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“The Church is the mystery made perceptible”

In his 18 February general audience, Pope Leo XIV continued the catechetical cycle on the Second Vatican Council, speaking about the dogmatic constitution “Lumen gentium” and the mystery of the Church, sacrament of union with God and the unity of all humanity.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

When the Second Vatican Council, to whose documents we are dedicating the catecheses, wanted to describe the Church, it was concerned first and foremost with explaining where its origins lie. In order to do so, in the Dogmatic Constitution Lumen gentium, approved on 21 November 1964, it drew the term “mystery” from the Letters of Saint Paul. By choosing this word, he did not mean to say that the Church is something obscure or incomprehensible, as is commonly thought when the word “mystery” is heard. It is exactly the opposite: indeed, when Saint Paul uses the word, especially in the Letter to the Ephesians, he wishes to indicate a reality that was previously hidden and is now revealed.

It refers to God’s plan, which has a purpose: to unify all creatures thanks

to the reconciliatory action of Jesus Christ, an action that was accomplished in his death on the cross. This is experienced first of all in the assembly gathered for the liturgical celebration: there, differences are relativized, and what counts is being together because we are drawn by the Love of Christ, who broke down the wall of separation between people and social groups (cf. Eph 2:14). For Saint Paul, mystery is the manifestation of what God wanted to achieve for the whole of humanity, and is made known in local experiences, which gradually widen to include all human beings and even the cosmos.

The condition of humanity is one of fragmentation that human beings are unable to repair, even though the tendency towards unity dwells in their heart. The action of Jesus Christ enters into this condition through the power of the Holy Spirit, and

overcomes the powers of division and the Divider himself. Gathering together to celebrate, having believed in the proclamation of the Gospel, is experienced as an attraction exerted by the cross of Christ, which is the supreme manifestation of God's love. It is feeling called together by God: this is why the term *ekklesía* is used, that is, an assembly of people who recognise that they have been summoned together. So, there is a certain coincidence between this mystery and the Church: the Church is the mystery made perceptible.

This convocation, precisely because it is brought about by God, cannot however be limited to a group of people, but rather is destined to become the experience of all human beings. Therefore, the Second Vatican Council, at the beginning of the Constitution Lumen gentium, states that: “the Church is in Christ

like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (no. 1). With the use of the term “sacrament” and the consequent explanation, it is intended to indicate that the Church is an expression of what God wants to accomplish in the history of humanity; therefore, by looking at the Church, we can to some extent grasp God’s plan, the mystery. In this sense, the Church is a sign. In addition, the term “instrument” is added to the term “sacrament,” precisely to show that the Church is an active sign. Indeed, when God works in history, he involves in his activity the people who are the objects of his action. It is through the Church that God achieves the aim of bringing people to him and uniting them with one another.

Union with God finds its reflection in the union of human beings. This is

the experience of salvation. It is not a coincidence that in the Constitution Lumen gentium, in Chapter 7, dedicated to the eschatological nature of the pilgrim Church, again uses the description of the Church as a sacrament, with the specification “of salvation”: “Christ, having been lifted up from the earth has drawn all to Himself (cf. Jn 12:32 gr.). Rising from the dead (cf. Rom 6:9) He sent his life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him has established his Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father, He is continually active in the world that He might lead men to the Church and through it join them to Himself and that He might make them partakers of his glorious life by nourishing them with his own Body and Blood.”

This text enables us to understand the relationship between the

unifying action of the Pasch of Jesus, which is the mystery of the passion, death and resurrection, and the identity of the Church. At the same time, it makes us grateful to belong to the Church, the body of the risen Christ and the one pilgrim people of God journeying through history, which lives as a sanctifying presence in the midst of a still fragmented humanity, as an effective sign of unity and reconciliation among peoples.

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