (see Gal 3:27); it is having the "mind of Christ" (see 1 Cor 2:16). This means that through faith we assume and grow in Christ's own inner attitudes and relationships, most profoundly with respect to God, but thereby also with respect to others.

Jesus' own inner attitude toward God was summed up in the way he ordinarily addressed God: "Abba, Father!" In this he expressed not only his experience of divine intimacy and the care of God for him as His Son; he also expressed his own utter dedication to God and to God's will for him. It was a word of trust and adoration, a word of obedience and self-surrender.

It was in this spirit and with this attitude that Jesus faced death. The mission given him by his Father brought him into mortal conflict with the sin of the world, summed up in the blindness and selfishness of the religious and civil leaders of his time. Instead of retreating before their opposition, he remained faithful and obedient even unto death in fulfilling the mission the Father had given him. He continued to inaugurate the kingdom of God through preaching and healing, through proclaiming truth, doing justice, and showing mercy. When in the end his enemies captured him and unjustly put him to death, "through the eternal Spirit he offered himself without blemish to God" (Heb 9:14). His whole life, which had focused uniquely on doing the Father's will, was consummated in a death that was an act of sacrificial worship. The Father received the sacrifice of His Son by raising him from the dead, exalting him above all creation, and giving him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon those who believe in him. This is the paschal mystery of Christ.⁸

The Church as the community of the Holy Spirit enters into the paschal mystery of Christ to become a community of worship. Through the Spirit we are enabled to call God "Abba" and thereby to share in the sufferings of Jesus: "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom

⁸ See F. X. Durrwell, C.Ss.R., *The Resurrection* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960). Though published many years ago, this work contains perennially valid insights developed just before Vatican II by Scripture scholars like Stanislas Lyonnet, S.J. See especially chapter 2, "Incarnation, Death and Resurrection" (35-77), and chapter 3, "The Resurrection As Outpouring of the Holy Spirit" (78-107).

8:15b-17). St. Paul introduces the great hymn on the paschal mystery of Christ by exhorting the Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). And he tells the Corinthians how it is through receiving the gift of the Spirit that "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:10-16).

The faithful of the Christian community express their union with Christ in his paschal mystery, their participation in his worship of the Father, especially by their celebration of the Eucharist, in which they "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Their sharing in Christ's sonship through divine adoption is expressed and nourished by this sacrament: "As the living Father has sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who eats me will live because of me" (Jn 6:57). Paul refers the oneness of Christians through both baptism and the Eucharist to the work of the Holy Spirit when he writes: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13).⁹

Community of Love

As Christians put on the mind of Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit, they share not only his attitude of worship, trust, and obedience toward the Father; they share also his attitude of love for other human beings. They become thus a community of love for one another and for the whole world. The Gospel according to John expresses this as the distinguishing characteristic of the followers of Jesus: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35).

When Jesus was asked for the first and greatest commandment of the law, his reply was: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." And without being asked he added: "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:37-39). There was nothing new in these commandments themselves; both are taken from the Old Testament. Even the primacy of the commandment to love God was acknowledged by many (cf. Mk 12:32; Lk 10:27). What was new in Jesus' teaching was, first, to associate the love of one's neighbor directly with the love of God; next, to see these two commandments as comprehending the whole law and the prophets (cf. Mt 22:40);¹⁰ and

⁹ The Eucharistic implications of "drink of one Spirit" become clear from 1 Cor 10:2-4, 16.

¹⁰ Cf. J. L. McKenzie, "The Gospel according to Matthew," *JBC* 2, 101.

finally, to identify one's neighbor not just with a fellow Israelite but with every human being in need (cf. Lk 10:29-37, the parable of the Good Samaritan). This describes the kind of personal interaction that belongs to the Christian community.

Paul in the Letter to the Romans echoes the teaching of Jesus when he writes: "Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:8-10).

This love for others, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community. Paul lists various gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12. But in the following chapter he describes the greatest of the gifts, without which all others are meaningless: the gift of love. In Galatians 5:22-23 he lists the characteristics of the Christian life which are the fruit of the Spirit; the first of these, and the root of the others, is love. When the Letter to the Ephesians encourages Christians to do deeds of love and to avoid what might injure it, we read: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:30-32).

This, then, is what the Church is most profoundly: a mysterious work of God, who unites separate, selfish, and sinful individuals into a community of the Holy Spirit, a community of faith, worship, and love. All that is visible and external in the Church serves to express this profound communitarian reality and to nourish and sustain it.

THE CHURCH AS SACRAMENT

The Church, as we have seen, has necessarily and inseparably both an inner and an outer aspect. The inner life of faith, worship, and love actually becomes the basis of community only as externally manifested in the profession of faith, the celebration of worship, and the service of love. The visible aspect makes it possible for the Church to hand on its full reality from one generation to the next, and for those of the same generation to be in communion with one another both on a local and on a world-wide basis. For it is not just a visible institution that is handed on; the Holy Spirit acts in and through that institution to communicate the invisible reality which is expressed and symbolized by the visible. It is in this way, first of all, that the Church is sacrament: as effective symbol in the communication and maintenance of its own inner reality.

It caused some wonder when the Second Vatican Council referred to the Church as the fundamental sacrament. Is this strictly true? Is the Church another sacrament in addition to the seven we commonly enumerate? Does it work *ex opere operato* in the activities we are considering? It is strictly true, though analogously so. And it is not in addition to the seven sacraments, but inclusive of them. And it works *ex opere operato*, if this is not understood as magic. Let us explore how this is so.

We need first to consider briefly the meaning of effective symbolic activity. Symbolic activity in general means bringing to expression some interior attitude or relationship. Thus, a smile or a handshake or a word of encouragement expresses an inner attitude of kindness and support. Signing a contract or making a promise expresses an inner commitment to act in a certain way. But most often symbolic activity is not only informative, it is also performative: it brings about a result, and in this way is effective. It establishes, maintains, deepens, and intensifies the inner attitude or relationship it expresses. All human interpersonal relationships come about through symbolic activity and are maintained in this way: friendships, marriage, positions of authority, buying and selling, religious orders, labor unions, etc. No interpersonal relationship comes to be and continues to live except in effective symbolic activity.

Now the traditional seven sacraments effectively manifest God's saving love for individual members of the faith community in particular situations of need. They focus on a single person, though in his or her relationship to the whole community. But the entire visible Church in all that makes it visible as church (hence, inclusive of the seven sacraments) effectively manifests the saving power of God for itself and also for the world. It does this by being what it is and doing what it does as church, independently of how others may regard it, i.e. *ex opere operato*, thus bringing about God's purpose in "those who place no obstacle."

Out of this arises the broader aspect of the Church's sacramentality, one that Vatican II emphasized: the Church is the sacrament of the unity of the whole human race. "By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind, that is, she is a sign and an instrument of such union and unity."¹¹ This means that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church and through the visible structure of the Church to bring all humankind into oneness, and into the kind of oneness symbolized by the visible Church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Church by being a visible community of faith, worship, and love effectively symbolizes the presence of Christ as prophet, priest, and

¹¹ *Lumen gentium*, no. 1.

shepherd-king. Through faith she expresses a commitment to truth; through worship, to transcendent goodness; and through love, to the value of the human person, as this commitment is first found in the mind and heart of Christ and comes to live in the community by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is to say that the unity of the human race as symbolized by the Church is founded on truth, on the supreme goodness of God, and on the sovereign dignity of the human person as a child of God. Dedication to these values is the source of the unity of all humankind; failure to pursue these values is the source of all our fragmentation, disunity, and alienation from one another. While this dedication should characterize the life of every Christian, it is the special obligation of the leaders of the Church, who speak officially for the Church, to the Church and the world.

Falsehood, error, ignorance, misunderstanding, lies, and selfish ideologies divide one member of the human race or group of human beings from another and they are all opposed to the truth that can alone unite us. These attack the human spirit at its core, in its radical orientation to the way things really are, and thus destroy the most fundamental basis of our communion with one another. For people then begin to inhabit different and separate unreal worlds of their own private construction, rather than the one world which actually exists independently of what we might think about it, but which we genuinely affirm in every true judgment about it. When the Church faithfully witnesses to an uncompromising commitment to truth, to the search for truth wherever it can be found, to the manifold understanding of truth, to affirmations of truth proportional to its manifestation, and not to self-serving errors and ideologies, to narrow perspectives and culturally-conditioned formulas as if they were absolute, then she is a sacrament for the unity of all human beings at this most fundamental level. The claim of truth upon the human mind is absolute, and the Church by witnessing to that claim in her life serves effectively to unite all humanity under that claim.

Each human being is in the end freely committed to something or someone as a supreme value, not sought as a means to something else, but in and for itself, be this fame, wealth, pleasure, power—or God. And every human society is unified by the commitment of its members to some common purpose or goal. To the extent that human individuals and societies ultimately pursue a good that is less than God as their supreme good, they are inevitably set in opposition to one another, as rivals, competitors, and enemies, with no final ground for mediating differences and bringing about harmony. The goods pursued in this way are in fact idols, creatures worshiped as if they were supremely good. But they are not goods that are infinitely loving and infinitely communicable

to all who love them in return, as God is. Hence this idolatry inevitably brings about clashes, resentments, suspicions, depredations, and wars. When the Church is committed in worship to the glory of God as the loving Creator and merciful Savior, she is effectively (in the degree of her commitment) a sacrament of the unity of the human race found in the pursuit of a common destiny, in which the success of one does not diminish but enhances the success of all the others.

If our basic stance toward other human beings is that they are in some way means for the achievement of our personal goals, once again the human race is radically fragmented. Love for God as the supreme good should lead us to see in other human beings not mere means to an end but fellow sharers with ourselves in the supreme good, the end of all that has been created, God Himself. There is a basic human instinct to affirm the sovereign value of the human person. An Oriental parable illustrates this. A lawless bandit sitting next to a well, if he sees a small child about to fall into the well, feels stirred to reach out and prevent the child from falling in. He may indeed resist the impulse and let the child fall in, but he cannot fail to experience the instinct to save it. This instinct reflects the value of each person as called to share eternal life with God, even though we may not explicitly recognize this call. But if we deny the call, if we fail to care for one another, to accept and treasure one another as each embodying an irreplaceable value, then every form of oppression and slavery becomes possible: racism, sexism, economic exploitation, war, abortions of convenience, making money by inducing drug addiction, prostitution, and so on and on. When and to the degree that the Church manifests a genuine care for each person, avoiding all forms of unfair discrimination, genuinely concerned about the welfare, development, and happiness of all, she manifests the love of Christ for the whole world, and thus becomes a sacrament of the unity of the human family based on that love.

In each case the Church and her members produce fruit in the world and truly advance the unity of the human race by the effectiveness of personal witness, through which shines the witness of the Holy Spirit. For the Church acts in the world not so much by dispensing information as by kindling a fire. The fire of faith and love in one person enkindles it in another. While this is true of each member of the Church, it is especially true of those who have official care for the welfare of the Church: the members of the hierarchy and the clergy. Other aspects of Church life and activity are necessary and indispensable, but they find the source of their effectiveness in this inner fire.

THE CHURCH AS A HUMAN INSTITUTION

The Church is not only a mystery, i.e. a work of God that exceeds human observation and understanding, and a sacrament, i.e. a living symbol through whose activity God influences the world; it is also a human society, made up of limited, weak, sinful human beings. The grace of God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit take on a particular shape as they are received by these human beings in particular situations of time and culture. Divine and human mingle throughout the whole Church; it is not possible to point to anything and to say it is wholly divine or wholly human. The Scriptures are the word of God; but some of their sentence structures are ungrammatical. The Mass is the Sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ; but its celebration may be hasty, thoughtless, and routine. In many ways the human element brings the divine into contact with concrete situations of human need; the words and actions of human beings are instruments of God and mediate His saving mercy to the world. They prove fruitful as they adapt themselves in different ways to diverse cultures and situations. But they can also hinder and block the divine purpose, though never wholly thwart it, as self-centered motivations influence them.

There are at least three reasons why it is important for us to remember this matter of human adaptation and limitation as we consider the pre-eminent importance of the inner life of the Church, community of the Holy Spirit: (1) for missions and evangelization, (2) for ecumenical activity, and (3) for the continual renewal of the Church.

Missions and Evangelization

As wine poured into a cup assumes the shape of the cup without ever becoming identified with the cup, so the grace of the Holy Spirit is poured into human words, symbols, structures, and customs. These bear and contain the grace of the Spirit as a cup contains wine, though the union of Spirit and symbol is far closer than wine and cup. But as the same wine without ever becoming changed in itself can be poured into different cups and assume different shapes (though the shape of a cup, if it is to hold anything at all, places some limits on possible designs: it must have sides that reach up and be without holes, for example), so also the grace of the Holy Spirit can vivify many different customs and structures, provided these are not opposed to human dignity or divine holiness. Pope John XXIII made this point in his allocution of October 11, 1962 opening the Second Vatican Council: "For the deposit of faith, i.e. the truths which are contained in our venerable teaching, is one thing, and the way in which they are expressed with the same sense and meaning is another."

The Church as it expanded into the Roman Empire and encountered

classical philosophy and culture assumed within that environment many of the features of thought and society that were found there. For it belongs to the incarnational character of the whole mystery of redemption that God's grace is adapted to human forms. The language it used was koine Greek, the common language of the Greco-Roman world. It adopted philosophical notions to express its teachings, e.g. "providence" and "substance." The Church likewise continued to bear some of the outward forms deriving from its origins in Judaism, though one of the earliest problems the Church had to solve was whether to cling to some of the most sacred of these forms, e.g. temple worship and the rite of circumcision. It turned away from these but did continue to venerate the Hebrew Scriptures as the word of God.

When the gospel is proclaimed to peoples of other cultures, if the outward cultural forms it has assumed elsewhere are proposed as essential to the meaning of the message, then Christianity comes as something alien, introduced from without, not strengthening and invigorating the culture it meets, but destroying and replacing even much of what is good in it. There is simply nothing that truly conforms to human dignity which the gospel seeks to remove; it can vivify all that is truly human. If it opposes idolatry or human sacrifice, it is because these things are already destructive of what is human. For the gospel does not primarily proclaim a new world view or even a new ethic, but an event: the entry of God into human history in the person of His Son Jesus Christ, who lived, suffered, died, and rose again, and pours out upon all who are willing to receive it the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The proclamation of the gospel should be perceived not as a threat to various human cultures but as their crowning and fulfilment; for Christ by his coming affirms all that is good in human life and development. The Second Vatican Council declared in its Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad gentes divinitus*): "Whatever goodness is found in human minds and hearts, or in the particular customs and cultures of peoples, far from being lost is purified, raised to a higher level, and reaches its perfection, for the glory of God, the confusion of demons, and the happiness of men and women."¹²

Ecumenism

The Church, while safeguarding the truth of its inner life, must not only tolerate but welcome the differences that manifest the inexhaustible richness of its reality as mystery. It has been observed that no division in the Body of Christ became fixed except through the failure to love.

¹² Tr. Flannery (n. 6 above) 823.

Vatican II, reflecting on the division between Eastern Churches and Rome, observed: "These reasons [cultural, regional, and personal differences], plus external causes, as well as the lack of charity and mutual understanding, left the way open to divisions."¹³

Doctrinal or disciplinary differences can finally be resolved when the parties are willing to be led by the Holy Spirit and to treat one another with mutual love and respect. When, then, we seek to heal the wounds of the Body of Christ, we must be willing to embrace within the unity of the Church a great variety of customs and approaches. On October 29, 1958, the morning after his election as pope, John XXIII gave a radio address in which he spoke to all Christians. He invited them to communion with the Roman Catholic Church, telling them it was not a stranger's home but their own.¹⁴ He added a remark at this point which I remember vividly, though it was not printed in the official text: "And if there is something about it which makes it impossible for you to recognize it as your own, tell us and we will change it."

The Petrine office, for example, is integral to the reality of the Church. But the way in which it is exercised is inevitably influenced by the historical conditions through which the Church has lived and by the powerful personalities who have occupied that office. We think of men like Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, Innocent III, and Pius IX. Their style and way of shepherding the flock of Christ set precedents for their successors. The same thing can be observed in the way a political office like president of the United States develops by establishing certain precedents. Thus not everything that concretely surrounds the papacy today is of divine origin, arising directly from the intention of Christ, just as not everything in the present exercise of presidential authority comes simply from the Constitution. It is significant, for example, that the last two popes assumed their office without a coronation ceremony, forgoing the triple crown or tiara that symbolized in the Middle Ages supreme authority in both spiritual and temporal matters. The primacy of the Roman See is not the same as the concentration of the government of the universal Church in Rome.

Continual Renewal

Every religious body tends to fall into certain failures and distortions. The New Testament's exhortations to the very early Christians make it clear that even in the primitive Church some of these appeared. Jesus' words in the Synoptic Gospels that Christian leaders should seek to serve

¹³ *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 14 (tr. Flannery 464).

¹⁴ *Acta apostolicae sedis* 50 (1958) 840.

and not be served (see Lk 22:24–27; Mk 10:42–44) and Peter's plea with his fellow presbyters not to tend their flocks for shameful gain nor to domineer over them (see 1 Pet 5:1–3) show how very human failings appeared even in the leaders of the first Christian communities.

Though the Holy Spirit preserves the Church from final failure by the power of God's grace and love, still even within the Church, as in all religious societies made up of frail human beings, belief tends toward superstition or ideology; ritual tends toward magic and formalism; and the ethics of love tends toward legalism and self-righteousness. While we are confident that these tendencies will never triumph in the Church, still their influence can considerably weaken the witness it bears to the presence of the Spirit and the risen Lord within it. For this reason the Church must always remain critical of the way it is actually following the guidance of the Holy Spirit in obedience to Jesus, the Lord of the Church.

An even more subtle difficulty is that of holding on to former solutions to practical problems without fully reappraising the situation. Walter Kasper observed recently:

... what has been said of the Spirit has consequences for the understanding of the church. If the Spirit is the authentic presence and realization of the salvation given through Jesus Christ, then whatever is external in the church—scripture and sacraments, offices and certainly the discipline of the church—has for its sole task to prepare men for receiving the gift of the Spirit, to serve in the transmission of this gift, and to enable it to work effectively.¹⁵

I propose as an example a problem that confronts us today. This proposal is not to be construed as already opting for a particular solution to this problem, but as reaffirming that what is external must always be ordered and directed to the spiritual welfare of the community and that we must be willing to face all issues in the light of this principle. Somewhere in the fourth or fifth century the discipline of celibacy for all the clergy was found to suit admirably and fruitfully the well-being of the Western Church. Many at that time found themselves called to forgo marriage in their service of God. The Western Church chose from among them the ordained ministers to care for the community under the guidance of the bishops. This has worked well for many centuries. Today, however, nearly half of the Catholic congregations who assemble on Sundays to worship do not celebrate the liturgy of the Mass because there is no ordained priest available to them. Where possible, a communion service of some kind is held instead. We must be willing to ask

¹⁵ *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 228–29.

whether it is the will of Christ to maintain this truly venerable discipline of celibacy for all ordained clergy rather than to ordain married people who may preside at the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the divinely instituted worship of the community.

Celibacy or virginity for the kingdom of God will always remain a precious treasure in the Church, a clear manifestation of her eschatological reality, a way of life followed by many thousands. But the question raised here concerns maintaining a disciplinary relationship between celibacy and ordained ministry in the Western Church. (The discipline of the Oriental Catholic Churches shows that it is possible to be truly Catholic and to have a married clergy.) The answer to this question and many like it is not simple and obvious, but we must be willing to raise such questions and to be led by the Holy Spirit in seeking an answer. For all that belongs to the visibility of the Church has only one purpose: to manifest, sustain, strengthen, and intensify the inner life communicated to us by the Holy Spirit, in virtue of which we are a community of faith, a community of worship, and a community of love.

The Local Churches and the Universal Church

Just as each consecrated Host contains the full reality of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, so every local Church possesses the full reality of the vivifying presence of the Holy Spirit. And each local church is called to manifest the fulness of the divine presence as a community of faith, a community of worship, and a community of love. The Holy Spirit is not more truly present in the universal church than in each local church, though the mode of His presence is there more all-embracing. So also, faith is not more genuinely lived, nor worship more profoundly expressed, nor love more intensely exercised in the universal Church than in the local churches.

What, then, is the universal Church as distinct from the local churches, and how are we to understand their interrelationship?

It would be a mistake to think of the universal Church as simply a federation of local churches, with one of these local churches (the church of Rome) supervising the affairs of the federation. Neither are the local churches simply organizational divisions of the one universal Church. Both of these views reflect an excessively juridical perspective, based on concepts of contract, law, subordination, and obligation, rather than on the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit.

The universal Church is essentially a communion of local churches. Communion means, as was indicated earlier, a sharing of life. Because the one Holy Spirit is in all the churches and is everywhere the same undivided, life-giving divine person, all the churches are in inner and

invisible communion with one another in one community of faith, worship, and love. As they manifest visibly this inner communion with one another, they are the one, visible, universal Church. The visible relationships between these local churches are essentially ties of support and encouragement as they call and help one another to be more truly what they are supposed to be: communities of faith and worship and love. For it is possible for a local church through human frailty and lack of total faithfulness to the Spirit to begin to distort somewhat the reality of faith, to introduce some alien spirit into Christian worship, or to lose sight of the real demands of Christian love. It is then that the local churches in their mutual relationships can call and challenge one another to be more authentically what they are meant to be. It should be noted that this is the only purpose for churches to interact with one another: to build one another up as true communities of the Holy Spirit. This purpose is the theological foundation of the collegiality of bishops. As a college or assembly, all the bishops taken together have a care for what happens in every church. This care does not mean control or interference but support, nourishment, and upbuilding. The bishops support one another in the charge that each one exercises in his care for a particular local church.

The head of the local church of Rome is also head of the college of bishops. The bishop of Rome is the effective symbol of the unity and universality of the Church. It is his responsibility to foster communion among the local churches, and thus to decide conflicts that may be dividing the churches, but always in a way that respects both their individual integrity and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in each one. For local churches are never simply administrative divisions of the universal Church, and local bishops are not simply representatives of the pope. This is so because the Church is not primarily a hierarchical organization but a mystery, the community of the Holy Spirit. And the full reality of the Church is essentially present wherever the Holy Spirit draws people into true communion with one another as believers, worshippers, and lovers of God and all their brothers and sisters.¹⁶ The Church's external structure as a visible institution is intrinsically aimed at fostering this communion by being a sacrament through which the power of God is at work within the Church and in the world. It does not have some other self-contained and self-justifying purpose.

This relationship of local churches to one another, to the universal

¹⁶ When Paul warned against divisions in the Church because the Church is a temple of the Holy Spirit, it was the local church at Corinth that he was describing, not the universal Church as such (see 1 Cor 3:16-17).

Church, and to the See of Rome inevitably produces tensions when different kinds of personalities bear the responsibility for actualizing these relationships. A glance at the history of the Church makes this clear, even when these relationships are also affected by questions of orthodox teaching. The rivalry between Constantinople and Alexandria in the fifth century, when Nestorius and Cyril differed on how we should describe the unity of Christ as both human and divine, was not just a doctrinal difference but a matter of personalities, cultures, and philosophical terminology. The doctrinal difference could almost certainly have been resolved had these other differences been surmounted.

The relationships between churches can become even more difficult if different conceptions concerning their nature should develop. If one thinks of a local bishop as simply a representative of the pope, having authority in his local church only through delegated sharing in the universal authority of the pope, then tensions may develop which do not build up the Church at any level. A local bishop could perhaps not truly express his own faith and the faith of his church because he fears he may disagree with the pope, even when the pope is acting not out of his experience of the universal Church but out of his personal experience or the experience of his local church alone. Is it not possible as well that the pope might act within a local church in a way that disregards the distinct (though not separate) reality of that church, and reduces the authority of its bishop to delegated authority?

The enduring unity of the universal Church requires a careful balance here, coming from the Spirit's gift of love. The pope as head of the college of bishops is called upon from time to time to announce authentically and, on occasion, even definitively and hence infallibly the faith of the universal Church. This faith is an agreement in faith of all the local churches.¹⁷ On these occasions the pope has, as Vatican I expressed it, that infallibility with which Christ wished his Church to be endowed (DS 3074). Short of such an agreement in faith, when the Holy Spirit is still leading the churches into the discovery of truth, it belongs to the Holy See to support and guide the discussion, which may issue in a definitive statement of faith. It does not belong to the Petrine office to cut short this discussion prematurely and impose a uniformity that does not actually exist. Attempts at such unilateral decision-making in the past

¹⁷ When Pope Pius XII contemplated defining the Assumption of Mary as a dogma of Catholic faith, he did not consult simply his own piety or theological opinion, but solicited from the bishops of the world what was the faith of their churches. This was done in his letter of May 1, 1946, *Deiparae virginis*; see DS, prenote to 3900, p. 781. Pius IX had done the same thing before proceeding to the definition of the Immaculate Conception; see also DS, prenote to 2800, p. 560.

have often been notably unsuccessful.¹⁸

All that this study has said earlier about the Church as mystery, as sacrament, and as human organization comes to a focus in this consideration of the local church and the universal Church. The vitality of the Church as the community of the Holy Spirit is above all the vitality of the many local churches. It is what happens at this concrete level of lived Christianity that constitutes the true condition of the Church. However, in their faith, worship, and love these local churches are interdependent, each manifesting the power of the Spirit within it both for itself and for all the other churches, and each drawing upon the vitality of the universal communion of all the churches. The analogy of the body holds here as well: the vitality of the whole body depends upon the vitality of each part, and the vitality of each part depends upon the whole. The whole does not have a life apart from the parts, and the parts do not have a life apart from the whole, however much the life that each part has is truly its own.

I observed at the beginning that one and the same person contemplating the greatness of the Church, its complex organization, its many activities and interrelationships can indeed experience a great variety of reactions: admiration, disappointment, anger, joy. For, as Vatican II

¹⁸ Many examples could be adduced. To take one instance: Pius XII tried to resolve the disputed question about the membership of non-Catholics in the Church. He taught in *Mystici corporis* in 1943: "Those who are divided in faith or government cannot be living in the one Body such as this, and cannot be living the life of its one divine Spirit" (DS 3802). He thereby excluded from the unity of the Body of Christ both Protestants and Eastern Churches not in communion with Rome. Nevertheless, theological discussion of this matter continued. In *Humani generis* (1950), no. 20, he taught: "If the supreme pontiffs in their official documents purposely pass judgment on a hitherto controverted matter, it is clear to all that that matter according to the mind and will of those same pontiffs can no longer be regarded as a question freely debated among theologians" (DS 3885). And a few paragraphs further on (no. 27), he explicitly referred to the ongoing discussion of his teaching on the identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the Mystical Body of Christ, reproving theologians who thought this was still an open question. (See *The Papal Encyclicals 1939-1958*, ed. Claudia Carlen, I.H.M., [Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath, 1981] 178, 179.) However, discussion still continued until Vatican II. Here, with all the local churches represented, the Council taught in the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 3: "The brethren divided from us also carry out many of the sacred actions of the Christian religion. Undoubtedly, in ways that vary according to the condition of each Church or community, these actions can truly engender a life of grace, and can rightly be described as providing access to the community of salvation. It follows that these separated Churches and communities, though we believe they suffer from defects already mentioned, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church" (tr. Flannery [n. 6 above] 455-56).

observed:

Although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace, yet its members [at all levels] fail to live by them with all the fervor they should. As a result, the radiance of the Church's face shines less brightly in the eyes of our separated brethren and of the world at large, and the growth of God's kingdom is retarded.¹⁹

However, one reaction at least is always finally inadmissible: discouragement or lack of hope. For the Church with all its human defects is the community of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, and not any human plan or leader or organizational arrangement, is the final ground of our trust, of our hope for the future, until Christ comes to claim the Church as his bride.

¹⁹ *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 4 (Flannery 458).