

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

Part I

The mystery of the Church in the salvation history

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 (cf. CCC 758). Church's mystery is a **plan born in the Father's heart**. In fact, "already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvelous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and the old Advance. 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 (cf. CCC 759).

Etymology

The word "Church" (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, to "call out of"; in Hebrew: *Qahal*) means a convocation or an assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people, usually for a religious purpose. *Ekklesia* is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the assembly of the Chosen People before God. By calling itself "Church," the first community of Christian believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly. In the Church, God is "calling together" his people from all the ends of the earth. (cf. CCC 751)

1. Love and rejection - Creation and original sin

1.1. Creation (cf. CCC 280; 293-294)

- 1) The world was made for the glory of God.
- 2) The meaning of the glory of God: God has no other reason for creating than his love and goodness (divinization of man).
- 3) Creation is the foundation of "all God's saving plans," the "beginning of the history of salvation" that culminates in Christ.

1.2. The original sin - what does man's first sin consisted of? (cf. CCC 397-398)

- 1) Disobedience toward God;
- 2) Lack of trust in God's goodness (man let his trust in his Creator die in his heart)
- 3) Man chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good

1.3. The Adam's sin and its consequences for humanity and all creation (cf. CCC 399-400)

- 1) Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness.
- 2) They become afraid of God of whom they have conceived a distorted image - that of a God jealous of his prerogatives.
- 3) The interior harmony is destroyed: the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body (the relationship between mind and will is shattered),
- 4) The exterior harmony is destroyed: the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations are marked by lust and domination,
- 5) Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man.

1.4. Church's history started as the answer of God to the original sin.

2. The successive stages of preparation of the mystery of the Church in the Old Testament

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 (cf. CCC 761)

- 1) The gathering together of the People of God began when the God called Abraham and promised him that he will become the father of a great people,
- 2) The main assembly in the Old Testament is the gathering together of the people on Mount Sinai where Israel received the Law and was established by God as his holy people.
- 3) By this election, Israel is to be the sign of the future gathering of All nations.
- 4) The prophets "accuse Israel of breaking the covenant and behaving like a prostitute". They announce a new and eternal covenant (cf. CCC 762).

3. The Church - instituted by Jesus Christ

3.1. Why did Christ institute the Church?

For the same reason that the Word became flesh (cf. CCC 756-760). The reason lies as well in the fact of the creation of the world and in the consequences of the original sin.

- 1) In order to save us by reconciling us with God; our nature demanded to be healed;
- 2) *So that thus we might know God's love*: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (1 John 4: 9) - *So that thus we might have the true image of God* - God is the Father and we are His children;
- 3) *To be our model of holiness*: "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work" (John 4: 34);
- 4) To make us "*partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1: 4); the purpose of man is divinization.

3.2. Which events were the most significant for the institution of the Church by Christ? (cf. CCC 763-769)

- 1) The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Reign of God, promised over the ages in the scriptures;
- 2) The seed and beginning of the Kingdom are the "little flock" (Luce 12: 32) of those whom Jesus came to gather around him, the flock whose shepherd he is.
- 3) The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head.
- 4) The Church is born primarily of Christ's total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross. As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam's side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross.

4. The Church - revealed by the Holy Spirit (cf. CCC 767-768)

- 1) The connection between the Jewish feast of Pentecost and the first Christian Pentecost. Jewish Pentecost was the feast of the Covenant God had made with his people on Sinai, when he gave Israel his law. St Luke describes the Pentecost event as a theophany, a manifestation of God similar to the one on Mont Sinai (Act. Apost., 2, 1; cf. Exodus 19:16-25). Pentecost is the new Sinai; the Holy Spirit is the New Covenant; it is the gift of the new law.
- 2) The Church was openly displayed to the crowds and the spread of the Gospel among the nations, through preaching, was begun.
- 3) So that she can fulfill her mission, the Holy Spirit bestows upon the Church varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her.

5. The Church - perfected in glory (cf. CCC [769](#))

The Church will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven at the time of Christ's glorious return.

The Church, and through her the world, will not be perfected in glory without great trials.

In glory will all the just from the time of Adam, from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect, be gathered together in the universal Church in the Father's presence.

Part II

Deferent ideas of the Church

- 2.1. The Church as the mystical body of Christ
- 2.2. The Church as the sacrament
- 2.3. The Church as the People of God
- 2.4. The Church as the temple of the Holy Spirit
- 2.5. The Church as communion

Part III

The four characteristics of the Church (one, holy, catholic, apostolic)

The four characteristics, inseparably linked with each other, indicate essential features of the Church and her mission. The Church does not possess them of herself; it is Christ who, through the Holy Spirit, makes his Church one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and it is he who calls her to realize each of these qualities (cf. CCC 811).

3.1. The Church is one (cf. CCC 811-822)

The Church is one because of her source and purpose

From the beginning, this one Church has been marked by a great diversity which comes from both the variety of God's gifts and the diversity of those who receive them

What are these bonds of unity? Above all, charity binds everything together in perfect harmony. But the unity of the pilgrim Church is also assured by visible bonds of communion:

- profession of one faith received from the Apostles;
- common celebration of divine worship, especially of the sacraments;
- apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders, maintaining the fraternal concord of God's family.

Wounds to unity: heresy, apostasy, schism.

Christ always gives his Church the gift of unity, but the Church must always pray and work to maintain, reinforce, and perfect the unity that Christ wills for Her.

Certain things are required in order to respond adequately to the call to the unity:

- a permanent *renewal* of the Church in greater fidelity to her vocation;
- *conversion of heart*;
- *prayer in common*;
- *fraternal knowledge of each other*;
- *ecumenical formation* of the faithful and especially of priests;
- *dialogue* among theologians and meetings among Christians of the different churches and communities;
- *collaboration* among Christians in various areas of service to mankind.

3.2. The Church is holy (cf. CCC 823-829)

- 1) United with Christ, the Church is sanctified by him; through him and with him she becomes sanctifying.
- 2) Universal call to holiness
- 3) The holiness of the Church shines in the saints; in Mary she is already all-holy.

3.3. The Church is catholic (cf. CCC 830-856)

The word “catholic” means “universal”, in the sense of “according to the totality” or “in keeping with the whole”. The Church is catholic in a double sense:

- 1) the Church is catholic because Christ is present in her;
- 2) the Church is catholic because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race.

Ad 1) In the Catholic Church **subsists** the fullness of Christ's body united with its head; this implies that she receives from him **the fullness of the means of salvation**, which he has willed: correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession (cf. CCC 830).

Many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements. Christ's Spirit uses these Churches and ecclesial communities as means of salvation, whose power derives from the fullness of grace and truth that Christ has entrusted to the Catholic Church (cf. CCC 819).

With the Orthodox Churches, the communion is so profound that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Lord's Eucharist (cf. CCC 838)

Ad 2) All men are called to this catholic unity of the People of God. . . . And to it, in different ways, belong or are ordered: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God's grace to salvation (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 13; CCC 836).

Mission - a requirement of the Church's catholicity.

“Outside the Church there is no salvation”

- It means that all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body.
- This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church.
- Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith . . . , the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men (cf. CCC 848).

3.4. The Church is apostolic (cf. CCC 857- 865)

The Church is apostolic because she is founded on the apostles, in three ways:

- she was and remains built on the foundation of the Apostles, the witnesses chosen and sent on mission by Christ himself;
- with the help of the Spirit dwelling in her, the Church keeps and hands on the teaching, the good deposit, the salutary words she has heard from the apostles;
- she continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ's return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, assisted by priests, in union with the successor of Peter, the Church's supreme pastor (cf. CCC 857).

All members of the Church share in this mission, though in various ways. The Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well. Indeed, we call an apostolate every activity of the Mystical Body that aims to spread the Kingdom of Christ over all the earth (cf. CCC 863).

The structure (constitution) of the Church

4.1. The hierarchical constitution of the Church

Christ is himself the source of ministry in the Church. He instituted the Church. He gave her authority and mission, orientation and goal (cf. CCC 874).

No one - no individual and no community - can proclaim the Gospel to himself ...

No one can give himself the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel.

The one sent by the Lord does not speak and act on his own authority, but by virtue of Christ's authority; not as a member of the community, but speaking to it in the name of Christ.

No one can bestow grace on himself; it must be given and offered.

This fact presupposes ministers of grace, authorized and empowered by Christ.

From him, bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty ("the sacred power") to act *in persona Christi Capitis*; deacons receive the strength to serve the people of God in the *diaconia* of the liturgy, word and charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate. The ministry of the Church is conferred by a special sacrament - sacrament of Holy Orders (cf. CCC 875).

The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls (CCC 937).

The Bishops, established by the Holy Spirit, succeed the apostles. They are "the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches (CCC 938).

Helped by the priests, their co-workers, and by the deacons, the bishops have the duty of:

- authentically teaching the faith,
- celebrating divine worship, above all the Eucharist,
- guiding their Churches as true pastors.

Their responsibility also includes concern for all the Churches, with and under the Pope (cf. CCC 939).

4.2. The lay faithful

The term 'laity' is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church. That is, the faithful, who **by Baptism are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the People of God**, are made sharers in their particular way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, and have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the World (cf. CCC 897).

The initiative of lay Christians is necessary especially when the matter involves discovering or inventing the means for permeating social, political, and economic realities with the demands of Christian doctrine and life. This initiative is a **normal element** of the life of the Church (cf. CCC 899).

Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, **they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth** (cf. CCC 900).

4.3. The consecrated life

The life consecrated to God is characterized by the public profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, in a stable state of life recognized by the Church (cf. CCC 944). Consecration is based on the Baptism. The person consecrates himself more intimately to God's service and to the good of the whole Church (cf. CCC 945).