

# THE CONFESSION OF THE *CASTA MERETRIX*

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“The Church, [many of the Fathers] say, continues to live by the pardon that transforms her from a harlot into a holy Bride.”



## *ECCLESIA SANCTA SIMUL ET SEMPER PURIFICANDA*

It is surely not without significance that Hans Urs von Balthasar chose to republish “*Casta Meretrix*,” his now classic study of the holiness and the sinfulness of the Church, on the very eve of the Council in 1961.<sup>1</sup> The significance of this gesture is underscored by his simultaneous republication of another article, “Who Is the Church?”<sup>2</sup> which complements the first through its emphasis on the Church’s identity. While the first explains the sense in which the Church can call herself at once “harlot” and “chaste” before

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1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “*Casta Meretrix*” (=CM), in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2, *Spouse of the Word*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 193–288. [Note: Many of the citations of the Church Father’s writings are taken from Balthasar’s essay as they appear in the English translation.]

2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Who Is the Church?” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2, *Spouse of the Word*, 143–92.

her Lord, the second grounds this because she is a subject who is really distinct from her Bridegroom. These two essays doubtless share a certain affinity of spirit with an important statement in *Lumen gentium*, which speaks about the Church in terms to which the hierarchy had hardly accustomed the faithful:

While Christ, holy, innocent and undefiled knew nothing of sin, but came to expiate only the sins of the people, the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal. (*LG*, 8)

This passage draws a stark contrast between the total absence of sin in our Lord, which is in fact clearly affirmed by Scripture (cf. Heb 7:26), and the Church's earthly wayfaring condition, to which the words of St. John apply: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves . . ." (1 Jn 1:8–10). Taking their cue from this statement, Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis have not shied away from inviting the "penitent" Church (Paul VI) to acknowledge publicly that she is a sinner and to beg the Lord's forgiveness. Their interventions and initiatives in this regard have provoked diverse reactions among Christians and non-Christians alike. Indeed, both the conciliar statement and its pastoral implementation continue to raise a number of difficulties for the conscience of faithful Catholics.

Granting that we cannot simply identify the Church with the society of "the good," because "the wicked" are part of it as well, granting that the Church's faithful and even her pastors are affected by this mixed condition, can we legitimately say the same thing of the Bride "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing . . . holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27), "clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" (Rev 19:8) of whom the New Testament speaks? What is the relation between the Church's essential possession of holiness and the fact that she not only contains sinners in her bosom, but is herself a Church of sinners, or even, as some will say, a sinful Church? How can a Church that prays "forgive us our trespasses" in the name of her children consider herself at the same time to be the source of their sanctification? Could it be that the holiness which the Creed names as one of her essential traits actually belongs only to God, her Triune Author, but not to her concrete, visible reality as a fallible human society? Does holiness

begin to belong to the Church herself only in the eschaton when she enters into possession of the heavenly homeland?

Such a claim would contradict an important conviction of the faith. In former times, YHWH pledged to “cover” Jerusalem “with the robe of righteousness” (“as a bride adorns herself with her jewels,” Is 61:10). Similarly, he bade believers to look toward the accomplishment of a still future reality (“I [will] create Jerusalem a rejoicing,” Is 65:18). Now, however, the Old Covenant has been fulfilled in the New. With the advent of Jesus, the “fullness of the times has come” (Gal 4:4) and we have thus already truly entered into “these last days” (Heb 1:2). Doesn’t this suggest that Christians, unlike the Jews, are not fated to lament the lost ideal of life in the desert during the Exodus, when Israel, still a child, did not know any foreign gods and faithfully followed YHWH, who was present in the cloud (cf. Hos 2:16)? What exactly, then, is this Church about which the People of God proclaims, after professing its faith *in* the Holy Spirit: “I believe . . . one, holy . . . Church” [without the Latin or English preposition *in*]?

These are the questions we intend to address in what follows. We will begin by calling to mind the gesture with which John Paul II opened the Great Jubilee: his invitation to the Universal Church to walk the path of repentance nicely accords with Balthasar’s thought. After briefly sketching the patristic topos of the *Casta meretrix*, we will present Joseph Ratzinger’s account of this ancient motif, which is indebted to both Balthasar and de Lubac. At this point, we will turn to the other theme mentioned above: the personal identity of the Church, which in our opinion is the key to understanding the sense in which she confesses her sins and bids the faithful not to fear the humiliations of which the world is frequently the instrument today.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE *MEA CULPA* OF JOHN PAUL II IN THE NAME OF THE CHURCH

On the First Sunday of Lent, 2000, during the Eucharistic celebration marking the Jubilee Year, John Paul II presented to the

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3. Cf. Jacques Servais, “Confession as a Sacrament of the Father’s Mercy According to Adrienne von Speyr,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26 (Summer 1999): 343–57.

Lord a solemn request for forgiveness for the present and past sins of the sons and daughters of the Church.<sup>4</sup> The Church's knowledge that we are healed by the Lord's stripes [cf. Is 53:5] should, he insisted, lead her to take responsibility for the sins of her children and to implore the Father's forgiveness on their behalf. The pope had chosen to deliver this plea before the crucifix from the Church of St. Marcellus "*al Corso*," thus underscoring that it was addressed to Jesus Christ. He also very deliberately made a *statio* [ceremonial stop] at the Pietà to signify that "the Church, like Mary, wishes to embrace the crucified Savior, to take responsibility for the past of her children and to implore the Father's forgiveness." During the penitential procession, the assembly prayed the litany of the saints, who in the *communio sanctorum* "intercede for their sinful brothers and sisters. . . ." At the Prayer of the Faithful, seven cardinals took turns inviting the faithful to make some common confession of sins: first a general confession, then the confession of particular sins against the service of the Truth, against the unity of the Body of Christ, against the People of Israel, against the rights of peoples, against the dignity of women, and against the fundamental rights of the human person. During his homily, the pope commented on 2 Corinthians 5:20–21, emphasizing the "paradox" of the supplication addressed by Paul to his community:

How could God, who is holiness itself, "make" his Only-begotten Son, sent into the world, "to be sin?" . . . We are in the presence of a mystery: a mystery which at first sight is baffling. . . . "The Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all" (Is 53:6). . . . Christ, the Holy One . . . agreed to take our sins upon himself . . . in order to redeem us.

At the end of the celebration, John Paul II returned to the mystery of the *pro nobis* and in this context called upon the "Mother

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4. "Holy Father celebrates 'Day of Pardon,'" *L'Osservatore Romano* (=OR), 15 March 2000, weekly English edition. Our commentary follows and quotes from the "Presentation" by the Master of Ceremonies, who on the previous Tuesday had announced the elements of which the celebration was to consist: OR, 10 March 2000, weekly Italian edition; available in English at: [www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/documents/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_20000312\\_presentation-day-pardon\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/ns_lit_doc_20000312_presentation-day-pardon_en.html).

of forgiveness” to obtain the grace of pardon for the faithful.

This public act of repentance, explicitly correlated with the confessions of the Old Testament,<sup>5</sup> was the goal of an examination of conscience to which the Holy Father had first invited believers as early as 1994.<sup>6</sup> In an Apostolic Letter announcing the event, he recalled the traditional function of the Jubilee—conversion and the remission of sins—before going on to explain the meaning of the planned gesture: “[T]he Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and . . . indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal” (*Tertio millennio adventiente*, 33). In the Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee, promulgated in 1998, John Paul II stressed once more the meaning of the planned liturgy of pardon. It was to be “an act of courage and humility” before a world from which the Church could no longer hide the responsibility of “those who . . . bear the name of Christian”<sup>7</sup>:

Because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgment of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us. Yet we too, sons and daughters of the Church, have sinned and have hindered the Bride of Christ from shining forth in all her beauty. Our sin has impeded the Spirit’s working in the hearts of many people. Our meager faith has meant that many have lapsed into apathy and been driven away from a true encounter with Christ. . . . As the Successor of Peter, I ask that . . . the Church, strong in the holiness which she receives from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters.<sup>8</sup>

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5. In his catechesis on 1 September 1999, commenting on Dan 3:26–29 (and Bar 2:11–13): “This is how the Jews prayed after the Exile, accepting responsibility for the sins committed by their fathers. The Church imitates their example and also asks forgiveness for the historical sins of her children” (1).

6. *Tertio millennio adveniente* (=TMA), 33–36.

7. *Incarnationis mysterium*, 11.

8. *Ibid.* The pope talked again about the subjective responsibility of the

Predictably, there were some, even among the cardinals, who expressed reservations—at least from the pastoral point of view—with regard to this act.<sup>9</sup> This despite the fact that John Paul II had charged the International Theological Commission with crafting a document to foster a proper understanding of the gesture.<sup>10</sup> According to the ITC (citing here TMA, 33), the pope's words

emphasize how the Church is touched by the sin of her children. She is holy in being made so by the Father through the sacrifice of the Son and the gift of the Spirit. She is also in a certain sense sinner, in really taking upon herself the sin of those whom she has generated in Baptism. This is analogous to the way Christ Jesus took on the sin of the world.<sup>11</sup>

The document also addresses the theological foundations of the pope's act, locating them in *Lumen gentium's* teaching that the Church, like the mystery of the hypostatic union in the Incarnate Word that it images, is “one complex reality resulting from a human and a divine element.”<sup>12</sup> But there is more:

Thanks to the bond established by the Holy Spirit, the communion that exists among all the baptized in time and space is such that . . . each person . . . is conditioned by others . . . in the living exchange of spiritual goods. . . . [S]in also does not have an exclusively individual relevance, because it burdens and poses resistance along the way of salvation of all and . . . truly touches the Church in her entirety. . . .<sup>13</sup>

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brethren who have preceded us in the Angelus message following this celebration (*OR*, 15 March 2000, weekly English edition).

9. G. Biffi, *Memorie e digressioni di un italiano cardinale* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2007), 536.

10. International Theological Commission: *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (December 1999), published as a special insert of *OR*, 15 March 2000, weekly English edition.

11. *Ibid.*, 3.0.

12. *LG*, 8, cited in *ibid.*, 3.1.

13. *Ibid.*, 3.3.

Nevertheless, the document registers an important qualification. Although she “confesses herself a sinner” and is continually in need of the power of redemption, the Church “recognizes herself to be holy in her saints,” and so cannot offer the admission of guilt “as a subject who sins,” but only as one who takes upon herself “the weight of her children’s faults in maternal solidarity.”<sup>14</sup> This is a decisive distinction that we shall develop further below.

When looked at empirically, the ecclesial community undoubtedly appears as a huge mass of sinners. The eyes of faith, however, recognize it as a society established by Christ and animated by his Spirit: a holy Church partaking here below in the battle against the sin that has already been conquered by the Cross. The International Theological Commission does not speak, as some theologians did at the time of the Council,<sup>15</sup> of a paradoxical union of visible sin and hidden grace—the saints are, after all, part of the visible Church! Nevertheless, it leaves an important question unexplained: if, like Christ, the Church somehow unites a human and a divine element, what does this union consist in? Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger suggests an answer when, in his presentation of the document, he frankly acknowledges that sin is present “at the heart of the Church,” even as “the living Church confesses [it] in her living members.”<sup>16</sup> More on this anon.

#### THE CHURCH AND THE BABYLON OF THIS WORLD

The Church that John Paul II invites to do penance is the earthly Church, composed of fallible human beings, which as such always justifies St. Paul’s apprehension lest, “as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Cor 11:3). In the same Epistle to the Corinthians, however, the Apostle also makes it clear that in her concrete nature the Church always remains the “pure bride” (v. 2). It is precisely because she is such, even today, that the Vicar

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14. *Ibid.*, 3.4.

15. Cf. René Latourelle, *Christ and the Church: Signs of Salvation*, trans. Sr. Dominic Parker (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1972), 211–42, esp. 236ff.

16. *OR*, 17 March 2000, weekly Italian edition.

of Peter can confess failings and sins in the name of all the faithful. This act of confession expresses the Bride's awareness that, having been saved by sheer grace, she still knows sinners' failings and so must always renew her plea for God's mercy.

"How can the Church, made up of defiled people, be undefiled?"<sup>17</sup> To this burning question the ecclesiastical writers gave different answers, some of which doubtless did insufficient justice to the fact that "the Catholic faith uniformly and truly teaches that the good and the bad belong to the Church."<sup>18</sup> In the early centuries, indeed, from the very beginning of Christianity, the main concern was to preserve the union of hearts against false doctrines that threatened to undermine the simplicity of the faith and to disrupt the unity of the Church. Pastors were therefore urged to deal severely with heretics, i.e., with those proscribed by the Acts of the Apostles and the Pastoral Letters [Catholic Epistles] as "false teachers," "false prophets . . . among the people" (2 Pt 2:1–2), "fierce wolves" who "among your own selves" are "speaking perverse things" (Acts 20:29–30; cf. Mt 7:15). A good number of the Fathers stigmatize the latter as sons of prostitution: though they pass themselves off as believers, they are, as Ephrem the Syrian puts it, nothing more than "deceitful suitors" who have "shamed the Bride of the Son." The purpose of such statements was not to condemn these false disciples, but to safeguard the image of the Church. The Fathers were admonishing the faithful: "The spouse of Christ cannot be defiled; she is inviolate and chaste. . . . Whoever breaks with the Church and enters on an adulterous union cuts himself off from the promises made to the Church."<sup>19</sup>

The Apostles themselves frequently exhorted the Christian community to call to mind their origins; rather than forget their former shame, they must persevere in the attitude of Mary Magdalene, who professed and adored her Lord. Let the Church

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17. Ambrose, *In Luc 1, 17*, *Sources chrétiennes* 45 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1956): 55 [as cited in CM].

18. *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, IX, part 1, trans. in 1829 by Rev. J. Donovan (Baltimore: Lucas Brothers, n.d.), 73.

19. Ephrem, *Hymn 24 Against the Heretics*, BKV2 vol. 61, p. 91–92; Cyprian, *De unitate Ecclesiae* 6, *Sources chrétiennes* 500 (2006): 186 [both passages as cited in CM].



remember “Rahab the harlot,” who was justified “by faith” (Heb 11:31) no less than “by works” (Jas 2:25). The Fathers were firmly convinced that the Church, “the spotless Bride” of Christ (cf. Eph 5:27), is holy, because she is devoted and consecrated to God, because she is united to a holy Head of which she is the Body, and because she herself becomes the Eucharistic Body that sanctifies and purifies her in Christ’s blood: “[The Church] is the beloved and spouse who alone is sanctified by Christ, and alone is cleansed by his washing.”<sup>20</sup> The Church’s purity is that of the Bride (fallen from heaven to earth) whom Christ found in sin and whom, through the redemption, he has restored to virginity. Planned by the Father in his free and mysterious design, the Church was prefigured from the beginning of the world, prepared in the Old Covenant, and finally ransomed and recreated by Christ. The Fathers make frequent use of the image of the biblical “prostitutes,” among whom they include not only the foreigner Rahab, but also Tamar, Bathsheba, and Ruth (another foreigner). The allusion to these women (who significantly figure in the genealogy of Jesus: Mt 1:5) expresses not only the universal scope of salvation—the Church comes from the Babylon of this world—but also the grace that has been lavished upon her.

This harlot is a type of the Church. Once she dwelt among the Gentiles, depraved by idolatry, disgraced by the fornication of idle superstition. The crowd of false gods had made her an adulteress. . . . But once our Lord Jesus Christ had poured the pure water of baptism over her, she received the washing away of both her crimes and her earlier name through the grace of faith. By God’s grace the former harlot becomes a virgin.<sup>21</sup>

Most patristic commentaries on these figures accentuate their change of condition in time: Rahab, who was spared because she welcomed Joshua’s spies (Josh 2:1–1), has now become holy; the woman who prostituted herself with idols now belongs chastely to Christ. Like Mary Magdalene, she is the type of the

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20. Cyprian, *De unitate Ecclesiae* 6, ANF 5:388a. Ephesians 5:26–27 takes up the image of the bath that Ezekiel 16:9 uses in reference to Israel’s entrance into the covenant. The allusion to the Oriental custom whereby the bride was washed and prepared helps explain the washing alluded to here (cf. Tit 3:3–7).

21. Pseudo-Ambrose, *Sermo de Salomone* 46, 15 [as cited in CM].

converted woman who sins no more but remains faithful because she keeps alive the memory of the favor that was done her. If Augustine exhorts the faithful: “We are the holy Church. . . . Let us honor her, for she is the spouse of such a great Lord,” it is precisely for this reason: “Great and singular is the condescension of the Bridegroom. When he found her, she was a harlot. He made her a virgin. That she was a harlot we must not deny, lest we forget the mercy of him who set her free.”<sup>22</sup> Paradoxically, the Church is commanded to regard herself as the virginal Bride, and even as the Mother of Christ, and at the same time never to forget her origins, the shame of her former sins, because her salvation depends on that memory. If the Bride-Church keeps herself pure, she does so by virtue of a grace owing to her Spouse. The past is erased, completely left behind—and yet it remains present. Though the former evil of the Church’s sinful members is no longer active as such, the memory of it enters as a formal constituent into the present. The human beings who make up the Church know that unless grace continued to elevate them above themselves and to unite them with one another, they could easily fall back into sin at any moment.

*NIGRA SUM SED FORMOSA*

To underscore the absolute and ever-present requirement of conversion, several Fathers of the Church take a further step: the Church, they say, continues to live by the pardon that transforms her from a harlot into a holy Bride. The model of guilty past versus perfect present is too simple. God’s act of calling and gathering his People from sinful Babylon, the dwelling place of man after the Fall, is always new. What Origen says about the believer is true of the Church as a whole: “Blessed is he who is ever born of God. For the righteous man is not born of God just once, but constantly. In every good work, God gives birth to him. This can be explained by reference to the Savior.”<sup>23</sup> The whole dynamic

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22. Augustine, *Serm.* 213, 8, *Opere* (Latin-Italian edition) 32, no. 1 (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1984): 210–12 [as cited in CM].

23. Origen, *Homelia in Jer.* 9, 4, PG 13, 356–57, *Sources chrétiennes* 232 (1976): 392 [as cited in CM].

of Christian existence, indeed of Christianity itself, lies in this re-creation, this continual transformation of the prostitute into a Bride and faithful Mother of many children.<sup>24</sup>

Joseph Ratzinger has retrieved and developed this idea. Drawing on the Letter to the Romans (especially Rom 4:14, 16), he underscores the essential difference between the Old and the New Covenants. The former, Ratzinger says, is “conditional,” that is, bound up both with the conditions of the present eon and with the observance of God’s commandments (cf. Dt 11:22–32; ch. 28), while the latter is “unconditional,” founded as it is on the incarnation of God himself and on his acceptance of those who believe in Jesus Christ. The latter, then, is a Covenant that can no longer become obsolete: It is definitive, absolute, and eschatological, and it can no longer be invalidated by any transgression of the law. As Ratzinger explains:

The Church is not founded (as was Israel) on the morality of man, but rather on the grace issued against the amorality of man, on the incarnation of God. She is founded on an obstinacy—the obstinacy of a divine grace which refuses the chains of condition and has decided once and for all to save mankind. . . . The Church is the final, unsurpassable placement of the divine salvific operation within man[kind]. . . . Now, this final and unsurpassable character of the Church is rooted in the incarnation of the divine Word which is the concrete realization of the obstinacy of divine grace. In other words, the Church is the perpetual witness to God’s salvation of man the sinner. Subsequently, it is proper to the Church that the men who form her be sinners, because she is born from grace.<sup>25</sup>

In this context, Ratzinger cites Origen’s commentary on the well-known verse from the Song of Songs: “I am very dark, but comely” (Song 1:5), a commentary on which both Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar fruitfully drew. In her inmost nature, the Church is distinguished from the unbelieving Synagogue. Nevertheless, insofar as she is made up of believers

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24. Balthasar, CM, 207ff., 228ff., 264–65.

25. Joseph Ratzinger, “Freimut und Gehorsam,” in *Gesammelte Schriften* (= GS) 8/1, 448–67, at 454–55. Reprinted in English as: “Free Expression and Obedience in the Church,” in *The Church: Readings in Theology* (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1963), 194–217; citation at 201–02.

like ourselves, the Church in her concrete historical existence is in many respects still enmeshed with the Synagogue. "Were the bride to say that she had nothing black in her, she would be deceiving herself, and the truth would not be in her."<sup>26</sup> The fact that this bride, the figure of the Church, is sunburned betrays her humble, rural origin; the king stoops to her lowliness in loving her. But her color in no way detracts from her beauty, which charms the Bridegroom in spite of everything (Song 4:1ff.; 6:4; 7:7f.). The Church, which is the fruit of the Cross, has the right to feel assured of salvation only as long as she keeps her eyes fixed on the Cross of her Lord. This very gesture commits her to a path of conversion and repentance leading toward the Cross, which, as Balthasar says, "stands in an unimaginable position beyond all sin, even the ever-greater sin of the old and new bride."<sup>27</sup> This is also why the old economy, too, can never simply be left behind, but remains as the stock onto which the Church of the pagans must continually be grafted.

The Church is therefore always at once "immaculate" and "disfigured"; she is always at the same time "virgin" and "harlot," though of course always in different respects. To make this paradox comprehensible, Dionysius the Carthusian explains that "the whole, through the diversity of its parts, can get conflicting names." So that "the Church is called disfigured, estranged, bloodless, or whorish with regard to believers without charity or good works, yes, those who have been befouled by vice, whose souls are not brides of Christ but adulteresses of the devil."<sup>28</sup> Sin is not external to the Church; it is concomitant to her nature, insofar as the material of which this nature consists is as an assembly of sinners on the way to conversion, sinners for whom the Church, *Mater et Magistra*, assumes responsibility before God. There is indeed much of the Babylonian spirit within the Church-Jerusalem, and only on the last day will the weeds in it be separated from the wheat. Made up of sinners, the Church

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26. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Serm. in Cant.* 25, 3, *Sources chrétiennes* 431 (1998): 262 [as cited in CM].

27. Balthasar, CM, 208.

28. Dionysius the Carthusian, *In Cant.*, art. 12, *Opp* VII, 368B; art. 18, 406B; H. Riedlinger, "Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche in den lat. Hoheleide-kommentaren des MA," *BGPhThMA* 38, no. 3 (1958) [as cited in CM].

can only testify that she is what she is—spotless—by sheer grace. “So do not become proud, but stand in awe,” the Apostle warns his readers (Rom 11:20). As a concrete community of believers, she knows that she can never be sure of having crossed the threshold of conversion once and for all. She is, as de Lubac puts it, at the same time powerful and fragile; a harlot, she is holy only in her principle.<sup>29</sup> If it often seems that “all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Pt 3:4), this is because, as de Lubac goes on to note, “for the time being, the new world fits into the old one.”<sup>30</sup>

#### THE PARTIAL, TEMPORARY REALIZATIONS OF THE CHURCH

Ratzinger’s stress on this point, which is reminiscent of the teaching of de Lubac and Balthasar, also reflects his pastoral concern to show believers the path they have yet to travel before reaching their final fulfillment. On earth, Christian communion is achieved only to the extent that believers accept and live out the mission that Christ has given them: to bring peace to those who are far off (Eph 2:13, 17). In this regard, the provisional “putting aside” of Israel (Rom 11:15) serves to put Christians on their guard against the illusion that their own achievements are anything but provisional:

However important it is for the Church to grow into the unity of a single brotherhood, she must always remember that she is only one of two sons, one brother beside another, and that her mission is not to condemn the wayward brother, but to save him.<sup>31</sup>

There is no doubt that Ratzinger very decidedly goes beyond a classic, but simplistic reading of Rahab, which, while acknowledging that she is more than a converted harlot, prophethess,

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29. Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 289–91, at 289.

30. *Ibid.*, 167.

31. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 80.

or woman incorporated into the ecclesial community, nonetheless regards her—too simply—merely as a figure of the Church of the Gentiles, who have supposedly taken the place of the repudiated Synagogue. Instead, Ratzinger follows the more subtle interpretation of Origen,<sup>32</sup> who consistently sees the Old Testament as being entirely a type of, and an object of contemplation for, the Church: what was vitally true then necessarily remains so today. For Ratzinger, as for the Alexandrian, Rahab is the image of the Church of the Jews that now welcomes the Church of the pagans into its bosom. The latter, indeed, receives salvation and sanctification precisely by being grafted onto the People chosen from the beginning. The contention between Israel and the Church results from the central event of redemption, but this event does not admit of a univocal interpretation. The Church's relation to the Synagogue has a mysterious dialectical character. In her innermost awareness, the new Daughter of Zion, while recognizing the old Israel as her permanent root (Rom 11:16–20), also knows that the source of her holiness is the “folly of the Cross” (1 Cor 1:18). As she turns to face the Cross, which stands fixed ever before her, she realizes that she is at once *nigri* and *formosa*.

The liturgy itself is the best illustration of how the holiness of the Church does not exclude her continual need for conversion and repentance at the same time. The assembly convoked by God shares the same faith and, as God's new People, carries out a single liturgical action whose value is in a certain way independent not only of the quantity but also of the quality of the assembly's constituent members. On the other hand, the Church knows that she is a wayfarer. She knows that she is only the vessel of the divine presence that is ceaselessly confirmed and renewed in her, just as she knows that this presence alone confers upon her the holiness by which she lives. In this sense, she prays not only for her children, but also for herself, knowing as she does that the sanctification she bestows on her sinful members is itself sheer gift without which she, too, would be nothing more than the imperfect, fallible assembly of those sinners. In order to be what she is by grace, i.e., the “city of peace,” she continually seeks peace with God, and her worship accordingly takes the

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32. Origen, *Homelia in Jos.* I, 4; VI, 4 and esp. VII, 5, *Sources chrétiennes* 71 (1960): 104 and 206–08. Cf. Balthasar, *CM*, 215–17, esp. 217.

form of “a struggle for atonement, forgiveness, reconciliation.”<sup>33</sup> This is because she feels herself united in profound solidarity with human beings, incapable as they are of expiating their sins and of reestablishing their relationship with God. Insofar as it is a “memorial” of Christ’s suffering and death (1 Cor 11:24), the worship of the Christian community nicely expresses the nature of the Church considered as it were materially: an assembly of sinners called together by their Lord to commemorate his death and resurrection. In those who pray for purification, then, it is the Church who prays to her Lord, and she can be said to pray for herself insofar as she knows that “the great gesture of embrace emanating from the Crucified has not yet reached its goal; it has only just begun.”<sup>34</sup>

At the end of his life, Augustine sadly observed that the Bride without spot or wrinkle, whose praises he had sung, exists only in a very inchoate state here below. In her earthly condition, he remarked, the Church is an inextricable mixture of two warring kingdoms: *caritas* and *cupiditas*. Unlike the Donatists, who understood the Church as an assembly of the perfect or of the predestined saints, he consistently rejected an identification of the earthly Church with the already present fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. To understand the Church in such terms, Joseph Ratzinger comments, “in effect would be to deny her great eschatological future, the judgment and end in which everything will be transformed.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Ratzinger, like Augustine himself, knows that we cannot think even of the earthly Church as a blemished thing whose holiness is merely objective, or “institutional,” or as a mere mixture of good and evil that endures until the eschaton. The Church on earth, the Church man joins by baptism, is itself “the Jerusalem above. . . , our mother” (Gal 4:26), the “new city in which his new existence is to unfold.”<sup>36</sup> The earthly Church is the heav-

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33. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 35.

34. *Ibid.*, 50.

35. Ratzinger, “Free Expression and Obedience in the Church,” 203 [emended].

36. de Lubac, *Splendor of the Church*, 168.

only Church identifying herself with sinners before God in a gesture of solidarity and substitution. By the same token, the very holiness she receives solely as a divine gift, a gift continually bestowed and re-confirmed without any merit on her part, is also a property truly belonging to her, truly qualifying her existentially as a subject really distinct from that holiness itself. Exactly “*who*,” then, is this holy Church, whom we believe as a Mother that brings us regeneration?

#### THE CHURCH AND THE VIRGIN MARY

In order to resolve the aporia, it is necessary to delve more deeply into what Balthasar calls the “Marian principle” of the Church. The Church, he tells us, is the subject who, by infused divine grace, participates in the supreme, normative Subject, Jesus Christ, and in his consciousness. This grace of participation is offered to humanity in him and

through Christ and the sphere that is his (*en Christô*) and that he has prepared as Redeemer, namely, the Church. . . . Insofar as she makes to him the response of a woman and a bride, she has her supreme, normative subjectivity in Mary. Finally, insofar as the one grace streams through her, this grace makes all spirits, in all their personal varieties of missions and spiritual ways, converge in a single consciousness, opening in Mary to Christ, and through Christ to the Holy Spirit of the three-personal God.<sup>37</sup>

Mary, enabled to communicate the Divine Mystery by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, is the “true Eve, sole true Mother of all the living.”<sup>38</sup> She is the Mother of God insofar as she is the “principle, prototype, and summing-up of the Church.”<sup>39</sup> In a word, Mary is the archetype of the perfect Bride, the “personal center” who is “the full realization of her idea as Church.”

Whereas the act of faith is always incomplete in sinners,

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37. Balthasar, “Who Is the Church?,” 179–80.

38. de Lubac, *Splendor of the Church*, 278.

39. *Ibid.*, 316, citing Karl Barth, who thus stigmatizes the Catholic “heresy.”



such as believers must confess themselves to be, it is perfect in Mary, especially at the moment of her Yes to her Son's sacrifice on the Cross. Correcting, or rather supplementing, Augustine, de Lubac explains how the Virgin can stand as the foundation of the motherhood of the sanctifying Church: While she is of course a member of the Church, saved like all believers by redeeming grace, Mary's mode of membership is so eminent that she can truly be called the Church's Mother. For, de Lubac goes on to write, "she is redeemed in a manner altogether different," a manner he explains with a citation from Newman: "She was included, together with the whole race, in Adam's sentence; . . . she incurred his debt, as we do, but . . . for the sake of him who was to redeem her and us upon the Cross, to her the debt was remitted by anticipation."<sup>40</sup> In this sense Mary "precedes" the Church as an eminent model, as a personal pattern whom God places before the entire People of God: the Mother of All Graces and the Mother of Sorrows united to Christ as he bears the sins of mankind.

We cannot say without qualification, then, that on Golgotha the Son suffered for Mary as he suffered for sinners. The Virgin is a gift that the Father and the Spirit prepare for the Son from the beginning in order to assure him of the efficacy of the redemption. Mary is pre-redeemed, and this privilege granted her in view of her son's foreseen merits enables her to accompany him towards the Cross. Because she is the Immaculate Conception, she can begin showing the Word the value of his coming passion from the moment he takes flesh. Indeed, she can even be his helpmate on the way leading to the Cross: Mary is the true "First Eve" at the side of the "New Adam" (Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 15:45), the pre-existing Son (Jn 8:58). Now, just as this First Eve was fitted from the beginning for cooperation in the work of salvation,<sup>41</sup> in her the whole of humanity, and therefore

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40. Ibid., 335, citing J. H. Newman, "The Belief of Catholics Concerning the Blessed Virgin, as distinct from their Devotion to her," in *A Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D., on Occasion of His Eirenicon: Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching*, vol. 2 (London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), 26–76, at 48.

41. Adrienne von Speyr, *Maria in der Erlösung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1978), esp. 19–20. Cf. Jacques Servais, "Mary's Role in the Incarnation," *Communio* 30 (Spring 2003): 5–25.

the whole of the Church, is included in the Passion. They take their place within the very act by which Christ atoned for our sins in our stead even before we could actively put our faith in him (Rom 5:8, 10). The Passion occurred at a precise moment in history, yet it remains an ever-present event, because faith in this saving act does not depend on the inchoate holiness of believers, but has been perfectly fulfilled from the beginning in Mary. Mary, in fact, is the Church in the fullness of her origin. She plays this role thanks both to her Yes at the Annunciation and to its renewal at the foot of the Cross, where she repeats her unconditional assent to the Son's redemptive love. For the union between God and man in the (divine) person of Jesus Christ was not accomplished in Mary without her consent and cooperation; the hypostatic union is already, as such, a nuptial, ecclesial mystery. From the very outset, the redemptive Incarnation includes the Virgin in the work of our salvation. All the graces coming from the Word-made-flesh pass through her mediation. Mary's human (spiritual) motherhood of Christians, being identical to her universal mediation of grace, is equally universal in its turn.

Drawing on the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, then, we have sought to answer the question about *who* the Church is (and not just *what* she is at the objective, institutional level), by highlighting the real distinction between the Church-Bride—whose archetype is the “woman” at the foot of the Cross (Jn 19:26)—and the Bridegroom, i.e., Christ the one and only Redeemer. The Church is the *immaculata ex maculatis* (Ambrose), unstained yet from the stained, holy because “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:2). Augustine compares her to the dazzling garments of the Transfigured Lord: “his clothing on the mountain, which shone like pure white snow, signified the Church cleansed of every stain of sin.”<sup>42</sup> She is the New Eve who bears in her womb the destiny of Israel and of humanity and who, in her *fiat*, recapitulates the history of both and places it, whole and entire, under the sovereignty of the New Adam. She is the great believer who, from the first moment of her conception, offers perfect, loving obedience to him, the Man (Jn 19:5) in whom the plenitude of the divine world is concentrated and the whole of the created world is ful-

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42. Augustine, *Sermo in Psalmum 50*, 12, *Opere* 25 (1982): 1312 [translated from Latin].

filled (Col 2:9). There is never a time when she has not said and lived out a free Yes to his work of vicarious substitution, and her Yes contains in advance every Yes on the part of believers. She is the Mediatrix of All Graces because from now on her protective mantle covers all sinners. “No one, whether he wants to or not, fails to find room under her cloak,” Balthasar explains.

For when her Son has by his suffering chosen all people to be his brothers and sisters, she can be none other than the mother of all these. And since first of all she was his physical and spiritual mother and he never grows out of being her son, the word she puts in with him for her children cannot be in vain.<sup>43</sup>

She shares most intimately the Crucified Lord’s awareness that he bears the sin of the world before the Father; being all-pure, she is uniquely able to measure the gravity of sin, to gauge its effect on the Son. In her profound communion with him, at the time and place where he confesses and atones for our sins in our stead, she insistently pleads with sinners to go to him and to “do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5; cf. Gn 41:55). She is the Mother of Sorrows whom her Son has given the grace of collaboration in the redemption. By the same token, she is the Mother whom the believer, like John, is called to take into his home, to receive as a guide in following her Son through the confession both of his, the believer’s, own sins and of those of his brethren and of the Church.

#### THE CHALLENGE FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY

Let us be clear to avoid misunderstanding: the confession to which the *Casta meretrix* is invited today should obey the fundamental criterion of prudence, which is inseparable from transparency. The victim of injustice or persecution normally seeks to defend himself, and such self-defense is perfectly legitimate, even for a Christian. In many cases, it will be not only his right but his duty to defend the truth. In dealing with calumniators, Ignatius of Loyola routinely had recourse to the courts: he did not

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43. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mary for Today* (Middle Green, England: St. Paul Publications, 1987; reprinted San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 73.

merely hope for an eventual recantation, but demanded an actual trial in due form, for this alone, he thought, redounded to the greater service and glory of God. There is no license to abdicate responsibility when truth is at stake. If an individual Christian chooses to forego self-defense in some particular circumstance, this choice can only reflect a special call, a prompting of the Holy Spirit who has placed in his heart the desire to imitate the Son beyond the requirements of common Christian judgment and reason. More often than not, however, the Christian who has made a serious examination of conscience realizes that the truth is not all on his side. In fact, Mary points him toward the humble admission of his own sins or at least of his failings and compromises with sin. The Universal Mediatrix thus places him on the path of a confession that can only set into greater relief the beauty of the Church of which he is a member.

Alluding to the seemingly hopeless stand-off between a Catholic Church tempted to close in on herself and an increasingly secular modern culture, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, in 1952:

[The Church], the “closed garden,” . . . the veiled Bride of the thousand monasteries, has been opened up by force and almost ravaged, now that the feet of the nameless multitudes tramp heavily through her soul. . . . [A] wall has collapsed in the heart of the Church herself, and where previously only stone seemed to meet the touch of the voluntarily cloistered nun, there is now warm and living flesh: the flesh of the unknown brother who sleeps and dwells, works, suffers and dies in the next room. The Nun Church must learn not to be alarmed at this proximity.<sup>44</sup>

Now, is there any reason to be astonished that the “proximity” Balthasar speaks of should make it easier for the world to discover blemishes that we Christians would prefer to keep hidden? Why not accept this situation as an opportunity to overcome the ever-recurring temptation to dissimulate? According to Balthasar, the old methods are “no longer possible in an age in which the press and the other media ruthlessly turn their spotlights on every detail of human affairs.” As he then goes on to explain:

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44. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions: On the Church in This Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 100.

If in earlier ages a loyal “ecclesial prudence” could still be expressed in an apologetics that veiled and disguised certain aspects of the life of the Church and individual Christians, . . . [nowadays] the real scandal consists in the fact that the Church at all costs wants to hide the truth of what is common knowledge. . . . The scandal can be erased, if at all, only through humility.<sup>45</sup>

The great remedy for this scandal, which results from mediocrity, hypocrisy, and falsehood, is a Church who dares to humble herself! If anything can do it, then humility—and it alone—can wipe away the scandal.<sup>46</sup> Of course, humility before the Truth must not be confused with grovelling before the *Zeigeist*.

Not only Christians, but even the Church herself, will need to acquire something of the serenity of the martyrs in order to face the challenging humiliations—deserved or undeserved—that come to her from the world. “Christians should not react like overdicate sissies if now and then a justified or even (in God’s name) unjustified blow . . . should graze them.” This is, indeed, a grace of purification that can be beneficial to the whole body: “A good field of wheat is always grateful for a cleansing thunder-shower. Even if a few stalks should break, most of them come out refreshed and breathing more freely.”<sup>47</sup> The truth that sets us free often shows itself to us sinners in the form of a confession of sin. The *Casta meretrix* is not afraid of such confession, even when it is forced from her, because she knows that it does not conflict with the holiness that she is also commanded, to her consternation (cf. Lk 1:29), to acknowledge before the world. She sees in this the invitation to an “unveiling” that is painful but salutary. When accepted and lived from the heart, it immediately produces a beneficial effect. “He who does what is true comes to the light,” says St. John (Jn 3:21). And St. Paul remarks that someone who is open to the truth is “light in the Lord” (Eph 5:8), because “anything that becomes visible is light” (5:14).—*Translated by Michael J. Miller* □

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45. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 349.

46. Cf. Balthasar, *Bernanos*, 358.

47. *Ibid.*, 597.