

GRACE AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

THE vitally important doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ has found a valuable exponent in Mgr. Fulton Sheen, in whose recent book¹ is to be found a popular exposition of this hitherto somewhat neglected teaching of St. Paul and the Fathers. Unfortunately, however, there does not appear in it a clear notion of the *union* of the Mystical Body, without which the significance of the doctrine must inevitably escape the lay reader. In this book, as elsewhere, one finds a very useful distinction between an *organization* and an *organism*, which serves to set the Church apart from any other type of social unit. Yet many of the terms, such as "body," "organism," "life," "cells," commonly used in this context swing to and fro between mere metaphor and strict analogy, so that it is not always easy to pierce the cover of resemblance and lay hold of the reality beneath. Further, analogy is of the lower with the higher, and represents the attempt to arrive at a knowledge of the invisible by comparison with the visible and the material. Continual stress on material likeness is apt to shape the hidden truth according to the unreality of the looking-glass; so that when there does exist a notion which is immediately applicable to the truth itself, and which is commonly understood by the general reader, that notion should be used with insistence. We may gain a considerable knowledge of the nature of "art" by studying it in terms of lines and masses, but we can hardly obtain by these means a clear idea of the vital spirit which makes a work of "art" something beyond either line or mass. We may possibly turn to the origin of the work and discuss it in terms of genius; there are in any case some more immediate terms for expressing the nature of "art" itself. Similarly with the Mystical Body of Christ, we have near at hand a reality that will explain clearly the nature of the union and at the same time raise to their true level all the metaphors and analogies taken from the corporal

¹ *The Mystical Body of Christ*, by Fulton J. Sheen, Ph.D. (Sheed & Ward; pp. 404; 7/6.)

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human body. This reality is *grace*. It is curious how so many learned writers, including Mgr. Sheen, appear to miss this obvious and important point. It has already been noticed in a previous article² that the one thing which places the union of the Mystical Body in a totally different and higher plane than that of any other type of social gathering, is the fact of grace. We venture, here, to offer some development of the notion of the Church's union, with a hint of its application.

In seeking the nature of a union among separate individual beings, the initial difficulty is to conceive or rather imagine it in any concrete manner. One can picture with ease the unity of a single material body, the round shining mass of the sun, the delicate tracery of the tree with all its branches spreading out in visible contact with the trunk. It is harder to imagine the contact of a thousand men in a single and real union. In the New Testament this difficulty is met by the use of the most striking examples of a visible organic whole used to express the mystery of the spiritually organic whole of the Church. Of these examples one of the most significant is that of the union of husband and wife, for this should lead the mind easily from sensible images on towards the reality of a spiritual union. The eye can see two individuals, two separate and distinct bodies, nothing more; yet the simplest intelligence can penetrate beyond the corporal distinction to an idea of a union of spirit that can and should exist between the husband and his wife. If one should still hanker after some other, and perhaps more consistent, material representation of a union which identifies separate autonomous things, it might be found in the modern marvel of the radio. The flute gives out its one sound in the studio, and this same sound is picked up on thousands of different instruments all over the world. All recognize that it was the one note produced by the flautist in Langham Place, yet this one note has been reproduced at the same time in a Glasgow slum, and in the saloon of a liner in mid-Atlantic, and in a million other diverse places. If the whole orchestra

² Cf. BLACKFRIARS, May, 1935, pp. 353 sq.

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be added to the flute, the unity of organized production is added to the unity of varied reception, and a striking example of the point at issue is obtained.

With such examples to assist us, we may now notice the basic natural unity of all things in God, for we are seeking a union, not indeed natural but built upon the natural, of many individuals in God. The universe did not chance to be a unity; it is a unity because it proceeds, as a whole and in all its parts, from the intelligence of its Creator. It is a unity, too, because everything in it tends towards the one final goal of all activity and all desires, God, Who alone is Supreme Good, and because at every instant each individual thing contained in it depends upon God for its very being. Nothing can exist independently of God; but God, Who alone exists of Himself and by Himself, supports and maintains the world, the constellations, the trees, the insects, the stones, Tom, Dick and Harry, every single individual thing, in its actual present being. All things exist, not ultimately of themselves, but by their dependence upon God's all-supporting being. We may imagine the unity of a village of poor, unemployed families all dependent upon the generosity of one rich man, who by his alms preserves them from starvation and misery and supports them all in their daily needs. The dependence of creatures on God is far more intimate and completely universal, producing a far closer union where all things share in their dependence of being upon God. Thus we say that God is present, even in the natural order, in all things, and that all things are in God. A true and most intimate union.

Mankind shares this union with the rest of the material creation, but since his nature is essentially intellectual, and possessed of free-will, it is patient of two modifications within this general union of all things with the Creator. In the first place, while he is one with all men in dependence upon God for his being, he shows possibilities of independence of, disunion and variance with, other men. The determinations of one man's free-will may clash with those of another, leading to disunion of a most complete kind. Secondly, by contrast, this same nature allows man to receive as a gift

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from God a higher and far closer union, capable of annulling the disruptive tendencies of his free-will and fashioning all those who receive it into a harmonious whole. This is the supernatural union of grace, called supernatural because it belongs to an order immeasurably higher than the nature known to us and proper to us—a union which uses and absorbs every capability of body and soul. Everyone raised to this supernatural state is penetrated by one and the same divine gift, and there springs up a union infinitely more complete and intimate than any attainable in the order of nature.

The understanding of this supernatural union lies in the Scriptural teaching that the gift of grace implies a sharing in the intimate nature of the Godhead. We are made "partakers of the divine nature," as St. Peter puts it. All men are indeed united specifically by possessing the same human nature, just as there is one species of tree to which all individual trees belong. But the sharing of the divine nature by grace is something totally different from this. Within the human species each has his own individual nature separate and distinct, united to others of the same nature more in the abstract than in the concrete; but by grace each individual shares one and the same concrete nature, the nature of the one and indivisible God. There we see many natures of the same type, divided from one another by space and time; here we see one unique nature lasting for eternity, communicated to different individual men in order to weld them into an intimate union with the divinity. This gift of God does not destroy or mar the individuality or the personality of man. It is not given in exchange for man's nature, nor even so mixed with his nature as to produce a new kind of thing. It does not produce a composite mixture of divine and human nature, any more than the hypostatic union in Our Lord Himself produced such a composite. And the union caused by supernatural grace is a mystical reproduction of the Incarnation in those who are made, by adoption, the sons of God. Human nature remains substantially unchanged, yet a man now lives with a new life, a divine life, and his faculties are capable of new activities, divine activities; such a man

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remains essentially human, and yet his human life is wholly suffused with a new and divine vitality, as gold in the crucible remains essentially gold and yet is lucent with the fire that has saturated it. It is in this sense that we speak of the soul's "deiformness" or conformity to God, of the soul's assimilation to and participation in the divine nature by grace.

The relation of unity among men themselves resulting from this sharing of the divine form must now be apparent. Apart from the unique instance of Christ's hypostatic union, the union based on grace is the closest form of union between man and God. Any closer form of union would require a change or loss of personality. Nor is such solidarity with God attained by one man alone; there exists a vast multitude of men all at the same time united to the Godhead, all conformed and assimilated to the divine nature, just as all the countless living creatures of the earth are permeated by the self-same light and heat flowing from the sun. To give the necessary corrections to this picture we must realize at once that by grace God becomes intimately present to the souls of the just, and that they are all conformed to him, all "deformed." One and all possess within themselves the intimate nature of the blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, while the union of all things in dependence on the being of the Creator can give no such universal and intimate conformity. It is in this sense therefore that the unity of the Mystical Body has been called a "quasi-formal" unity, as based on the form of the Trinity in the souls of all the just.

Grace, however, can hardly be considered without relation to man's activities, for it is placed in the depths of the soul as a perfection to flow out into all the faculties of man, but more especially the faculties of his soul, his mind and his will. From grace flow the supernatural perfections of the will, namely charity, and of the mind, which is faith leading eventually to complete perfection in the beatific Vision. Grace flowers in charity, and the will is perfected by the love of God. It flowers in living faith and so perfects the mind. It flowers in all the gifts and virtues, thus ordering the whole man, and all men of grace, to one and the same end both

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easily and directly, and it is in this oneness of supernatural end and endeavour that the unique union of the Church itself consists, for it is a supernatural union produced by grace alone, including but surpassing other types of unity among men, unity of will or moral union and unity of mind. Although the Church is distinguished from all other types of society, which are in the main united morally as striving for one ideal, this does not imply the absence of moral union. On the contrary, it is present in a more perfect way as a direct result of the fundamental union of participation in the divine nature. The bond of this supernatural moral unity is charity; it is the bond of mutual love, shared between God and man, and between all men who have become assimilated to the divinity. This likeness to God is the basis of man's love both of God and of his neighbour, for like must needs love like.

Two points are to be noticed, which indicate how the union based on grace surpasses that of any other society both in the moral and in the intellectual orders. Firstly, the power given to the mind and will by this gift is divine and supernatural. The will does not act unaided, neither does the mind. They are assisted in their activities by the special movement of God. In all human organizations the members depend ultimately upon their own imperfect knowledge and upon the power of their own wayward will alone. That is why they never achieve more than a partial success, nor arrive at any permanence; that is why men are always seeking new types of organization and new ideals, with new methods of propaganda, to create emotional stimulus to the will. But the Church remains constant and sufficient.

Secondly, the members of a merely human group are always seeking for something unattained. One of the essential features of an organization is that it seeks to gain something outside and beyond itself; and if perchance its ideal is attained, the organization falls to pieces since united effort among the members is no longer required. The union of grace, on the other hand, at once seeks and possesses, and the possession only serves to strengthen and confirm the union. In the glory of heaven which is the fulfilment of grace, complete possession of God by the soul entirely com-

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pletes the harmony and union between God and those who enjoy the Beatific Vision, and there remains no element of effort towards further attainment in this fulness of grace. But even on this earth those who are in a state of grace have the beginning of possession through the nature of grace itself. This sharing of the divine nature brings God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in a special way into the intimacy of the soul. It is true that God is present in all things, uniting them by that dependence in being which we have noticed as the basis of the oneness of the universe; but by grace He becomes present in a new and more intimate way. He is in the soul as the Guest Who is known, loved and possessed in the closest familiarity. Therefore grace in this world is called the *Semen Gloriar*, the divine seed endowed with all the powers of growing up into the fulness of possession in the Beatific Vision; it sets its recipients in the initial stages of the glory of heaven and puts them in possession of their ultimate end, a possession as yet incomplete but none the less real.

In this discussion of grace we may seem to have been drawn rather far from the idea of the Mystical Body. But, on the contrary, we have been discussing the very life of the Mystical Body, and no clear idea of an organic body can be acquired without enquiring into the nature of its life, for life is the principle of any corporate organism. Grace is at once the life of every individual member of the Body and the life of the whole Body. It is the life of the individual because it gives him a share in the life of God. This is a new life, a supernatural life, which presupposes a death and a re-birth. The death in question is the cessation of the life of sin, while the re-birth is the introduction of the soul into a new supernatural mode of existence. By receiving grace man begins to live on another plane, so that just as by natural birth the child begins to live in this world, by grace man begins to live in the supernatural world. Grace represents a regeneration, in which we are born to God as his children, having received a share in his nature and life. It is also the life of the whole body of the Church because its members, thus regenerated, share in one and the same supernatural corporate life, which

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is the divine life of the Blessed Trinity. As members of the Mystical Body, they are not autonomous and independent with an individual life of their own, for the Body is Christ's and its life is His, communicated through divine grace.

This profound view of the Church implies some understanding of the mission of the Holy Ghost, to provide for Whose coming it was expedient that the Son should ascend to His Father. To the Holy Ghost, as the Love and the Gift proceeding both from the Father and the Son, are attributed grace and all the effects of grace in the soul, for the Third Person dwells in the unity of the Holy Trinity as subsisting Divine Love and grace is given to the soul precisely and solely because God loves it; by loving the soul God makes it lovable by grace. This sanctification is therefore particularly attributed to the Holy Ghost, the Person of Divine Love, Who is the Gift of God possessed and enjoyed in the depths of the soul. It is for this reason that the sanctified soul is called in a special way the "temple of the Holy Ghost," though this does not exclude the presence in the soul of all the Persons of the Trinity. But because it is a work of Divine Love, the Holy Ghost is declared to be "the Spirit of adoption of sons whereby we cry Abba, Father," and as the bearer of grace He is the source of union and life in the Mystical Body, as the soul of man unifies and vitalizes his body.

Christ Our Lord, in His Human Nature, is the Head of the Mystical Body. This Headship, as may be clearly seen from the teaching of St. Thomas, is part of the fulness of grace which belonged to Him in His Humanity. Grace holds the key position here just as in all the other aspects of this doctrine, and from this aspect alone can one begin to grasp the true relation of Head and members. The entire scheme of grace comes to us solely through the medium of Christ. He was constituted head of the human race by reason of the perfection of His human nature, as well as by the work of redemption pertinent to His Priesthood. This perfection flowed from its intimate proximity to the divine nature to which it was united in the divine Person of the Son. But, in the divine economy of the Incarnation, this grace was not

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given for Himself alone; it was to be shared by the whole human race, or, to speak according to actual fact, by the whole Mystical Body. Moreover, in addition to this, He merited by His redemptive Passion grace sufficient for the salvation of all mankind. Thus no one can be saved except through the grace of Christ, in His capacity as Head of the Mystical Body.

As the visible Mission of the Son was carried out by means of His human nature, so is the invisible Mission of the Holy Ghost (which is a continuing and completing of the work of the Incarnation) carried out through the instrumentality of the Son's mystical humanity of which He is the Head and we are the members; and it is the grace which He merited and earned in the Incarnation that is the principle of organic life and unity in the Head and members of the Mystical Body, the bond of union between the Mystical Body and God. Thus it is solely through the medium of that fulness of grace pertaining to the humanity of Christ that men participate in the divine nature, and it is through the operation of His Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost dwelling in the soul, that this participation is perfected. This, we believe, is the fundamental notion necessary to the understanding and appreciation of such a valuable exposition of the general doctrine of the Mystical Body as that given by Mgr. Fulton Sheen, an exposition which unfolds in a most vivid and practical way the deeper meaning of the spiritual life for the workaday Catholic and the tremendous possibilities resulting for all from their membership of the Mystical Body of Christ.

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