



# The Church

## II. The Church's Origin, Foundation, and Mission

### 758

We begin our investigation of the Church's mystery by meditating on her origin in the Holy Trinity's plan and her progressive realization in history.

#### *A plan born in the Father's heart*

"The eternal Father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life,"<sup>150</sup> to which he calls all men in his Son. "The Father . . . determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ."<sup>151</sup> This "family of God" is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history, in keeping with the Father's plan. In fact, "already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvellous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and the old Alliance. Established in this last age of the world and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time."<sup>152</sup>

#### *The Church—foreshadowed from the world's beginning*

### 760

Christians of the first centuries said, "The world was created for the sake of the Church."<sup>153</sup> God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the "convocation" of men in Christ, and this "convocation" is the Church. The Church is the goal of all things,<sup>154</sup> and God permitted such painful upheavals as the angels' fall and man's sin only as occasions and means for displaying all the power of his arm and the whole measure of the love he wanted to give the world:

Just as God's will is creation and is called "the world," so his intention is the salvation of men, and it is called "the Church."<sup>155</sup>

#### *The Church—prepared for in the Old Covenant*

### 761

The gathering together of the People of God began at the moment when sin destroyed the communion of men with God, and that of men among themselves. The gathering together of the Church is, as it were, God's reaction to the chaos provoked by sin. This reunification is achieved secretly in the heart of all peoples: "In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable" to God.<sup>156</sup>

**762**

The remote *preparation* for this gathering together of the People of God begins when he calls Abraham and promises that he will become the father of a great people.<sup>157</sup> Its immediate preparation begins with Israel's election as the People of God. By this election, Israel is to be the sign of the future gathering of all nations.<sup>158</sup> But the prophets accuse Israel of breaking the covenant and behaving like a prostitute. They announce a new and eternal covenant. "Christ instituted this New Covenant."<sup>159</sup>

**III. The Mystery of the Church**

**770**

The Church is in history, but at the same time she transcends it. It is only "with the eyes of faith"<sup>183</sup> that one can see her in her visible reality and at the same time in her spiritual reality as bearer of divine life.

*The Church—both visible and spiritual*

"The one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope, and charity, as a visible organization through which he communicates truth and grace to all men."<sup>184</sup> The Church is at the same time:

- a "society structured with hierarchical organs and the mystical body of Christ;
- the visible society and the spiritual community;
- the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches."<sup>185</sup>

These dimensions together constitute "one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine element":<sup>186</sup>

The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world, but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest.<sup>187</sup>

O humility! O sublimity! Both tabernacle of cedar and sanctuary of God; earthly dwelling and celestial palace; house of clay and royal hall; body of death and temple of light; and at last both object of scorn to the proud and bride of Christ! She is black but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, for even if the labor and pain of her long exile may have discolored her, yet heaven's beauty has adorned her.<sup>188</sup>

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*The Church—mystery of man's union with God*

**772**

It is in the Church that Christ fulfills and reveals his own mystery as the purpose of God's plan: "to unite all things in him."<sup>189</sup> St. Paul calls the nuptial union of Christ and the Church "a great mystery." Because she is united to Christ as to her bridegroom, she becomes a mystery in her turn.<sup>190</sup> Contemplating this mystery in her, Paul exclaims: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."<sup>191</sup>

**773**

In the Church this communion of men with God, in the "love [that] never ends," is the purpose which governs everything in her that is a sacramental means, tied to this passing world.<sup>192</sup> "[The Church's] structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members. And holiness is measured according to the 'great mystery' in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom."<sup>193</sup> Mary goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church's mystery as "the bride without spot or wrinkle."<sup>194</sup> This is why the "Marian" dimension of the Church precedes the "Petrine."<sup>195</sup>

*The universal Sacrament of Salvation*

**774**

The Greek word *mysterion* was translated into Latin by two terms: *mysterium* and *sacramentum*. In later usage the term *sacramentum* emphasizes the visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation which was indicated by the term *mysterium*. In this sense, Christ himself is the mystery of salvation: "For there is no other mystery of God, except Christ."<sup>196</sup> The saving work of his holy and sanctifying humanity is the sacrament of salvation, which is revealed and active in the Church's sacraments (which the Eastern Churches also call "the holy mysteries"). The seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body. The Church, then, both contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies. It is in this analogical sense, that the Church is called a "sacrament."

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"The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men."<sup>197</sup> The Church's first purpose is to be the sacrament of the *inner union of men with God*. Because men's communion with one another is rooted in that union with God, the Church is also the sacrament of the *unity of the human race*. In her, this unity is already begun, since she gathers men "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues";<sup>198</sup> at the same time, the Church is the "sign and instrument" of the full realization of the unity yet to come.

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As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. "She is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all," "the universal sacrament of salvation," by which Christ is "at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for men."<sup>199</sup> The Church "is the visible plan of God's love for humanity," because God desires "that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit."<sup>200</sup>

**IN BRIEF**

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The word "Church" means "convocation." It designates the assembly of those whom God's Word "convokes," i.e., gathers together to form the People of God, and who themselves, nourished with the Body of Christ, become the Body of Christ.

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The Church is both the means and the goal of God's plan: prefigured in creation, prepared for in the Old Covenant, founded by the words and actions of Jesus Christ, fulfilled by his redeeming cross and his Resurrection, the Church has been manifested as the mystery of salvation by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. She will be perfected in the glory of heaven as the assembly of all the redeemed of the earth (cf. *Rev* 14:4).

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The Church is both visible and spiritual, a hierarchical society and the Mystical Body of Christ. She is one, yet formed of two components, human and divine. That is her mystery, which only faith can accept.

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The Church in this world is the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men.

**Paragraph 2. The Church—People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit**

**I. The Church—People of God**

**781**

"At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him. He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him

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and serve him in holiness. He therefore chose the Israelite race to be his own people and established a covenant with it. He gradually instructed this people. . . . All these things, however, happened as a preparation for and figure of that new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ . . . the New Covenant in his blood; he called together a race made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit."<sup>201</sup>

*Characteristics of the People of God*

**782**

The People of God is marked by characteristics that clearly distinguish it from all other religious, ethnic, political, or cultural groups found in history:

- It is the *People of God*: God is not the property of any one people. But he acquired a people for himself from those who previously were not a people: "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation."<sup>202</sup>
- One becomes a *member* of this people not by a physical birth, but by being "born anew," a birth "of water and the Spirit,"<sup>203</sup> that is, by faith in Christ, and Baptism.
- This People has for its Head Jesus the Christ (the anointed, the Messiah). Because the same anointing, the Holy Spirit, flows from the head into the body, this is "the messianic people."
- "The *status* of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in a temple."
- "Its *law* is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us."<sup>204</sup> This is the "new" law of the Holy Spirit.<sup>205</sup>
- Its *mission* is to be salt of the earth and light of the world.<sup>206</sup> This people is "a most sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race."
- Its destiny, finally, "is the Kingdom of God which has been begun by God himself on earth and which must be further extended until it has been brought to perfection by him at the end of time."<sup>207</sup>

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*A priestly, prophetic, and royal people*

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Jesus Christ is the one whom the Father anointed with the Holy Spirit and established as priest, prophet, and king. The whole People of God participates in these three offices of Christ and bears the responsibilities for mission and service that flow from them.<sup>208</sup>

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On entering the People of God through faith and Baptism, one receives a share in this people's unique, *priestly* vocation: "Christ the Lord, high priest taken from among men, has made this new people 'a kingdom of priests to God, his Father.' The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are *consecrated* to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood."<sup>209</sup>

**785**

"The holy People of God shares also in Christ's *prophetic* office," above all in the supernatural sense of faith that belongs to the whole People, lay and clergy, when it "unfailingly adheres to this faith . . . once for all delivered to the saints,"<sup>210</sup> and when it deepens its understanding and becomes Christ's witness in the midst of this world.

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Finally, the People of God shares in the *royal* office of Christ. He exercises his kingship by drawing all men to himself through his death and Resurrection.<sup>211</sup> Christ, King and Lord of the universe, made himself the servant of all, for he came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."<sup>212</sup> For the Christian, "to reign is to serve him," particularly when serving "the poor and the suffering, in whom the Church recognizes the image of her poor and suffering founder."<sup>213</sup> The People of God fulfills its royal dignity by a life in keeping with its vocation to serve with Christ.

The sign of the cross makes kings of all those reborn in Christ and the anointing of the Holy Spirit consecrates them as priests, so that, apart from the particular service of our ministry, all spiritual and rational Christians are recognized as members of this royal race and sharers in Christ's priestly office. What, indeed, is as royal for a soul as to govern the body in obedience to God? And what is as priestly as to dedicate a pure conscience to the Lord and to offer the spotless offerings of devotion on the altar of the heart?<sup>214</sup>

## **II. The Church—Body of Christ**

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*The Church is communion with Jesus*

**787**

From the beginning, Jesus associated his disciples with his own life, revealed the mystery of the Kingdom to them, and gave them a share in his mission, joy, and sufferings.<sup>215</sup> Jesus spoke of a still more intimate communion between him and those who would follow him: "Abide in me, and I in you. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches."<sup>216</sup> And he proclaimed a mysterious and real communion between his own body and ours: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."<sup>217</sup>

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When his visible presence was taken from them, Jesus did not leave his disciples orphans. He promised to remain with them until the end of time; he sent them his Spirit.<sup>218</sup> As a result communion with Jesus has become, in a way, more intense: "By communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers of his who are called together from every nation."<sup>219</sup>

**789**

The comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and his Church. Not only is she gathered *around him*; she is united *in him*, in his body. Three aspects of the Church as the Body of Christ are to be more specifically noted: the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ; Christ as head of the Body; and the Church as bride of Christ.

*"One Body"*

**790**

Believers who respond to God's word and become members of Christ's Body, become intimately united with him: "In that body the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe, and who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ in his Passion and glorification."<sup>220</sup> This is especially true of Baptism, which unites us to Christ's death and Resurrection, and the Eucharist, by which "really sharing in the body of the Lord, . . . we are taken up into communion with him and with one another."<sup>221</sup>

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The body's unity does not do away with the diversity of its members: "In the building up of Christ's Body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions. There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives his different gifts for the welfare of the Church."<sup>222</sup> The unity of the Mystical Body produces and stimulates charity among the faithful: "From this it follows that if one member

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suffers anything, all the members suffer with him, and if one member is honored, all the members together rejoice."<sup>223</sup> Finally, the unity of the Mystical Body triumphs over all human divisions: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."<sup>224</sup>

*"Christ is the Head of this Body"*

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Christ "is the head of the body, the Church."<sup>225</sup> He is the principle of creation and redemption. Raised to the Father's glory, "in everything he [is] preeminent,"<sup>226</sup> especially in the Church, through whom he extends his reign over all things.

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*Christ unites us with his Passover:* all his members must strive to resemble him, "until Christ be formed" in them.<sup>227</sup> "For this reason we . . . are taken up into the mysteries of his life, . . . associated with his sufferings as the body with its head, suffering with him, that with him we may be glorified."<sup>228</sup>

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*Christ provides for our growth:* to make us grow toward him, our head,<sup>229</sup> he provides in his Body, the Church, the gifts and assistance by which we help one another along the way of salvation.

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Christ and his Church thus together make up the "whole Christ" (*Christus totus*). The Church is one with Christ. The saints are acutely aware of this unity:

Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God's grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members; he and we together are the whole man. . . . The fullness of Christ then is the head and the members. But what does "head and members" mean? Christ and the Church.<sup>230</sup>

Our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy Church whom he has taken to himself.<sup>231</sup>

Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person.<sup>232</sup>

A reply of St. Joan of Arc to her judges sums up the faith of the holy doctors and the good sense of the believer: "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter."<sup>233</sup>

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*The Church is the Bride of Christ*

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The unity of Christ and the Church, head and members of one Body, also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of bridegroom and bride. The theme of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church was prepared for by the prophets and announced by John the Baptist.<sup>234</sup> The Lord referred to himself as the "bridegroom."<sup>235</sup> The Apostle speaks of the whole Church and of each of the faithful, members of his Body, as a bride "betrothed" to Christ the Lord so as to become but one spirit with him.<sup>236</sup> The Church is the spotless bride of the spotless Lamb.<sup>237</sup> "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her."<sup>238</sup> He has joined her with himself in an everlasting covenant and never stops caring for her as for his own body:<sup>239</sup>

This is the whole Christ, head and body, one formed from many . . . whether the head or members speak, it is Christ who speaks. He speaks in his role as the head (*ex persona capitis*) and in his role as body (*ex persona corporis*). What does this mean? "The two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church."<sup>240</sup> And the Lord himself says in the Gospel: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh."<sup>241</sup> They are, in fact, two different persons, yet they are one in the conjugal union, . . . *as head, he calls himself the bridegroom, as body, he calls himself "bride."*<sup>242</sup>

**III. The Church Is the Temple of the Holy Spirit**

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"What the soul is to the human body, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ, which is the Church."<sup>243</sup> "To this Spirit of Christ, as an invisible principle, is to be ascribed the fact that all the parts of the body are joined one with the other and with their exalted head; for the whole Spirit of Christ is in the head, the whole Spirit is in the body, and the whole Spirit is in each of the members."<sup>244</sup> The Holy Spirit makes the Church "the temple of the living God":<sup>245</sup>

Indeed, it is to the Church herself that the "Gift of God" has been entrusted. . . . In it is in her that communion with Christ has been deposited, that is to say: the Holy Spirit, the pledge of incorruptibility, the strengthening of our faith and the ladder of our ascent to God. . . . For where the Church is, there also is God's Spirit; where God's Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace.<sup>246</sup>