

“SACROSANCTA ECCLESIA”:
THE HOLY CHURCH OF SINNERS

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“The Church . . . becomes holy through the
holiness of her heavenly spouse.”



In the Catholic churches throughout the world, every Holy Saturday night the deacon intones the ancient hymn *Exultet* in which the most holy Church (*sacrosancta Ecclesia*) offers to the Father the praise of the Paschal candle. The Latin original “*sacrosancta Ecclesia*” expresses the holiness of the Church more emphatically than “*sancta Ecclesia*” would, yet, in spite of the former’s apparently unrealistic meaning, we often find it in the liturgy and ecclesial documents. In the past, pious Catholics also used to speak about “Holy Mother Church.” In recent years, however, many pious Catholics were deeply shaken in their inherited belief regarding the Church’s holiness. Although most of them remained loyal, they no longer refer to the Church as “holy mother.” The recurring stories on the sexual abuse scandal made their childhood catechism lesson on the holy Church less credible.

In this essay I plan to respond to this situation by reviewing the theme of holiness and sin in the Church as it appears in the Scriptures, tradition, and experience of the Church.

The following issues will be treated:

1. The experience of God's holiness in the Old Testament
2. Jesus Christ, the "Holy One of God"
3. The holy Church of God
4. Sin and holiness in the Church
5. The holy Church and evangelization

1. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S HOLINESS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Holiness resists any attempt at a definition since it refers to what is divine and therefore marked by the unfathomable depth of the mystery of God. It marks God as God in contradistinction to all that is not God. Everything else is holy to the extent that it belongs to God. Thus all that is taken out from the sphere of the profane (the secular, "this-worldly" realm¹) and dedicated to God—such as the Temple, the City of Jerusalem, the priests, the commandments, the people of Israel, in fact the whole earth—is holy in the ontological sense of belonging to God.

Although we cannot grasp and express the reality of God's holiness, we can describe its effects on the people who experience it. Moses is attracted to the burning bush that is not consumed in the desert. As he draws closer, he is stopped by the voice: "Come no nearer. Remove the sandals from your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Ex 3:4–5). Yet the mysterious fire of God's holiness does not harm Moses, and God sends him on a saving mission to his people. God does not reveal his name to Israel through Moses, yet this non-revelation ("I am who am") will be the sacred name by which the Israelites can call upon him.² He is absolute and unapproachable mystery; nonetheless he is present in a pillar of cloud during the day and in fire at

1. Profane, secular, or "this-worldly" does not mean sinful; rather, it means created realities in their relative autonomy as distinguished from what is divine.

2. The sacred name YHWH, translated in the LXX as *Ho Ón*, has also an implicit ontological meaning: "the One Who Is," but the analogical meaning of being, if understood in the sense of greater dissimilarity than similarity, preserves mystery.

night as he leads Israel through the desert. He does not disdain to dwell in the midst of a people of erring and hardened hearts and is not ashamed to be called their God. But Israel’s stubborn disobedience stirs up his wrath to destroy the sinners.

In the call of Isaiah we notice the same polarity regarding the experience of holiness. Isaiah is struck with terror when he sees God seated on a lofty throne in the Temple. He thinks he will die for he is sinful and lives among a sinful people, and now he has seen God. He is convinced of the Old Testament belief that “one cannot see God and live” (Ex 33:20). Yet, as soon as his lips are cleansed with a burning piece of coal by a seraph, he volunteers to be God’s messenger: “Send me,” he exclaims (Is 6:1–8). Rudolf Otto is right: the experience of holiness is the experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: a mystery both frightening and irresistibly fascinating.³ We find the same polarity in the experience of Jacob’s night-long wrestling with God (Gn 32:23–31): a terrifying and yet uplifting event. It forecasts the entire history of Israel as a painful and gradual educational process in which Israel has to learn how to live in the presence of the holy God and to act according to his will. We find the climax of this revelation in the book of Hosea. After God punishes Israel for all her breaches of fidelity, he reveals to her the inmost secret of his holiness:

My heart is overwhelmed
My pity is stirred.
I will not give vent to my blazing anger,
I will not destroy Ephraim again;
For I am God and not man,
The Holy One present among you;
I will not let the flames consume you (Hos 11:8–9).

Here it becomes clear that God’s holiness is different from any human quality not because it is an alien and destructive force but because it is an infinitely intense fire of love. “He is God and not man,” so his love is incomparably greater than ours and unshakably faithful in spite of the accumulating infidelity of his people.

3. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press: London, 1958).

The holy God of Israel demands that his people live up to his holiness: “Be holy as I am holy” (Lev 11:44, 20:26). Exactly because God has chosen her and consecrated her to be holy in an ontological sense, Israel must become holy also in the ethical sense, that is, in her hearts and in her actions. Yet she has failed time and again. In fact, God has often complained through his prophets that Israel, his spouse, became a harlot by going after alien gods. In punishment God destroyed first the Kingdom of Israel, then that of Judah. Nevertheless, in Isaiah’s words, he left for himself a “holy trunk,” a holy remnant (Is 6:13).

2. JESUS CHRIST, THE “HOLY ONE OF GOD”

While the just men and women of the Old Testament anticipate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the holiness of the renewed people of God, the form of their holiness is the yearning for—and the expectation of—a new beginning, a new creation in which the Law of God will be inscribed in the hearts of his people, and he will espouse the remnants of the former harlot Israel forever in justice, love, and fidelity (Hos 2:13).

When in Jesus Christ God begins to fulfill these promises, he does not save Israel and humankind from the outside, as it were, by a totally foreign divine intervention; rather, he does it from within, by becoming man, a man of Israel, the son of Joseph and Mary, the offspring of great men and women, saints and sinners, the son of David, Abraham, and Adam. Jesus, however, is not conceived by Joseph’s seed but by the Holy Spirit, therefore he is the *hagion gennómenon*, the “holy thing,” the Holy One of God (Lk 1:35). In him the fullness of divinity and, therefore, the fullness of holiness dwells among his people in a bodily form (Col 2:9). This presence is no longer conditioned by Israel’s fidelity to the Covenant, as it was in the Temple of the Old Covenant. God had left the Temple before the Babylonians occupied and destroyed it (Ez 10:18–23). In Jesus, however, the Holy One of Israel is inseparably and unconditionally united with his people for all eternity. His body is now the center and source of God’s holy presence, dwelling upon the earth and becoming holy food for all believers. Yet, apart from

some anticipated revelations of his glory⁴ as power and majesty (Mt 14:33; 17:2), Christ's body before the Resurrection reveals his glory as weakness and lowliness, as compassionate love that accepts the ultimate desecration of his body on the Cross. It is no accident that the Church kneels and sings at the foot of the Cross on Good Friday: "holy God, holy and immortal, have mercy on us."

Jesus did not come only to manifest his divine holiness but also to share it with us. He prays to the Father that his disciples may be consecrated in the truth (Jn 17:17–19), and on the Cross he hands himself over for her people, so that "he may sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:25–27). Thus, the ultimate humiliation of the Crucifixion brings about the messianic wedding feast, the transformation of the harlot into the chaste Bride of the Lamb. Jesus and the Church are so intimately united in the most perfect spiritual marriage as Bridegroom and Bride that they become one body and one spirit (Cf. 1 Cor 6:17; 12:12). The Church, then, becomes holy through the holiness of her heavenly spouse.

The Gospel of John completes this Pauline teaching by showing the role of the Holy Spirit in the birth of the Church. Jesus hands over the Spirit with his last breath on the Cross, and out of his pierced side blood and water flow, Baptism and Eucharist, the two Church-constituting sacraments (Jn 19:34–37). At his first appearance to the disciples, Jesus breathes into them the Holy Spirit, the source of all forgiveness and sanctification. The entire mission of the Church is foretold here (including the sacrament of Reconciliation) as the continuation of the breathing of the Holy Spirit into all those who are receptive to it. The forgiving and sanctifying mission of the Holy Spirit through the apostolic mission extends the realm of light and holiness into the darkness of the world, which is still lying in the power of the Evil One (Jn 20:19–23; 1 Jn 5:19).

4. The glory of God is synonymous with holiness; it means its manifestation.

3. THE HOLY CHURCH OF GOD

In the New Testament the adjective “holy” is applied not to the Church but to her members. St. Paul writes to his faithful as to “the chosen holy ones” (*klétois hagiois*). Since they belong to the Mother Church, the Christians in Jerusalem are in a special way the “holy ones” (Rom 15:25–26). Closely following the Old Testament, the term has a twofold but interrelated meaning. All Christians are holy because they are chosen out of this world and transferred unto the possession of God. “Having been registered” through baptism “unto the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” their persons and in particular their bodies no longer belong to this world but are Christ’s possession.⁵ This ontological holiness, their becoming one body and one spirit with the Lord and with each other, calls for ethical holiness. Since Christ died for us, therefore we belong not to ourselves but to him, so we should live not for ourselves but for the one who died for us (Rom 14:7–8). This is the foundation and compendium of the Christian’s moral life. Paul’s priestly ministry aims at the same goal: that the self-offering of the Gentiles may be sanctified by the Holy Spirit and become an acceptable sacrifice to God (Rom 15:16).

In the history of the Church we find the first occurrences of the phrase *hagia ecclesia* (holy church) in the letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Trallians, in the martyrdom of Polycarp, and three times in the Shepherd of Hermas, all dating from the second century. In the Nicene–Constantinopolitan creed it occurs along with the three other essential marks, “one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church.”

For the Fathers, the Church in the full sense of the word is the “glorious church without spot or wrinkle,” the spouse whom Christ washed clean by his sacrifice on the Cross. They call this perfect church, the church of those who are spiritually mature, “the bride without blemish” (*sponsa sine macula*) in reference to Ephesians 5:27. Beginning with Origen, the Church-

5. The baptismal formula of Mt 28:19—“baptize them unto the name (*eis to onoma*) of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”—denotes the original meaning of registering something or someone unto the name of the owner: The one who is baptized becomes the possession of the Triune God and therefore holy.

Bride is identified with the bride in search of the bridegroom in the Song of Songs, and so is the “beautiful soul” (*anima decora*) who is the perfect Christian. Using the titles of the bride in the Song of Songs, the Church and the perfect soul are both called “dove without any blemish, a unique dove, my immaculate dove” (*columba sine macula, columba unica, columba mea immaculata*). The Fathers put these words of invitation from the Song of Songs onto the lips of the Bridegroom:

See the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of pruning the vines has come, and the song of the dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs and the vines, in bloom, give forth their fragrance. Arise my beloved, my beautiful one and come. (2:11–13)

Christ has only one immaculate spouse, the Church to whom he is always faithful. Therefore no soul may be united to Christ in holiness without the Church. She must embody the Church-Spouse in herself; in Origen’s words, she must become an *anima ecclesiastica*, “an ecclesial soul,” who realizes in herself the spousal relationship of the Church and participates in the intimate union between Christ and the Church.⁶ In this context we can understand why for St. Bernard and many other Fathers Christ has both one spouse and many spouses: the many spouses participate in the relationship to Christ of the one perfect Spouse, the Church.⁷ The individual is sanctified to the extent that he or she becomes that one unique Spouse. For this reason there is no holiness outside the Church, and growth in holiness means a growing identification with the disposition and activity of the one Church-Bride.⁸

6. “Therefore, if you are an ecclesial soul, you are better than all other souls; if you are not, you are not an ecclesial [soul]” (Origen, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 1:10).

7. “We ourselves are the Spouse, and if this does not seem to you unbelievable, we all are one spouse and the souls of each are individual spouses” (St. Bernard, *Sermon on the First Sunday after the Octave of Epiphany*).

8. The insistence of the Fathers on the one Church-Bride without whom there is no sanctification is not incompatible with the teaching of Vatican II that admits the possibility of salvation outside the Church. The grace offered to those outside the Church is the grace of Christ and therefore, to the extent

What has been intuited from the beginning is articulated conceptually only much later, a process of development culminating in the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. This church of the perfect, the immaculate dove, can in the full sense be only the heavenly church: the immaculate Virgin Mary in the most perfect way and around her all the saints sharing in her holiness.⁹ The Church on earth is always in process, transitioning from harlot to chaste harlot, from black beauty to white dawn, from young girl to perfect Bride. It is the Bridegroom who effects this purification:

. . . whatever he found repugnant in the bride he took away and affixed it to the cross. He took away through the tree where he endured her sins on the tree. What was naturally hers he assumed and put on himself, what was his own and divine, he gave [to his bride] . . . so that all that belongs to the Bridegroom may belong to the Bride.¹⁰

Through her union with the Bridegroom the Bride becomes mother and thus associated with the sanctifying action of the Bridegroom. The active originator of sanctification is Christ, but Mother Church receives and nurtures the “seed” of the Bridegroom to full growth by her prayers, sacraments, and teaching. As Blessed Isaac of Stella explains:

Every faithful soul is understood to be a spouse of the Word of God, the mother, the daughter, and the sister of Christ, both virgin and fertile.¹¹

According to Isaac’s wonderful formulation:

The almighty Christ is able to do everything by himself, that is, to baptize, consecrate the Eucharist, ordain [ministers], and so on. But the humble and faithful Bridegroom does not want to do anything without the

it is accepted, it conforms the non-Christians to Christ and thus joins them in some real sense to the Church who in her saints reflects Christ to the world.

9. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 227–28.

10. Isaac of Stella, *Sermo* 11:10.

11. Id., *Sermo* 51:8.

Bride. Therefore, what God has joined, man should not separate.¹²

The implications of this unbreakable marriage are far-reaching. The Divine Office is the prayer of the Church not just by a legal decree of Church authority. When we pray it, we truly share the prayer of the one Spouse, Mary, and all the saints who already enjoy the vision of God as well as those on earth in whom the Holy Spirit is present and active. Moreover, when the priest prays before holy communion that Christ “may not look at my sins but at the faith of your Church,” the *fides ecclesiae* is not an abstract notion. It is the faith of the one Spouse, that of Mary and of all those in heaven and on earth who possess the supernatural virtue of faith.¹³

Perhaps we can make the following distinction regarding what traditional theology calls the two types of efficacy among the sacramental activities of the Church: the sacramentals, that is, prayers and blessings instituted by the Church, work *ex opere operantis ecclesiae*, while the sacraments, instituted by Christ, work *ex opere operato*.¹⁴ The sacramentals, then, are primarily the prayers of the holy Church accompanied by Christ who gives weight and efficacy to his Bride’s prayer. The sacraments, on the other hand, are primarily Christ’s sanctifying actions, mediated for us by the faith of the Church.¹⁵

In the light of the above considerations, we see what an impoverishment of sacramental theology resulted from the popular Catholic notion that the sacraments are merely visible signs

12. Id., *Sermo* 11:14.

13. Balthasar in several texts interprets 1 Cor 13:13: “so faith, hope, and love remain” in the sense that all the three theological virtues remain in heaven, but operate in a different way. If faith is sharing in the knowledge of God here on earth, in heaven this share will be perfected: We will see the Father by sharing in the face-to-face vision of the Son.

14. The free translations of *ex opere operantis ecclesiae*: it is effective by what the Church does; *ex opere operato*: it is effective by the rite performed.

15. In what de Lubac calls the “Great Tradition,” the faith of the Church does not mean only what the Church believes but also the subject of that faith, the holy Church, the Spouse of Christ, Mary and the saints. This is the reason why the faith of the Church is always informed by love according to St. Thomas (*De veritate* q. 14, a. 11), since it is the faith of the saints.

of invisible grace. The formula is true but inadequate and potentially misleading. It can lead us to neglect the personal structure of the sacraments: the principle of *ex opere operato* in St. Thomas's theology means the unconditional presence of the personal sanctifying activity of Christ through the performance of the rite as well as the receptive action of the faith of the Church.

4. SIN AND HOLINESS IN THE CHURCH

While the authors of the New Testament and the Fathers were aware of the lofty vision of the Church as the Holy Spirit-filled Bride, they had to acknowledge also the reality of sin in the Church: Evidently, none of the local churches could be seen to fully embody the spotless spouse of Christ. Paul's letters to the churches, and in particular his two letters to the Corinthians, deal with cases of grave sin that called for temporary exclusion from the community. St. Augustine and some other Fathers explained this conflict between belief in the immaculate Bride-Church and the presence of sinners in the Church by the following distinction: The sinners only appear to be within the Church for they are there only "by body" and not "by heart," and so they do not belong to the Holy Church of God, to "that unique dove, modest and chaste, the spouse without blemish or stain."¹⁶ This view, however, that sinners only appear to belong to the Church has led, before and after Augustine, to heretical or near heretical beliefs, as many succumbed to the temptation of restricting church membership to a pure church of the Spirit and omitting Augustine's concession that sinners belong by body (*corpore*) to the Church. Montanists, Donatists, Novatianists, the Cathari, and the followers of Wycliffe all reduced the Church in one way or another to "the pure" ones or "spiritual" elect. The Catholic view has always maintained that the faithful in grave sins still in some sense belong to the Church; moreover, the holy Church prays for them and calls them to penance and full participation in her life.

16. See Augustine, *De baptismo* 6:3, 28:39. He, however, acknowledged the validity of the baptism of heretics and of grave sinners so that in case they return to the Church there was no need for rebaptism. Thus he implied that sinners belong to the Church in some way: *corpore* but not *corde*.

As a reaction against the Protestant tendency to emphasize the importance of the invisible church of true believers, post-Tridentine Catholic theology defined membership in the Church by solely external criteria: confession of the same creed, acknowledgment of the Church’s sacraments, and subjection to the authority of legitimate pastors, principally to the Roman Pontiff.

Lumen gentium (=LG) of Vatican II avoided the term church membership since it cannot express the many different ways of belonging to the Catholic Church. According to LG those are

fully incorporated into the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept its whole structure and all the means of salvation that have been established within it, and within its visible framework are united to Christ. (LG, 14)

Thus, the Council restored the role of the “possession” of the Holy Spirit and union with Christ as essential to the nature of the Church. The perennial *sensus fidei* has now been confirmed by the Magisterium, the *sensus fidei* that has always maintained that the Church is most intensely present among those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells and so belong to Christ. On the basis of *Lumen gentium* we can now show that the objective holiness of the Church as an institution is based on her union with Christ and his holy Church-Bride who uphold the institution until the end of history.

Since it is Christ who works through the Church’s rites, the sacraments sanctify the worthy recipients regardless of the holiness of the minister. The teaching of the Church is preserved in the Church in spite of, and at times through, unworthy bishops and popes. The Church offices of deacon, priest, and bishop, and in particular that of the bishop of Rome, remain sacred in spite of the sinfulness of the office holders. In this context it becomes evident that the above belief has nothing to do with magic but is rooted in the christological and pneumatological mystery of the Church. Christ has given himself over to the Church completely and irrevocably. He has united the renewed Israel to himself so that, as said before, he has become one body and one spirit with her. The basic structures of the institution, then—sacraments, teaching, office—

are sacred and indestructible because they are the ways in which the one Bride of Christ operates, the Bride Mother with whom and through whom Christ sanctifies through the Holy Spirit all those who are open to his grace.

All graces come from Christ's sacrifice present in the Church's Eucharist, including the graces given to those outside the institutional structures of the Church, who always prays for all men and women. We may even speak about non-Christian saints who, for reasons outside their fault, have not found the Church. Yet, since they were sanctified by the grace of Christ, they reveal some of Christ's virtues. Two examples may suffice. According to Chinese sources Confucius (Kung-Fu-Tzu) was such an honest and irreproachable public servant of a prince that the prince could not tolerate his righteous deeds and fired him. Then Confucius wandered around in the provinces of China and offered his services to rulers, but none of them was willing to hire him. Thus, he became a relatively unknown master for a few disciples and only after his death was he acknowledged as the unparalleled moral master of Chinese history. He taught that one should strive for Goodness (*jen*) and Heaven gives everyone the power of virtue (*te*) to obtain Goodness. But he also acknowledged that neither he nor others whom he knew had ever realized this Goodness in their lives.

Another example is Mahatma Gandhi, who preached non-violent resistance to, and non-hatred of, the British oppressors and was killed by one of his compatriots for he opposed the war between India and Pakistan. He had a special love for the *dalits*, the outcasts of Indian society, and called them children of God. In both men we discover certain features of Christ: indomitable courage to teach and live justice and goodness, and in the case of Gandhi, dying as a martyr for preaching peace and love.¹⁷ If it is true that these "saints" are conformed to Christ in some important ways, they must have been molded by the Spirit of Christ, the "finger of God" who carves out the features of Christ in us. Then also the "saints" outside the institutional boundaries of the Church belong in some real sense to the Church, the Body of Christ.¹⁸

17. Cf. Roch Kereszty, *Christianity Among Other Religions: Apologetics in a Contemporary Context* (New York: Alba House, 2006), 79–85, 152–53.

18. I present these two men as highly probable examples of some Christic

Having seen the indestructible holiness of the Bride-Church rooted in the spousal love of Christ, we are now in a better position to appreciate what *Lumen gentium* says about sin in the Church:

[T]he Church containing sinners in her own bosom, is at one and the same time holy and always in need of purification and it pursues unceasingly penance and renewal. (LG, 8)

Confirming the perennial tradition of the Church, the Council refuses to exclude sinners from the Church, but at the same time it also refuses to call the Church herself sinful. The Council evidently could not do otherwise since, according to Ephesians 5:25–27 and her constant tradition, the Church is the spotless Bride of Christ and thereby his Body itself. Thus the Church, insofar as she is the holy Bride of Christ, cannot commit a sin. Nevertheless, she accepts full solidarity with her sinful members, does penance for them, and thus constantly purifies and renews her earthly countenance, disfigured and soiled as it is by sinful Christians. It is important to see that the holiness of the spotless Bride has nothing to do with scorn or indifference toward sinners. Since her holiness is the holiness of Christ, she continues in history the mission of Christ who has come to seek what has been lost, goes after the straying sheep, takes upon himself not only the sins of her members but the sins of the world, and accepts to be counted among the wicked by hanging on a cross between two criminals. God made him to be sin, according to Paul, so that we may become God’s righteousness in him (2 Cor 5:21). According to St. Thomas, Christ “as it were, ascribes to himself all the sins of the human race.”¹⁹ Thus, the Church fully purified in heaven and on the way to purification on earth (and probably also in Purgatory²⁰) unites herself in compassion

features in their attitudes and actions, rather than as a suggestion for their canonization.

19. ST III, q. 46, a. 6.

20. There is no consensus among theologians whether or not souls in Purgatory can help the rest of the Church while they are totally dependent on the help of the Church in heaven and on earth.

and prayer with her sinful members on earth and with all sinners. In addition to compassion and prayer, the Church on earth also does penance for her sinful members and, as her Divine Master, carries the burden of all the sinners of the world. Ratzinger beautifully summarizes the relationship between the Church of sinners and the holy Church. He asks the rhetorical question: If the Church is the manifestation of Christ's holiness who enters into full solidarity with sinners, then

is it not appropriate that the Church appear in inseparable communion with sin and with the sinners in order to continue the destiny of the Lord and his carrying of us all with him? If so, then the proper, new, and true holiness of God's love would manifest itself in the unholy holiness of the Church in contrast to the human expectation of Purity. This holiness would not stand in aristocratic distance from the untouchable Pure One but would mix itself with the filth of the world in order to overcome it. It would express itself—in opposition to the ancient notion of purity—as essentially love, which means standing for the other, taking over the burden of the other, carrying the other, and thereby redeeming him.²¹

5. THE HOLY CHURCH AND EVANGELIZATION

Today, many would answer the question: "Why did you leave the Church?" by "I left because of the Church." Some, because they found the Church too holy for them, calling for a moral life they found too demanding. Others, however, whose sincerity we can hardly call into question, say that they left because they found in the Church only a soulless bureaucracy or a scandal-ridden institution. Some had a bad experience with a priest, not necessarily a case of sexual abuse but a lack of personal care or understanding. Briefly, these people left because they did not find Christ in the Church.

On the other hand, if we interview those who have found Christ, we discover, in a great variety of ways, some form of ecclesial mediation. Even those who had come to Christ by a

21. Joseph Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes. Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1969), 245 (translation mine).

spiritual experience apart from any visible ecclesial setting began to search afterward for a Christian community where they could find the Christ whom they had encountered in a private experience. The story of Paul is paradigmatic for a certain type of conversion: in a personal encounter with the risen Christ he was instructed to go to the church in Damascus where he would be told what to do. Had these people not found the community that had convinced them of the permanent presence of Christ in their midst, their faith could not have grown beyond a lonely yearning for the presence of Christ in this world.

In other cases, the encounter with holy Christians gave the first impetus to the process of conversion. For instance, searching for God or for some ultimate meaning in their lives, they met a person or a community that radiated goodness, peace, joy, and a readiness to forgive and love. Such an encounter has the potential to draw the one searching to discover the "secret" that makes such a life possible.

A few examples from my own experience may concretize the above description. I think of the love of the imprisoned abbot who prayed every day for his torturers; the priest absolving the dying judge who had condemned him to prison; the young girl who, released from Auschwitz and hearing that Hitler committed suicide, quite naturally prayed the Office of the Dead for him; the love of the nun whose spontaneous smile enraged her prison guards; the love of the young university student, who, bursting with energy and happiness, visited and served the poor in secret.

Those who were intrigued to search for the secret of people like these found out that faith in Jesus sustained them. And so they concluded that Jesus must be real, alive, and powerful. Yet not everybody who met these holy people sensed their mystery. Therefore the case of those who encountered Christ through people presupposes an inner working of grace that inspired in them a sensitivity to discover Christ in the holy men and women they encountered.

Thus, in both types of conversion outlined above we find two kinds of causes, an inner and an external one: the inward experience of grace and a visible encounter with the Church through some of her members or her communities. In each encounter with the Church it is essential that the searchers find

Christ present in that Church member or Church community. In other words, the searchers must encounter the holy Church. Once their faith has become stronger and deeper, converts can see that the holy Church does not disown her sinful members (even if in case of grave sin she excludes them from sacramental communion) but rather carries the burden of their sins and intercedes for them. In fact, since Christ is present in her and acts in her, the Church carries not only the sins of her members but those of all human beings by helping them, by suffering, and interceding for them.

CONCLUSION

God's holiness refers to what characterizes God as God. He reveals his holiness in the Old Testament as a deadly threat to sinful man but simultaneously as an infinitely attractive mystery. Israel learns through the prophet Hosea that God's holiness is so dreadful not because it is destructive but because it is a love that exceeds man's endurance, a love whose fire mortal man cannot bear. In spite of Israel's infidelities God does not disdain to become the Holy One of Israel who dwells in the Temple among his people. Yet Israel's sins eventually arouse God's wrath: his glory abandons the Temple and Jerusalem is devastated by Babylon. Although God's glory returns after the exile, Israel's future remains unclear.

God's presence becomes unconditionally guaranteed in Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, in whom the fullness of divinity and thus the fullness of holiness dwells. In Jesus' passion, death, and Resurrection, God's holiness or glory reveals itself as infinite humility, a compassionate search for sinners and a vicarious suffering for them. He thus obtains forgiveness and sanctification for his Bride, the immaculate dove that comprises Mary and the saints in heaven and on earth. It is this holy Bride, the *sacrosancta Ecclesia*, that Jesus associates to himself in his work of extending forgiveness and divine life to the world, to all those who open up to him. The association of this Bride with Jesus in his sanctifying activity is signified by the fact that the priest or bishop in preaching and especially in administering the sacraments represents both Christ and the Church. This immaculate

Church is definitively sanctified in those who have been consummated in heaven and is in the process of sanctifying those who belong to her on earth. The members who remain within the Church by being joined to Christ in the Holy Spirit are going to be infallibly sanctified.

The objective structures of the Church, the Gospel, the sacraments, and church office are indefectibly holy not by themselves, but by Christ who with the cooperation of his holy Church-Bride safeguards their holiness. Ratzinger, then, is right in saying that “in theology it is not the person that is reducible to the thing, but the thing to the person.”²²

The holiness of the immaculate Bride Church is the holiness of her Bridegroom who carries the stray sheep on his own shoulders and takes upon himself all the sins of the world on the cross. The Bride therefore embraces her sinful members in her bosom, supports them with her prayer, and offers for them the sacrifice of her Groom. The sinners who lost the Holy Spirit by mortal sins and the saints on earth who are still not fully purified disfigure the face of the holy Bride on earth, yet none of their impurity can deface the Church in heaven. Nor can sin destroy the sanctifying power of the sacraments, falsify the teaching of the Gospel, prevent the emergence of saints, or eliminate the presence of the Holy Spirit, who, in the words of Irenaeus and *Lumen gentium*, rejuvenates the Church, continually renewing her and leading her “to perfect union with her spouse.”²³ □

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22. Joseph Ratzinger, “Thoughts on the Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety in Faith and Theology as a Whole” in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger, *Mary at the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 27.

23. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III, 24, 1, quoted in *LG*, 4.