

## THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST AND LENT

The Church came into being when Christ died on the Cross, but it was formally inaugurated at Pentecost when He sent the Holy Spirit as He had promised. St. Paul speaks of all Christians as members of Christ, so that with Him, they form one (Mystical) Body (1 Cor 12:12-31). However, St. Paul did not use the word 'Mystical'. It was developed more recently to bring out the fact that this union is unique; there is no parallel to it. It is not the same as the union of a physical body, or that of a business corporation. One idea to which St Paul frequently returns is the comparison between the faithful who are in Christ Jesus and the members of a human body. He makes use of this metaphor frequently to prove several different things, to show, for example, in one place that each has a separate work to do, and in another that each separate work is dependant on the rest. The Church in its great prayer, the Divine Office, takes us by its Readings from Ash Wednesday via the story of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt, through their journey in the wilderness to the Promised Land. It was a journey lasting 40 years.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in dealing with the 'Profession of Faith' (781 – 810), covers the subject of being a member of the 'Mystical Body of Christ the Church. Pope PIUS XII in an encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (June 29, 1943) made it clear who were its members. (Paragraph 22) *"Only those are to be included as members of the Church who have been baptized and profess the true faith, and who have not been so unfortunate as to separate themselves from the unity of the Body, or been excluded by legitimate authority for grave faults committed. "For in one spirit" says the Apostle, "were we all baptized into one Body, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether bound or free." [17] As therefore in the true Christian community there is only one Body, one Spirit, one Lord, and one Baptism, so there can be only one faith. [18] And therefore, if a man refuse to hear the Church, let him be considered so the Lord commands - as a heathen and a publican (Matt. 18.17). [19] It follows that those who are divided in faith or government cannot be living in the unity of such a Body, nor can they be living the life of its one Divine Spirit. "*

The Catechism (C.C.C 793) informs us that *"Christ unites us with his Passover: all his members must strive to resemble him, "until Christ be formed in them. "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." (C.C.C. 794) Christ provides for our growth: to make us grow toward him, our head he provides in his Body, the Church, the gifts and assistance by which we help one another along the way of salvation. (C.C.C. 79) 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. Our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy Church whom he has taken to Himself. Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person. "*

Some years ago, in a series of addresses and writings Pope St. John Paul II speaking about Lent used the phrase *"The Christ of Lent"*. He expressed an idea that gives all members of Christ's mystical Body, something to imitate. The example is of how we should live our own Lent. He too spoke of a journey, the one recorded in Genesis. It tells us of the path God ordered Abraham to take. *"Go forth from the Land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you"* (Gen. 12.1). The 75-year old Abraham set off without any support other than his trust in the Divine promise. The Pope

likened Lent to the journey God calls us to follow, where we entrust ourselves to the projects He has for each one. He said the country towards which we are heading is the Christian's new life, a 'paschal' life. (Paschal means pertaining to the Passover, or Easter, which is our Passover.) According to St. Paul this was when *"Christ robbed death of its power and brought life and immortality into clear light through the Gospel."* (2 Tim.1: 9-10). The same letter to Timothy also points out that the bread of new life is given to us because of a mysterious calling and assignment on God's part "not because of any merit of ours, but according to His own design" (2 Tim. 1-9). So we have to be like Abraham, people of faith, who do not count so much on themselves as on the word and power of God. Christ plainly showed us this way by His own life on earth. Both Christ and His disciples followed it. His Church follows it to this day and has established Lent so that we might honour and imitate Christ during the forty days of fast and self-denial in the desert, and so celebrate worthily our own great Passover, the feast of Easter.

There are good reasons for training our body to obey the will by fasting and self-denial. This is to atone for sin. By every sin we take some satisfaction to which we have no right. Moreover, since we are all one body in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:12-31). Our self-denial can atone for the sins of others and obtain grace and help from God, both for the living and the dead. By self-denial we give up some legitimate satisfaction and so make up for the unlawful pleasure we have taken. Self-denial willingly borne is a way in which we follow in the footsteps of Our Lord. Remembering Christ's instruction *"if anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."* The Church urges us to follow His example, as we make ready for Easter. With fasting is linked the practice of prayer and almsgiving.

We must understand that *"the Christ of Lent"* awaits us in every suffering person. Christ taught us to love, and told us that He judges each according to what we have done for even one of our weaker brethren. In this way Lent is a challenge to let Christ open up our consciences through the eloquence of His Passion and cross. The life that follows of major and minor sufferings and self-denials is offered up to God the Almighty Father at every Mass. There is a connection between our life and the Mass. We are, after all, members of the mystical body of Christ, and it is the whole Christ that is offered in the Mass to Our Almighty Father. Remember that in the Mass we are invited to share with Christ not only his sacramental body but also his sacrificial act. At every Mass after the priest has washed his hands he says *"Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father."* Given that the Mass makes present the sacrifice Christ offered at Calvary and that the sacrifice on the cross was acceptable, and is always acceptable to the almighty Father; our prayers can't make it more or less acceptable. However, we with our own sacrifices and sufferings are united to Our Lord's sacrifice, and we need to pray about that part of it, for that does have to be made acceptable. We need to be sorry for our sins, confess them, be forgiven and blessed before making our offering. Hence the Mass includes the 'Confiteor', 'and the Absolution'. Then just before we receive Our Lord Himself, comes that wonderful prayer adapted by the Church from the words of the Roman Centurion, *"Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed"*. The loving and merciful Lord whom we receive in Communion hears our prayer, and offers the sacrifice to Our Almighty Father.

Many years ago now, Fr. W. Roach S.J. wrote a preparatory prayer to the Mass, on the sacrifice of Christ with His Church. It illustrates this points just made, making clear our part in joining in the sacrifice of Our Lord.

***"The mass is not a private prayer of mine such as I can say at home, nor the public prayer of pious people. It is the mystery of Our Lord's own supplication, His perfect prayer of self-oblation, adoration and thanksgiving in which I take a part.***

*It is then more than words and wishes, more than asking things of God. It is giving, an offering, a sacrifice. Whosoever offers sacrifice offers self: the offerer and the victim must somehow be one.*

*So I am here to give rather than to get, to fulfil a duty, to pay a debt, to render homage, to satisfy the claims and rights of God, my Sovereign Lord, Creator, King of Kings.*

*This I can never do alone, I am not fit. But do it I can most perfectly in this Holy Mass with Jesus my Saviour, through Whom are given to God all Glory, worship, honour, thanks, and to me continued mercy, a Father's love and guidance, and with that all best things. Amen.”*

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May God bless us and our efforts to follow diligently the Christ of Lent, which we offer to God the Almighty Father through, in, and with His Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.