

## THE MYSTICAL BODY

IN the meandering of mankind through the ages the stream of vitality has flown back and forth from one system of life to its opposite. At present we seem to be in a transitional period when the main stream is sweeping back from individualism to an extreme collectivism. Since the Reformation men have done violence to their social nature by attempting to work out their own salvation independently of others. There were times when this seemed to be the only way of achieving any vital movement, since the alternative of co-operation and corporal unity lay apparently dead among a heap of legalities and impositions from a tyrannous authority. The reign of the individualist, however, though it made many new and valuable conquests, could not endure for long, for of its nature it was doomed to fall to pieces. Now we see a return to co-operation, to the united efforts of many men sharing one ideal. This is glaringly obvious in the dictatorships supported by the enthusiasm of the people, and in the growing solidarity of Communism; but it appears in religious spheres as well, in such movements as those of the Groups or leading to the absurdity of Christian and Jew attempting to find a common religious basis in a symposium entitled "In Spirit and Truth."

Though the true Christianity of the Catholic Church has always been essentially social, it was inevitable that it should have been influenced to some extent by the common outlook on life. The stress was laid on the relations between the individual soul and God, while the idea of brotherhood in Christ, though not forgotten, was put in the background. The return of vitality in other spheres to the sense of fellowship and co-operation of men in society has been the occasion of a revival of interest in the social character of the Church. It is this return to a somewhat neglected truth which is the inspiration of such activities as the Liturgical Movement and the many social groups and societies within the Church. We may look to the lists of publications for the signs of the times, for books are the weather-cocks of human move-

ments. There we find an increasing number dealing with this central theme, on Christ as our brother, on the co-operation of the liturgy, and particularly on the idea of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Ernest Mura, inspired by this new insistence on the unitive force of the Church, offers us in a popular and devotional, yet sound and theological, form a whole conspectus of the Mystical Body in its Nature and Life.<sup>1</sup> These two volumes of his show us the centrality of this doctrine which stretches out to, and connects, all the elements in the scheme of salvation. He is, however, more particularly concerned to show us the precise nature of this Body in itself and in its activity, an essential feature which has not been sufficiently examined even by such authorities as Père Mersch, S.J., and the Abbé Anger. In view of the other types of union, both political and religious, which surround the Church, there is an obvious need for precision on this central point so as to prevent misunderstandings and to encourage a conscious participation in the union of this Body.

Yet in his attempt at an original contribution to the doctrine Ernest Mura is perhaps rather confusing. After declaring emphatically that the union of the Mystical Body is not a merely moral union, he goes on to enumerate seven different modes of union which are all brought into action in this unique corporal unity. Of these one is in the moral order according to the bond of charity, while another is that of the final cause or end, while yet another is the "quasi-formal" union in the Holy Spirit as the Soul of the Mystical Body. In spite of this enumeration it would seem at first sight that if he reduced these to the one central unity which must lie at the foundation of all these different aspects, his conclusion would point to its being essentially a moral union, that is a union of wills united in a single end, though of a nature far more profound than any other type existing in

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Corps Mystique du Christ. Sa nature et sa vie divine d'après S. Paul et la théologie.* Ernest Mura. (André Blot. 2 vols. pp. 214 and 458. Frs. 40.00.) To this R. P. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., has added an excellent preface dealing with the position of the Mystical Body in the theology of St. Thomas.

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human affairs. Such a conclusion would not, however, be in accord with the intentions of the author nor with the reality of the case, since such a unity does not account for the real difference in kind which exists between the union of the Mystical Body and the union of any other human society.

Quite rightly the author insists that the word "Body" in this context is used analogically and that it is not meant to convey the idea of a single physical being having its soul precisely as a form which is an incomplete substance, and composed of members who can have no separate individual existence. The Church is conceived as a body because it is a living organism, living by the vitality flowing into it from its Head, Christ, and organised so that its various members, while performing different functions, are all tending to the same end, which is the hallowing of the name of God, all finally united with Christ in the beatific vision. It is not however merely the union of those tending to a common goal, for the members are united by grace, which is the actual participation in the life of God. Hence the members are not united merely in will, the moral union, but in the sharing in their very being the one life of God.

The analogy of the body is not restricted to the Church. We often speak of a "body of men," particularly of a military organization with its one leader and its singleness of purpose, where the word "corps" has its special signification. Communism and Fascism are bodies in this sense, though the idea of the one life-giving and inspiring head is not so evident in the former. Such groups are living organisms in their unity of purpose. Therefore it is of the utmost importance to establish the uniqueness of the Body of Christ which is not bound simply by this unity of purpose but by the unity of a real divine life. These other corporations may be explained completely with reference to the human will and a common, human end. But the Mystical Body cannot be understood in this way since it is a mystery of faith and based on the unparalleled union of grace.

From another standpoint Christ in His Church differs from all other bodies of this nature in the profundity and universality of His Mystical Body. Christ, the Head by

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His humanity, is the immediate instrument conveying this life, a real and supernatural life, to each member, infusing grace into the very being of each. This grace flowers in all the supernatural virtues and gifts which link all the members to God through Christ and consequently with one another. They all believe by the same faith the truths that Christ has taught them, they all will the same end by charity, by which they can order every single action towards the attainment of the one goal. It is in these virtues and gifts that the Holy Ghost is given to the Church as its soul through the instrumentality of Christ. Hence we may regard this union as one of efficient causality in relation to Christ's humanity and the sacraments, or as a "quasi-formal" union of the Holy Ghost as the soul. Yet it is so profound and ultimately mysterious that we hardly dare to compare it with such superficial bodies as those political ones which are indeed merely moral unities. We may however mention one other obvious difference: those political groups unite their members, perhaps in a philosophy of life, but more evidently in the political or economic spheres, whereas the mystic union of the Body of Christ unites all the members in every single action they may perform, so that in eating their dinners or in smoking their pipes they may well be acting in conjunction with the one all-embracing and unitive goal.

The main contribution that the waning individualism has left to this vital doctrine which has lived in the Church ever since Christ's parable of the Vine and the branches, may be regarded as twofold, a more personal and immediate presentation of Christ the Head, and a greater insistence on the importance of the rôle to be played by each member. This contribution removes any possibility of conceiving the Head as a supreme and far-distant, merely directive influence on the Body to which the member belongs, while each member will realize more fully and consciously the part he has to play in co-operation with Christ. He cannot think of Christ as one might think of the Pope far away in Rome, nor can he be tempted to sink back, as it were, into the midst of this Body to be carried to his final goal without effort on his

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part. While this influence insists on personal energy and activity in furthering the work of Christ, the doctrine itself shows the absolute dependence on Him as the principle of life and vitality, and the need for co-operation with Him and the other members in every detail in the plan of campaign. The strength of the Church lies in its all-embracing unity and in its immediate connection with its Head, Christ.

Ernest Mura devotes two-thirds of his work to the life of this Body. Here he does not seem to have added much to previous works and he fails to show the profound inter-relation of the Headship with the Mediatorship or the Priesthood of Christ, so that this second volume might at first sight seem to be rather inconsequential. Yet he makes it clear that the life of this Body is the supernatural life of grace flowing from Christ to every member, exercised individually, though never separately as false individualism would teach, and socially which appears in the co-operation of liturgical worship and Catholic activity. It is a life which each must foster and nourish in himself by taking all the means which Christ has given to His Mystical Body, especially in its central source, the Eucharist and the Mass. If a member allows sin, that is mortal sin, to enter his life he must realize that he has effectively stifled this life. He still remains united in the unity of faith and he still bears the sign of membership given to him by baptism, yet he is a dead member of the Body. Vitality has left him because he is not united in will to the Head and to the other members. He has turned away from God whose life he had been sharing, so that the bond of union is completely nullified; just as a dead member of a human body may be still outwardly attached to the body, but be fundamentally disconnected since the soul no longer resides there. Such a member is utterly useless.

It is apparent therefore that to increase the power and to strengthen the co-operation of the Church each member must attend to his personal sanctification as the basis of his operation. Each one must realize how much depends on his own union with Christ and in Christ with all the members. There is of course an interaction here since the purpose of

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the Mystical Body is to bring life to each member and to incorporate him ever more firmly. The point however to be insisted on here is that it is useless to attempt any united Catholic activity unless it is first vitalized by the spirit of the whole Body, unless each person making the attempt is rooted first in grace and charity. In an age of so much external activity and of so many charitable institutions and societies this point is easily overlooked. One becomes absorbed in achieving this or that particular reform; one throws himself heart and soul into this or that movement, so much so that he cannot find time to concern himself about prayer, about sharing properly in the Mass, or about making sincere and fervent Communions. All this seems of little moment when the Church has so much to conquer in the outside world. One of the dangers which cloaks the worst type of individualism, is the apparent intellectual union of opposition. People will group themselves together and seem from outside thoroughly united, whereas they are only joined in opposing or attacking the present system. Here is a certain union of wills, but it is only in the purpose of destruction. At heart they are all confirmed individualists, so that when true co-operation is called for and a united effort in a positive direction is required the group at once falls to pieces. All this grouping in external activities, all this union in opposing the present system is quite futile unless it be based on the supernatural life of grace, the personal striving for holiness, which is the profound union of the Mystical Body of Christ.

In this respect we might take hints from the political co-operation of Fascism or Communism with its intense devotion to ideals and, in the case of the former, to the personal leader, with its positive constructional plans and aims. Such unions are not based on the intent to destroy, but on the desire to build a single house. If every member of the Church was intent to vitalize all his activities with the supernatural life of Christ, aiming ultimately at the final goal of the whole Mystical Body, the Church would be able to overshadow completely those political or economic organizations with her all-embracing unity and the universal

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enthusiasm she would show in her members. The peace of the world would be far nearer achievement and the problems of our day would be practically solved in this tremendous unity of purpose based on the grace of God and animated by the spirit of Christ.

Yet we must not look for spectacular results in this order from the renewed consciousness of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. The Jews of the first century could not recognize Christ as the Messiah because they were looking for a Jewish world-state with the Messiah at its head. It would be an equally serious error to expect the same of the full development of the unity of the Church. This union is not aiming at political or economic ends, nor can it ever achieve its completion on this earth. As Ernest Mura says in his concluding section, "It is in the glory of heaven that this 'pleroma' of Christ will be realized, this fulness of the Mystical Body, of which the Apostle speaks to the Ephesians; it is there that our incorporation in our divine Head, our well-beloved Saviour, will attain its last perfection, its full measure" (Vol. II, p. 402). The success which the Messiah achieved on this earth was the success of the Cross, so that the achievement of this return to co-operation and cohesion in the supernatural life of the Church may well be of the same nature. Yet if the life is thoroughly grounded in each member by continual efforts towards personal sanctification, the greatest trials of the Church will be its most valuable sacrifices, and will all lead to the Resurrection. If these efforts are lacking in some members, many or few, the Mystical Body of Christ will indeed attain its resurrection, but those member will have attained or contributed nothing.

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