

THE BODY AND THE BRIDE OF  
CHRIST: THE CHURCH  
AS ONE UNIQUE  
TRANSCENDENT SUBJECT

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“The Church’s dependence on Christ through the Holy Spirit is the source of her independent reality.”



Beginning in the nineteenth and continuing through the twenty-first century, the prevailing way of characterizing the Church has changed several times. The “perfect society” in the nineteenth century was followed by the “Mystical Body of Christ” in the first half of the twentieth, only to be replaced after the Second Vatican Council by the term “People of God.” Today, the preferred description of the Church seems to be as “Communion.” Beginning in the twentieth century, however, a much less popular complementary patristic perspective emerged, which saw the Church as Bride and Mother as well as the *perichoresis*, or “being in one another,” of Mary and the Church.

In this article I attempt to show the role of the Holy Spirit in the inner cohesion of these apparently disparate aspects and to understand in what sense the Spirit unites the Church into one unique

ontological subject. A helpful starting point in this enterprise is to examine the decision of the Theological Commission of the Second Vatican Council that, in its quasi-definition of the Church in *Lumen gentium*, introduced into the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the term *subsistit* rather than *adest* or simply *est*.

This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, *subsists* in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity.<sup>1</sup>

If the verb *adest* (is present) had been used instead of *subsists*, the text would have implied the possibility that in other churches the Church of Christ might be just as present as it is in the Catholic Church. The verb *est* would have expressed an exclusive and complete identity between the Catholic Church and the Church of Christ, which would have disavowed the statement that other Christian churches could possess any “elements of truth and sanctification.” The members of the Commission and the vast majority of bishops were sufficiently versed in scholastic theology to know that *subsistit* means the mode of being of a subject, and also they must have been aware of the dogmatic tradition that holds that the hypostasis of the Son “subsists” as the one subject of both human and divine natures.<sup>2</sup>

On its surface, questioning whether or not the Church is one subject could be seen as irrelevant theological speculation.

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1. *Lumen gentium*, 8 (emphasis added). After a long and frustrating debate in the Theological Commission, Fr. Sebastian Tromp proposed the verb *subsistit* that immediately found universal agreement among the members. See Maximilian H. Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology; Fundamentals of Ecclesiology with Reference to Lumen Gentium* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 74–75.

2. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarified the meaning of *subsistit* without further articulating its metaphysical base: “Christ ‘established here on earth’ only one Church and instituted it as a ‘visible and spiritual community’ that from its beginning and throughout the centuries has always existed and will always exist, and in which alone are found all the elements that Christ himself instituted” (*Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*, June 29, 2007).

I plan to show, however, that understanding this question is of great importance for the nature of the Church and for her role in the emerging new stage of human culture. Even though *Lumen gentium* does not explicate the notion of the Church as subject, we can articulate its meaning by analyzing certain elements of patristic ecclesiology. After describing the phenomena in which the oneness of the Church manifests itself, we will attempt to examine her underlying metaphysical structure as a transcendent suprapersonal subject that participates in the trinitarian mystery.

### 1. THE CHURCH AS ONE

The Acts of the Apostles characterizes the first Christian community of Jerusalem as “being of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common” (4:32).

The Pauline letters point to an even more radical oneness in the Church: “You are one (*heis*) in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). The masculine form of “one” in Greek expresses a more radical form of oneness than the cohesion of a regular community. Rather, it asserts that Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, males or females are all, as it were, one being in the Church. Those who are baptized are baptized through the Holy Spirit into one body, the body of Christ, which in turn is built up by his eucharistic body. The symbol of the “body” of Christ does not simply mean a social body in which every member has a certain function to contribute to the whole; instead, it is analogous to a human body in which a person is present to other persons and through which the person acts and suffers in the world. In a similar way, the body of Christ is Christ present in the world, acting and suffering in and through the bodies of Christians. This ecclesial body is a dynamic, changing reality held together by the Spirit. The extent and intensity of the Spirit’s operation depends on the Spirit’s freedom but also on the strength of the faith of the individuals and of the community.<sup>3</sup>

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3. The first influential work that reinstated the importance of this biblical and patristic concept was Emile Mersch, *Le Corps Mystique du Christ*, vol. 2 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1936).

Because the Church is one, what its members think, value, and appreciate must also aim to be one. St. Paul often encourages his faithful *to auto phronein*, “to think the same” (Rom 12:16, 15:5; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 2:2, 4:2). This is not only a call to learn the same words or formulas, but rather to renew their minds and hearts so that they think and feel with Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5–11; Rom 15:5).<sup>4</sup>

Another Pauline theme is the Church as a communion of *ekklesiai*, local communities, but not as if these local communities were merely parts of a whole; not parts which taken together make up the whole Church in the way that counties make up one state. In every local community, the one Church of God is present and makes itself visible. For instance, the one and the same Church of God that is in Corinth (1 Cor 1:2) is also present and made visible in every other local community.<sup>5</sup> Were the Church the same as any other collective society or association in history, we could not say that the one Church and the same society is present in every local community of the Church.

The following are just several samples from the abundant patristic literature that illustrate the ancient Church’s conviction that the Church acts as one subject on certain occasions, although she exists in many places and throughout time.

St. Irenaeus calls attention to the one and the same proclamation of faith in the entire Church:

She . . . believes these points [the faith received from the Apostles] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun . . . is one and the same throughout

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4. Formulas of faith were, of course, also coined. The oldest was: “Jesus is Lord,” followed by creeds.

5. See Henri de Lubac, *Les églises particulières dans l’Église universelle* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971).

the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1.10.2)<sup>6</sup>

According to St. Irenaeus, not only the proclamation of faith but also the offering of the one and the same sacrifice manifests the Church as everywhere one and the same active subject who offers the same pure sacrifice prophesied by Malachi (4.17.6; 18.1, 18.4).

The Church's singular identity is not only spatial but also temporal. It is the same Church as that of the apostles, but today it preaches everywhere in the world and it still possesses the same charisms as it had at the time of the apostles. More precious than any other charism is the gift of love.

Therefore, the Church does in every place, because of that love which she cherishes towards God, send forward, throughout all time, a multitude of martyrs to the Father. (4.33.8–9)

If we study the liturgy of the Church, we arrive at the same conclusion. Although certain individuals activate the liturgy of the Church, the main celebrant is always Christ through the Church or the Church with Christ. In the sacraments Christ's sanctifying worship is expressed *ex opere operato*; that is, Christ offers his saving grace through the Church's ritual. In the divine office and other sacramentals the Church prays, but she is supported by her head, Christ, *ex opere operantis ecclesiae*.

St. Augustine explains that, in every local church, the one and the same Dove, the Spirit-filled Church, always is the one who baptizes.<sup>7</sup>

These samples we have selected from among the countless texts of the tradition that portray the Church as one agent or active subject of preaching, teaching, liturgical offering, and praying could still be interpreted as the functions of a personified

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6. All texts from St. Irenaeus in English are taken from A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. C. Coxe, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905) (some translations slightly modified).

7. For instance, Augustine, *Tractatus in Johannis Evangelium* 6:13, 19, 26; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 21, 2:19.

collective subject—such as “the Congress of the United States decided or rejected a bill of law.” If that were so, then, one could ask whether the oneness of the Church is a mere poetic device without metaphysical implications. An inquiry into the role of the Holy Spirit who is the source of the Church’s unity will show that he actualizes the Church as one unique suprapersonal ontological subject.

## 2. PARTICIPATION IN THE HOLY TRINITY

First, we will outline the role of the three persons within the eternal immanent Trinity and then explain their role within the Church by relying upon the common elements of patristic and medieval theology. Instead of following the trinitarian analogy of human cognition and volition, however, we will use the vague but still helpful analogy of the personal love triangle by Richard of Saint Victor.

The Father loves the Son whom he has begotten or who has been born from him from all eternity. The Church has always understood this begetting or giving birth as a spiritual activity, but the prevailing psychological interpretation for this begetting or birthing (the Son compared to the “product” of the Father’s perfect self-knowledge) cannot be used as a proper analogy for the divine Father-Son relationship.<sup>8</sup> If that were a proper analogy, the Father and Son would be only metaphorically father and son and more properly a transcendent archetype of the human cognitive process. But, according to Jesus, the proper name of the God to whom he prays is “Father.” This Father is incomparably more perfect than any father on earth can be (Mt 7:11; Lk 11:13, 15:11–32) and when compared to this fatherhood every human fatherhood fades away (Mt 23:9). In addition, according to Paul, the most real and most perfect Father is in heaven “from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph 3:15). Therefore, we should approach the mystery by reflecting on the biblical theme of Father-Son relationship but understanding it by way of the threefold way of affirmation, negation, and supereminence: God is father, but

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8. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 27, a. 1–5.

not as a father on earth. He is Father in a supereminent sense that transcends our understanding.<sup>9</sup>

Although we are unable to further explain this generation-birth aspect, we can gain some understanding by using the analogy of human love regarding both the active and passive generation of the Son. The logic of love calls for a mutual gift of the self, but, on the human level, the gift always remains partial and limited. In the Trinity, the Father gives his self, which is identical with the fullness of the infinite divine being, to the Son and the Son returns his self, which is also identical with the fullness of the same being, in thanksgiving to the Father. Since perfect love between two persons would not be selfish exclusivity, but instead naturally blossom into a sharing, so does the Father-Son relationship include a third or, as Richard of Saint Victor referred to it, a *condilecta* (loved together with the other), with whom the Father and Son together fully share themselves in mutual love.<sup>10</sup>

This analogy to human love, of course, is inadequate for a proper understanding of the mystery of the Trinity since our minds are unable to grasp such an intense communion of love in which each of the three persons possesses one and the same infinite divinity. Nevertheless, this analogy makes the mystery more intelligible for us: if the love between Father and Son is so unselfish and overflowing that it calls for a *persona condilecta*, a divine person with whom Father and Son fully share the delight of their love, then it seems appropriate that in this *condilecta* their unselfish relationship is freely extended to include the creatures who are created in the image of the Triune God. In the words of St. Augustine, God is *donabile* (giveable) only in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God brings life to creation and breathed into man, he lifts man up to the level of communion with himself. After the Fall, God continues to speak to his people in the Spirit through

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9. Some Fathers of the Church, including St. Bernard, even spoke of the Son as being born from the womb of the Father. This traditional way of speaking about the Father's act of generation as equivalent to giving birth makes clear that heavenly fatherhood transcends the notion of gender. Even though revelation names the First Person of the Trinity "Father," because he is the absolute unoriginated origin of the Trinity, this Father also includes the perfection of "mother."

10. See Ruben Angelici, *Richard of Saint Victor: On the Trinity; English Translation and Commentary* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011).

the prophets, the judges, and the just men and women of Israel. In the fullness of time, it is by the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit that the eternal Son of God is conceived as David's son from Mary in Bethlehem. The Holy Spirit sanctifies and fills Mary from the first moment of her existence so that through her free acceptance the Incarnation may take place. Through the Holy Spirit the eternal birth of the Son is manifested to humankind in the birth of Jesus. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus communicates with his Father, rejoices in praying to the Father, expels demons and offers himself to the Father (Heb 9:14)—all in the Holy Spirit. With his last breath he hands over the Spirit simultaneously to his Father and to the Church (Lk 23:46; Jn 19:30).

Raised up by the Holy Spirit and constituted Son of God in power—his body spiritualized and Spirit-filled (Rom 1:4)—the risen Christ pours out the Spirit upon all the earth and draws to the Church those who accept him. The Spirit unites them with the Son, with each other and through the Son with the Father. Just as he unites Father and Son while preserving their personal differences, so does the Spirit respect and perfect the personal and vocational differences of all those whom he unites with each other and with the Son. One and the same Spirit is the principle of unity and of the differences among the many charisms and ministries in the Church.

St. Paul and the Fathers speak about the “seal of the Spirit” by which the Christians are sealed (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13, 4:30) as part of the initiation rite of baptism and confirmation. This seal makes us spiritual by imprinting in us the image of the Son who is the face of the Father. Thus, the Spirit includes us in his communion but does not have a special “face” to whom we should conform. We become spiritual through communion with the Spirit, and he imprints into us the image of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Yet we do not become carbon copies of Christ but rather, by our conformity to Christ, we realize our most authentic individual selves.

Before we describe further the role of the Spirit in the Church, we should consider a pertinent section of the encyclical *Mystici corporis Christi*:

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11. See the large collection of patristic texts on this theme in Dionysius Petavius, *Dogmata Theologica*, vol. 3. (Paris: Vives, 1865), 315–25.



To this Spirit of Christ, also, as to an invisible principle, is to be ascribed the fact that all the parts of the Body are joined one with the other and with their exalted head; for he is entire in the Head, entire in the Body and entire in each of the members [*totus in Capite cum sit, totus in Corpore, totus in singulis membris*]. To the members he is present and assists them in proportion to their various duties and offices and the greater or lesser degree of spiritual health they enjoy.<sup>12</sup>

Because of the active presence of the Holy Spirit, there is an “infinite qualitative difference” between the Church and every other community. The members of communities other than the Church may share similar goals and methods for reaching these goals, and they may feel some kinship of thought, will, and emotions, but on this natural level they cannot and will not overcome distances great and small among them. In contrast, one and the same Spirit is present in every living member of the Church “in proportion to their various duties and offices and the greater or lesser degree of spiritual health.” Thus, by cooperating with the Spirit’s power, the Church’s members can overcome alienation and distance, and share with each other their very selves.

We understand, then, that it is more than a poetic metaphor when the Church Fathers and the liturgy itself describe the Church as being one soul and one heart, as speaking with one voice, as acting as one subject in liturgical prayers and substituting for the faith of baptized children by her own faith. The same faith is inspired by the Holy Spirit according to the offices and duties of each member. However, this unity of mind, heart, and action is opposed to uniformity. As mentioned earlier, the Holy Spirit preserves and fosters diversity within unity and inspires the unique perfection and beauty of each individual person.

Since the same Holy Spirit dwells in each member on earth, in heaven, and in purgatory, there is constant interaction among them and, most notably, vicarious substitution whereby the merits by one member are offered for the others. This mutual offering of merit comes to characterize the life of the Church. St. John Paul II speaks about the “vicariousness”

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12. *Mystici corporis Christi*, 57.

between Christ and the Church and between the members in a “spiritual communion,” created by and filled with the Holy Spirit:

Revelation [. . .] teaches that the Christian is not alone on the path of conversion. In Christ and through Christ, his life is linked by a mysterious bond to the lives of all other Christians in the supernatural union of the mystical body. This establishes among the faithful a marvelous exchange of spiritual gifts, in virtue of which the holiness of one benefits others in a way far exceeding the harm which the sin of one has inflicted upon the others. There are people who leave in their wake a surfeit of love, of suffering borne well, of purity and truth, which involves and sustains others. This is the reality of “vicariousness” upon which the entire mystery of Christ is founded. His superabundant love saves us all. It is part of the grandeur of Christ’s love not to leave us in the condition of passive recipients, but to draw us into his saving work and, in particular, into his passion. This is said in the famous passage of the Letter to the Colossians: “In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church” (Col 2:24).

This profound truth is also wonderfully expressed in a passage of the Book of Revelation, where the Church is described as a bride dressed in a simple robe of linen, the finest linen, bright and pure. And John remarks: “The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev 19:8). In fact, in the lives of the saints the bright linen is woven to become the robe of eternal life.

Everything comes from Christ, but since we belong to him, whatever is ours also becomes his and acquires a healing power. This is what is meant by “the treasures of the Church” which are the good works of the saints. To pray in order to gain an indulgence means to enter into this spiritual communion and therefore open oneself totally to others.<sup>13</sup>

The Spirit’s “uniting-in-difference” works on a global scale. When the Gospel is proclaimed in a new culture, the culture is purified and finds its own depth; through the inspiration

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13. John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (Vatican City, 29 November, 1998), 10, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/jubilee/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_doc\\_19981129\\_bolla-incarnationis-mysterium.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/jubilee/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_19981129_bolla-incarnationis-mysterium.html).

of the Holy Spirit, it finds its own unique “genius” by reflecting in its own way upon the Christian values. Thus, the faith and liturgy of the Church will enrich a local culture and will be enriched by it. The one and the same Gospel and liturgy will resound in a new culture with new beauty and new insights.

If we further analyze the activity of the Holy Spirit, we see that he operates in two opposite directions at the same time. On the one hand, he comes from Christ and, as Christ’s promise and breath, the Spirit builds up the Body of Christ, which is united to the personal Christ as a body is to its head. This is the *Christus totus*, whose eternal vocation is to love and praise the Father. On the other hand, the same Holy Spirit inspires the duality of Christ and the Church as two distinct and different realities, Bridegroom and Bride. If we acknowledge these two contrary yet simultaneous operations of the Spirit, we must also admit that the unity between Christ the Head and the Church as his Body is the result of an infinite love shared by both partners. It is love alone between persons that achieves unity while perfecting individual differences.<sup>14</sup>

If we look at the concrete existential aspect of the love that unites Bride and Groom, the mystical tradition suggests that the Spirit in the Bride inspires her to return herself completely to her source, the Bridegroom. On the contrary, the Spirit in the Groom inspires the full flowering of the Bride in her uniqueness as a worthy partner of the Groom. Christ wants the Church to be immaculately pure, beautiful, and perfect so that he can delight in her.<sup>15</sup>

In earthly marriages, the bride exists before the wedding and at its consummation she receives not her life, but merely the husband’s lifegiving seed. In the marriage of the Church and Christ, the Bride herself is born at the Messianic wedding feast in which Christ gives his life on the Cross for her life in order to offer fallen humankind the grace to become his “holy and immaculate” Bride. Unlike earthly spouses, this Bride never

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14. Interpreting Eph 5:25–30, Origen shows that “the spouse of Christ who is the Church is also his body and his members” (*Commentarium in Canticum Canticorum*, bk. 2. See also bk. 3).

15. The entire book of the *Song of Songs* celebrates the Bride and Bridegroom’s mutual admiration of each other’s beauty.

dies since the Holy Spirit constantly rejuvenates her.<sup>16</sup> Just as the Bride's life is divine (sanctifying grace), so are her acts by which she surrenders to the Groom, the acts of the divine virtues: faith, hope, and charity.

In order to better understand the relationship of Christ and the Church, we need to examine the relationship between Mary and the Church as well as the eschatological shape of the Church in heaven.

### 3. MARY AND THE CHURCH

The entire tradition has called the Spirit-filled Church "chaste virgin," "immaculate spouse," or "immaculate dove."<sup>17</sup> In so far as the virginal Bride of Christ is fecundated by the Spirit, the Church is also "mother" or "virgin mother." At the same time, the fervent individual Christian is also spouse and mother. In the most eminent sense, however, the virginal spouse and mother is Mary. This identification of Israel, Mary, and the Church can be found in the Book of Revelation: the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars, gives birth to the Messiah and also to those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus (12:1–18).

St. Irenaeus describes a most pure womb, the womb of both Mary and the Church: "The Pure One opening purely that pure womb, which regenerates men unto God and which he himself made pure."<sup>18</sup>

There are also other Fathers, such as Cyril of Alexandria and Clement of Alexandria, who identify Mary and the Church. The former praises Mary the ever-virgin, the Holy Church.<sup>19</sup> The latter asserts: "There is only one Virgin Mother and I am

16. "[The Holy Spirit] makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly He renews [the Church] and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse" (*Lumen gentium*, 4).

17. Already Paul speaks about his desire to lead the Corinthian Christians as a "chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Cor 11:2). The "immaculate dove" is a reference to the "beloved" of the Song of Songs.

18. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4:33, 11.

19. Cyril of Alexandria, *Homily IV Preached at Ephesus against Nestorius*.

glad to call her the Church.”<sup>20</sup> Following Scheeben, de Lubac calls this mystical being-in-one-another of Mary and the Church a kind of *perichoresis*.

More numerous than the texts that identify Mary and the Church are those that describe a close parallelism between them. Jesus was conceived in Mary by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit and so too does the womb of the Church bring life, since the water of baptism gives birth by the power of the Holy Spirit to the same Jesus in the Church. Mary offers Jesus to God in the Temple and so does the Church consecrate every Christian to God. Mary nourishes and raises Jesus and so does the Church educate and form Christians. Mary accompanies her Son to the Cross and gives him back to the Father while the Church accompanies her members in their sufferings up to the gate of death; she strengthens them for the final struggle and provides the viaticum, the bread that accompanies the Christian into eternal life.

The Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption proclaim and anticipate the final shape of the Church in the world to come. In the kingdom of the Father we will share in the immaculate holiness of the Blessed Virgin and our bodies will shine with a splendor that Mary’s glorified body has possessed since her Assumption.<sup>21</sup>

The post-Tridentine Marian theologians loved to extol the exclusive privileges of the Mother of God, such as the immaculate beauty and purity that God imparted only to her on account of her divine motherhood. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, without any knowledge of patristic theology, reversed this trend. She was convinced that if a mother loves to distribute her riches to her children, then Mary, our mother, does it much more generously; she enjoys sharing her fullness of grace and glory with the Church!

Note that the Holy Spirit is not incarnate in the Church and so the “subject” of the Church is not the Holy Spirit, whereas in the case of Christ the subject of the man Jesus is the eternal Son. The Holy Spirit shares Christ’s divine life with the Church,

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20. *Paedagogue* I, 6.

21. See the rich final chapter on the relationship between the Church and Mary with an extended bibliography in Henri de Lubac, “L’Église et la Vierge Marie,” in *Méditation sur l’Église* (Paris: Aubier, 1953), 273–329.

enables her to “to give birth” to Christ in her and in each of her members. In the Spirit, she can respond with acts of divine virtue to her Groom, but she remains a creature and by joining to herself all of creation she becomes the perfectly beautiful Bride in whom the Son finds his delight.

Thus, insofar as the Holy Spirit makes us members of Christ’s Body and thereby “completes” Christ by helping all saved men and women to “attain to . . . mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13), then both men and women manifest the face of Christ. In Origen’s words, we become “sons in the Son.” To the extent, however, that the ecclesial Body of Christ is the fruit of the union of love between Bride and Groom, the same Spirit simultaneously re-creates the redeemed human race, both men and women, into the one Bride who shines with the beauty and splendor of the Virgin Mary.

#### 4. “THE TRUE CHURCH”

This twofold process (of the Church reaching the full stature of Christ and becoming the perfect Bride of Christ) begins on earth but is consummated in heaven. For this reason, St. Thomas calls the heavenly Church the *vera Ecclesia*, “the true Church”; she is the *Christus totus* of St. Augustine and the immaculate Bride, the heavenly Jerusalem. There the prayer of the Bride and the Spirit (“Come, Lord Jesus”) is fulfilled because the Lord Jesus reveals his hidden presence, and the wedding feast, which had begun in the agony of the Cross, is made manifest in glory.

The Church in this world is only a beginning because very few members become fully “Church” on earth. Most of those in the state of sanctifying grace allow very limited space in their souls for the transforming action of the Spirit. Who of us could say that he or she always obeys the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as it is revealed in the daily chores and duties of one’s life? Therefore, Christ does not rule over most of our thoughts, words, and actions. The “old man” is still alive and fights against the Spirit. Even if we have rejected what is manifestly sinful, the roots of our actions, our motives, are still far from being pure. There are also many dead members of the

Church in the state of mortal sin, members who have not only saddened the Holy Spirit but expelled him from their souls.

In heaven, our souls will be fully purified. The Holy Spirit will sanctify and glorify our mortal bodies and envelop them in the splendor of the risen Christ. At the same time, we will be the ecstatic Bride of Christ and, as such, one body and one spirit with Christ. And, to the extent that we are one with him, we shall be blessed children of the Father.

The Holy Spirit will find no resistance in us to overcome, but instead he will be able to inspire free and intimate communication among all the members. All that we will be and have will come from the Father through Christ. Yet Mary will not cease to be the mother of the Church in heaven. All the redeemed will share her love, goodness, beauty, and joy. We will also communicate with the greater and lesser saints. St. Thomas says that in heaven, all will love one another as themselves and so we will share in each other's experiences and gifts.<sup>22</sup>

The Church on earth has believed from its beginnings that the saints in heaven, especially the martyrs, participate in the kingship of Christ through their intercessions on our behalf and, therefore, they may be called upon for help (Mt 19:28; Rv 3:20–21). The bishops of Rome, especially in the first centuries, testified to their belief that the real rulers of the Roman church are Peter and Paul, while they themselves were only representing them. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who promised that her real activity would begin only in heaven, has not stopped raining down roses since her death.

How the saints can, at the same time, enjoy full union with the Holy Trinity and be fully active in the Church on earth remains a mystery. St. Benedict's experience, as narrated in the Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great, may be of some help. In a vision during the night, Benedict saw a great light and, "in one ray of the light," the entire world, because "for him who

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22. "In the blessed, charity will be perfect; therefore, everyone will perfectly fulfill the commandment: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Thus, everyone will rejoice about the good of the other as about his own" (Thomas Aquinas, *Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 49, q. 3, a. 5, qc. 4, arg. 2).

sees God, every creature is small”<sup>23</sup> It seems that the saints who see God see in him all the persons and events God wants them to see.<sup>24</sup>

##### 5. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CHURCH AND THE MATERIAL WORLD

Both the Old and New Testaments and the Fathers believe that material creation will be an integral part of the eschatological state: “We expect a new heaven and the new earth where justice dwells” (2 Pt 3:13). Since we will be raised with spiritualized and glorified but real bodies, we will need for them a connatural, transformed material universe. The Letter to the Ephesians declares the goal: “to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Christ” (1:10).

At this stage of universal reconciliation, the relationship between humankind and the material cosmos will radically change. The hostility between us and our material environment will cease. The thorns and thistles of the soil, the wild animals, and all cosmic catastrophes will no longer threaten our existence, since heaven and earth will be filled with God’s glory and the knowledge of the Lord will be poured out as water covers the sea (Is 6:3, 11:9).

In our present time, the material world may reveal the Creator to us, but it also may be, and indeed has been, abused as an idol, the only object worthy of investigation. In the eschaton, creation becomes transparent, showing us God’s wisdom, power, and beauty. We will contemplate God in himself and in our brothers and sisters, but also in all the material cosmos. According to Maximus the Confessor, through Christ and in the Spirit, humankind will become *syndesmos* (the connecting link) between the many different forms of creation. As St. Bernard taught: in the end, God’s love will unite the *summa cum imis*, the highest and the lowest in harmony.<sup>25</sup>

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23. *Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great*, bk. 2, *The Life of Saint Benedict*, chap. 35.

24. The purification of the souls in purgatory depends completely on the prayer and good deeds of those on earth and in heaven.

25. St. Bernard, *De consideratione*, 2:18; *Sermo in Assumptione*, 1:2; *Sermo in Epiphania*, 4.



## CONCLUSIONS

We have reviewed the unique character of the mystery of the Church.

She is a visible, organized society, the people of God, in which every member has equal dignity and each is called to contribute for the common good with his or her unique personal qualities, charisms, and ministries.

Yet, the Church transcends any other unity since it participates in the life of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit, present in both the Church and the person of Christ, unites the two in love, and true love unites by preserving and enhancing the lovers' uniqueness. The Spirit, then, unites the Church with Christ as body to head, but, at the same time, does not absorb her into the person of Christ, but rather preserves and promotes the Church as an autonomous reality, whom Scripture and tradition call the virginal Bride of Christ.

The Church Bride is one subject of action. She believes, loves, prays, and sanctifies as one. She consists of individual persons who reach their identity and personal flowering as each actualizes in his or her own way the One Bride, the Church.

However, this one subject of action is very different from any imagined "One Super-Person" who would possess literally one mind and will. Every member of the one Church Bride is a unique bride that is developing her own irreplaceable personal beauty, thought, and action. But the mystery is that each member becomes her unique perfected self to the extent that she embodies in herself the one Church Bride. As Origen before him, de Lubac calls such a person *homo ecclesiasticus*.<sup>26</sup> In this sense no one can have a private relationship with Christ since Christ has only one Bride, the Church.

The diverse members of the Church, the individual brides who make up the One Bride, are united with each other in the one Spirit so intimately that they share each other's experiences and merits, faith and love, joys and sorrows. In particular, Mary, the mother of the Church, shares her own beauty, purity, and love with every member.

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26. See *Homilia in Leviticum*, 1:1.

Of course, many on earth are only potentially a bride in the Church, but everyone is called to become a bride in the fullest sense. In the words of St. Bernard: "Every soul, even if burdened with sins, enmeshed in vice, ensnared by pleasure, captive in exile, imprisoned in the body, caught in mud, fixed in mire," should aspire not only to mercy, but to becoming the Bride of the Word.<sup>27</sup> At the end of time, the Church Bride, perfectly beautiful, will be the everlasting delight of the Bridegroom.

In the light of this bride-theme, the inspiration for a new understanding of Christian humanism appears to be taking shape. In post-Tridentine spirituality, most Catholic writers emphasized the misery and helplessness of fallen humanity over and against the power of God's grace and his perfection. After the Second Vatican Council, the insistence on sin and misery was at times replaced by belief in human progress and an optimistic fight for social justice. The recovery of the theology of the Bride provides a beautiful balance between human misery and human greatness in that it recognizes the tragic wretchedness of sinful human nature, but knows that the infinite depth of divine mercy wants to pull us out of the abyss of sin and transform each one of us into God's masterpiece, the Bride for his Son.<sup>28</sup>

This theme of bride has important implications for the Church's relationship to the contemporary world. The advancement of technology and increased population has created an economically, technologically, and politically interdependent world where the dignity of each individual is in danger of shrinking to the point of becoming a small cog of the all-devouring machine of production. We become an anonymous number in a fast-growing bureaucracy.

Those, however, who oppose this dehumanizing trend often turn to the opposite extreme: the individual human being

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27. St. Bernard, *Sermones super Cantica Cantorum*, 83:1.

28. Some Catholic philosophers may object that God, as absolute fullness of being, cannot desire and cannot find delight in anything outside of himself. It is true that nothing can be added to God's fullness of being, yet Christian revelation shows that he freely chooses to depend on us by desiring the sinner's conversion and he finds joy in the beauty of the purified human person.

becomes *the* supreme value and claims the right to fight for and enjoy his maximum well being, wealth, and power. Laws and rules should exist only to ensure that the struggle for individual greatness does not degenerate into anarchy.

Regarding beliefs in the afterlife, we also find similarly opposing views. On the one side, Christians have a widespread understanding of heaven as the individual's happy enjoyment of God; on the other, the goal of human life is to be liberated from the limits of individual existence and become fused with the one impersonal reality, Brahman, or the cosmic Buddha.

These opposing views of reality contain many shades of differences and vary by degrees of emphasis, but this controversy, which has pervaded human history from its beginning, today seems to have reached a unique intensity, fluctuating between the idol of the unfettered self and that of impersonal collectivity. Seemingly, the best solution societies are able to achieve is a negotiated compromise between the two.

Within this context, we can better appreciate the mission of the Church in today's world. Wherever the Church is enlivened by the Holy Spirit—he who unites by preserving and perfecting differences—we discover the possibility of transcending a state of mere compromise or uneasy coexistence between the individual self and society. It dawns on us that personal flourishing and intimate community life do not restrict, but mutually enhance each other. A renewed living church community, then, provides hope and inspiration even for a radically secular society.

In summary, the Holy Spirit, who is present in the Father and the Son, is in each living member of the Church and in the Church as a whole as well. He preserves and fosters difference and unity among the members and the many different tasks and aspects of the Church. Therefore, by the same Holy Spirit, the Church, on the one hand, flourishes in her autonomous reality as Virginal Spouse and Mother; on the other, she is united with Christ and made alive by Christ in complete dependence on him. Her dependence on Christ through the Holy Spirit is the source of her independent reality. Moreover, she transcends both our notion of community and of person. Her unity is qualitatively more perfect than any earthly community, yet her unity is the

source of the individual differences of her members. Thus she is a unique, transcendent ontological subject because, by the divine reality of the Holy Spirit, both her unity and multiple perfection are real. □

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