

# THE CHURCH THAT JESUS ESTABLISHED

## Introduction

The reality of the Church is presupposed in the proclamation of the gospel as the kingdom of God and cannot be separated from the whole structure from which it forms the foundation in time and place. Because of this, the experience of the Church, given as a gift of the Father by the risen Son and regenerated by the Spirit, conditions the whole of Christian reflection. The whole of Scripture speaks of Christ and the Church through the imagery of people, body, temple, house, spouse, flock, vineyard, kingdom, field, and net as well as the typological interpretation of the Old Testament.

The Church is built upon the "foundation of the apostles and prophets", with a special role for Peter, and gathers together in Christ all of Christ's disciples. The holy Spirit makes the community of believers the dwelling place of a completely new existence and a sign of the accomplishment of God's plan for the world through Christ. The "household of God, which is the Church of the living God, (is) the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

The Church is the proclamation and the presence of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ. In it, the new life of the Spirit is imparted and the apostolic faith is preserved in its memory. As the effective sign of the resurrection of Christ, the Church sees its relationship with God as the principle of salvation through the sending of his Son and as the goal of salvation through the gift of the Spirit. In the Spirit, it has the authority to interpret the Scriptures in a Christ-centered sense and communicates the Spirit to all people.

The Church sprang from the preaching of the Word, which is achieved in the sacred signs, especially the Eucharist. It is the fellowship of those called to Wisdom in the Spirit while awaiting the manifestation of glory. The Church came into view, like the Incarnation and Pentecost, as the unfolding of the mystery of Christ's suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father. It was understood to be constituted by the sacred signs or sacraments. These sacred signs are acts of Christ himself through action and word, empowered by the Spirit, and are points of contact with the death and resurrection of Christ. (cf. John 20:22 & 23). Thus, they are effective, when approached with a submissive and receptive spirit and attitude, simply because they are a contact in the present time with the risen Lord.

Through word and sign, the Church empowers the human race through every age and time to pass from its fragmentary existence into the unity of Jesus Christ in God, regardless of race or culture. There is, now, neither Jew nor non-Jew (Gentile), but all are one in Christ, as Paul teaches. The Church is the human race itself insofar as it must eventually come to Christ and be vivified by his Spirit. The Church is, therefore, no stranger to the life of the world. It is the human race existing in Christ and already saved by hope, living in the world but not of the world.

All authority in the Church, then and now, exists only in relation to Christ's authority and must be measured by and derived from it. It was to those that Jesus chose and to whom they delegated their authority that Jesus said, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me...and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18, 20b). The authority of Jesus is passed on throughout history through those upon whom hands have been laid by those who had received it in this way. There is no other legitimate authority apart from this authority

established by Christ, its source: Christ to the Apostles to those upon whom they laid their hands, and so on until the "end of the age".

It is this Church, established by Christ upon the Apostles and birthed through the Spirit at Pentecost, that eventually gave us the Scriptures we call the New Testament. The Scriptures themselves never claim to be the foundation or sufficiency of Christ's truth. The Scriptures are the witness of the living faith and life of the communities founded by the Apostles and governed by those to whom they delegated their teaching, ruling, and sanctifying authority.

The Church that Jesus established is thus both divine and human. Jesus knew that his Apostles were human and frail. One betrayed him, one denied him, and all but John left him at the final hour. Yet, Jesus promised that his Spirit would be with his Church until the end of time to preserve it in all truth. He never assured that every believer, including bishops and priests who continue in the authority of the Apostles, would be sinless. Nor did Jesus ever authorize anyone to start another Church on the basis that his was flawed. He did guarantee that his teaching would not be adulterated, falsified, or lost.

Jesus prayed that his followers would be one as he and his Father are one. Disunity within the Body of Christ is not his will. Christ continues to be present by the Spirit in and through frail human beings. The multiplicity of "churches", sects, and denominations are the result of men's rebellion and refusal to accept the Church as Christ established it, with all its sin and imperfection. There is only one Church - the one Jesus established; all others must be seen, therefore, as man-made, incomplete in origin and foundation, birthed through a seed of division, each bearing fruit of further division after its own kind and claiming an authority that was not received from Jesus, whatever the purpose and intent of their founders. What truth they contain and profess is valid only to the extent that it reflects the inerrant teaching of his Church under the guidance and direction of the Spirit

### **The Church As Sacrament Of Salvation**

The Word of God helps us to understand the Church of Jesus through a multiplicity of concepts and images. In Ephesians 3:4, the Church is seen as the "mystery of Christ" because in it is realized the eternal plan of the Father, inaugurating on the cross the union of humanity, Jews and non-Jews, in the Church and leading it to the consummation where "God will be everything to everyone" (1 Corinthians 15:28). The word "mystery" means the act whereby God manifests his love in the wisdom incarnate of Jesus Christ to bring mankind to glory. It is the Word of God as the fullness of revelation and is the accomplishment of the "secret" hidden for ages in God (Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 3:3-9; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10). Hence, the mystery implies that the saving incarnation of Christ takes effect in the Church through the preaching of the Word and through the sacred signs, thus leading it to the glory of heaven. The redemption of Christ calls the Church into being (Ephesians 2:13-16; 5:22ff; Colossians 1:20-22) and there achieves its fulfillment as all mankind is assembled in the Church. The Church is, itself, a sacrament, a sacred sign of Christ, the Head's, continued activity throughout history in word and action through his Body. The Church is the Body of Christ, Head and members, living and working together through the Spirit. Hence, an understanding of the Church is to be conceived in terms of the mission of the Son and the Spirit.

The Church is, thus, the assembly in which, through the action of the holy Spirit, the past, Jesus Christ, in his Passover of salvation, becomes present in view of the future of the world at the end of time, when Jesus comes again in his glory. The Church is Word and sacrament for the whole world. Because its vocation is to place the world in the presence of the mystery of Christ in the Spirit, all of its structures are completely subordinated to the mystery of Christ. The visible and social structure of the Church is, thus, only the sign and means of the action of Jesus Christ in the Spirit. What principally constitutes the Church is the holy Spirit in peoples' hearts. All other things are in the service of this inner transformation.

This underlines that an understanding of the true nature of the Church as a sign presupposes that it is seen in all of its spiritual dimensions. In itself and by itself, it has no consistency but draws all of its substance from its relationship to Christ in whom, through whom, and for whom it is a sign. The spiritual reality that it signifies is the whole Christ, Head and members, in the holy Spirit and growing in grace. It stands forever in dependence on the free saving act of Christ and thus in the Spirit. The Church is the place of the manifestation of the Lord. It is truly a sign when it allows the Spirit to center it upon Christ and not upon itself.

As mystery and sacred sign, the Church is always to be seen as proceeding from its source, which is the Trinity. It appears in the divine thought which establishes it in Jesus Christ and descends from God's presence to become the "messianic" people of God. It is sent to the scattered, imperfect, and potential people of God, the human race called to the salvation already purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ and even now permeated by the action of grace. As the bearer of the gift made to the world by God in Jesus Christ, the Church thus draws the principle of its universal dynamism from the Trinity.

### **The Church As The Fullness Of Christ And Of Fellowship**

To think of the Church as purely a sign, however, would be to forget that it is already the reality that it serves and signifies. The true notion of the Church as mystery or sacrament necessarily implies the notion of the fullness of Christ and of fellowship.

In dependence on Christ, in whom is given the fullness of revelation of God's communication of the human race (Colossians 2:9), the Church is the fullness of Christ. It is the fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:23) because in it is revealed and realized the mystery of God's own life, giving people fellowship in his love. In this way, the Church is defined as an extension in the human race of the life of the Trinity through the mystery of the Incarnation, or again, as fellowship in the Spirit.

### **The Church As The Body Of Christ**

In St. Paul, the idea of the Body of Christ can be understood only through the notion of mystery, fellowship, and sacrament as has been described. His notion of the "Body of Christ" means the actual being of the Lord, the personal body of Christ, the beginning of a new creation.

Thus, when Paul applies the expression of Body of Christ to the Church, he means the one body that gathers within it, in the Spirit, the whole assembly of believers by means of sacred signs, and primarily the Eucharist. So, it is God himself who calls the faithful together in Christ, and it is

he who unites them in one body through the Spirit. That is why the unity that binds believers together, while dwelling within them, does not derive from them but is based essentially on the unity of the body of the Lord who died and rose again.

The Church is, thus, the Body of Christ because, once brought into existence through the fellowship of the faith professed in baptism, it is perfected through communion in the same Eucharistic bread that puts Christians in contact with the risen body of the Savior, drawing those who believe in him into his own body. Unity in the Church, then, is something spiritual, real, and quite unique and clearly shows the connection between the Eucharist and the Church.

Christ, as the Head, exercises absolute authority over his Body and, in the Spirit, is the vital principle of the organic unity of the whole body. The Church now appears as a visible Body made up of people in whom are manifested all of the different graces or charisms given by the one Spirit who animates and governs the Church. It was at Pentecost that the Church was born, so the foundation of the Church as fellowship and sacred sign is the holy Spirit.

The building up of the Church in time by means of the ministries and charismatic gifts established by Christ tends toward perfect spiritual unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16). Through the will of Christ, its Head, and through his permanent action within it, the Church, which is both fellowship with Christ and an institution of salvation, bears within itself all that it needs to complete its construction. The ministry entrusted to the Church as a gift to be used is also one essential part of its make-up because the ministry is charged with the preaching of the gospel and celebrating the Eucharist which together build up and develop the Body of Christ.

The Church is conceived in the same line as the sacramental mission of Christ, as part of a whole conception that affirms that the whole work of the Church is a continuation of that of Christ. This means that a sound understanding of the Church involves a study of the relations between the Church as a whole and the hierarchy, between the primacy and Episcopal collegiality, as well as a study of the theology of the Episcopal ministry, the relation between prophecy and authority, and the exercise of authority in the Church, among many things.

### **The Church As People Of God**

The Church is the People of God established by the Spirit as the Body of Christ. The Church is a growing community involved in history and affected by the weakness of its members that always stand in need of the mercy of God. It was foreshadowed in the Twelve gathered around the suffering servant, Jesus, the tiny elected remnant destined to spread out over the whole world. It was then born on the cross and at Pentecost as the People of God of the new and eternal covenant. From then on, it is constituted by the preaching of the Gospel, by baptism and the response of faith (obedience), and is established in unity through fellowship with the dead and risen Christ (1Corinthians 10:16 & 17; Colossians 3:11; Galatians 5:28) as it awaits his return.

The newly born Church was thus conscious of living in continuity with Israel, whose history was interpreted in the light of the central event of the coming, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. According to Ephesians 2, henceforward the Gentiles share in Jesus, in the grace and the good

news promised to Israel (cf. Acts 15:8, 24). The faith expressed through baptism and the Eucharist is the conclusive mark of belonging to this people authenticated by the seal of the Spirit.

So, it is in Christ, the first-born Son who embodies the complete loyalty of God to his people, that the unique People of God, from now on to be the bearer and witness of salvation, is brought into existence. This People, in virtue of its re-creation in Christ, is a free people, and so it must live in a spirit of freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17) as a witness to hope in final victory when Christ returns in glory.

### **The Church And The Kingdom**

The New Testament shows the connection existing between the Church and the kingdom of God but does not authorize a complete identification. The Church will become the perfect divine community of the kingdom only after the proving and sifting time of the judgment.

It is true that the Church is already in substance the kingdom of God, but in a state of pilgrimage in the dimness of faith. The Church is, in a sense, already present and realized, appearing now in what are the last days (Mark 1:14; Acts 2:17; 1 Peter 1:20); it is the anticipated but only partial realization of the kingdom. The benefits of the kingdom (the inheritance), which are the fruits of the Spirit, knowledge, and glory, are possessed by the Church, individually and collectively, in an imperfect manner (1 Corinthians 12:2), in "mystery" but really and truly.

But, if the kingdom denotes consummation and fullness, there is even now in the Church a clear and growing sense of the distance that still separates it from the glorious consummation and that explains the growing tension that must dominate it in its yearning for the return of the Savior. This midway situation, standing between what is come and what is yet to come, has a profound effect on the whole nature of the Church and explains a great number of its characteristics, in particular its crucified state. The Church is the realm of the king who is the suffering servant. Just like its Lord, it must suffer to enter into its glory (cf. Luke 24:26). That is why the Church is here below a pilgrim Church (2 Corinthians 8:6; cf. 1 Peter 2:11).

The tension between the kingdom and the Church can also be understood as a consequence of the divine action that involves the whole process of salvation -- call, justification, glorification -- and whose final goal is the glory to be revealed (Romans 8:18-30).

### **Conclusion**

All of the images and concepts that depict the Church are, thus, seen to be mutually complementary. They must all be interpreted in the light of the mystery of God whose purpose is to establish people in the fellowship of his Son. In the light of revelation, the Church is recognized as a society of fellowship with God, the sacrament of salvation, the People of God established as the Body of Christ and the temple of the holy Spirit.

--Marie-Joseph le Guillou, edited by Patrick J. Hession