

XIV

THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

WE have taken a first look at the Church Our Lord established. We have seen that in it and through it we have access to the truth and the life and the union with Himself in which our redemption consists. What truth means has been explained fairly fully, and something has been said of life, though more must be said. But what of union?

From what we have said thus far, we see it as a union of love and obedience. And as such it is wonderful beyond man's dreams. But that is only the fringe. The fullness of the union that Christ planned for us—union with Himself and through Him with God—is far closer and deeper. We must try to understand it, for it is the central reality of the Church and the central reality of ourselves. (For a fuller study of the Church, as visible body and mystical body, a wonderful book is Karl Adam's *Spirit of Catholicism* (Sheed & Ward).)

Take as a starting point the question Our Lord, from the right hand of His Father in heaven, put to Saul on the road to Damascus. (Read Acts ix. 1-8.) Saul had been persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem fiercely (for he never did anything by halves, either as Saul the Pharisee or Paul the Apostle). He was on his way to Damascus to seize Christians there too when he was stricken blind and heard a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Not "My Church", you observe, but "*Me*".

Our Lord is asserting an *identity* between His Church and Himself. Is it a real identity—that is, does He mean the words to be taken at their full value? Or is it merely a rhetorical device, a way of saying that the Church is His special property, so that if anyone persecutes it, it is *as though* he persecuted Him? It would have been an odd moment for rhetoric: for Saul it was the moment of truth. He knew the identity to be real. Years later he could write to the Galatians (iii. 28): “You are all one person in Jesus Christ.”

Our Lord had actually said it—although on the Damascus road Saul knew nothing of that—at the Last Supper: or rather on the way from the supper room to the Garden of Gethsemane (John xv. 5): “I am the Vine, you are the branches.”

The phrase is decisive. The union of Christians with Christ is no mere union of love and obedience; it is a living, organic unity. Branches are not simply a society that the vine decides to found and take a kindly interest in. The vine lives in the branches, the branches live in the vine, live with the very life of the vine.

Our union with Christ is of such a sort that He lives in us, we live in Him, live with His very life.

The truth is at once marvellous and mysterious. It is St. Paul who goes deepest into the mystery—naturally, because it alone Our Lord had uttered in converting him. The Church is the body of Christ and we are all “members” of His body, parts of His body. With our present knowledge of the human body’s structure we more readily think of ourselves as cells in His body. We shall return to St. Paul later: here note one text (1 Cor. xii. 27): “You are Christ’s body, organs of it depending upon each other.”

We have come to call the Church the Mystical Body of Christ: the adjective simply means mysterious. Thus we

distinguish it from the natural body, in which He was conceived in the womb of His mother and born in Bethlehem, which hung upon the cross, is now at the right hand of the Father, is received by us under the appearance of bread in the Eucharist. Theologians speak of the second body as the successor of the first, because in it Our Lord continues to act among men as He did in His natural body during His short life upon earth.

To call the Church Christ's body is no more a piece of rhetoric than was His own phrase to Saul. The Church is not simply an organization to which we resort for the gifts He wants us to have; to think of it only as a society founded by Him is not enough. In our human experience a living body comes closest to giving us the true idea of it. For it is of the essence of a living body that there is one life-centre, so that every element in it lives by one same life.

That we are thus living cells in a body of which Christ is head is the most important fact about ourselves. We must try to see further into it.

To the Ephesians, St. Paul said (i. 22): "God made Christ the head to which the whole Church is joined, so that the Church is his body."

In other words Our Lord, living in His natural body in heaven, lives also in another body on earth. The second body is not a replica of the first, it is of a different order. But it is as truly entitled to be called both a body, and Christ's body. In a body, every element, every limb and organ, every cell lives with one same life, the life of him whose body it is. So it is with Christ's natural body, so it is with His mystical body.

The two lives are different: in the first body it is natural life, in the second supernatural life, sanctifying grace. In the Church every member has his own natural life and must labour to correct its defects; but the life of grace, by which at

last we shall come to the vision of God in heaven—that is simply Christ living in us, sharing His own life with us. “I live,” says St. Paul, “now not I, but Christ lives in me.”

We have cells in our own body living with our life; we must become cells in Christ’s body, living with His. We must be incorporated with Christ, built into His body. How? By baptism. Born into the race of Adam, we must be reborn into Christ. “We were taken up into Christ by baptism” says St. Paul to the Romans (vi. 3); to the Galatians he says (iii. 27), “All you who have been baptized in Christ’s name have put on the person of Christ . . . you are all one person in Christ.”

That, then, is the Church; and that is what it is to belong to the Church. We are built into, in that sense made one with, Our Lord’s humanity. But that humanity is the humanity of God the Son; so that we are united with the second Person and thus with the Blessed Trinity. We now see new meaning in two phrases used by Our Lord at the Last Supper.

In a text already quoted, He prays that all who come to accept Him “may be one, as Thou Father in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us” (John xvii. 21, but read on to the end of the chapter). Near the beginning of the great discourse He had uttered the same truth in one phrase “I am in My Father and you in Me and I in you” (John xiv. 20).

To be a Catholic and not to grasp what it is to be a Catholic—that is a matter for pity, one misses so much. But to grasp it can be frightening too, for we have not only the supernatural life given us by Christ, we have also a natural life of our own, and in harmonizing nature and grace few of us can show any spectacular success. Yet with all our mediocrity there is greatness for us: there is no other dignity given to men which can approach this, and it is given to every one of us by baptism.

We are united with Christ, who is God, with a closeness which no human relationship even comes near. Mother and son are close, but they are still two. Our union with Christ is closer than that union, at its very closest, could ever be: and this for a double reason.

First, we are members of Christ—we do not think of the organs of our own body, heart or liver for instance, as relations, kinsmen; they are closer to our very being and so are we to Christ's.

Second, our union with Christ is in the supernatural order, and the lowest relation in the order of grace is nearer than the highest in the order of nature. It was so for Our Lady herself. St. Augustine notes that she was more exalted by her holiness than by her relation to Our Lord: and he says again: "More blessed was Mary in receiving Christ's faith than in conceiving Christ's flesh."

Even when we have grasped the reality of the Mystical Body, most of us know that we are making scarcely an effort to live up to it. Take one single fact: every Catholic is closer to us by the union he and we have with Christ than is any member of our family by natural kinship. If we began to treat one another accordingly, it would be a new world.

To treat another Catholic with cruelty or injustice is plainly to act as if the Mystical Body did not exist; but short of actual maltreatment, to regard a fellow member of Christ's body as merely somebody else is to ignore the principal fact about ourself and him.

We have just spoken of Our Lady. She is the first member of the Mystical Body. We shall speak more of her.