

# What is the Church?—VII

A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

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Some people think that what is called the First Epistle of St Peter is not a letter but an address given by the leader of the first Christian bishops to a group of men and women who had just been baptized. Certainly a good deal of it is devoted by St Peter to an explanation of what it means to have become a Christian:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people . . . (1 Peter 2. 9-10.)

The converts who listened to this would have recognized that St Peter's words are based on a famous passage in the book of Exodus.<sup>1</sup> He is comparing the new community to which they belong to the community of Israel:

Yahweh called to Moses out of the mountain saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians

how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now therefore if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples;

for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19.3-6.)

Israel has not come to Yahweh of its own accord and by its own power, Yahweh has brought it to himself. He did this by defeating their oppressors at the exodus; he has given them a law to guide them and made a covenant with them. These three things, exodus, law and covenant, are the foundation of the people of the Old Testament. The people have been created for a definite purpose; they are to be his priests, his sacred nation. Israel is to be his possession among all peoples, not because the other peoples do not belong to him ('for all the earth is mine') but because it belongs to him in a special way, as his priesthood. It is to represent God to all the peoples and to represent humanity before God. The priestly activity of Israel is not something distinct

from her history, her wars and her political influence. It is as a people with an historical destiny that she stands as a mystery and a sign of God's concern for man. The Hebrews were not a people who happened to have certain 'advanced' views about God; their religious beliefs were an interpretation of their own history.

As we have seen throughout these articles, the things foreshadowed in the Old Testament are fulfilled first of all in the person of Christ. In his defeat of Satan and passage through death to life we have the real exodus of man from darkness to life; he himself is the word which is fulfilment of the law, and in his body the new covenant is established which unites God and man.

Again, as we have seen, these things are represented sacramentally in the Church. The people to whom St Peter is speaking have just, by baptism, participated in Christ's exodus; they have received his Spirit so that the new law is written in their hearts, and in the eucharist they celebrate the new covenant in his body and blood. Because of this they too have become a royal priesthood and a sacred nation.

According to the Epistle to the Hebrews there is an essential difference between the Christian community and the community of the old law, or any other religious body. Under the old law there had to be a class of priests who kept up a daily series of sacrifices for the people; and the reason for this was that every sacrifice was inadequate. This priestly class, however, with its continual repetition of sacrifices, is no longer necessary, for we have one high priest, Jesus Christ, who has once for all offered the perfect and adequate sacrifice. The Christian body will therefore be characterised by the absence of a special group of men called priests, separated off from the rest of the community. It is Christ who is the one priest, though the community as a whole may share in his priesthood. It seems that in order to emphasise this the earliest Christians avoided using the word 'priest' except when speaking of Christ himself or, as with St Peter, of the Church as a whole. When they wished to refer to the officials of the community they called them 'overseers', 'elders' and 'ministers'.

Now it is notorious that the Roman Church is an exceedingly clerical affair. For many centuries she has spoken of her bishops and presbyters as 'priests', and no other Christian body is more dominated by its priestly class. Can such a body claim to be the Christian community as envisaged in the Epistle to the Hebrews? To many of the Reformers the claim seemed obviously false; whatever differences of function there might have to be within the community, the absolute distinction

between clergy and laity, as found in the Roman Church, seemed a denial of all that the New Testament stood for. To have mediators between God and man other than Christ himself is to deny that his mission has succeeded.

These articles are not concerned with the defence of the Catholic position but with explanation of it, and in this matter it is important to see what this position is not. In the first place, traditional Catholicism is in full agreement with the Reformers' doctrine that there is but one priesthood in the Christian Church, that of Christ himself. We go on to say that it is possible to speak, nevertheless, as St Peter does, of the priesthood of the Church. This is not something alongside or additional to Christ's priesthood, it is our sharing in it. It belongs to the fullness of his priestly power that we should be able to participate in it. We touch here on a deep point of difference between the Catholic and the Reformed traditions. To the Reformers it always seemed that to attribute anything to man as his own was to derogate from what belongs to God. For the Church to claim to *have* divine life or the power of the priesthood as its own life and power is to deny that everything is absolutely and entirely from God. To the Catholic, on the other hand, it seems that to say that God can only make creatures who are passive before him is to lessen his divine dignity; it belongs to God and to God alone, who is closer to me than I am to myself, that his activity can be mine without ceasing to be his. This, however, is not the place to discuss that difference.

The clearest divergence between the Catholic teaching and that of the Reformers comes after this point, when we come to consider the organisation of the Church itself. A man might agree that the Church is priestly and yet disagree with the next step that the Catholic takes. Such a man might hold that although the Church needs some kind of organisation and some kind of authority within it, no particular form of organisation is sacrosanct. What is appropriate at one stage in history need not be appropriate at another. For him the structure of the Church would be on the same level as, say, the architecture of her buildings or the language of her liturgy. In such matters it is well to respect a venerable tradition but nothing is fixed for all time.

The Catholic view is that the basic structure of the Church is one of her sacraments, part of her way of revealing Christ to the world and making him present in the world; it is on the level, that is to say, of baptism or the eucharist. Just as a community which abandoned baptism in favour of some other initiation rite would not be the

Christian Church, so one that lacked the structure and tradition of the episcopacy could not be that Church. We are speaking here, of course, of the basic structure. Just as the ceremonies and conventions surrounding baptism may change completely in the course of centuries and yet the sacrament itself be preserved, so everything associated with the priesthood may be altered and yet the thing itself remain. To insist on a fundamental qualitative distinction between the man who is ordained and the man who is not, is not necessarily to acquiesce in all the institutions and customs that have grown up around this distinction. The habit of subservience to the clergy, for example, that has developed in some countries, is no necessary part of the priesthood and is, indeed, highly dangerous to the Church.

In the traditional Catholic view the Church is not said to be a royal priesthood because it contains clergymen; on the contrary, it contains such ordained priests only because it is already priestly. My priesthood is derivative from, and a sacrament of, the priesthood of the whole body of Christians. At his ordination a man comes to represent sacramentally the community and Christ at the same time. The priesthood received at ordination depends upon the priesthood conferred by the character of baptism. What exactly is the difference between the priesthood of baptism and that of ordination? Before answering this question it may be useful to look at the matter of priesthood in a wider context.

Why Christianity should have a priesthood at all is part of the more general question why it should be a religion at all. This is not easy to answer. By 'religion' I mean the whole business of cult and worship; it has to do with the way in which man can get in touch with the divine. Religion is not, of course, magic (which is concerned with the control of dangerous and mysterious forces) and to criticise religious rites as though they were magical is both crudely to misunderstand them and also to miss a more profound criticism that can be made of them. Religion is concerned with temples, sacrifices, feasts and prayers. Now, at first sight it might seem that Christ came to abolish religion. There can be no religion without some sort of distinction between the profane and the sacred, between the ordinary business of life and the special things, times, persons or places that have to do with the cult. A great deal of the teaching of Jesus seems devoted to breaking down this distinction. For him—and in this he stands well within the Hebrew prophetic tradition—a man is brought into the presence of his heavenly Father not, first of all, by religious observances, but by the quality of his ordinary relations with other people. It is not ritual that matters but

love. He has come to destroy the Temple and the new temple that is to be rebuilt in three days is not made with hands, it is his risen body.

Nevertheless it is equally clear from the gospels that Christ is not crudely humanist. Although he is in a sense anti-religious, he does not appeal from religious rites to man's human nature. He does not teach that churches are unnecessary, all that is demanded of you is good behaviour. He demands of men that they receive the divine Spirit, and this is to be possible to them through belonging to a definite community, one that is at odds with the standards of behaviour expected by the world.

The paradox of the gospels is due to the fact that Christ's mission is in one sense completed but in another sense awaits fulfilment at his second coming. In the meantime the Church is poised between the old world and the new. Certainly after the resurrection there will be no distinction of sacred and profane, no religious activity. We read in the Apocalypse that there will be no temple in the new Jerusalem but the Church still awaits this consummation. On the other hand, the distinction of sacred and profane is no longer so simple as it was under the old law, when it more or less corresponded to the distinction between the chosen people—the sacred nation—and the rest. Under the old covenant grace was the history of the Hebrews; since the coming of Christ it can no longer be identified with history; grace is now the risen Christ who is not a part of history but its fulfilment.

The community of the old law and that of our resurrection both, so to say, exist for their own sakes. It is true that Israel existed simply in order to prepare for and symbolise the Christ who was to come, but she did this by being herself, by maintaining her identity as a people and pursuing her historical destiny, by having a history alongside that of other peoples. Similarly, the risen world will exist for its own sake, it will simply be itself. The Church, however, in its present interim state represents the world to come but not simply by its history. The sacraments of the Church are historical but her history is not sacramental. There is in fact for her a distinction between her history, which is her 'ordinary life', and her sacraments, a distinction corresponding to one between the profane and the sacred. Of course in the old law, too, there were 'sacraments' in the sense of ceremonies such as the passover or circumcision, or the sacrifices of the Temple, which were not part of ordinary life, but the significance of these was fundamentally social and historical, they were ultimately part of the political life of the Hebrews.

Thus in Christianity the distinction between the last things as realised

and as yet to come takes the place of the distinction between profane and sacred that is to be found in other religions. None of the life of the Christian is profane, all his life except for sin is a realisation of the eternal life within him, but not all of it is a sacramental revelation of that life. It is characteristic of Catholicism to make this distinction within the Christian life, and it is a distinction quite other than that between sin and grace. Thus for the Catholic the equivalent of the 'profane' need not be the sinful.

But to return to the particular matter of the priesthood. All Christians, as we have seen, receive at baptism a character which is a membership in the worshipping community of the body of Christ and is thus a sharing in his priesthood. In virtue of this character they are, as St Thomas Aquinas says, dedicated to the Christian cult. Again, in confirmation they receive a rededication, of which more in a moment; finally, by ordination a man shares in a special way in the priesthood of the Church. How are we to define the precise difference that ordination makes?

Both the Christian who is ordained and the one who is not have become by baptism members of the laity, the *laos*, the people of God, and both have a priesthood. It is thus confusingly possible to speak of both as laymen and both as priests. For the sake of clarity, therefore, let us in what follows speak of the ordained man only as the priest and the other only as the layman. What, then, is the difference between the priesthood of the layman and that of the priest? In the convenient language of Thomism we might say that neither is said to have a priesthood merely metaphorically; it is literally true in both cases, but the word is used analogously, its primary application being to neither of them but to Christ. Such a schematic statement, however, conveys very little; let us instead consider the activity of both of them at mass. The difference between the two is that the priest's offering of the mass *qua* priest consists in certain sacramental acts, whereas the layman's offering need not do so.

The layman exercises his baptismal priesthood and offers the mass to the extent that he is personally committed to what is taking place. The greater his devotion, the more truly he can be said to be offering the sacrifice. It is this personal element that defines his priestly activity. It is thus possible for him in special circumstances to offer the mass without even receiving communion. This sacramental act is not of itself essential to his offering. Similarly if, for example, he were deaf and dumb and paralysed he might genuinely offer the mass without

any external sign of participation in it. (It is, of course, strange that people in perfect health should sometimes behave at mass as though they were afflicted in this way, but this is commonly due to ignorance or shyness and is not absolutely incompatible with a real offering of the mass.) This offering of the mass by exercise of the baptismal priesthood is the most important activity for anyone taking part, whether he be priest or layman; without it the celebration of the mass is quite worthless to them as individuals.

The layman is free to exercise his baptismal priesthood at mass in a number of different ways, the priest can only exercise his priesthood by doing and saying certain definite things, for his offering consists in certain sacramental signs. It is of course necessary for the salvation of the priest, as for the layman, that the mass should be an exercise of his baptismal priesthood—it would be a great wickedness to offer the mass sacramentally without this. His sacramental priesthood should flow from his 'personal' baptismal priesthood; the one without the other is rather like dead faith deprived of charity. Nevertheless the priest is not ordained precisely for his own salvation but for the community, and what he can do in virtue of his ordination is not first of all concerned with his own salvation but with the worship of the community. It is significant that we do not speak of the 'sacrament of the priesthood' but of the 'sacrament of order'. Ordination establishes an order in the community: there is a special sense in which the community rather than the individual is the primary recipient of this sacrament. A man is not ordained for his own sake any more than he is married for his own sake. This does not mean that there are not definite specified persons who are married or ordained, nor does it mean that individuals may not receive definite graces from these sacraments, different from those received by other members of the community, but the sacrament exists in the first place for a community, in the one case the eucharistic assembly, in the other, the family.

Thus the priest's offering, precisely as a priest, is independent of his personal devotion and consists, unlike the layman's, in certain definite acts. If *he* were deaf, dumb and paralysed he would not be able to exercise his priesthood, for this depends on certain kinds of communication. We may put the same point another way by saying that both layman and priest represent Christ who offers the sacrifice, but the layman represents him in virtue of his personal devotion while the priest also represents him sacramentally. His actions symbolise sacramentally, and thereby make present, acts of Christ.

Besides speaking of representing Christ we can also speak of representing the Church. By their faith and personal commitment the congregation gathered at the eucharist represent the Church. It is perfectly correct to say that they are the Catholic Church for a particular region. But the priest—or rather the bishop, who is priest in the fullest sense—represents the Church sacramentally; the Church is to be defined by reference to him. It is where the bishop is that the Church is. Even when we return to the ancient practice in which the bishop is elected by the laity, his consecration will make him no longer simply the representative of their choice but of their priesthood—he will represent them not precisely because they have chosen him but because he represents Christ, who has chosen them. Similarly, under the present system bishops are not merely the representatives of those who appoint them—I suppose it need hardly be said that bishops have never, in Catholic teaching, been thought of simply as agents of Rome, any more than the other apostles were agents of St Peter.

The priesthood, and in particular the episcopacy, cannot be described simply in terms of the sacramental action of the eucharist. With the eucharistic sacrifice the Church has always associated the liturgy of the word—the first part of the mass, in which the scriptures are proclaimed and explained. Here there is an obvious difference of function between the bishop and his people. The tradition of the Church, the tradition of the scriptures, exists in the whole community; it is not a secret doctrine handed down amongst a class of priests. The bishop, however, is the guardian of this tradition; he is, as we say in the canon of the mass, the ‘husbandman’ of the apostolic and orthodox faith, the *cultor*. It is his business to see that it grows well and neither withers nor is choked with weeds. It belongs to him, then, first of all, to preach the gospel to his people, and it is from this that he derives his teaching authority. This does not mean, of course, that the bishop is a substitute for biblical scholarship or for theologians, but it is his business and final responsibility to use the work of such men to foster the faith of his people and at the same time to ensure that no teaching conflicts with the faith of the whole community that has been handed down to him to preserve. A bishop may do his job badly, the faith of his people may remain infantile and stunted, his Church may fall into heresy or schism; we have no guarantee that this will not happen, it is only the faith of the Church as a whole, speaking through the assembly of all the bishops or through their leader the Bishop of Rome, that is guaranteed against failure.



It is not particularly difficult to understand the relationship and difference between the priesthood of the laity as a whole and that of the bishops and priests; a much more difficult question is the exact meaning of the priesthood derived from confirmation. Confirmation is a completion or ratification of baptism, and one of the reasons why it is a little obscure is that it is difficult to disentangle from that sacrament. In the early Church it seems to have been a part of the ceremony of baptism, and some of the things that nowadays appear to be characteristic of confirmation are simply remnants of what used to belong to baptism as well. We think of confirmation as a particularly solemn public ceremony presided over by the bishop, but this was originally the case for baptism as well. Again, the special instruction nowadays associated with confirmation was at one time the normal accompaniment of baptism. We may come to understand confirmation better if we recall a strange phenomenon of the early Church. In apostolic times, baptism was frequently, even normally, accompanied by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit; the newly baptised began to prophesy, to 'speak with tongues' and so on. For example when St Paul came to Ephesus '... he met some disciples and said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said "Into what then were you baptised?" They said "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." On hearing this they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.' (Acts 19.1-6.)

In the case of the household of the Gentile Cornelius, the Holy Spirit came down even before they were baptised in sign that they were to receive the sacrament:

The believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 'Can anyone forbid water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10.45-48.)

Both these stories suggest that the outpouring of the Spirit was normally regarded as a sort of confirmation of baptism, and this may help us to understand the sacrament of confirmation. The Spirit comes

on the baptised so that they prophesy and bear witness to Christ. This, for both St Luke and St John, is the essential work of the Spirit in the Church:

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1.8.)

When the Advocate comes, whom I shall send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15.26.)

The Holy Spirit, then, comes in confirmation so as to overflow from him who receives it onto others, so that he becomes a source of the Spirit to others. We may compare the priesthoods of baptism and confirmation to the two functions that we mentioned of the bishop; he offers sacrifice and he preaches. In each case what is done in a public official and sacramental way by the bishop is done in a personal way by the layman who is baptised and confirmed. The bishop exercises his priesthood in offering the mass by sacramental acts, the layman exercises his baptismal priesthood by his personal devotion. The bishop exercises his priesthood in witnessing to the gospel by preaching, while the layman witnesses to it in more personal and complex ways.

It may be objected that there is no true parallel here, for while the bishop's priestly activity in offering the mass is truly sacramental and is thereby distinguished from the exercise of baptismal priesthood, his work of preaching is not a sacramental act and cannot thereby be distinguished from the witness of the layman.

It may be admitted that there is not an absolute parallel here, and yet many theologians today would hold that preaching, as a liturgical act, performed by the bishop or under his authority as a part of the eucharist, is quasi-sacramental. That is to say its efficacy, like that of a sacrament, lies in an act of Christ and does not depend simply on the qualifications and skill of the preacher. The Spirit in the heart of the listener responds to the Spirit in the spoken word in a way that goes beyond the techniques of rhetoric. Exactly how this view is to be formulated without making preaching into an eighth sacrament is a question upon which theologians differ, and clearly it is a matter about which we have a good deal to learn from other Christian bodies who have always given preaching a central place in the liturgy.

If these suggestions are true then we may say that in virtue of the priesthood of his confirmation a Christian has the power to witness to

Christ, to bring the truth to his fellow men, in a way that goes beyond his skill in apologetics or the persuasiveness of his language; and this power will be exercised in function of his personal devotion to the truth and not, as with the priest or bishop, in function of an official liturgical role. The fact that holy men are especially effective in bringing to others an understanding of Christ cannot be explained simply in terms of 'setting a good example'. That the Doctors of the Church are theologians and saints indicates that theology itself is an exercise of the priesthood received at confirmation.

When St Paul said to the men of Corinth 'My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might rest not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God' (1 Cor. 2.4-5), he was not necessarily referring to miracles he worked or even to the para-normal effects of the coming down of the Spirit; he may have meant simply the mysterious compelling force that the Spirit gave to his preaching. Christ's promise to the martyrs need not absolutely be confined to Christians in the courtroom:

When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. (Luke 12.11-12.)

What I have said about confirmation is no more than a suggestion about where a theology of the sacrament might begin. There is a great deal more to be said. In particular, we should investigate the relation between the priestly authority associated with the episcopate and the analogous priestly authority associated with confirmation. This concerns authority in the family and in all kinds of education—also the interaction between the authority of the layman in these fields and that of the bishop.

One reason why confirmation has been so little studied in the past is that it is the sacrament of lay witness. It is only in modern times (apart, no doubt, from the very earliest years) that the laity has begun to play its proper part in the life of the Church. Of course there has been plenty of lay influence in the past, but this has commonly been the influence of politically powerful groups or individuals who have in one way or another found the Church useful for their purposes. Consciously or not, they have treated the Church as simply a stabilising force in society, as inevitably on the side of the *status quo*. This has produced that alignment of the Church with parties of the Right and with the wealthy and privileged which is such a scandal to anyone

familiar with the *Magnificat*. Those most concerned for the the life of Church have always been suspicious of this kind of lay influence. Today, however, we see something different. There has grown up an educated adult laity deeply concerned with the mission of the Church itself. The laity in many countries is shaking itself free of its proletarian condition and the consequences of this both for the organisation of the Church and for its theology still remain to be worked out in full.

Even so brief an outline as this of the order of the Church would be incomplete without some reference to the diaconate. The story of its institution is well known:

When the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6.1-4.)

Seven were chosen and the apostles 'prayed and laid their hands upon them.' It is clear that the deacons were instituted to take care of what we would now call the 'temporalities' of the Church, the financial side of the parish or diocese. In token of this their liturgical function is to prepare the offerings of bread and wine for the eucharist.

In the Western Church the order of the diaconate has for practical purposes disappeared. It is usually regarded as simply a step on the way to the priesthood, and in most places the deacon's work is done by priests. It is, however, becoming obvious that the business complications of a modern parish take up far too much of a priest's time and energy and involve him in the world of Mammon in a way inappropriate to his function. In some parishes, particularly in America, the finances of the parish have been handed over to a group of lay people with varying success. The obvious and traditional solution would seem to be a return to a real diaconate, an order of men devoted to the business side of the Church, having a definite part in the liturgical life of the parish and concerned, as deacons have traditionally been, with teaching as well as with finance. There would seem a very good case for dropping the rule of celibacy for such deacons.

Such a change would be a part of a general move towards levelling out the pyramid of authority in the Church. In the recent past the activity and authority of the Church has been, as it were, concentrated

in a steep and tall hill surrounded by level country. This picture can represent both the concentration of authority in the Roman Curia vis-à-vis the bishops of the world, and the position of the parish priest vis-à-vis his parishioners. It would seem a better and more stable situation if there were a gently rising slope rather than a sudden precipice connecting the highest authorities in the Church and their subjects. In this way the priesthood of Christ would be shown forth in many different ways, sacramental and non-sacramental, amongst the members of his body.

## The Body of Christ<sup>1</sup>

T. S. GREGORY

### I

A body is a terrestrial thing. It exists in time. It has a shape and a locus. The *Christos* is the Lord's anointed. He is a being divinely ordained to realize the divine purpose, whatever that may be. The body of the Christ is, therefore (whatever else it be) a temporal and terrestrial entity with a shape and locus ordained to realise the divine purpose.

It has been clear for a long time, indeed I think it was always obvious, that a book, though it be the Bible, was never adequate means to realize the divine purpose. The Torah would not be the Torah without a community to believe and practise it. If the *Christos* has a body, this body must be not merely a system of utterances, but at least a community of people and things, a community that embodies and is chosen or ordained to embody the divine purpose fulfilled by the *Christos*. The body of Christ is the economy, the *ecclesia* of Christ.

Since the body of Christ is a community with shape and locus in time, it will not suffice, at any given time, to postpone its existence to the indefinite future, since this means for all practical and therefore all moral purposes that it is not a body in the time that we call time. The body must be present. If it is not present, we have no sufficient grounds

<sup>1</sup>The substance of a paper read to a conference of Catholics and Jews.