

The Mystery of the Church^{*}

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IT IS COMMON knowledge that St. Thomas did not compose a treatise *De ecclesia*; his theological synthesis does not present any unified ecclesiological development. The reason for this lacuna is likewise familiar: the mystery of the Church is the very mystery of the divine economy which created angels and human beings in order to lead them into beatitude. This thoroughly Patristic view explains why Thomas does not consider the Church as a particular mystery, but considers it in all aspects of Revelation. The need for a distinct treatise became apparent only in the fourteenth century, when the word “Church” came to signify the one economy of Redemption at the stage of development achieved by Christ. The real origin of the modern treatises lies in the controversy with the Protestants, because of the ecclesiological dualism between the visible and invisible Church exemplified in Luther and Calvin. By the twentieth century, these new treatises on the Church were slowly evolving out of their apologetic approach to attain a truly theological level. Major contributions to this field have been made by significant authors in the Thomistic tradition (Yves Congar, Charles Journet). Today, the ecclesiologist’s primary responsibility is to construct a synthesis based on the insights of Vatican II which will help to recover the true depth of Patristic theology. Some main features of the Thomistic contribution to this present-day challenge will serve to illustrate the assistance that can be expected from this school of thought today. I will highlight two speculative points: the question of the “definition” of the Church, which should

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articulate the constitutive unity of the ecclesial mystery, and the question of the Church's unicity.

The Definition of the Church

While the literal meaning of the word Church (*ekklesia*) is "the convoked assembly," we need to determine the real definition by refining our understanding of the corresponding concept. The first clue Vatican II provides in this regard is that this community is a complex reality: the various elements that constitute the mystery of the Church (elements that can be reduced to two, the divine and the human) "are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality which comes together from a human and a divine reality."¹ In other words, this particular being is profoundly one and undivided, even though it is composed of multiple elements. Man himself is the type of this complex being: "Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity."² The various elements of a single but complex reality are inseparable, "coextensive," as Journet would say, in such a way that the one never exists without the other, although the one is not the other, the subject itself being the unity between the two, a unity that is in some way substantial. The mystery of the Church consists primarily in this unity.

In the field of ecclesiology, the theological renewal of the twentieth century focused intense study on the different aspects of the ecclesial mystery, drawing up an inventory of the mystery's fabulous wealth which was progressively adopted by the Magisterium (see the encyclical *Mystici Corporis*). The Council summarizes the multiplicity of aspects under two general headings: the Church is at once human and "divine." How can we account for this unity? Before Vatican II, most authors (with the notable exception of Journet) upheld a simple juxtaposition: the Church is a hierarchical society and a supernatural community. After the Council, one theory, using a dialectical method of analysis, explained the ecclesial mystery in terms of "tension" between the two elements, each of which is defined by the negation of the other. The Church is at once institution and communion in a state of constant tension: institution being "exterior" and not-communion, and communion being "interior" and not-institution.

Thomism, however, seeks to explain communion through and in institution, rather than alongside it or in spite of it, both aspects being sustained in real unity at the deepest level. Its starting-point, as noted by Journet back in 1926 and then by Congar, is taken from Thomas's expo-

¹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* [LG], §8.

² Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §14.

sition of the New Law.³ Within the New Law, which is thoroughly one at heart, Thomas distinguishes two dimensions. The primary one is the Holy Spirit in Person (uncreated grace), together with the virtues and gifts (created grace). The secondary dimensions are those which dispose toward or precede the primary one (the written law, precepts, etc.), and those which result from or are posterior to it, bringing God's gift to fruition in man (good works). To the modern bipartite structure, exterior (human) and interior (divine), Thomas prefers a tripartite one: created causes of grace (which mediate grace), first effect (uncreated and created grace in man), and second and final effect (the works accomplished in grace). In this view, all three are essential, because grace is operative at each stage, whether communicating itself, inhering in the subject, or working in and through the subject. In the first stage, grace is as though contained in mediating things (literally so in the sacraments); in the second, it is received into persons (grace heals and raises up nature); finally, in the third, it operates in and through works. Thomas sets forth these concepts in several places in his writings. In the treatise on the sacraments in the *Summa theologiae*,⁴ Thomas establishes that a sacrament "contains" the grace which it confers, a theme that was reiterated by the Council of Trent and became a doctrinal given thereafter. In the treatise on grace,⁵ Thomas demonstrates that grace is a new quality in the soul. Finally, according to his doctrine of merit,⁶ the acts man performs in grace are truly his own acts, effected by his free will, even though since he is a creature, his capacity to act comes from God in the first place.

These principles point out a fruitful path toward explaining the unity that conjoins all the elements of this complex being, the Church: sacramentality. Vatican II states repeatedly that the Church is the sacrament of salvation, that is, the sign and instrument of man's unity with God and other human beings.⁷ The early Fathers were well-acquainted with the idea of the mystery of Christ as a sacrament. They also applied the name of sacrament to the Church, since the Spouse is in a certain way one with the Husband, and they called the acts of divine worship sacraments. Thomas, however, reserved the name to the seven acts of divine worship, and the clarifications he contributed are invaluable. We owe to Thomas the now-classic definition of the sacrament as "sign of a holy thing insofar as it makes men holy";⁸ the sign makes known a reality that is in the

³ *ST* I-II, qq. 106-8.

⁴ *ST* III, qq. 60-65.

⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 110.

⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 114.

⁷ *LG*, §1.

⁸ *ST* III, q. 60, a. 2.

act of sanctifying. That which is signified is first a cause (Christ acting) and secondly an effect (sanctification—the gift of grace). These insights will help us to gain a better understanding of sacramentality in all its Patristic breadth.

First, sacramentality is revealed in its most perfect form in the mystery of Christ Himself. He is the first and most fundamental sacrament. Christ's sacramentality expresses His ontology. Christ is true God and true man; in Him, divine reality makes itself known (via sign) and gives itself (via instrument) through and in the assumed human reality. The constitutive relation of the mystery of the Savior is a humanity that is at once sign and instrument of the divinity. This sacrament-being, which is Christ Himself, is perfectly indivisible, on account of the union of the two natures in the Person of the Word.

Second, Christ's Spouse likewise manifests a sacramentality which defines her very being. But there is one difference: the Church is not divine in the same way that Christ is God. The Church is a graced human reality, and that fact necessitates an ecclesiological monophysitism. With this clarification in mind, we can say that the Church is the theological community of men with God and each other, in the sign and instrument of a human sociological religious community. The materially visible community is a sign and instrument that only faith can recognize: the supernatural community subsists in this community, because the Church is inseparably the means and reality of grace. Moreover, this is the dwelling-place of her mystery.

There is, however, a difficulty implicit within the entitative sacramentality of the Church which is absent from the entitative sacramentality of Christ: by virtue of the hypostatic union, the sign and instrument that is His humanity is so pure, so transparent, that it cannot conceivably be separated from His divinity. In contrast, the ecclesial community on earth is composed of sinners. Should we then say that in the Church the two communities—sociological sign and theological reality—are “normally” joined but can be dissevered by the transgressions of its members? If this were the case, the Church's entitative sacramentality would be destroyed, since this sacramentality defines the Church as a being with constitutive unity. The Church might or might not exist at any given moment, depending on the ups and downs of its local or universal history. This idea is often upheld by our Protestant brethren, who consequently cannot escape the ecclesial dualism between visible Church and invisible Church, Church of saints and Church of sinners. The potential dualism of the ecclesial mystery is one of the modern difficulties in Catholic dogmatic theology, and it can be found in Rahner and Kasper. These

authors consider sacramentality, not from the starting point of its perfect fulfillment in the ontology of Christ, but from the other end, so to speak—namely, from its fulfillment in the operative sacramentality of the seven sacraments. In these sacraments, indeed, it is possible to conceive of the sign without the accompanying effect of grace, if grace is hindered by an obstacle in the person who is receiving a sacrament.

The solution to this serious problem, in my opinion, can be found by applying to the Church the specific sacramentality of the Eucharist. Unlike the other six sacraments, this sacrament does not consist in one single sacramental act. It is first of all the presence of a being, of Christ the Head, aiming toward bringing into existence the whole Christ, Head and members: in other words, the Church. In the Eucharist, the “physical” Christ engenders the “mystical” Christ.” The Church is the ultimate end of this sacrament. What happens if the sacrament is celebrated unworthily (for instance, if the faithful are poorly disposed)? The Lord becomes really present in the consecrated species, but the edification of the Church does not follow. In this sacrament, then, there is one reality existing under the sign of species, as well as an ultimate reality which depends on the state of the participants. Consequently, the Eucharist has three dimensions: the sign alone (the bread and wine, realities which are profane in themselves, but which, once consecrated, are in the most literal sense the Body and Blood of Christ), an intermediary reality (the real presence in the sign), and a final reality which depends on the fervor of the participants.

Applying these principles to ecclesiology, then, we can say that the Church is a religious community in the sociological order, a sign containing an intermediary community which indefectibly possesses the *sancta* (preaching of the Gospel, celebration of the sacraments) for the sake of bringing to birth the final community which is the Mystical Body in act. The mystery of the Church’s constitutive unity lies in the fact that the three communities are but one. The *sancti* belong to it by means of the *sancta*, which are visibly manifested in the empirical community. In answer to the formerly daunting question, “Who is a member of the Church?” we can reword and repeat Joan of Arc’s answer to her judges: “If I am a (holy) member, God keeps me one (by means of the *sancta*); if I am not, God makes me one (by means of the *sancta*).” Just as no one can know with certitude whether he is in the state of grace, the identity of the members of the Church cannot be resolved except in terms of “tendency.” Am I, or am I not, within the “logic” of incorporation, by belonging to the empirical community that possesses the *sancta*? Here an answer does exist: the Church is perfectly formed in the saints who take

advantage of all three aspects of the ecclesial mystery, and it is still in the process of coming to be in the sinners who are tending toward the final theological reality.

This way of viewing the ecclesial mystery illuminates several problems, including the thorny problem of the Church's holiness. She is indefectibly holy with respect to the *sancta*, which she possesses and which are infallibly fruitful. She is also really holy in those who live by grace, whose presence in every age and place is made manifest through the tradition of canonization. A Christian's sins are precisely what puts him in a position of diminished membership in this holy community. The statements of repentance being issued today for the sins of Christians underline the fact that, although such sins have obscured the ecclesial sign, they have not affected the holiness of the mystery. It is in himself that the sinner impairs ecclesiality, not in the community that is the Body of Christ.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the mystery of these three communities in one is manifested in the charity that constitutes the unifying link among all the aspects of the ecclesial sacrament. The sociological-sign community is united by the mutual love of its members, and not only by exterior juridical bonds. The community that possesses the *sancta* is also united by charity, since charity animates the preaching of the Gospel and inspires adherence, just as it animates all the sacramental celebrations, of which it is the fruit. The community of the saints is the final and definitive dwelling-place of the love between God and human beings, a love shining through works. All this is aptly summarized by the modern rediscovery of *communion* as a definition of the Church. Communion is the name of the unity that charity effects. Thomas has left us a profound theology of charity as friendship (*ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1), that is, reciprocal love founded on a common good. While he took the idea directly from Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* VIII), he transposed it to the level of the marvelous New Testament concept of *koinonia*: God shares His beatitude with us so that we might share in it; thence is born community between God and human beings.

In other words, the mystery of the Church is the mystery of divine beatitude communicated to us so that we might share in it and therefore share a divine common good with God and each other. This is the economy established in the era of Redemption, according to the foundational law of sacramentality. Revealed in the mystery of the Savior's very being, this law expresses to us the means God has undertaken to rescue the world. If the Church can be defined as *the sacrament of the communion of men with God and each other*, it is because she is the Body and Spouse of Him in Whom sacramentality is most perfectly found as in its source.

Therefore, the acts of divine worship that take the name of “sacrament” can be understood as the joint acts of the two sacraments of salvation, Christ and the Church: act is in accordance with being.

The Thomistic tradition provides invaluable resources for developing this position. Such a concept of unity—one might even say substantial unity—between various elements leaves no room for divisive dualisms. Far from emptying the mystery, this concept of unity reveals the mystery’s proper place: in the bond that joins the mystery of Christ to that of the Spouse. This speculative proposal can be verified by examining its effects in concrete personal life. Those who profess the Church’s substantial unity will never separate visible membership from invisible membership; they will live a concrete ecclesial life which honors sociological membership for the sake of a liturgical and doctrinal membership fulfilled in the plenary theological membership which is the goal of their whole lives, ever more fully reduced to act in good works. Conversely, those who profess separations or “tensions” have a tendency to relativize more or less the secondary dispositional dimensions of the Church: how many of our contemporaries think—often in good faith—that the communion of saints is not linked to doctrinal correctness and liturgical fidelity? Moreover, membership in an empirical community, liturgical fidelity, and doctrinal correctness do not derive primarily from “exterior” or juridical considerations, but are already expressions of charity; charity animates the means so that it may be the end.

The Unicity of the Church of Christ

These considerations bring us to another question, which Vatican II sought to clarify but which still needs to be addressed comprehensively. *Lumen Gentium* states: “[T]he sole Church of Christ . . . constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church. . . . Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines.”⁹ The issue at stake here is how to understand the unicity of the ecclesial mystery: the Church is one, not many. The deposit of faith teaches that the mystery of the Church has been fully manifest ever since the day of Pentecost, and that it perdures through the faithfulness of God. But if the Church is indissolubly visible and invisible, as discussed above, where in the world is it? Pius XII taught that the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, is the Catholic Church (see *Mystici Corporis* and *Humani Generis*). Vatican II preferred to say that the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, “subsists in” the Catholic Church.

⁹ LG, §8.

The Magisterium thus moved from an identification which might be called exclusive (the Mystical Body is the Catholic Church), to a non-exclusive identification (the Mystical Body subsists in the Catholic Church). The Council Fathers' explicit intention was to highlight in this way the existence and value of the means of salvation preserved by communities separated from the Catholic Church.

To understand this very recent dogmatic development, we must somehow account for two seemingly contradictory points. On the one hand, the Church is one, not many; on the other hand, there are a plurality of ecclesial community situations. The Magisterium of Vatican II limited itself to articulating this state of affairs through expressions like "perfect or full ecclesiastical communion" (referring to the Catholic community) and "incomplete or imperfect ecclesiastical communion" (referring to the other separated communities).¹⁰ How can the conclusion that there are many and various Churches be avoided? How can ecclesial unicity be upheld?

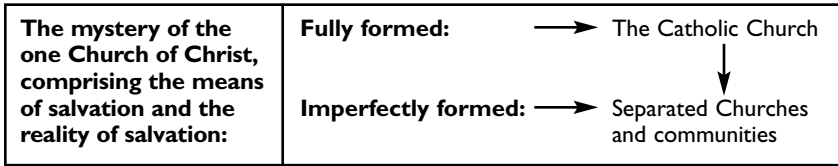
The easy way out would be to state that the one Church of Christ is the sum of the Church and the ecclesial communities, none of which could then claim that it alone is the Church of Christ. But such a solution would contradict the overall tenor of Vatican II's magisterial statements: this one Church of Christ is present and dwells in the Catholic Church. More complicated is the notion of the separated communities as "*in some way analogous*" to the Catholic Church. This notion can also militate against unicity, since analogous realities can be really distinct from each other, which is exactly how these communities consider themselves in their rejection of Catholic communion. Instead, the Council prefers to say that the one Church of Christ is imperfectly present in the separated communities. What is the meaning of this statement?

I will propose the following solution, which is based on the teachings of Vatican II.

It should first be noted that the multiplicity of ecclesial situations is connected to the fact that the mystery of the Church is the mystery of unity between the means of salvation and the reality of salvation, as mentioned above. The Catholic Church is the one ecclesial community which has preserved the integrality and integrity of the means of salvation: the other separated communities have only preserved some of the means of salvation. This Catholic plenitude guarantees her identity with the Church of Christ. Nevertheless, the means of salvation preserved among our separated brethren can still effect the mystery of salvation in their communities (see Diagram 1).

¹⁰ See LG §14; Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* §4.

Diagram 1



Still, how can we avoid recognizing a plurality of Churches? It is at this point that Thomism can contribute an original proposition which I think respects the magisterial *datum*. This proposition is based on the notion of the “potential whole.”

A whole is basically a reality composed of parts held together in a unity which constitutes them into a complete being needing no further addition in order to be itself. It is this completeness which defines the value of the whole. For instance, a *complete* collection of the works of Balzac is worth more than the sum of the individual books: even if one work is missing, its perfection is lost, it is no longer a “whole.” There is, however, a kind of “whole” which has particular significance for our inquiry. Let us take the royal power as an example and analyze it, for the sake of clarity, in the form that was so familiar to France’s Old Regime, that is, the absolute monarchy. Royal power resides wholly in one man—the monarch—and he needs no power from the ministers to complete his own. The king possesses all the arms of power: executive, legislative, and judiciary. The ministers share *part* of the royal power (executive), a part that is ordered toward certain affairs such as justice, finances, or the military, but that does not count toward the power of the king: no more executive power resides in the king’s whole council of ministers than in the king alone. The power delegated to a minister is a *limited participation* in the king’s executive power. To some degree, this principle is operative in the sacrament of holy orders. The orders are profoundly *one*, but they exist in their fullness only in the bishop: priests and deacons participate in them only according to the functions proper to each. The bishop, priest, and deacon together do not have any more power than the bishop alone.

This kind of “whole” is called the *potential whole* because the various members each realize the perfection of the whole in essence (royal power, holy orders) but not in power (the minister, the priest and deacon). Only one being realizes both essence and full power (the king, the bishop).

This insight illuminates our question about the one Church. The ecclesial essence is the reality of the communion of theological life; ecclesial power is constituted by the means of salvation, which communicate

theological life (that is, the preaching of the Gospel, the sacraments possessed by a sociological community). On this basis, it seems to me, one can maintain that the one Church of Christ truly subsists in the Catholic Church because it is in this community that the ecclesial essence is found in connection with the fullness of its power. To use the Vatican II terminology, here is perfect or complete ecclesiality. The separated communities can realize the ecclesial essence, but only by participating in certain means of salvation (diminished power). They are therefore potential parts of the one Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church; they subsist by participation in the one subsistence of the Catholic Church, to varying degrees, based on the number and weight of the common means of salvation which they have managed to preserve. This scenario is expressed in Diagram 2.

Diagram 2

The one Church of Christ, in this world:	is the community of theological life (essence)	exists through the means of salvation instituted by Christ (power)
This one Church of Christ...	...subsists in the Catholic Church	
This one Church of Christ, the Catholic Church, is also present	in terms of essence... in the separated communities: identity	in terms of power... in the separated communities according to varying degrees: participation

If there is no plurality of Churches, but unicity alone, it is because the Catholic Church—the one Church of Christ—is present in its essence in the separated communities. This insight also highlights the state of imperfection in which participated ecclesiality of the separated communities exist. Their incompleteness results from a lack of integrality in the gifts of Christ. This discovery outlines a path for ecumenism: to strive, through doctrinal dialogue, for a unity in the means of salvation, which will then fully manifest the unicity of the Church.

The ecclesial unity and unicity mentioned in *Lumen Gentium* §8 are essential features of the mystery of the Church. From a speculative point of view, they express the *datum* of Revelation, which is principally embodied in the theme of the Church as Mystical Body of Christ (the paragraph preceding *Lumen Gentium* §8 unfolds the theme of the Church as Body of Christ). Here the tradition originating in Thomas converges with a stream of theological research whose conditions are primarily determined by the progress that was made by twentieth-century

ecumenism. Here the Thomistic tradition has an opportunity to reveal its true fruitfulness, striving above all to reveal the continuity within this real dogmatic development: from Pius XII to Vatican II, theological insight into the same truth grows ever deeper. **N.V.**