

MYSTICI CORPORIS: THE FULLNESS OF CATHOLIC LIFE

Is the Church a democracy? It is a question which cannot be answered by a simple yes or no, and without preliminary definition of the term. Democracy does not necessarily imply the rule of all by all; it does imply first of all a society in which the citizens are complete individuals, persons, whose life and destiny the State must not subjugate to its own purposes, but serve; and it does imply, secondly, that the individuals contribute, according to their different gifts and therefore their different functions, to the shaping and growth of the life of society. And is the Church a democratic society in this sense? There are many, catholic as well as non-catholic, who would be inclined to answer no. Information, direction, power, they would say, all alike come from above; for the rank and file there is nothing to do but to receive what is given and to do what is commanded.

It is easy to find solid arguments for this view. Faith and law and power are indeed given from above; the Church, the *ecclesia docens*, has the office of guarding and giving them; you find in the Gospel the picture of the sheep and the Shepherd, and what have the sheep to do but to obey, and be fed by, the Shepherd? What has the ordinary catholic to do but obey his pastors and so make his way to heaven?

The answer is to be found in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, which gives a magnificent picture of the balanced fullness of the Church's life, and of the life of the individual christian in it¹.

¹ It is a scandal that in this country we should have had to wait till the end of February, 1944, for a translation of this encyclical, given at Rome on June 29th, 1943. (It has now been issued by the Catholic Truth Society, price 9d., under the title *The Mystical Body of Jesus Christ*.) For the purposes of the present article, which was written before the appearance of the English edition, I made use of the American version, published by the National Catholic Welfare Association, Washington, D.C., and obtainable from Burns and Oates, D'Olier Street, Dublin. As this translation is considerably less ponderous and opaque than the English C.T.S. version, I have kept the quotations from it in the text; though for the convenience of readers I have changed the references given in brackets after the quotations to corresponding sections in the C.T.S. pamphlet.

But may one take this opportunity to plead for a policy, in the matter of translation, other than that of strict *verbal* fidelity to the rotund formality of the Latin original of the encyclicals? There is good reason for the impersonal aloofness and weightiness of the Latin: there must be about the encyclicals, for all their immediate relevance to actual problems of the moment, an element

The Church is a monarchy. The members are dependent on their Head for their knowledge of the truth; dependent on his will in deciding all that they do, dependent on his power, his gift of divine life, for the value of all that they do and are. He 'governs and guides his community . . . directly and personally. For it is He who reigns within the minds and hearts of men and bends and subjects to his purposes their wills even when rebellious' (37). But He governs also, visibly, through his Vicar on earth: for his Body is indeed a community, a human society which must therefore have a visible head (38); and as 'Peter in virtue of his primacy is only Christ's Vicar, so that there is only one chief Head of this Body, namely Christ,' so also the bishops and priests who fulfil their teaching and pastoral office in subordination to the Holy See are in their turn but representing and executing the will of the divine Head (*ibid.*)

The Church is a monarchy. But it has another aspect. It is like Jacob's ladder: there is the upward as well as the downward movement. Why is it inaccurate to say that the christian has nothing to do but be led, a docile sheep, to heaven? The answer is given in a magnificent passage of the encyclical. 'Because Christ the Head holds such an eminent position, one must not think that He does not require the Body's help. . . . "The head cannot say to the feet: I have no need of you." . . . This too must be held, marvellous though it appear: Christ requires his members. . . . Deep mystery this, subject of inexhaustible meditation: that the salvation of many depends on the prayer and voluntary penances which the members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ offer for this intention, and on the assistance of pastors of souls and of the faithful, especially of fathers and mothers of families, which they must offer to our Divine Saviour as though they were his associates. . . . To us it has been granted to collaborate with Christ in this work of salvation, "from one and through one saved and saving"' (42, 57).

You cannot be at the same time a good christian and an egoist. 'In the Church the individual members do not live for themselves

of timelessness, for they are expressing truth which is eternal, and their very remoteness from the idiom of a particular epoch gives them the enduring quality of granite. But the vernacular translations have a different purpose: they are needed to bring the thought and teaching of the Pope to busy priests and laymen; they ought to convey the thought, not only without the necessity of painful analysis of involved sentences and locutions, but also in a way that immediately shows its immediate relevance. Surely then we need sentences that are short and crisp and instantly intelligible; we can do without the verbal flourishes, the rhetorical epithets; we do not want a period piece, we want the answer the Pope provides to our immediate pressing needs, and we want it in language which is as clear and intelligible and unforgettable as the thought. Is there any good reason why we should not have it?

alone, but also help their fellows, and all work in mutual collaboration for their common comfort and for the more perfect building up of the whole Body ' (15). There is, in the power of the one Spirit, a diversity of gifts; we all have different functions to fulfil: none of us has no function to fulfil. The christian life is the life of charity.

Again you cannot be a good christian and at the same time deny the need of co-operating actively with the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is ' the one source of whatever supernatural power enters into the Church and its members ' ; but the effects of this power are dependent on the giving by men of ' their daily share of zealous activity ' (86). The christian must have initiative if charity is to issue in action.

But christian action is the activity neither of isolated individuals nor of a herd, but of individual human beings within the unity of a shared life. We are united by a ' bond which leaves to each intact his own personality ' (59); as we differ from a physical body because the different members of the physical body are ' ultimately destined to the good of the whole alone,' so we differ from a moral body because the co-operation of the members of a moral body for a common end is supplemented in our case by a ' distinct internal principle,' the Spirit of God, existing ' effectively in the whole and in each of its parts ' (60). That is the secret of the ' exalted supernatural nobility of the faithful ' (11); it is also the clue to the part they must play in the life of the Church as a whole.

For what does it mean, this existence of the Spirit of God in every part of the Body? ' Holiness begins from Christ; by Christ it is effected. For no act conducive to salvation can be performed unless it proceeds from Him as its supernatural cause.' He is said to disburse the treasures of his divine goodness to the members of the Body, ' not merely because He . . . lets his wounds and prayers plead our cause before the eternal Father, but because He selects, He determines, He distributes every single grace to every single person " according to the measure of the giving of Christ " ' (49). And why? His redemptive work must go on in the world; and who is to do this work? Who but the faithful who are his Body. ' Not only does He share this task of sanctification with his Church, but He wants it in a way to be due to her action ' (42). And therefore ' all who claim the Church as their mother should seriously consider that not only the sacred ministers and those who have consecrated themselves to God in religious life, but the other members as well of the mystical Body of Jesus Christ have the obligation of working hard and constantly for the upbuilding and increase of this Body ' (97).

The present age is to be, by the express desire of the papacy, the

age of 'catholic action'—the lay apostolate; and *Mystici Corporis* is the charter of catholic action. There is to be no apathetic quietism on the part of the faithful, ready to do what they are told but lacking in all initiative (86). We are not to excuse inactivity on the grounds of prudence, safety, decorum. The fire of charity is not to be deadened by the procrastinations and shufflings of timidity. There was nothing prudent, there was nothing safe, there was nothing decorous, about the folly of the Cross. One of the outstanding greatnesses of this encyclical is its sturdy, inspiring, sympathetic invitation to us to think, to use our own minds and try to probe deeper and deeper into divine truth and its applications to our immediate problems. Of the doctrine of the mystical Body itself the Pope writes: 'Some through empty fear look upon so profound a doctrine as something dangerous, and so they fight shy of it as of the beautiful but forbidden fruit of Paradise. It is not so' (10). How much richness has been lost, humanly speaking, to the Church; how often has its growth been impeded, by empty fear of what seems dangerous? If you want a decorous orderliness and an unruffled calm in the intellectual life of the Church, then of course you must silence the laity, you must eliminate all discussion of divine truth, you must confine any such work to those who are called upon to speak not with inquiring but with authoritative voice: and then you will have calm and decorum no doubt, but perhaps, if history means anything, it will turn out to be the calm and decorum of the tomb. Such, at any rate, is not the desire or intention of the Pope. We might do well to memorize the following words, and recite them, as sonorously as possible, to anybody within the Church or outside it who tries to argue that, for the good catholic, dogma means the death of all intellectual initiative: 'We know . . . that well-directed and earnest study of this doctrine, and the clash of diverse opinions and their discussion, provided love of truth and due submission to the Church, be the arbiter, will open new and bright vistas, whose light will help to progress in kindred sacred sciences. Hence we do not censure those who in various ways and with diverse reasonings strain every effort to understand and to clarify the mystery of this our marvellous union with Christ' (78). You cannot have catholic action without catholic thought: *Mystici Corporis* is the charter of action because it is the charter of thought.

But there is a phrase which must be given its full value: 'provided love of truth and due submission to the Church be the arbiter.' It means in the first place that you can never afford to be arrogant: the mysteries of God, and their application to man, are not things that the human mind can easily or lightly deal with. It means that your motives must be pure: you must try always and wholly to serve

truth, and not try to make it serve you. It means in the third place that you must remember how Christ the Head speaks through his Vicar : that Christ, who alone knows the truth in its wholeness, 'governs and guides his community' through its visible head on earth. Will it be said then that the Pope takes away with one hand what he gives with the other? On the contrary, the encyclical shows us the fullness of the Church's life because it shows us how apparently incompatible aspects are in fact complementary.

The Church is a monarchy : 'I live, now not I but Christ liveth in me'; the Church is a democracy : the Head requires 'the Body's help.' But the two things are one : it is the man whom supernatural love makes wholly obedient to the will of Christ who can fully and as a complete and mature personality use the power and do the work of Christ : 'I can do all things'—how?—'in Him who strengtheneth me.' It is the same with the juridical and the 'pneumatic' aspects of the Church. We destroy the fullness of catholic life if we represent the Church either as a juridical organization and nothing else, or as being simply the grace of the Spirit in the hearts of men, untrammelled by the structure and discipline of law ; we distort the fullness of catholic life also if we regard the presence of these two different aspects as an insoluble paradox. There is, presumably, always the danger that a too exclusive concentration on the external unity and order of the catholic community will produce an over-emphasis on law and a silence about that which quickens the legal structure and turns it into the freedom of the sons of God ; there is the opposite danger that, when the threat of an over-emphasis on law is in fact discerned, the inner reality of the Church's life may be set in opposition to its outward structure. In either case—and these are not remote possibilities, but actualities—the truth is distorted : the two aspects are complementary, not only in the sense that if either is forgotten the reality is impoverished, but also in the sense that each is necessary to the other. There is diversity of gifts : the divine life is given to each individual for his own special divinely-appointed purpose and within the framework of the total activity of the Church, so that its effectiveness depends upon the orderly functioning of the whole Body ; the initiative of human mind and will needs a guidance, for these God-given purposes, greater than that of man, and so cannot be effective without 'due submission to the Church.' On the other hand, the letter killeth, the spirit quickeneth : it is only when supernatural love animates the structure of law, in those who command as well as those who obey, that law becomes life and grace, and discipline becomes freedom. The reason which led our Lord to give his Church 'the constitution of a society . . . juridical and social'

was also the reason 'why He wished it to be enriched with the heavenly gifts of the consoling Spirit'—namely, 'that He might perpetuate on earth the saving work of redemption.' The Church is like Christ its Head and Exemplar, who is 'not complete if only his visible human nature is considered, or if only his divine invisible nature . . . , but is one through the union of both in one and one in both.' 'Like body and soul in us, (the two aspects) complement and perfect each other, and have their source in our one Redeemer' (62, 63).

Like soul and body . . . It is the soul however that is the more important; and this the Pope stresses in an important paragraph which sets things in their exact proportions. 'The juridical principles on which the Church rests and is established derive from the divine constitution given it by Christ. . . ; but what lifts the society of christians far, far above the whole natural order is the Spirit of our Redeemer who until the end of time penetrates every part of the Church's being and is active within it. . . Just as our composite mortal body, for all its being a marvellous work of the Creator, falls far short of the eminent dignity of the soul, so the social structure of the christian community, though eloquent of its divine Architect's wisdom, remains still something inferior when compared to the spiritual gifts which give it beauty and life, and to their divine source' (61).

But is it not the fact that *in practice* things do not work out quite like this? Is it not the fact that authority as exercised by human beings within the Church is sometimes purely repressive and obstructive when it should be encouraging and stimulating as well as guiding and controlling? Of course it is; but here again the Pope points us clearly to the conclusions we should draw. When a divine gift is held in human hands we ought to expect, if we are realists, that it will not always be skilfully or worthily held: but how foolish we are if, when that happens, we start grumbling not at the hands but at the gift. It must be admitted that sometimes the confusion is made difficult to avoid because of an unwise and untruthful partisanship which is afraid—fear again—to admit that anything in the Church can ever be wrong; for the observer, unimpressed by this apologetic, will be likely to assume that the 'juridical principles' of the Church are in fact as indefensible as the abuses of it. The words of the Pope leave room for no such confusion. 'And if at times there appears in the Church something that points to the weakness of our human nature, put it down not to the juridical constitution, but rather to that regrettable inclination to evil found in everyone, and which its divine Founder permits, even at times in the most exalted members of his

mystical Body, for the purpose of testing the virtue of flocks and shepherds and that all may increase the merit of their christian faith ' (64).

There is a third duality in the Church's life which is necessary to its fullness and which is most important at this point. As we have already seen, the activity of the Church is the activity not of a herd but of individual human beings; at the same time their activity is dependent on the power and the will of Christ, and controlled therefore by the juridical framework of his community. But we must understand by that more than that the work of the individual is for the community and governed by the community under its Head. The Spirit which makes us one with Christ makes us one also with each other: the Body is in truth a mystical Body and no merely 'moral union.' And what keeps the reality of this union alive within us, and at the same time keeps the legal aspect of the Church vital and free, is the liturgical life of the Church. Here again we must be careful: if we extol the liturgy in such a way as to belittle the importance of private prayer we destroy the fullness of catholic life: you cannot even contrast the liturgy with private prayer by saying that the former is the concern of the mystical Body while the latter is not. It is true that prayers 'that are offered by Mother Church, because of the dignity of the Spouse of Christ, excel any other kind of prayer; but no prayer, even the most private, lacks its own dignity and power, and all prayer is most helpful to the mystical Body' (88). It remains true that the liturgy does 'excel any other kind of prayer'; the first reason we have just seen; the second is the power of this common prayer of the Church to weld christians together into that intimate fellowship of charity which, to put it negatively, keeps them from the danger alike of individualism and of collectivism—for you cannot remain an individualist if you daily enact the reality of the unity of mankind in the mystical Body, and you cannot lose your personality in collectivism if the enacting of that unity calls forth from you an intense individual effort and the expression of your whole personality.

But there is more than that. The final duality in the Church's life which we have to consider is the duality of action and contemplation: and again we are wrong if we see these things in opposition, and right only if we see them as complementary aspects of a single life. To every christian, the Pope has told us, though in different ways, there comes the call to share in the redemptive activity of Christ in the world; but equally to every christian there comes the call to that without which action is valueless because un-Christlike: the call to prayer. We must put on Christ: his Spirit 'is communicated to the Church in an abundant outpouring, so that she and

her single members may become daily more and more like to our Saviour' (54). Action *must* be the overflow of contemplation: and therefore the catholic life of action must be a life of private prayer. But the perfect type of catholic action is the action of a full and rich personality *in union with* the other personalities which make up the whole Body. Hence the necessity, the vital necessity, of preserving and fostering the Church's liturgical life. The liturgy is the supreme prayer first of all because it is essentially the offering to God of the worship of the *totus Christus*; but secondly because it is that which not only expresses but also effects the unity of the *totus Christus*. We are one Body because we share in (the offering and the receiving of) one Bread. You return to the same central theme of the encyclical: the Church's liturgical worship is equally far removed from individualist piety and from the revivalism which submerges the personality in herd-consciousness—and if there is one thing we need to learn to-day in our political thinking it is that this pattern of human existence set for us by the mystical Body, neither individualist nor collectivist subhumanity but the enhanced humanity of a full personality enriched by a shared common life and purpose, is the only one that can make civil life worth living.

The liturgical aspect of the Church's life, however, leads us on to another fact of fundamental importance. The Church is a democracy; but there is diversity of function within the organism. The individual christian is meant to play a responsible and creative part in the life of the Church; and we have already seen the way in which the Pope encourages those who, with humility and love of truth as their guide, can become pioneers in its intellectual life. But that is not the only way in which individual initiative can be expressed: it is not the way in which the initiative of every individual can be expressed. Diversity of function follows diversity of gift. Some are called to work for the intellectual growth of the Body—and in this age of 'catholic action' we must thank God that He has raised up powerful figures among the laity to do this work for the Church. Others are called to an initiative in the realm of action—to serve the truth in the realm of national or international life. But there is one form of initiative, one way of furthering the Church's life, to which we are all equally called, and it is the way of prayer. The life of the catholic body itself is dependent on the fervour of its prayer; but the Church is not a closed system without interest in the outside world, it is the redemptive Christ working in and for the world; and that redemptive work in the world is in its turn dependent on our prayers. Our Lord 'showed his burning love for the Church particularly by praying for her to the heavenly Father'; and we in our turn have to 'pray each

day the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest.' We have to pray for 'all the members of the mystical Body'; we have to be specially mindful of those who are 'burdened with the sorrows and afflictions of this earthly habitation and for the departed souls in Purgatory.' But that is not enough. 'Oh how earnestly we desire that the immense charity of these common prayers embrace those also who not yet perceiving the light of the Gospel's truth are still without the Church's safe fold, or, for the regrettable conflict of faith and unity, are separated from us who though unworthy bear the person of Jesus Christ on earth'. For why is it that 'many are still walking far from the catholic truth, not willing to follow the suggestions of divine grace'? 'The reason is that not only they but the faithful too fail to intensify their prayers to God for this intention' (99, 100, 103).

And still this is not enough. The Church is necessarily concerned—and therefore we are all as individuals necessarily concerned—with the political life of the world. 'It is something more than commendable, in the present crisis above all it is imperative, that fervent prayers rise to God for kings and princes and for all those who govern the nations. . . We must plead with God to grant that the rulers of peoples may love wisdom' (104). And what is it that the Church, the redemptive Christ, is concerned for most in the natural life of man: what is the reality that lies behind the pageantry of kings and the marching of armies and the story of national states: what is the cause for which the christian, precisely as a member of Christ's Body, must always and everywhere pray? It is the reality of suffering

² It may be well to refer here to a passage in the early part of the encyclical, dealing with the membership of the Church, which if taken out of its context might cause needless anxiety and distress. This says that those only are members of the Body who have received baptism and profess the true faith, and have not cut themselves off from the Body nor been expelled from it for grave crimes (cf. C.T.S. 20). The sentence is of course to be read precisely in its context, which is the discussion of the Church's visible structure and therefore the conditions of *visible* membership of it. This is indeed sufficiently clear from the second half of the sentence, from which the first half cannot be isolated: 'cut themselves off . . . expelled.' The point that the Pope is making is that the Body cannot of *itself* be divided: therefore those who are personally guilty of the sins of schism or heresy or apostasy cannot be members of it, for these sins, unlike other kinds of sin, however grave, themselves imply a deliberate severance from the Body. You cannot be a member of the Body if you wilfully and knowingly reject that which makes a man a member of the Body: unity of faith and baptism and government. But all this is in no sense a contradiction of the common doctrine concerning those who, through no fault of their own, are not *visibly* members of the Church, but who none the less are given grace by God, even if only through the 'baptism of desire,' and are therefore *invisible* members of the visible Church. (Cf. Victor White, O.P.: *Membership of the Church*, BLACKFRIARS, Sept., 1941, p. 455.)

humanity, the suffering world. Christ came with power to *heal*, to heal both the soul and the body; it is the Church's office to carry on that work of healing and restoration. 'As we write these words there passes before our eyes, alas, an almost endless throng. . . . ; sick, poor, mutilated, widows, orphans. . . .' (107). Wherever there is suffering, there the Body of Christ must be to heal and console. But there can be no healing without power; and there can be no power without prayer³. That is the catholic action from which none can be excused.

To be a member of Christ's mystical Body is, in these days especially, as great a responsibility as it is a glory. 'Look down, we beseech thee, Lord, on this thy family.'

GERALD VANN, O.P.

TRENDS OF CATHOLIC THOUGHT ON THE CONTINENT

AMIDST the turmoils of the war, of which the Eternal City itself has become one of the centres, the Holy Father has issued two Encyclicals devoted entirely to subjects interest in which is apparently confined to theologians. These are the Encyclical on biblical studies and the earlier *Mystici corporis Christi*. The encouragement given through the first of these Encyclicals to the study of Holy Scripture is of the greatest significance with regard to countries which, in that respect, still labour under ideas formed during the Penal times. But what interest to these is the refutation of certain theological errors as given in the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*? Where, in English Catholic literature, have the excesses of the liturgical movement or the exaggerations of the teaching on the mystical Body of Christ, referred to in that Encyclical, been advocated?

The passages in which the Encyclical concerns itself with those errors clearly refer to the Continent, in particular to Central Europe. If we regard the spiritual position of German-speaking Catholics as

³ In this context the Pope singles out for special commendation the *Apostleship of Prayer* as an association 'most pleasing to God' (107).