

THE WHOLE CHRIST¹

BY

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PERCEIVE', said the Countess, 'that philosophy is now become very mechanical.' 'So mechanical', said I, 'that I fear we shall quickly be ashamed of it: they will have the World to be in great what a watch is in little; which is very regular and depends only upon the just disposing of the several parts of the movement. But pray tell me, Madam, had you not formerly a more sublime Idea of the Universe?'² We have now passed the mechanical phase of religious teaching and are come to a time when it is easy to be ashamed or at least timid about religion. And the one leads to the other. So soon as religion is reduced to a code of rules and embargoes adherence to any religious sect ceases to have any more significance than affiliation to a golf club. When, on top of all this, human society is threatened with dissolution and men are compelled to try and think out for themselves the meaning of their own existence one may hardly dare to urge the importance of religion when it has been made to appear trivial or eccentric. It is symptomatic of this that we hear of distinctions like 'religion and life', and ask such questions as, 'Who invented religion?' We should no more separate oxygen from breathing or ask who invented talking. But because such distinctions are made, and such questions asked, Catholics are faced not with the task of analysing and dissecting life, but with the far more subtle and delicate task of coordinating and putting sense into a human situation which is distressingly at odds with itself. This means reducing chaos to order, not in such a way that it becomes mechanical and therefore less than real, but so that it becomes a living organism, which is something different from an organisation. For this reason it has been pointed out that the doctrine of the Mystical Body 'has today become our special heritage'. Like M. Fontenelle we see fit to turn back the pages of history to a former time in which we had 'a more sublime idea of the universe'.

But at once we shall find ourselves in difficulties unless we rid ourselves of certain of our preconceptions. To begin with, the phrase Mystical Body itself has dangers of its own. It is St Paul's invention as, we imagine, an image or device used to thrust home an impor-

¹ *The Whole Christ: The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Mystical Body in Scripture and Tradition*. By Emile Mersch, S.J. (Dennis Dobson; 30s.).
² *Plurality of Worlds*. Fontenelle.

tant truth. Almost invariably we think of the body as a dead one and mystical as a synonym for half real. The object of our study is however not unreal death but real life and its meaning from the beginning of all time. Fr Mersch anticipates any such preconception by beginning his study, not with St Paul but with Adam. He traces for us, briefly only, the 'mystery' of Christ's life in the Church as it showed itself in the Old Testament before the earthly coming of Christ.

We should find difficulties were we not constantly reminded that the same truth has a parallel existence both in time and in eternity and that history expresses only the human manner of sharing in the eternal life and truth. 'The "mystery" is before all else a prodigy of unity. Therefore it can never be finally expressed in a simple didactic formula: it can never be communicated adequately by any slick dialectic: and it certainly cannot be marketed as the painless remedy for all social ills. God's truth shows itself outside God never more than analogically and finds itself expressed in myths and dreams and poetry and ways of life and a thousand hints of a truth which must always be larger than the sum of its parts. 'Christian truth is something more than an abstraction that can be expressed in the form of theorems and theses. Before all else that truth is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ teaches it not only in his words but simply by being himself.' The moral for our 'practical' and activist age is clear enough; being must come before doing.

In the same context Fr Mersch points to an easily forgotten truth. 'Jesus reveals his union with the faithful not in words merely but also in the very order of the events of his life.' We do tend to talk about the teaching of our Lord and to mean only the things that he said. We isolate the Sermon on the Mount, the parables and the Last Supper discourses. Such isolation is dangerous. That was not the way of the evangelists. St John's concluding words are, 'There are also many other things which Jesus *did*'. And the Fathers never tire of saying that Christ's every action is a lesson, 'etiam factum Verbi, verbum nobis est'. This means that the actions of the mystical Christ as well as of the historic Jesus are a lesson: in other words the development of this doctrine in the Church is itself an image of the doctrine. Fr Mersch brings this out very clearly and up to a point we can claim to see the pattern. In the early ages of mankind we see the human race 'groaning and travailing', as St Paul puts it, dreaming of Christ in myth, symbol and image, half and less than half articulate. The whole of nature points with St John the Baptist to the Lamb of God. At the peak of human history Christ himself, 'the desire of the eternal

hills', comes and makes true all the desires, dreams and hopes of Judah, Greece, Rome, Persia, Egypt. But to talk of a peak is misleading; human fortunes do not decline after Christ departs; Calvary is as eternal as it is temporal and it is truer to say that human fortunes repeat themselves. Christ is for ever coming and the development of the central dogma of the Church appears like some power—a refiner's fire, shall we say?—radiating its strength and heat and light outwards from the centre that is also the area and the periphery, that is Jesus himself. St Paul and the evangelists turn their attention to the figure of Christ himself. The Greek Fathers with their metaphysical outlook focussed on the heart of the matter, the 'whatness' or 'thisness' of Christianity; what is Christ and what is Christianity? And St Irenaeus answers that it is the 'recapitulation' or re-enlisting of the human race under Christ the second Adam. The Latin Fathers with their more practical outlook discussed the moral implications. The Scholastics drew effect out of cause and saw the dignity of man and society reinvigorated in Christ. The later French theologians concentrated on the details of conduct and behaviour which one must follow. Clearly there may be more to come; who shall sound the depths of divine wisdom? But in the presence of this fact which is the central fact of the Church's life we are in a manner detached from time and the details of development.

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

Here is the unfolding and completion of the Incarnation, what St Augustine called the completing of the work of Christ, and the taking up of our own lives and work into that of the Whole Christ. And this unfolding is still unfinished. What is more important is that it is being finished (not to be confused with being 'finished off') here and now, and the dollar crisis, the Bonn elections, the test matches and missing or catching a bus are all parts of the pattern. We cannot see the pattern and we cannot always see where our own stitches fit for there time and eternity intersect—

At the still point of the turning world.

This is the mystery of unity and 'unity must be within that which it unites as the yeast must be within the dough that it leavens'.

Because we are contemplating the mystery of unity we may not dissect it too much; one eye at least must always remain as far as possible on the whole truth. When that eye grows dim, mechanical and facile solutions are offered. Time and again this tendency is seen in the history of the understanding of this truth; over-

simplification and analysis and a crude moralising break out into heresy—Arianism, Docetism, Donatism, Pelagianism. And each time the balance had to be restored by a return to the 'whole' view which had been seen, perhaps most clearly, by St Irenaeus and the Greek Fathers. It is a continual cause for wonder and gratitude that the earliest documents were written in Greek, a language more fitted to portray life than mechanics. Nowadays this aspect of the mystery as something living is particularly valuable. Men are all asking for some explanation of life; but, and this is a healthy sign, they are not satisfied with the neat logical answer. They do not necessarily despise logic or underrate its importance, but they have realised that there is no single formula which can encompass the whole truth. Perhaps they are unconsciously aware of what the Scholastic philosophers called the analogy of being. Today it is seen in the belief (often unacknowledged or only half acknowledged) that life as we know it, even in its richest manifestations, is a reflection of something which is at once deeper and more real. Often enough they advance no further than the admission that there is a mystery at the heart of reality. Christianity claims to explain this mystery and make all the dreams of mankind come true. That in brief is the meaning of the Mystical Body; in Christ all the dreams of the human race came true and are still coming true; all the dreams of dying and being re-born, all the dreams that sound so paradoxical when they are put into words.

The very heart of the matter is to see the mystery as it has been spread out for us so far in time; to see the Old Testament and even the myths and literature of the pagan world as dreams of the Christ who was their fulfilment; and to see the subsequent history of the Church as the perennial coming of Christ and the perennial fulfilment of all the dreams. Time and again the mystery reveals itself in the literatures of the world; the tragic pattern is the pattern of Christ woven and interwoven, for ever descending into hell and rising again.

They all go into the dark,

The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant . . .

And we all go with them, into the silent funeral.

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you

Which shall be the darkness of God.

All true poetry is an attempt to catch the vision of the whole, to plumb the depths of the mystery of life and to say a thousand things simultaneously because they exist simultaneously. This is above all a Christian view which sees truth undivided. It sees Scripture and Tradition as two utterances of the Eternal Word in time, one made and crystallised at a particular point, the other

always advancing and developing but neither complete without the other.

Above all this Christian mystery 'gives us an angle'—or rather *the* angle—on life. With St Irenaeus we see the 'recapitulation' of the human race in Christ, the second Adam, and its restoration and perfection; with St Athanasius we learn of the transformation and divinisation of all human ideals and aspirations; with St Hilary we comprehend 'social significance'—men in the fullest possible sense members of one another—and all talk of social and corporate responsibility takes on a deeper meaning. And beyond all this we see that all these truths and many more are only facets of one central truth, the catching up of the human into the divine so that it is more perfectly itself. And because this is something that can only be seen, and never learned like a multiplication table, the process is endless and the approach tentative and halting. 'If any man shall say to you, Lo, here is Christ or there, do not believe him . . . as lightning cometh out of the east and appeareth even into the west, so also shall the coming of the Son of man be.' The teaching of this truth must be like Christ's own teaching, in parables and images, in poetic and intuitive forms rather than discursive ones. Perhaps that was how it came about that St Irenaeus's teaching of the second Adam inspired some of the finest poetry of the middle ages and still more why Christian thought when it took over pagan forms and idioms invariably enriched their poetry. In a similar fashion Christian doctrine today may give a deeper and a happier significance to life because it teaches that it is the life of Christ himself.

Nature is never spent:

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.