

THE MYSTICAL BODY OF THE ETERNAL PRIEST AND VICTIM

(J.F.M.H. –5.7.2018)

“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church.” (Col. 1.24)

There is an obvious analogy shared by any society to a living body. The individual members that make up the society are united, or at least should be united, to effect a common end; while the parts they separately play correspond to the functions of the bodily organs. They form a moral unity. This of course is true of the Church, but the Church also has a unity of a higher order. It is not merely a *moral* but a *mystical* body. The truth, that the Church is the mystical body of Christ, with all its members being guided and directed by Christ the head, is set out in various passages in Scripture e.g. by St. Paul, (Eph. 4. 4-13) and by St. John (15.5-8). The members of the Church are bound together by a supernatural life given to them by Christ through the Sacraments. Christ is the centre and source of life to whom all are united, and gives gifts/graces suited to the members position in the body. These graces equip them for their work within the body, and form them into an organized whole. Like any other living body the Church grows; in extent as it spreads throughout the world, and in intensity as the individual Christian develops in himself the likeness of Christ. It forms one whole with Him; and the Apostles even speak of the Church as “Christ”. This union is outwardly symbolized and inwardly actualized by the Eucharist.

Through our baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we begin a new life. We are actually united to Christ. He makes His Home in us: “I live, now not I, but Christ in me, (Gal.2.20) as St Paul puts it. This union with Our Saviour is so complete that we are part of Him: as a body belongs to the head. Hence we speak of ourselves and other baptised believers as forming the mystical body of Christ. In the great Apostolic Declaration ‘*Dominus Jesu*’ signed by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, there is a passage that is very relevant to the way Christ lives out His priesthood and His victimhood in the mystical body, the Church. *“Above all else, it must be firmly believed that “the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk16:16; Jn 3:5), and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door”. This doctrine must not be set against the universal salvific will of God (cf. 1 Tim 2:4); “it is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for this salvation”.*

The Church recognises three types of Baptism that unite men to Christ. The first, is a Sacrament, the ‘Baptism of water and the Holy Spirit’, the second and third, the ‘Baptism of blood’ and the ‘Baptism of desire’, are not sacraments but have the fruits of a sacrament. Properly understood this recognises the incorporation within Christ’s mystical body of people we might not think of usually as members of the Church. By these last two, (the non sacraments) they adhere to Christ and when they get to heaven they form part of the mystical body called “The Church Triumphant”.

In 1928 Pope Pius XI wrote an encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* on the atonement due to the Sacred Heart (1928) which tells us about the Mystical Body of Christ and our part in the atoning sacrifice of Christ (the vocation of a victim soul) *Yet, though the copious redemption of Christ has abundantly ‘forgiven all offences’, nevertheless, because of the wonderful dispensation of divine wisdom by which what is lacking of the suffering of Christ for His body, which is the Church (Col.1.24) is to be filled up in our flesh, we can add, nay even we are bound to add, our own praises and satisfactions to the praises and satisfactions ‘which Christ rendered unto God in the name of sinners.’ But we must always remember that the whole virtue of the expiation depends*

on the bloody sacrifice of Christ, which is renewed without intermission on our altars in an unbloody manner, 'for the Victim is the one and the same; He who then offered Himself on the cross is now offered through the ministry of priests, the manner of offering alone being different'" (Trent, 22nd Session). "Therefore with the most august sacrifice of the Eucharist should be joined an obligation of the ministers and the other faithful so that they also may present themselves as 'being victims, holy, pleasing to God' (Rom. 12.1). Nay, even St. Cyprian does not hesitate to declare that 'the Lord's sacrifice is not celebrated with legitimate sanctification unless our oblation and sacrifice correspond to His Passion'. Thus the Apostle admonishes us that 'bearing about in our body the mortification of Jesus' (2Cor.4.10) and buried together with Christ and planted together in the likeness of His death, we should not only crucify our flesh with its vices and concupiscence, 'flying the corruption of that concupiscence which is the world' (2Pet 1.4), but that 'the life also of Jesus should be made manifest in our bodies' and, being made partakers of His eternal priesthood we should offer 'gifts and sacrifices for sin' (Heb.5.1).

Then the pope went on to describe the mystical priesthood. "Participation in this mystic priesthood and in the office of satisfying and sacrificing is enjoyed not only by those whom our Pontiff, Jesus Christ, employs as his ministers to offer up a clean oblation to God's name in every place, from the rising to the setting of the sun (Mal. 1:11), but the whole Christian people, rightly called by the Prince of the Apostles 'a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood' (1 Peter 2:9), ought to make offering for sin, both for itself and for all mankind, in much the same way as every priest and pontiff 'taken from among men, is ordained for men in the things pertaining to God' (Heb. 5:1). The more perfectly our oblation and sacrifice correspond with the Lord's sacrifice, that is to say the more perfectly we immolate our self love and our desires, and crucify our flesh with that mystical crucifixion of which the Apostle speaks, the more abundant fruits of that and expiation shall we reap for ourselves and for others. For a wonderful living bond of union exists between all the faithful and Christ, a union such as prevails between the head and the other members; moreover, by that mystic Communion of Saints which we profess in the Catholic faith, both individuals and peoples are joined together, not only with one another but also with him 'who is Head, Christ, from whom the whole body being compacted and fitly joined together, by what every joint supplieth according to the operation in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body, unto the edifying of itself in charity' (Eph. 4:15f). This, indeed, it was that the Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, asked of the Father when nigh unto death: 'I in them, and Thou in me; that they may be made perfect in one' (John 17:23)..

The Pope in his encyclical explained that the expiatory passion of Christ is renewed, and in a manner continued and fulfilled, in his mystical body, the Church. He quotes St. Augustine, "Christ suffered whatever he was due to suffer; now nothing is wanting to the measure of his sufferings. Therefore the sufferings were complete, but in the Head; there still remained the sufferings of Christ in his body". This, indeed, our Lord Jesus himself proclaims when speaking to Saul, 'still breathing threats and slaughter against the disciples'. (Acts 9:1), he said, 'It is I, Jesus, whom thou persecutes' (Acts 9:5), clearly signifying that when persecutions are stirred up against the Church, the divine Head of the Church is himself attacked and harassed. Christ, who still suffers in his mystical body, desires to have us share in his expiation, for we are 'the body of Christ and members of member' (1 Cor. 12:27) whatever the Head suffers, all the members must suffer..."

The atonement for our sins goes on, in, with and through, our Lord; " He who began the work shall not desist; 'I am the Vine, you are the branches, If you abide in the Vine you will bear much fruit, but without Me you can do nothing!' ("Behold the Priest' by Fr. A. J. Ellis S.J)

