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“The Church welcomes the sinful man and leads him to God”

In his 4 March general audience, Pope Leo XIV continued the catechetical cycle on the Second Vatican Council, speaking about the dogmatic constitution “Lumen gentium” and the Church as a visible and spiritual reality.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

Today, we will continue our exploration of the Conciliar Constitution *Lumen gentium*, a dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

In the first chapter, which is primarily intended to answer the question of what the Church is, she is described as a “complex reality” (no. 8). Now we ask ourselves: what does this complexity consist of? Some might answer that the Church is complex in that she is ‘complicated’ and therefore difficult to explain; others might think that her complexity derives from the fact that she is an institution steeped in two thousand years of history, with characteristics that differ from any other social or religious group. In Latin, however, the word ‘complex’ indicates rather the orderly union of different aspects or dimensions

within the same reality. For this reason, *Lumen gentium* can affirm that the Church is a well-organized body, in which the human and divine dimensions coexist without separation and without confusion.

The first dimension is immediately perceptible, in that the Church is a community of men and women who share the joy and struggle of being Christians, with their strengths and weaknesses, proclaiming the Gospel and becoming a sign of the presence of Christ who accompanies us on our journey through life. Yet this aspect – which is also evident in its institutional organization – is not sufficient to describe the true nature of the Church, because it also has a divine dimension. The latter does not consist in an ideal perfection or spiritual superiority of its members, but in the fact that the Church is generated by God's plan for humanity, realized in Christ.

Therefore, the Church is at the same time an earthly community and the mystical body of Christ, a visible assembly and a spiritual mystery, a reality present in history and a people journeying towards heaven (LG, 8; CCC, 771).

The human and divine dimensions integrate harmoniously, without one overshadowing the other; thus, the Church lives in this paradox. She is a reality that is both human and divine, which welcomes the sinful man and leads him to God.

To illuminate this ecclesial condition, *Lumen gentium* refers to the life of Christ. In fact, those who met Jesus along the roads of Palestine experienced his humanity, his eyes, his hands, the sound of his voice. Those who decided to follow him were moved precisely by the experience of his welcoming gaze, the touch of his blessing hands, his

words of liberation and healing. At the same time, however, by following that Man, the disciples opened themselves to an encounter with God. Indeed, Christ's flesh, his face, his gestures and his words visibly manifest the invisible God.

In the light of the reality of Jesus, we can now return to the Church: when we look at her closely, we discover a human dimension made up of real people, who sometimes manifest the beauty of the Gospel and other times struggle and make mistakes like everyone else. However, it is precisely through her members and her limited earthly aspects that Christ's presence and his saving action are manifested. As Benedict XVI said, there is no opposition between the Gospel and the institution; on the contrary, the structures of the Church serve precisely for the "realization and concretization of the Gospel in our

time” (Address to Swiss Bishops, 9 November 2006). An ideal and pure Church, separated from the earth, does not exist; only the one Church of Christ, embodied in history.

This is what constitutes the holiness of the Church: the fact that Christ dwells in her and continues to give himself through the smallness and fragility of her members.

Contemplating this perennial miracle that takes place in her, we understand ‘God's method’: He makes himself visible through the weakness of creatures, continuing to manifest himself and to act. For this reason, Pope Francis, in *Evangelii gaudium*, exhorts us all to learn “to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)” (no. 169). This enables us still today to build up the Church: not only by organizing its visible forms, but by building that spiritual edifice which is the body of Christ, through

communion and charity among ourselves.

Indeed, charity constantly generates the presence of the Risen One. “If only we could all just let our thoughts dwell on the one thing, charity! It’s the only thing, you see, which both surpasses all things, and without which all things worth nothing, and which draws all things to itself, wherever it may be” (*Sermon 354*, 6, 6).

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