

The Community of Christ

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The term 'mystical body' is a curious one, curious, that is, in the sense that very few ordinary Catholics make very much of it as an important element in their lives. They are members of it, they know the name, but thinking of it as something real in the sense that our Lord or our Lady are real to them is very rare; this is partly due, I think, to the debasement of the word 'mystical', and partly due to historical circumstances. For so long it has been fashionable to think of Christianity as an affair of regulating our own spiritual lives that we have hardly given the idea of the community of Christians a thought. Now that 'mystical body' is a term heard on all sides, there is a consciousness that it is somehow important, but little idea how it is to be integrated into our daily lives. It is very hard to strike a balance between, or rather to see the falsity of, a vague idea of 'togetherness' with all the horror that it involves, and the isolating interiorisation of much recent and past religious thinking. But the effort has to be made if we are not to impoverish our lives, and it is with this effort in mind that I want to trace the outlines of the idea of the community of Christ and to try to show that it is at the very root of salvation. To do this in an article demands a certain amount of oversimplification, and I can only hope that where connections are not obvious they will not seem to be non-existent.

For as the new heaven and the new earth

which I will make

shall remain before me, says the Lord;

so shall your descendants and your name remain.

From new moon to new moon,

and from sabbath to sabbath,

all flesh shall come to worship before me,

says the Lord.

(Is. 66. 21-22).

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . . And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them . . .' (Apoc. 21. 1-3).

Then came one of the seven angels and spoke to me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb'. And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (Apoc. 21. 9-10).

I have chosen these two references to the heavenly Jerusalem, because they form a useful starting point for what I want to say. It would be absurd to try and build a complete picture of the people of God in heaven out of a handful of isolated texts, but it would be equally absurd, and far more disastrous, not to make use of what we can learn from them. There seem to me to be two points of importance here; the first of these is the idea of the renewal of our physical world, the new Jerusalem, the 'place', so to say, of heaven, a renewal which will come about with our resurrection on the last day. St John, in describing the heavenly Jerusalem, uses the same measurements and gives the same impression of the *shape* as that given of the Temple in the vision in Ezekiel (Ezek. 40. 5); the connection between the community in heaven and the community envisaged in the Old Testament is thus underlined. The second point, from which the first depends, is seen in St John's vision of life in heaven. He quotes the 'great voice' saying 'they shall be his people', the angel shows him the 'Bride, the wife of the lamb', and what he sees is 'the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God'. These are communal images, and they are the images used in the epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 11. 16; 12. 22, for example); in heaven, as on earth we will be known as members of Christ. It will be a communal sharing in the life of God, a communal relationship in which our individual relationship will be at once heightened and subsumed.

It is very important for us to remember that Christ the man ascended into heaven; apart from all that can be said about the Resurrection and Ascension in terms of our redemption, the simple fact that Christ is in heaven eternally as a man should make us think more clearly about our own humanity. We are called not as pseudo-angels whose bodies are in some way to be discounted or overcome, but as whole men. The whole man can only be thought of in human terms in a human environment, that is in the terms of this world; to try and think of him in any other way is to attempt to make him something other than human. It is true that we are to be changed, but this means that our humanity is to be made perfect, it is to be added to by the life of Christ, made greater, but not lost. To forget our essential humanity is to make it impossible to talk intelligibly about us at all, yet it is clear from the New Testament

that what can be said about us in heaven is intelligible.

The communal participation in the life of God, that is the beatific vision, makes complete the dimension added to our lives by the sacraments; it does not destroy anything that is essentially good in our humanity, but builds it all up into the perfection that belongs properly to the kingdom of heaven. The heavenly Jerusalem, the community of God's people, is seen by St John as a community, not because this is a convenient description, or because it is a new mode of existence for the Church, but because communal life is the normal way of human life, the gradual transformation of which is seen throughout the history of salvation.

The whole universe and its history centre upon Christ, but the chronicle of saving history (*Heilsgeschichte*) is primarily to be found in the Bible. The history of salvation can be seen to have two major characteristics which are interwoven; the first is that of the presence of God to the world, and the second is the growing dialogue between God and man. The framework of the historical process is formed by a series of 'covenants' between God and his people. In a sense creation was the first of these; Adam and Eve form the primitive human community controlling an ordered universe of which they were the summit and monarchs (Gen. 1. 29-30). In reversing the right order of man—woman—animal, etc., Adam destroyed also the community of God and the inevitable consequences were announced (Gen. 3. 14-19). The world could no longer be amenable to man's control, and Abel is still being slaughtered.

Throughout the Old Testament there is a recurring impression of the slate being wiped clean and a new start being made, but this impression is misleading. The slate is never cleared, the world and all the chaos in it that men have produced is the given situation on which God works. In the calling of Abraham (Gen. 17. 1-8) and the 'sacramental' sealing of the people of God in the ram which substituted for Isaac (Gen. 22. 1-18), God becomes present to the world in a dialogue with his chosen people. It makes little sense to contrast this with any other hypothetical way in which God might have entered history, because this was the way he chose to do it. There can be something queer about supposing that there might have been a better way, or a way that was just as good; this would be to suppose some other world than the one that actually was. The primitive nomadic community of the heirs of Abraham was the new epiphany of God and for all its blemishes it was to be the fusion of the community of the world and

the community of God. Until the moment of the calling of Abraham the community of the world, or rather the communities, had existed knowing God, when they knew him at all, through isolated manifestations of one sort or another. God had been remote from the world, but in this community a new principle of unity had been established. They had become the people of God and through all the vicissitudes of Israel they were to remain a homogeneous unit, both the vehicle of revelation and redemption, and, to a greater or lesser degree, a holy people who bring God to the world because they are a human, that is to say, a worldly community. This new relationship, or dialogue, with God, which made Israel the key to the redemption of the world, carried with it as part of the new awareness of God a corresponding obligation to do God's will; the first of the great covenants was made (Gen. 17. 1-4).

The embryo of the notion of the peculiar place of God's people is conceived in Exodus 10. 6: 'and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. It is an idea that is developed after the covenant of Sinai,¹ and again in the new Israel of the Church.² But it is in the light of the covenant of Sinai that we can see clearly the growth of the people of God as they manifest more and more clearly the God of their fathers. It is worth remembering that God does not normally move in a 'mysterious way, his wonders to perform'; that having created men with minds of their own he let them develop in a natural way towards a fuller understanding of him; every new moment of revelation came to a world prepared to take it and use it fruitfully. Man is not dragged by the nose into the light but generally stumbles there by the use of his reason; it was only when man (obviously with God's help) had contrived to assimilate and make fruitful the knowledge of God that was available to him, that God made the process continuous by fresh revelation. This is, of course, a crude summary of what is bound, in the nature of the case, to be a very complicated process. But it is necessary to keep it in mind if we are to understand what went on in the minds of the Jews when Yahweh appeared on Mount Sinai.

That later Jewish theologians and chroniclers understood the nature of this process as it applied to the growth of the relationship between God and his people seems to me to be clear from the manner in which they wrote their accounts. As each major historical change took place so is it allied to a new aspect of God. Power manifestations as in the

¹Deut. 7. 6; 14. 2-21; 26. 19.

²Tit. 2. 14; I Pet. 2. 9; Apoc. 1. 6; 6. 10.

plagues visited upon Egypt; manifestations of God as in the burning bush; manifestations of God as protector and provider as in the crossing of the Red Sea, the provision of manna and quails in the wilderness of Sin, of water from the rock of Horeb, and the defeat of the Amalekites at Rephidim all helped to weld the people of God into a closer community dependent upon God and to prepare them for the great epiphany at Sinai. It was to Sinai that the whole of saving history, and within it men's growing consciousness of God, was directed. Sinai was not simply the occasion of the conception of the Jewish *nation*, to be completed with the anointing of the first king, but also, above everything else, God became present to and in his people in a new and special way.

All the elements in primitive Jewish knowledge of God were drawn together at Sinai; he appears as the numinous God, Yahweh, who will destroy, or protect and provide in return for the dedication of the community of Israel to him; above all he deepens the relationship by becoming present locally in the ark of the covenant. Until this moment the Jewish community had been a worldly community in close dialogue with God, and belonging to him, but with the dedication of Sinai they became the community of God present to and in the world. That is to say that this human community, a community in the world representing the total community of the world, became the point of fusion between the communities of God and the world. From this moment on, the normal, the *proper* mode of God's presence to the world is in his community; he is no longer remote, bearing a resemblance to the primitive sky-gods, but is present in a sense *visibly* conducting a redemptive dialogue with men. For the Jews the law was redemptive and living because it was the form of their dedication to God; it gave shape to the community because it was the expression of their part in the dialogue. Frequently in the Old Testament there are accounts of the failure of the Jews to keep the law. This is disastrous not because it involves personal sin, though clearly that in itself is an evil, but because it is at once a denial of the dual nature of the community and, therefore, an attempt to destroy it (Deut. 28. 20; 28. 36-37). Defeat, captivity, exile and other evils are seen to follow from this failure and it is not until there is a return of the community to the law, a new dedication, a re-affirmation of the covenant, that it is once more restored to its former position as the effective vehicle of God's manifestation.

Again it was not quite the *former* position to which Israel was restored, but to one which was in effect greater because it carried with it

a deeper understanding both of God and of the mission of the Jews. The wedded concepts of nationhood, holiness and priesthood (Ex. 13. 2-6) became clearer to the Jews with each successive tragedy and subsequent recovery; that they finally misunderstood the position that they held was the ultimate tragedy, so that they ceased to have a part in the new kingdom of Israel; the failure was a failure to realise that the community of God is not exclusive in the way a racial community must be.

The theme of the presence of God to and in his people is the one from which all other Old Testament themes depend. This presence was the foreshadowing of and preparation for the presence of God in Christ. The history of salvation is the working out of the dialogue between God and men which makes this presence fruitful and, indeed, possible, and within this dialogue all other facets of history are included. For many modern Christians the sense of saving history, or the Christocentricity of history seems to have been largely overlaid; doubtless there are innumerable reasons why this should have happened, and their analysis might well help to remedy the situation. I feel that the emergence of widespread religious doubt may well be one of the reasons, and it is interesting to realise that such doubt would have been inconceivable to the men of the New Testament. For them, where doubt or denial existed, it was always the result of moral depravity or of culpable ignorance (Rom. 1. 18-32; I Cor. 1. 21; Eph. 4. 17-19).³

For the Jewish disciples and apostles this feeling for God-centred history was intensified and transformed by the fact of Christ, but it was not dependent solely upon their knowledge of him, it was inbuilt in their world picture. The human community through which God entered human history and through which he made himself present to men was a fact of which they had always been aware, it was their community; the death and resurrection of Christ did not change this situation into something completely other, it simply transformed it into something greater. The old covenant was not destroyed (Matt. 23. 17), but a new dimension was added to it involving a transformation that can only be compared with the transformation we shall undergo at the last day. The new community of Israel is still the mode or vehicle of God's presence to the world, but now the presence is more immediate than at any other time in the history of salvation. The new presence is the last step before the divinisation of the world is made complete.

³Karl Rahner, S.J. *Theos in the New Testament, Theological Investigations*, London 1961.

The prayer for unity in the Gospel of St John sums up the new situation perfectly:

... all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given to me, that they may be one, even as we are one'. (John 17. 10-11).

'I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me'. (John 17. 20-23).

The oneness of the new community could hardly be put more forcibly; not only this, but it is here that one can see the sense, so to say, of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. God did these things in order that he might *become* his community and that the loving, redeeming dialogue should be completed. The new Israel is a new shewing forth of God, it has 'put on Christ' in baptism (Gal. 3. 27), and is sent out to proclaim the mystery of salvation to the community of the world, to show Christ to the world by showing itself in order that all men might be brought into this charismatic unity with the Father (Mt. 11. 27; Mt. 28. 19).

The Church, to which St Paul gives the name 'body of Christ' (Eph. 1. 22-23), has unity not as a 'mark' by which it can be recognized as divinely ordained, but rather its unity simply exists because the Church is the body of Christ through which he continues his perpetual revelation. The world knows that God has sent Christ (John 17. 23), because in his body they can see him, manifesting himself now, in us. Of course, this manifestation is only fully possible as long as we are open to it and permit it, through grace, to shine out. The Christ that we make present to the world, and into whom we are baptized (I Cor. 15. 17), is the risen Christ, for the completion of the revealing act of the Incarnation, the act that makes this revelation redemptive, is the Resurrection; this is in no way to belittle the passion and death, but merely to insist on the organic whole of our Lord's passion, death and resurrection.⁴ By the Resurrection and Ascension Christ is present

⁴F. X. Durrwell, C.S.S.R. *The Resurrection*, London 1960.

to God in heaven as a man, and in virtue of our oneness with Christ through baptism and the eucharist, God knows us in him as risen with him. This is naturally not to say that this is the only way God can know us, but it is the loving way. When we are known to him thus we are of the elect; when we are known independently of the risen Christ it is because we have cut ourselves off from him by sin and are damnable.

The dedication of the old Israel was, in a sense, turned inwards; it was expressed in terms of the Mosaic law, the crown of which was the decalogue. The law delineated the nature of the old moral community; in the new Israel the dual function of the moral community is to love Christ and to carry him into the whole world so as to effect its transformation. The new Israel is also a dedicated community, but this dedication is now not simply an inward thing, but a part of the expression of Christ. The law is a thing of the past; it has not been destroyed but it has been completed in such a way that its provisions have become obsolete, and this is as true of the ten commandments as of any other part. The law, like everything else, has been transformed, and now we can sum up all that is necessary in the two great commandments (Mat. 22. 27-29; Mark 12. 29-31; Luke 10. 27). This love, of course, is an active thing and on what we make of our love of our neighbour, which is a necessary part of our love of God, depends our salvation; it is important to note in this connection that when Christ speaks of damnation the damned are condemned for what they failed to do rather than for their sins of commission, and the failure chosen is the failure to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick and visit and comfort the imprisoned (Mat. 25. 31-46).

It is not only in terms of the law that the new situation differs radically from the old, but also in terms of the priestly function of the people. St Peter repeats the promise in Exodus (I Pet. 2. 9) that we are a priestly people, but in place of the burnt offerings of the old covenant, it is Christ dead and risen whom we, as Christ, offer in our sacrifice of thanksgiving, and it is in that offering that we primarily perform our duty of making God present to our fellow men. The announcement of the mystery of Christ, the mystery of salvation, the source of God's aid in our part in our own redemption, even the source of the seal that makes us free, baptism, is the mass. But it is even more than the redemptive act; our sacrifice of thanksgiving is also both the means of our present union with Christ and the actual showing forth of Christ in the liturgy of the word. The many activities, so to say, of the mass are inseparable, since each one depends upon the other, and our

sacrifice as a priestly people is the summation of the whole dialogue between God and man on this earth. It would be no exaggeration to say that the normal function of the mystical body is the sacrifice of the mass, a sacrifice in which the whole community is the offering priesthood, the ministry of the new covenant (Jer. 31. 33; 2 Cor. 3. 3). As the mass is the source of life throughout the community so too is it the source of light and of our unity.

In his wisdom and in accordance with the counsels of the Father, the only-begotten Son has found a means of bringing and welding us into unity with God and with one another, although by reason of our souls and bodies we are each distinct personalities.

Through one body, which is his own, he blesses, by a mysterious communion, those who believe in him, and he makes them concorporal with himself and with one another.

Who can now separate them or deprive them of their 'physical' union? They have been bound together into unity with Christ by means of his one holy body. For if we all eat of the one bread we all become one body, since there can be no division in Christ. For this reason is the Church called the body of Christ, and we severally his members, according to the teaching of St Paul (Eph. 5. 23, ss.). Since we are all united with the one Christ through his sacred body, and since we all receive him who is one and indivisible into our own bodies, we ought to look upon our members as belonging to him rather than to ourselves.⁵

We are familiar with the Pauline comparison between the relationship of Christ and the Church and a man and his wife. This is constantly balanced by his insistence that the Church *is* Christ; this is no contradiction but simply the expression of related aspects of the Church as redeeming, as revealing Christ, and as the community of the faithful. With the unity given by Christ we can see the opening out of Israel. Our knowledge of God has all the elements contained in Jewish knowledge; God is numinous, destroying, fruitful, creating, omnipotent, loving, just and personal; but now we know so much more. God is a father with whom we can enter into a knowing and living relationship through his Son, which involves a share in his life inconceivable to the old Israel. Our community is bound together by a covenant as was the old community (Heb. 8. 10), but this time the dedication in the covenant is not in terms of the law and its observance,

⁵St Cyril of Alexandria, *In Joh.*, xi, II, P.G., vol. 74, 560. Quoted by E. Mersch, S.J., *The Whole Christ*, London 1938.

but membership of and commitment to the Son of God. To the extent to which we accept the share in God's life when we 'put on Christ' in baptism we are members of Christ, we are the vehicle of God's new revelation. It has been said elsewhere, often enough, that the Church is Christ revealing himself to us now, and we are a part of the Church.

Father E. Schillebeeckx has summed up the nature of that self-revelation of Christ in the title of his great book *Christus, sacrament van de Godsontmoeting*,⁶ which means 'Christ, the sacrament of encounter with God'. In an essay in a symposium published in English he adds,

Accordingly, the Church as the institution of salvation is essentially sacrament and Word. Both form the specific area of endeavour for the hierarchical ministry. The norm for ministry, sacrament and Word is, on the one hand, the *ephapax* (once-for-all-character) of the historical appearance of Christ and of the apostolic, primitive tradition, and on the other hand the earthly form of the saving action of the glorified *Kyrios* through his Spirit. The whole visible Church is the historical appearance of Christ and of the apostolic, primitive tradition, and on the other hand the earthly form of the saving action of the glorified *Kyrios* through his Spirit. The whole visible Church is ruled by the glorified *Kyrios* who, through the mediation both of his Holy Spirit and of the apostolic ministry of his earthly Church, brings to completion in this world the building up of the people of God. Christ *sends* the Holy Spirit (John 14. 16, 26; 15. 26) and he also *sends* his apostles (John 13. 16, 20; 17. 18). Both of these sendings are organically connected with one another. Pentecost, the day on which the Church with her sacramental and kerygmatic activity stepped forth into the full light of the day, is the mystery event of the manifestation of both these missions precisely in their conjointly acting unity, a unity which is vitalized from a single source of life, the *Kyrios* himself. What the visible Church does in the order of historical, external visibility, the Spirit sent by Christ does interiorly both in her authorized ministers and in the souls of the faithful. That is why the Church as the representation of the mystery of Christ can herself be called a primordial sacrament (*Ursakrament*) insofar as she is (1) *sacramentum humanitatis Christi* (sacrament of the humanity of Christ) or the sacramental Christ, and (2) the subject of which the seven sacraments, the specific ministerial actions of the sacramental Church are found.⁷

⁶E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christus, sacrament van de Godsontmoeting*, Nijmegen 1959

⁷E. Schillebeeckx, O.P. *The Sacraments: an Encounter with God, in Christianity Divided*, New York 1961.

It is in the Church that has been called *Ursakrament* that we encounter God, but the Church is the body of Christ and it is clear that here we have the fulfilment of the words of our Lord in John 14. 6-7. Our encounter with God is always through the Son in the Church, that is to say that whatever the form of our encounter in terms of religious experience, it is subordinated to that meeting of the whole man sacramentally, and that the normal, even the best kind of meeting, if these words can be used, is that experienced by Christians at the sacramental communal meal of mass.

In the portrayal of the last judgement (Matt. 25. 31-46) we see what it is we have to do to bring Christ to men; we must feed Christ, house him and comfort him. The unity with and in Christ that is consummated in the eucharist breaks out as a lifegiving force in the double activity of the Word and of works. It is not simply a question of feeding the poor man I meet starving in the gutter (I don't need Christianity to tell me about that obligation) but it is rather a matter of making sure that the community of the world reflects God's justice, is a just, good or loving community. The task of the united, loving community of God is to redeem by transformation the community of the world. We who are baptized in Christ are the new men (2 Cor. 5. 17; Eph. 2. 15; 4. 24; Col. 3. 10) renewed by the death and resurrection of our Lord. It does not do to try and inhibit the shewing of Christ by withdrawing into our own private religious world into which we want to draw all other men; rather we must take our mission as members of Christ seriously by exhibiting his justice in our actions as the 'new heaven' in the community of the world.

Christ has sent us to proclaim the mystery of salvation, but that proclamation is an affair of deeds as well as of words, and what we have to convert is the community of the world, which is not in itself evil but simply awaiting transformation, the change that we are all waiting for as members of Christ's body (2 Pet. 3. 10). Our task is not to substitute one community, that of Christ, for another, that of the world, but to make the first community present to the second in such a way that the community of the world is open to the transformation by the Spirit. In other words, working for social justice is to do the work of Christ and is a part of the job of announcing the mystery of salvation. It is clear that a kind of double-think will have to go on continually for it is improbable that we shall ever achieve even common justice for all our fellow men before the final transformation of the world, but we must work as if this were an existential possibility; such a necessity is

part of the command, 'You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect'. (Matt. 5. 48). The task of making the worldly community receptive is a task of Christian charity, but it must be clearly understood that while we have an absolute duty to help in cases of hardship known to us, this exercise of charity is primarily a community act. What we have to see is that as a *community* the world feeds its hungry, that national and international communities are responsible for justice as communities. In the last resort this is to say that communal responsibility and action is the fullest expression of humanity at the ordinary level.

It is also in these terms that we can see clearly the progression from the presence of God to Abraham and his heirs, through the more intense relationship after the covenant of Sinai, to the fusion that took place in our Lord. The obligations inherent in being a part of the community of God open out and become totally world-embracing as that community draws closer to God in time. Now, in these days of the community of the Lord our obligation to our brothers is total and there is nothing more to be added to our relationship with God. For those who are in Christ through baptism and grace there is simply a time of waiting until the effects of this relationship are brought into fruition. The kingdom of God is here, these are the last days and, therefore, this is the 'time' of heaven; we await the completion of the kingdom of God only in the sense that for a little while the effects of this situation are suspended.

So I come back to the point at which I began my remarks, the twenty-first chapter of the Apocalypse of St John. The community of God is to be saved as a community. God knows and loves us in Christ, knows us, in fact, *as* Christ; this is a knowledge of us which subsumes the knowledge of us as individuals. We are individuals, and always will be, but our individuality is made perfect in our integration into the community of Christ. The beginning of the process of perfection is in this world when we are called upon to 'put on Christ'; by living our lives fully in this world, which is God's world, as members of Christ, we bring Christ into the total human community. To do this successfully involves the recognition of the human community as good, and above all the realization that the Church too is a community.