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## THE MYSTICI CORPORIS AND THE DEFINITIONS OF THE CHURCH

Ten years ago this month, on June 29, 1943, to be exact, His Holiness Pope Pius XII issued the encyclical *Mystici Corporis*. The publication of this doctrinal instruction was providential, as any comparison between manuals of ecclesiology written prior to its appearance and the texts which have been printed during the last ten years will very easily attest. It is only fitting that Catholic theologians throughout the world should take cognizance of this anniversary, and try, on this occasion, to appreciate some of the great benefits God has granted to His kingdom on earth through this doctrinal letter of Our Lord's Vicar on earth.

The central pronouncement in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* is to be found in the declaration that the expression "Mystical Body of Jesus Christ" is actually a definition of the Church. In the words of the Holy Father, "If we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ—which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church—we shall find no expression more noble, more sublime, or more divine, than the phrase which calls it 'the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ.'"<sup>1</sup>

All of the rest of the purely doctrinal portion of the encyclical, the sections which deal with the concept of the Church as a "body," as "the body of Christ," and as "the Mystical Body of Christ," as well as the part which describes the union of the faithful with Our Lord, should thus be considered as directed towards a more perfect and detailed understanding of what is basically one of the great classical definitions of the true Church. And all of the pastoral exhortations which make up the remainder of the body of the encyclical are meant to warn the faithful against errors which would militate against their appreciation of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ and to encourage them to give to the Church the tribute of genuine, strong, and supernatural affection demanded by the bonds that join the Church and its members to Our Lord, the Head of the Mystical Body. All of this obviously revolves around the realization that the ex-

pression "Mystical Body of Christ" is a real definition of the true Church of God.

Although the Holy Father taught in his encyclical that the expression "Mystical Body of Jesus Christ" is a definition of the true Church, he neither said nor implied that it is the only genuine and accurate definition. Indeed, the literature of scholastic ecclesiology abounds in definitions of the Church, some of which have achieved the status of standard formulæ over the course of the centuries. By calling attention to the fact that the expression "Mystical Body of Jesus Christ" is likewise a definition of the Church, and a definition of paramount importance and significance, our Holy Father Pope Pius XII offered to the theologians of the world the opportunity to show how the various types of definitions are mutually complementary and to explain how they combine to bring out the magnificently rich notion of the Church that is conveyed in divine supernatural revelation.

The notion or concept of the Catholic Church, conveyed in God's supernatural message, is tremendously complex. This society is represented to us basically as the association or group within which alone we may find salvific contact with God in Jesus Christ Our Lord. It is the *ecclesia sanctorum*, the community or the communion of the Saints. Yet it is so constituted in this world that a man may be a member of it without actually living the divine and supernatural life of grace. It is truly a society instituted directly and immediately by Our Lord during the course of His public life in this world. At the same time, however, it is just as truly the continuation and the ultimate status here on earth of the supernatural kingdom of God which has been in existence, as the militant Church of God in Christ, since the days of our first parents. It lives as the militant company of Our Lord's disciples throughout the entire world. In the various cities and districts of the world its members gather to constitute organized individual families or households of the faith in Christ. Yet, at the same time, it is always in a condition of pilgrimage in this world and in its cities. Its ultimate and eternal home is to be found only in the courts of heaven.

It is precisely because of the complexity of and the wealth of meaning contained in this fundamental notion of the Catholic Church that the theologians have had to set forth many types of definitions of the Church. There are three main types of de-

<sup>1</sup> AAS, XXXV (July 20, 1943), 199. The text used here is that of the NCWC translation.

initions which scholastic theology recognizes as applicable to the Church militant. The first of these, the widest or most general kind of definition of the Church, applies to the entire company of those joined to God in Jesus Christ. It takes in the Church triumphant in heaven, the Church suffering in purgatory, and the Church militant here on earth. The second variety of definition is restricted to the Church militant, but it considers this company, not only according to its form and structure under the economy of the New Testament, but according to its conditions under the Old Dispensation also. The third type of definition explains only the Church militant of the New Testament. Within this type there are several subdivisions, all of which contribute powerfully to the explanation of the basic notion of the Church, as this is brought out in the various names and figures used to designate the Church in the inspired books of the New Testament.

These three basic types of definitions of the true Church of Jesus Christ have been in common use in sacred theology since the days of the great Jesuit theologian and controversialist, Gregory of Valentia (d. 1603). And, according to Gregory of Valentia, the broadest type of definition of the Church, the one which applies to this society as it lives in heaven, in purgatory, and on earth, is the formula describing it as "the multitude of those who have been gathered together by the grace of God's calling into the true worship of God and into the true and God-given knowledge of God, whether that knowledge be obscure, as it is in the case of the knowledge of the faith, or clear and manifest, as it is in the case of the blessed."<sup>2</sup>

There are, incidentally, certain standard definitions of the Church triumphant, as distinct from the Church suffering and the Church militant. As St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, "the Church, according to the *status viae* [the condition of those who are working towards the Beatific Vision, but who have not as yet actually arrived at it] is the congregation of the faithful (*congregatio fidelium*). According to the *status patriae*, however, [the condition of those who have already come to the homeland of heaven] it is the congregation of those who possess the Beatific

<sup>2</sup> Gregory of Valentia, *Commentaria theologica*, Vol. III (Ingoldstadt, 1603), Disp. I, *De fide*, Q. 1, Punct. 7, §14, col. 164.

Vision (*congregatio comprehendentium*)."<sup>3</sup> The Catechism of the Council of Trent, first published in 1566, defined the Church triumphant as "the most glorious and happy assembly of the blessed spirits and of those who have overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil, and who enjoy eternal beatitude, free and safe from the troubles of this world."<sup>4</sup> Both of these definitions obviously fit within the framework of the broadest type of definition of the Church enunciated by Gregory of Valentia.

The most general or most inclusive type of definition, as it was formulated by Gregory of Valentia, is a description which correctly and effectively shows up the unity of all the persons who belong to the Church triumphant, to the Church suffering, and to the Church militant. It speaks of all these persons as being really gathered or assembled together, that is, as constituting a genuine definite social unity. Likewise it speaks of these persons as being brought into their social unity "by the grace of God's calling." Thus it insists upon the basic fact that the assembly or congregation itself is definitely a reality of the supernatural order, something concerned, ultimately, with the intimate understanding and possession of God as He is in Himself, with the clear knowledge of the Triune God in the Beatific Vision.

Since the unity of the social group is effected by the grace of God's calling, the adherence of any individual member, and, for that matter, of all the members, to the assembly itself is something ultimately due to a freely given and supernatural favor granted by God. There is absolutely no created intellectual nature, actual or possible, which could give its possessor the right to belong to this social unit. In other words, membership in this blessed company is not something which necessarily goes with membership in the human race or with the condition of an intellectual creature. Those who are privileged to belong to this assembly owe their blessing to the direct, supernatural, and gratuitous favor of God.

The human beings who belong to this assembly have been called or summoned into it from out of another social entity, the fallen family of Adam. Analogously, the blessed angels who be-

<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, III, q. 8, a. 4, ad secundum.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechismus Concilii Tridentini*, Pars I, art. 9, cap. 9.

long to the Church triumphant have been called to overcome the temptation to which they were subjected and thus to enter into the condition of eternal and supernatural glory.

The same definition states the objective towards which the divine call or invitation has summoned the members of the Church, taken as a whole. This invitation is to the corporate activity of this company, considered as living and operating both in its heavenly homeland and in the place of its exile or pilgrimage. This objective is summed up in the phrase "into the true worship of God and into the true and God-given knowledge of God."

The worship of God is basically a spiritual act, something within the general classification of justice. It consists in the payment of the debt of acknowledgement, recognition, and gratitude, which all creatures really owe to God by reason of His infinite excellence. God Himself has prescribed the outward manifestation or expression of this spiritual act for the men and women of this world, and the Church is the society to which alone this ritual of divinely authorized and divinely ordered manifest worship actually belongs. Hence the people gathered together supernaturally by God's call and by His grace are assembled for a life of worship, a life of devotion, prayer, sacrifice, and adoration in this world. This activity is meant by God to continue for all eternity in the affectionate, grateful, and ecstatic acknowledgement of God's goodness in heaven.

We can only understand this part of the definition when we advert to the fact that this worship of God by those who belong to the entire Church, in heaven, in purgatory, and on earth, is a corporate act. Obviously the service or acknowledgement of God by each of the men and angels within the entire *ecclesia* is his own individual act also, but the assembly itself, as such, is likewise a unit which worships God. This community worship centers around the royal and eternal sacrifice of Our Lord. The work of the Church, in heaven, in purgatory, and on earth, is eminently His work, His operation. Ultimately, that is why He is its eternal King.

Finally, this definition offered by Gregory of Valentia speaks of the men and angels who belong to the Church as being called or summoned "into the true and God-given knowledge of God."

It is interesting to note that most of the great scholastic theologians of earlier days limited themselves to a mention of this cognitive activity when they set out to describe in their definitions the characteristic function of the Church in heaven and on earth. Thus, to cite only one example, the great fifteenth-century Dominican Cardinal John de Turrecremata, certainly one of the ablest and most influential ecclesiologists in all the history of Catholic theology, setting forth his own most extensive definition of the Church, designated it as "the entirety of all the faithful, both those in the *status viae* and the men and angels who enjoy the Beatific Vision."<sup>5</sup> Here Turrecremata uses the term "fidelis" to designate the Saints and the blessed angels in heaven for two reasons. First, the Beatific Vision is granted only to those who finish the *status viae* in possession of divine and supernatural faith. Again, the Beatific Vision is the clear and perfect understanding of those realities which, in the *status viae*, can be apprehended with certainty only in the light of divine faith. Gregory of Valentia brought out the same truth in a slightly different way when he spoke of "the true and God-given knowledge of God" as the objective towards which God has called His people, the members of His *ecclesia*, on earth and in heaven.

The most important fact to be garnered from this broadest type of definition of the true Church employed in the literature of Catholic theology is the truth that the blessed angels and the Saints in heaven, together with the souls in purgatory and the members of the Church militant on earth, actually constitute a single definite and genuine social unit, in and through Jesus Christ Our Lord. All of these people have been empowered to call God their Father, in a special and supernatural way. All of them are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and of each other.

Thus the Church militant, in the final analysis, is not merely a society existent in this world. It is one section or part of a society which finds its true and eternal home only in the supernatural glory of heaven. Its activity is something which is meant to find everlasting and glorious continuation in heaven. It is that section of the great brotherhood which is still in the period of trial, of struggle, of suffering, and of preparation, awaiting the fulfillment which will come only in the Beatific Vision itself.

<sup>5</sup> Cardinal John de Turrecremata, *Summa de ecclesia*, Book I, chapter 2.

The second type of definition commonly employed in the literature of scholastic theology is that which considers the Church militant alone, as distinct from the Church triumphant and the Church suffering, but which takes in the Church militant as a whole, without explicitly adverting to the difference in status between the *ecclesia Dei* of the New Testament and that of the Old Dispensation. According to this type of definition, the Church is usually described as the *congregatio fidelium*, the convocation or assembly of the faithful. Such was the terminology commonly employed by some of the earliest and most distinguished of the scholastic ecclesiologists, men like Moneta of Cremona (d. 1235), St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and Alvaro Pelayo (d. 1349). The expression *collectio catholicorum*, which Thomas Netter of Walden and other early scholastic theologians took from the *Decretum* of Gratian and employed as a definition of the true Church, was used as something identical in meaning with the form *congregatio fidelium*. As a matter of fact, Turrecremata used both expressions as a definition.<sup>6</sup> He likewise defined the Church militant as "the company (*universitas*) of the faithful, gathered together for the worship of the true God, in the profession of the one faith."<sup>7</sup>

The one faith, in terms of which the Church was defined and its members designated as "the faithful," was always faith in Our Lord. This aspect of the basic theological teaching about the Catholic Church is brought out very well in the definition offered by the Bishop of Avila, the famed Alphonsus Tostatus (d. 1455). Tostatus defined the Church as "the entire multitude of all the men believing in Christ."<sup>8</sup>

The man who has studied the history of ecclesiology during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is well aware of the controversy among theologians of that period about the actual import of the term "faithful" as it entered into the definition of the true Church. There were some (and Tostatus was of their number), who tended to define and describe the true Church in terms of the possession of the Catholic faith. There were others who, likewise setting out to define the Church in function of its member-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 25.

<sup>8</sup> Tostatus, *In Matthaeum, Liber V*, in the *Opera omnia* (Cologne, 1613), XI, 93 f.

ship, fashioned their definitions in such a way as to take cognizance of the fact that a man becomes and remains a member of the Church, not precisely by reason of his possession, but of his profession of the true divine faith. It is interesting to note that the definition of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, made and explained by Pope Pius XII, carries with it the definitive resolution of this extremely important debate.<sup>9</sup>

The central teaching brought out in the definitions of the Church militant in general, prescinding from the conditions of the Old Dispensation and the New, is the fact that the faith, in the profession of which a man is designated as one of the *fideles*, has been essentially the same since the grace of God was first offered to men after the sin of our first parents. As the theologians of the golden age never ceased to remind their readers, the faith which was requisite for all men after the fall of Adam was always a perfectly certain acceptance of God's supernatural revelation about His Son. In the days prior to the Incarnation, the faith that was the beginning of salvation was an acceptance of the supernatural divine teaching about the Redeemer who was to come. After the manifestation of Christ Our Lord it has been, and it will remain until the end of time, the certain acceptance of the divine revelation about the Redeemer who has appeared.

During the period of the Old Alliance, new items of information were added from time to time to the revealed message itself. Since the death of the last of the Apostles, however, there have been, and until the end of time there will be, no further additions to the body of truth revealed to us by God about His Son. Nevertheless, it was true under the Old Dispensation that "Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven given to men, whereby we must be saved."<sup>10</sup>

The most important definitions of the Church, from the standpoint of theological controversy, have always been those which applied exclusively to the Church militant of the New Testa-

<sup>9</sup> According to the *Mystici Corporis*, "In Ecclesiae autem membris reapse ii soli annumerandi sunt, qui regenerationis lavacrum receperunt veramque fidem profitentur, neque a Corporis compage semet ipsos misere separarunt, vel ob gravissima admissa a legitima auctoritate seiuncti sunt" (AAS, XXXV, 202).

<sup>10</sup> *Acts* 4: 12.

ment. Classical expressions of this type of definition are the formulae employed by Dominigo Bannez and St. Robert Bellarmine. The former defined the Church militant of the New Dispensation as "the visible congregation of the baptized faithful, under one Head, Christ, in heaven, and under His Vicar on earth."<sup>11</sup> St. Robert produced what has been by all means the most widely used formula for this sort of definition when he described the Church as "the assembly of men united in the profession of the same Christian faith and in the communion of the same sacraments, under the rule of legitimate pastors, and in particular, that of the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff."<sup>12</sup>

Definitions of the type offered by Bannez and St. Robert have frequently been subject to adverse criticism by writers who have not taken the trouble to investigate the purpose of these formulae. It is sometimes objected against them that they failed to take cognizance of the really important and spiritual elements of the Church in their definitions of this society. It was this attitude towards the teachings of St. Robert Bellarmine which eventually resulted in the development of a notion of an "invisible Church" within the theological systems of otherwise acceptable Catholic writers. Consequently, it was precisely this tendency which rendered the writing of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* imperative in our own day.

The main point which the student of sacred theology must bear in mind about definitions such as those of Bannez and St. Robert is the fact that these men were engaged in the absolutely necessary task of formulating what may be called an identifying definition of God's supernatural kingdom on earth. The question which they wanted to answer most explicitly in their formulae was this: "what body of people here on earth now constitute this supernatural kingdom of God?" Their definitions answered that question with complete clarity and exactness.

On the other hand, the entire theology of the Mystical Body is contained implicitly although still really and correctly in these definitions. Thus, when Bannez speaks of "the visible congrega-

tion of the baptized faithful," he is acknowledging that the kingdom of God on earth is made up of people who have been incorporated into Christ through the sacrament of faith. He is taking cognizance of the fact that men enter the true Church by being associated with Our Lord, dying and being buried to the old life of sin, characteristic of the "world," and rising to the new life of grace which alone should be lived in the company of Christ.

When he speaks of men being united or joined under Our Lord, he is adverting to the fact that the essential activity of the Church, directed and supported by Our Lord, is the integral work of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. And, when he mentions subjection to the Roman Pontiff as essential to membership in the Church, he is reminding his readers the mystery of the Church in this world is to be found precisely in the fact of its visibility.

These great theologians and apologists of another day never for a moment lost sight of the fact that the great and supernaturally merciful dispensations of God to man are to be found precisely along the line of this visibility. They never forgot that the world would never be particularly astonished or offended by the truth that an invisible God exists. What the world will not recognize is the truth that this individual man, one who worked, was tired, and was crucified, is actually the Incarnate Word of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Likewise the word would never take a great deal of umbrage at the fact that there is some association of men with God here on earth. What astonishes and displeases it is the divinely revealed truth that this association really is the visible society it knows, the religious society over which the Bishop of Rome presides as the visible head, in his capacity as the true and authorized Vicar of Jesus Christ. This was the truth men like Bannez, Stapleton, and St. Robert Bellarmine strove to bring out in their definitions.

The theologians of an older day knew well how to handle such definitions effectively. Thus the Dominican Vincent Contenson used what was in fact a twofold definition of the Church militant of the New Testament. He set out explicitly to prove that the definition of the Church as "the legitimate congregation of Christ's faithful" was applied correctly only to "the Roman Church, or the congregation of Christians obedient to the Roman

<sup>11</sup> *Scholastica commentaria in secundam secundae Angelici Doctoris D. Thomae* (Venice, 1588), Commentary on q. 1, a. 10, col. 153.

<sup>12</sup> *De Ecclesia militante*, c. 2.

Pontiff."<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Turlot, writing in catechetical form about the same time, towards the middle of the seventeenth century, made this procedure even more explicit.

Q. What is the only true and legitimate Church?

A. It is the congregation of all the baptized, professing the faith and the doctrine of Christ, which is governed by the one and supreme head and pastor after Christ on this earth, the Roman Pontiff.

Q. What congregation is this?

A. It is the congregation and assembly into a Church of those whom God, in His mercy and through the work of the preachers and doctors, has called together to worship Him and to possess an accurate knowledge of the eternal truths, by faith in this life, and in the next by the clear and Beatific Vision of God Himself.<sup>14</sup>

The function of these two definitions of the Church militant of the New Testament in the writings of Contenson and of Turlot was, in the last analysis, to bring out the objective identity of the concepts of "the Roman Catholic Church" and "the true Church of Jesus Christ." The type of definition set forth by Bannez and St. Robert defined the true Church by pointing out the salient characteristics of the Roman Catholic Church. The type of definition offered by Turlot as the answer to the second of the questions cited immediately above illustrates the intimate nature of the Roman Catholic Church by indicating some of the characteristics of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, it would seem that this was the great contribution which Pope Pius XII has made to the field of sacred theology in our time by his issuance of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* ten years ago this very month. Just as men have always been prone to close their eyes to the paramount fact that the same Christ who walked the roads of Judea, and Samaria and Galilee was the Incarnate Word of God, the God who created and who preserves all things in the universe, they have also been tempted to overlook the outstanding truth that this visible society, with its bad members mingled with the good, is actually the kingdom of the living God on this earth.

It is the glory of Pius XII that, in our days, he has combatted this evil tendency most effectively, and has brought out in a

<sup>13</sup> Contenson, *Theologia mentis et cordis* (Lyons, 1687), I, 152.

<sup>14</sup> Turlot, *Thesaurus doctrinae christianae*, p. 165.

uniquely effective way the characteristics which belong to the Catholic Church by reason of the fact that this visible society is definable as "the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ."

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FIFTY YEARS AGO

The leading article in *The American Ecclesiastical Review* for June, 1903, contributed by Fr. C. Coppens, S.J., is entitled "Annual Retreats for the Reverend Clergy." The author does not favor elegant or learned or entertaining discourses by the retreat master, preferring instead more time for meditation. He takes it for granted that the spiritual exercises for a clergy retreat shall be those of St. Ignatius. He says: "It cannot be reasonably expected that, of the Directors who depart from the plan of St. Ignatius, many will be such geniuses or such saints as to improve on the Exercises by their novel experiments." . . . Fr. T. L. Teeling, of England, presents a summary of the autobiography of a French priest of the middle nineteenth century. Besides the other hardships of the ministry in a poor and tiny village, the priest had to endure the scorn and dislike of his people, and the implication is that such was the common fate of a country pastor in those days: "The children of his parish, instead of running to him as to a father, are too often threatened with him as an object of terror. His very words are listened to with suspicion, and his most innocent actions commented on with the fierce malevolence of village gossip." . . . Fr. J. Hild, C.S.S.R., contributes a lengthy article in Latin, objecting to the view of Fr. Cassacca, O.S.A., that a woman deprived of ovaries is not entitled to enter marriage. . . . In the "Studies and Conferences" Fr. E. McSweeney urges a greater interest in the *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*. . . . In this same section Fr. J. F. Sheahan agrees to act as an agent whereby priests who desire a vacation in the country can be assigned for a few weeks to a rural parish, thus enabling the pastor also to have a vacation. He says: "There are hundreds of pastors, especially in the smaller dioceses, who would like occasionally to have a few weeks' vacation; there are hundreds of assistants in the big cities who would be delighted to spend two or three weeks at some country rectory in some distant place, but we have no ecclesiastical intelligence offices through which these two classes may become acquainted."

F. J. C.