

What is the Church?—II: The People of God

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In a previous article¹ I showed that the first effect of the Word was to create a community, and this time I want to speak about this community, showing first what it meant for the Old Testament, and then how the notion was deepened in the New. Textbooks sometimes approach this matter by asking themselves whether Christ founded a church to exist after him, and showing that he did so by reference to various gospel texts. The inadequacy of this lies in the fact that it conceives the possibility of Christ's not having founded a church. When we see Christ in the context of scripture we see that the Church is not an institution which Christ decided to have but might have decided not to have. When we see Christ in his Old Testament background, as he is presented by the New Testament, we see the Church as inevitable. Of course, God might not have planned to have a church but this would have meant having a totally different plan for the world. The Father's plan, as we learn from the tremendous last epistles of St Paul, was to bring all things to fulfilment in Christ. This process by which the world grows to maturity in Christ is the Church. The Church, as we shall see, is not a thing, it is a process in time.

I shall choose three main themes from the Old Testament, Israel as chosen people, as sacred people, and as bride of Yahweh. The first is summed up in a text of Deuteronomy:

'You are a people holy to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that Yahweh set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because Yahweh loves you and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt'. (Deut. 7. 6).

Notice first of all the difference between a title like 'the chosen people' and one like 'master race' or 'ruling class' or 'top people'.

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These all involve a claim to be especially suited to some outstanding position. If you are an Aryan you are suited by nature to governing the non-Aryans, and so on. Now the point of the phrase 'chosen people' is exactly the opposite of this. The Hebrews did not think that their special pre-eminence came from any special fitness of their own; they thought it came purely from the fact that God had chosen them. Every Hebrew knew that God's purpose was to subdue the world to his rule. He had chosen Israel for this purpose, but not because she was powerful and numerous or in any way suited to the task. ' . . . for you are the fewest of all peoples; but it is because Yahweh loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery.' The Hebrews did not think of themselves as a group of men who had come together and found God. They were a group who had been found by God. Israel is not the result of any human effort, it is purely the gratuitous creation of God. Significantly the passage I quoted cannot get very far without referring once more to the Exodus, the moment of Israel's creation, and the stories of the Exodus emphasise all the time that it was a work of Yahweh, not of Moses or of the Hebrew people. Indeed Yahweh brings them out of Egypt in spite of their opposition. Even Moses is occasionally disheartened while the rest of the people say quite frankly that what they want is a bit of peace and quiet.

Very closely tied up with the idea of being a *chosen* people is the idea of being children of God. At the Exodus Yahweh says to Moses:

'You shall say to Pharaoh: Thus says Yahweh, Israel is my first born son. And I say to you let my son go that he may serve me; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your first-born son'. (Ex. 4. 22).

This title of 'Son of God' is frequently applied to Israel, especially in the book of Deuteronomy:

'You are the sons of Yahweh your God . . . You are a people holy to Yahweh your God, and Yahweh has chosen you to be a people for his own possession'. (Deut. 14. 1).

'Do you thus repay Yahweh, you foolish and senseless people? Is he not your father who created you?' (Deut. 32. 6).

Like many of the ancient titles of Israel as a whole, this title is later especially applied to the messiah king who is to come:

'I shall be his father and he shall be my son'. (2 Sam. 7. 14).

This is another case in which we see how the New Testament has taken a phrase from the Old and deepened its meaning.

The second thing the Hebrews said about themselves was that they were a sacred people, a consecrated people, or as they sometimes put it, a holy people:

‘You shall be a people holy to Yahweh your God. Yahweh will set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour, and you shall be a people holy to Yahweh your God, as he has spoken’. (Deut. 26. 19).

It would be a great mistake to think that holiness here means first of all moral goodness. Holiness for the Hebrews is the first characteristic of God. What is holy is first of all terrifying, dangerous: God is dangerous not first of all because of his wrath, but because his holiness is of itself destructive of what is profane. No man can see God and live. He is a fire which burns up anything that comes within range. When he visits the earth he is accompanied by all the elemental forces of destruction:

The voice of Yahweh is upon the waters
 the God of glory thunders
 the voice of Yahweh breaks the cedars
 Yahweh breaks the cedars of Lebanon . . .
 The voice of Yahweh flashes forth flames of fire
 the voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness . . .
 The voice of Yahweh makes the oak trees whirl
 and strips the forest bare
 and in his temple all cry ‘Glory’.
 Yahweh sits enthroned above the flood
 Yahweh sits enthroned as king for ever. (Psalm 29).

The holiness of Israel is a sharing in the holiness of God. This means that on the one hand she is protected from the destructive power of Yahweh, while the other nations are destroyed; and on the other hand she herself is dangerous. It is because they are dangerous that holy things are set apart; it is not safe for ordinary people to handle them or come too near them. This idea that certain things are sacred as opposed to the profane world is, according to Mircea Eliade, the one thing that all definitions of religious phenomena have in common. He says:

It is dangerous to come near any defiled or consecrated object in a profane state - without, that is, proper ritual preparation. What is called taboo—from a polynesian word that the ethnologists have taken over—means just that: it is the fact of things or places or persons being cut off, or ‘forbidden’, because contact with them is dangerous. (*Traité d’histoire des Religions*, Eng. trans. p. 15).

For the Hebrews the whole people is dangerous in this way, set apart from secular nations about her. But on the other hand this means that Israel is herself able to endure the presence of God. Just as the priest is the only man who can safely handle the instruments of sacrifice, because he has been consecrated and belongs himself to the realm of the sacred, so Israel can safely approach God because she is consecrated:

Yahweh says to her: 'You shall be my possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. (Ex. 19. 6).

So Israel is chosen out gratuitously from among the peoples and made the children of God, she is chosen out to be the priestly nation, the representative of mankind who can safely converse with God, can offer him acceptable sacrifice. Israel is the chosen one, the son of God, the priest.

She is priestly because she belongs to the world of the divine, she shares in God's world, she lives by his life. Israel lives by the spirit or breath of God, this is why she can survive the terrifying presence of God. There is no space in this article to enter fully into this notion of the spirit of God, but there is one detail that is worth noticing. The presence of the spirit of Yahweh was associated by the Hebrews with the ceremony of anointing with oil; the Hebrews were thus an anointed people. This is the origin of the word 'Messiah' or, in Greek, 'Christ'. Israel is the Christ of God.

'When they were few in number
 . . . wandering from nation to nation . . .
 he allowed no one to oppress them
 he rebuked kings on their account,
 saying "Touch not my Christ
 do my prophets no harm".' (Psalm 104).

This word Christ or Messiah is another that was transferred first to the king of Israel as personifying the whole people, then to the king of the future, the Christ who was to come to bring the Spirit of God, the life of God to the whole world.

'Chosen one', 'Son of God', 'Priest', 'Christ'; this is how Israel saw herself. There is one further image that we must look at before we turn to what became of these ideas in the New Testament: this is the image of Israel as the bride of Yahweh. That belongs to the same complex of ideas as those we have seen, because Israel is the *virgin* bride of Yahweh. This theme is first developed in the stories of the barren woman who by the power of God gives birth to a son. There are several such stories

in the early part of the Old Testament and their point is always the same. The child who is born is the gift of God; the fertility of the woman is something that owes nothing to man, nothing to natural means, but is purely God-given fertility. The first of these women is Sarah the wife of Abraham, the mother of all the chosen people. In the prophets the idea is taken up and developed and applied to the whole people of Israel. The whole people is a virgin set aside for marriage with Yahweh. The phrase 'virgin Israel' is very common, especially in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezechiel. The exodus is seen as the espousals of the virgin and Yahweh, when Yahweh fell in love with Israel and chose her for his bride. Israel's frequent unfaithfulness to Yahweh is described in terms of unfaithfulness to her lover, as fornication and adultery. The future destiny of Israel is seen as the marriage of the virgin with Yahweh. Sometimes the Messiah is seen as the bridegroom, sometimes as the fruit of the union between Yahweh and the virgin Israel.

I said in my previous article that the New Testament comes about by taking the Old Testament literally; what is an image or metaphor in the Old Testament is realised in actual fact in the New. In the New Testament the pictures come to life. And of course the first image to be concretely realised is that of the virgin mother Israel. In the thought of the prophets it was the destiny of Israel to bring forth salvation not by human means but by the sheer power of God. It is the love of God for Israel that is to give her the fertility by which she will bring new life to the world. This vision is concretely realised in Mary the virgin mother of Christ. In Mary, the virgin motherhood of Israel is summed up and represented, in her the marriage between Yahweh and his bride is first consummated:

'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee. Therefore the Holy One that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God'. (Luke 1. 35).

The Holy One that is born of this union is not only called Son of God but also all the other titles which began as titles of the chosen people. He is also the chosen one, the Christ, the consecrated one, the priest of Yahweh. In him all that Israel under the old law has been doing symbolically, figuratively, in metaphor, becomes real.

It may seem very strange to say that Jesus, who is after all one individual man, should be the new Israel; how could a single man be the people of God? And yet this is the teaching of the gospels when we see them in their true context of the whole Bible. In St Matthew and St

Luke's gospels Christ begins his public life by re-enacting in his personal life the incidents of the exodus. He comes up after his baptism from the Jordan into the desert and here he has three trials, three conflicts with Satan, each of which corresponds to an incident in the story of Israel in the desert after she has come up from the Red Sea. Each of them is a trial or temptation in which Israel failed and in which Christ succeeds. The gospels are full of such parallels, but of course the most important of all is the culminating scene of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ which takes place significantly in the context of the pasch, so that the passing over of Christ from life through death to new life corresponds to the passing of the Hebrews through the death of Egypt into new life.

The reason why the destiny of the Hebrew people is fulfilled in one individual man is that this individual man is to be the source of a new people of God. Christ did not just found a church as a man might found an organisation; he *is* the unity of the Church. The Church, the new people of God, consists of those who are in him. There is one life in the Church and it is the life of Christ. This is the meaning of Pentecost. After his ascension into heaven Christ poured out his risen life, his Spirit, into the world so that we could live by it. The Church is all those who live by the risen life of Christ, which is the Spirit of Christ, a divine person, the Holy Spirit. The unity of the Church is not just the unity of a society with common aims, like a university; it is not just the unity of a society with a single recognised ultimate authority like a state; it is not just the unity of people who think in the same way, like a political party; it involves something like all these things, but the unity of the Church is first of all the unity of one *life*. What binds us together is that we live by the same life, the life of Christ.

This is why the images and words which were originally coined for use about a whole community and which found a concrete literal realisation in a single man, can now be extended once again to a whole community. What was said metaphorically about the people of Israel was said literally about Christ, and now it is said about the new people of Israel, the Church, those who live in Christ. How is it said about the Church? The things that are said *metaphorically* of Israel and *literally* of Christ are said *sacramentally* of the Church.

The history of the Hebrews was, of course, a series of real events which literally happened, but when we ask about their theological significance, when we want to interpret their history as the Bible interprets it, we see its significance as figurative, as metaphorical, as sym-

bolic of what was to come. Similarly with the cult of the Hebrews; their sacrifices and religious ceremonies, the pasch for example, had no value in themselves except as foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ.

When we come to Christ himself we find that the value of his acts lies precisely in the acts themselves, in the fact that they historically occurred. With the theology of the Old Testament we are in the world of metaphor and symbol, with the theology of the gospels we are in the world of physical fact, with the theology of the Church we are in the world of sacraments. It is because of a *metaphor* that the Hebrews were the Christ, the anointed who lived by the breath of God, the Spirit of God. It is because of the *literal* truth that Jesus of Nazareth lives by the Spirit of God and has done so from all eternity. It is because of the *sacraments* that the Church lives by the Spirit of God. Israel was *metaphorically* the virgin mother who brings salvation into the world, Mary was *literally* the virgin mother who gave birth to Christ, the Church is *sacramentally* the virgin mother who brings Christ into the world. The sacrifice of the paschal lamb was a picture or figure of the world's delivery from sin and union with God, the crucifixion was in physical fact the sacrifice of the atonement, the mass is the sacrament of this sacrifice.

I could go on indefinitely multiplying examples of this triad, metaphor, natural reality, sacramental reality, for nothing is more important for understanding the Church than to realise the distinction between sacraments and metaphor or picture on the one hand, natural reality on the other. Nothing is more important and few things are more difficult. Very briefly the whole of sacramental theology can be summed up in saying that a sacrament is a symbol which makes real what it symbolises. A sacrament has in common with a metaphor or image, that it symbolises something, and has in common with the natural world that it involves a reality; but a sacrament is neither of these, nor is it a mixture of both. In the eucharist, for example, we do not have the body of Christ present in the natural way in which it was present on earth together with a symbolic appearance of bread. This is not what 'real presence' implies. On the contrary in the eucharist we have the body of Christ present just precisely in so far as it is symbolised by the appearance of bread, but it is *sacramentally* symbolised and therefore made real.

The sacraments, as I suggested in the earlier article, are revelations of God, but not everything which shows us God can be called sacramental in the sense in which I am using the term. Of course 'sacrament' is one

of those key terms of religion which can be interpreted at several different levels, but in its deepest sense it means not just any symbol of God but a symbol which reveals the achievement of God's plan for human destiny. Many people have seen the world of nature as revealing the sacred: 'the heavens show forth the glory of Yahweh', and sometimes this is called having a sacramental view of the world. But the sacraments in our deeper sense are signs of the revelation which God has made of himself, signs of the Word of God in history. They are concerned not just with God's creation but with his special plan for humanity. This they have in common with the scriptures, and just as the scriptures had to be written by God so the sacraments had to be instituted by God. We can speak, and the Fathers of the Church constantly did speak of the sacraments of the old law: that is the signs, especially the cultic signs, which symbolised the workings of God's plan in the Old Testament. The difference between these signs and the sacraments of the new law is just that God's plan has now been realised in Christ. The sacraments of the new law are not simply looking forward to something which is not yet, they symbolise something actually present.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of the symbolism of the sacraments as confined to the present. This mistake is encouraged by the catechism definition of a sacrament as an 'outward sign of inward grace'. A sacrament is this, but its symbolism is much wider than this suggests. Sacramental symbolism, according to St Thomas, always embraces the whole history of God's plan, past, present, and future. The symbolism of each sacrament looks backward to its institution by Christ and through this to the Old Testament preparation; it looks to the present effect in the soul and it looks forward to the completion of God's plan in the second coming of Christ.

This last point is important. The earliest Christians, especially those who lived at Thessalonica, expected Christ to return from heaven to earth at any moment. They were disappointed at the delay. In fact the earliest letters we have by St Paul were written to reassure them, in particular to assure them that even if they died before Christ came back they would still have eternal life. Nowadays Christians seem to have gone to the opposite extreme, and have practically forgotten about the return of Christ. When a modern Christian thinks of the last day, which is not often, it is almost entirely in terms of the last judgement; will he scrape through or not, like an exam. It is not something he looks forward to with passionate longing. Every Sunday in the creed

he says that he waits for, or looks forward to the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting, but there is not much sign of this in his usual thinking. The last day is, of course, the day of crisis, the day of judgement, but it is also the day of resurrection and life, the day of the coming of Jesus in triumph, when Christ the King is revealed as such. The exclusive concentration on the judgement side of things comes to us partly from the medieval obsession with sin, but partly also from forgetting that our religion is an interpretation of history. Christianity is about the history of mankind, but we too often think of it as good advice instead of good news. This is one of the reasons why Marxism makes an appeal. It contains an authoritative teaching about the course of history, which fills a gap left by our inadequate preaching of Christianity. People want to know about the destiny of mankind, want to know whether history has a meaning, and what it is. Christianity does in fact give an answer here. Just as the Marxist looks forward to the millenium and the final withering away of the state, so the Catholic looks forward impatiently to the withering away of the organised Church. For the whole set-up of faith, organised religion and the sacraments is something temporary. It belongs to our brief era in history, the period between the first and second comings of Christ. In spite of the fact that at benediction we sing *adoremus in aeternum sacramentissimum sacramentum*, the sacraments are not eternal. The sacramental era only has a certain number of years to go, when it will be swept away. Just as the figures and metaphors of the Old Testament gave way to the reality of Christ, so our union with Christ by sacramental symbols will give way to a deeper union. All the sacraments in their symbolism look forward to this deeper reality which transcends them, and the ancient prayers of the liturgy bring this out clearly. The post-communion prayers of the ancient Sunday masses constantly speak of the eucharist as foreshadowing or prefiguring union with Christ in eternity. It is the pledge of eternal life.

As St Paul puts it, 'Whenever you eat this bread or drink the chalice you shall show forth the death of the Lord, until he comes'. What is true of the central sacrament, the eucharist, is also true of all the others. They and the visible church which they constitute belong to the era before the Lord comes and in their symbolism they look forward to this coming as they look to the present and to the past.

The sacraments are the ways in which the Word of God is present to us in our present era. Taken as a system or order they are the Church and they are the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the world. For this

reason they are the presence of the body of Christ in the world. The doctrine of the Church as the body of Christ is in some danger of being misunderstood. In our day there is a new, strong and entirely healthy emphasis on the Church as a community. The individualist piety which flourished in the last few centuries is giving way to a kind of thinking and a kind of praying which takes much more account of our fellowship in Christ. The liturgical revival is the culmination of this. We recognise much more clearly than I think previous generations have done, that we are all interdependent. This important truth is sometimes expressed, and in fact was expressed by St Paul in one of his early epistles (to the Corinthians), by saying that the Church is like a body, just as in a body there are all kinds of different parts doing different jobs, yet all belong to the one body, all are necessary to the working of the one body, so in the Church there are all kinds of people doing all sorts of jobs, but every job has to do with the life of every other member because it has to do with the life of the whole body. This is roughly the same truth as is expressed by the name 'Catholic'. It is one of the great glories of the Catholic Church from a merely humanist point of view that there is no such thing as a Catholic type. There is no temperament especially suited to catholicism, there is no nation or colour which is by nature Catholic. It is true you sometimes get people writing as though there were something especially European about the Church ('Europe is the faith', and similar nonsense) but these are aberrations condemned by both the words and the deeds of the Church as a whole. Someone once said that an absolute rejection of racialism and nationalism, of theories of master races and inherently inferior peoples, is a fifth mark of the Church. In fact however it is just part of what it meant by the third of the traditional four marks. The Church is Catholic.

But this catholicity of the Church by which all kinds of people work together in a living unity is only a fractional part of what is meant by speaking of the Church as the body of Christ. In St Paul's later epistles, especially in the last epistles—Colossians and Ephesians—the Church is called the body of Christ in a much more realist sense. The Church is sacramentally the body of Christ himself living by his Spirit in the world. In the Church we make, as it were, contact with Christ. He touches us in the sacraments. It is the body of Christ, risen from the dead in glory, that is the source of the Spirit for us; the sacraments make that body present to us. It is true that although in the sacraments Christ touches us, we do not touch him physically, because he is present only in so far as he is symbolised, and our touching him is not

directly contained in any sacramental symbolism. Nevertheless the sacramental order is the presence of the risen body of Christ to the world, the source of his Spirit in the world.

The bodily presence of Christ in the world, as the Church, differs from his bodily presence in heaven in that it is not a physical but a sacramental presence. This was a point stressed by the late Pope in his encyclical on the mystical body. The Church is not the body of Christ in such a way as to be identical with the person of Christ. In the Church Christ exists in the sacraments, and sacramental acts are, of course, human acts. Because of this sacramental character of Christ's presence, the Church on earth is not yet in glory. In spite of her holiness she contains sin, in spite of her unity she suffers schism. The Pope reminds us in this connection of St Paul's great image, in the epistle to the Ephesians, of the Church as the bride of Christ. Here the Church is taking over the Old Testament image of the virgin mother Israel, the bride of Yahweh. We saw how this image was fulfilled literally in Mary the virgin mother of Christ, and we now see it as fulfilled sacramentally in the Church.

'Husbands', says St Paul, 'love your wives as Christ loved the Church . . . husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.

For to love your wife, what is it but to love yourself.

Nobody ever hates his own flesh, on the contrary he nourishes it and takes care of it.

This is just what Christ does for the Church,

are we not members of his body.

"Behold a man shall leave father and mother and shall join himself to his wife, and they shall be two in one flesh."

This mystery is of great importance,

I say it applies to Christ and his Church'. (Eph. 5).

Here the point of comparing the union of Christ and the Church to marital union is precisely that man and wife cease to be two quite separate bodies and become two persons in one flesh. Each can say of the other's body, 'This is my body', and this is what Christ says of the Church.

In this paper I have said nothing about the structure of authority within the people of God. I have made no mention of the authority of the bishops, and in particular of the Bishop of Rome. I wanted to begin by establishing the sacramental character of the Church. I did this in the hope of correcting a false emphasis which can sometimes be given

if we begin with the notion of authority. The Church is sometimes seen as a quasi-political entity constituted by a certain hierarchic structure of jurisdiction and the sacraments are located within that community. The objection to this view is that it obscures the fact that the whole Church is sacramental, is itself the mystery, is only truly visible to the eye of faith. The Church is first of all the sacramental presence of Christ in the world and from this it follows that there is authority and jurisdiction within it. There will be much more to say of the authority within the Church when I come to speak of the priesthood of the Church.

St Augustine on the Trinity—I

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The *De Trinitate* is not the best known of St Augustine's works. But in my opinion it is his masterpiece, of a far greater doctrinal importance in the history of the Catholic faith than the *Confessions* or the *City of God*. It is indeed something of a theological portent, and as befits such a portent it took an uncommonly long time in coming to birth. As he himself says in a letter to the Bishop of Carthage which prefaces the work: 'I was a young man when I began it, an old man when I had it published'. It seems that he began it about 400 A.D. Twelve years later it was still unfinished, and his friends getting impatient managed to publish the first eleven books of it and part of the twelfth, which was as far as he had got, without his consent. At this he stopped work on it altogether for some time, but was at length prevailed on to finish it—there are fifteen books of it in all—and publish it, perhaps round about 418 A.D. This slowness of composition indicates that it was not a work which had any pastoral or controversial urgency about it. Augustine wrote it because it was on a theme which was of deep personal interest to him; it is a work of reflection on the central mystery of the Christian religion for its own sake.

And yet he begins the work in a tone that is surprisingly polemical. The classic enemies of Catholic trinitarian belief were the Arians, who denied the full divinity of the Son, his uncreated consubstantiality with