

Topic 15: The Church Founded by Christ

Throughout his life, Christ made clear what his Church would be like. The Church is the community of all those who have received the regenerating grace of the Spirit by which they become children of God. All the baptised share in the common priesthood; they are called to bring men and women into a relationship with God. The ecumenical movement is an ecclesial goal that seeks visible unity among Christians in the one Church founded by Christ.

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1. Christ and the Church

The Church is a mystery, i.e. a reality in which God and mankind come into contact and communion. Church comes from the Greek “*ekklesia*,” which means an assembly of those called together. In the Old Testament it was used to translate “*quahal Yahweh*,” the assembly convoked by God for worship. Examples are the Sinai assembly and the assembly that met in the time of King Josiah for the purpose of praising God and returning to the purity of the Law. In the New Testament it has various meanings, in continuity with the Old Testament, but designates especially the people God summons and gathers from every corner of the world in the assembly of those who, through faith in his Word and

Baptism, become children of God, members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit.^[1]

“The Church finds her origin and fulfilment in the eternal plan of God. She was prepared for in the Old Covenant with the election of Israel, the sign of the future gathering of all the nations. Founded by the words and actions of Jesus Christ, fulfilled by his redeeming death and Resurrection, the Church has been manifested as the mystery of salvation by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. She will be perfected in the glory of heaven as the assembly of all the redeemed of the earth.”^[2]

The Church was not founded by men, nor is it even a noble human response to the experience of salvation brought about by God in Christ. In the mysteries of Christ’s life, who was anointed by the Spirit,

the promises announced in the Law and the prophets were fulfilled. It is also in his life – in its entirety – that the Church was founded. There is no single moment when Christ founded the Church. Rather He founded it through his whole life: from the incarnation to his death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Paraclete. Throughout his life, Christ – in whom the Spirit dwelt – was manifesting how his Church should be, arranging first some things and then others. After his Ascension, the Spirit was sent to the whole Church and remains in it, reminding people of all that our Lord said to the apostles and guiding it throughout history towards its fullness. The Spirit is the cause of Christ's presence in his Church through the sacraments and the Word, and continually adorns her with various hierarchical and charismatic gifts (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 4 and 12). By his presence our Lord's

promise to always remain with us until the end of time is fulfilled (Mt 28:20).

2. People of God, Body of Christ and Communion of Saints

In Sacred Scripture the Church is called by various names, each of which underlines in a special way certain aspects of the mystery of God's communion with mankind. "People of God" is a title given to Israel. When applied to the Church, the new Israel, it means that God did not wish to save men and women in isolation, but to form them into a single people united in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who would know Him in truth and serve Him in holiness (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 4 and 9; Saint Cyprian, *De Orat Dom.* 23; CSEL 3, p. 285).

It also means that she has been chosen by God. The People is “of God” and is not the property of any culture, government or nation. Moreover, it is a visible community that is on its way – among the nations – to its final homeland. In this last sense it can be said that “Church and synod are synonymous” (Saint John Chrysostom, *Explicatio in Psalmum 149*: PG 55,493). We are all journeying together towards the same common destiny; we are all called to the same mission; we are all united in Christ and in the Holy Spirit with God the Father. In this People all have the common dignity of being children of God, a common mission to be salt for the earth, and a common goal, which is the Kingdom of God. All share in the three functions or offices of Christ.^[3]

When we say that the Church is the “body of Christ,” we wish to

emphasise that, through the sending of the Holy Spirit, Christ unites the faithful intimately with Himself. This is especially true in the Eucharist, through which the faithful grow and are united in charity, forming one body in the diversity of members and functions. It also points to the reality that the health and sickness of one member affects the whole body (cf. 1 Cor 12:1-24), and that the faithful, as members of Christ, are his instruments for his work in the world.^[4] The Church is also called the “Bride of Christ” (cf. Eph 5:26 ff.), which emphasises, within the Church’s union with Christ, the distinction between Christ and his Church. It also stresses that God’s covenant with mankind is definitive. God is faithful to his promises, and the Church faithfully responds to Him by being the fruitful Mother of all God’s children.

The Second Vatican Council took up an old expression for the Church: “communion.” This points to the reality that she is the extension of the intimate communion of the Holy Trinity, expanding this communion to include mankind. The Church is already here on earth communion with the divine Trinity, even if not yet consummated in its fullness. In addition to communion, the Church is a sign and instrument of that communion for all mankind.

Through her we participate in God’s intimate life and belong to the family of God as sons in the Son (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22) through the Spirit. This is made a reality in a specific way in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, also often called communion (cf. 1 Cor 10:16).

The Church is *communio sanctorum*: a communion of saints, that is, a community of all those who have received the regenerating grace of

the Spirit by which they become children of God, united to Christ and called saints. Some are still walking on this earth; others have already died and are purifying themselves with the help of our prayers. Still others already enjoy the vision of God and intercede for us. The communion of saints also means that all Christians have in common the holy gifts, at the centre of which is the Eucharist, all the other sacraments ordered to it, and all the other gifts and charisms.

Through the communion of saints, the merits of Christ and of all the saints who have preceded us on earth assist us in the mission our Lord himself asks us to carry out in the Church. The saints in Heaven follow closely the life of the pilgrim Church and are waiting for the fullness of the communion of saints to be made a reality through our Lord's second coming, the judgment

and the resurrection of bodies. The life of the pilgrim Church and of each of its members is of great importance for the accomplishment of its mission, for the purification of many souls and for the conversion of so many others: “Many great things depend — don’t forget it — on whether you and I live our lives as God wants.”^[5]

At the same time, it is unfortunate that the faithful sometimes do not respond as God wants them to, because of their limitations, mistakes or sins. Some of the parables of the Kingdom explain how the wheat lives alongside the tares, the good fish with the bad fish, until the end of the world. Saint Paul realised that the Apostles carried a great treasure in earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4:7), and the New Testament contains several warnings against false prophets and those who scandalise others (e.g. Rev 2 and 3).^[6] As in the early Church,

also now the sins of Christians (ministers or non-ordained faithful) have an impact on the Church's mission and on other Christians. This is even greater when the one who sins – by action or omission – is a minister or has the responsibility to care for others, and it can even happen that scandal is caused (invitation to sin). Although sins have an effect on communion, and this effect can even be quite visible, they can never completely overshadow the Church's holiness or stifle her mission, for that would be tantamount to affirming that evil is more powerful than the love God has shown and continues to show for mankind. Moreover, the impact of the good done by so many Christians is less visible, but far greater, than that of sin. The prayer of all Christians for the Pope, for the bishops, for all the clergy, for religious and lay people is a response of faith to this situation the Church is

experiencing until her mystery is consummated in her final homeland. While recognising the presence of sinners in the Church, Saint Josemaria stressed that this “does not authorise us in any way to judge the Church in a human manner, without theological faith. We cannot consider only the greater or lesser merits of certain churchmen or of some Christians. To do this would be to limit ourselves to the surface of things. What is most important in the Church is not how we human beings react but how God acts. This is what the Church is: Christ present in our midst, God coming towards men and women in order to save them, calling us with his revelation, sanctifying us with his grace, upholding us with his constant help, in the great and small battles of our daily life. We might come to mistrust other men, and each one of us should mistrust himself and end each of our days with a *mea culpa*, an act of contrition

that is profound and sincere. But we have no right to doubt God. And to doubt the Church, its divine origin and its effectiveness for our salvation through its doctrine and its sacraments, would be the same as doubting God himself, the same as not fully believing in the reality of the coming of the Holy Spirit.”^[7]—

The Church as communion of saints is organically structured on earth because Christ and the Spirit made her and makes her the sacrament of Salvation, that is, the means and sign by which God offers salvation to humanity. The Church is structured internally according to the relationships between those who, by virtue of Baptism, have the common priesthood and those who, in addition, have received the ministerial priesthood through the sacrament of Holy Orders. The Church is also structured externally in the communion of the particular

Churches, formed in the image of the universal Church and each presided over by its own bishop. Similarly, this communion exists in other ecclesial realities. The Church, thus structured, serves the Spirit of Christ in carrying out her mission (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8).

3. Common priesthood

On entering the Church, Christians are reborn in Christ and, with Him, made king and priest by the sign of the Cross; by the anointing of the Spirit they are consecrated as priest. In addition, some receive the sacrament of Holy Orders, by which they are enabled to make Christ sacramentally present to the other faithful, their brethren, to preach the Word of God and to guide them in the faith and Christian life. Through this distinction between the common Christian condition and sacred ministers, God shows us that He

wishes to communicate his grace through others, that salvation comes to us from outside each one of us and does not depend on our personal abilities. In God's Church, therefore, two essentially distinct ways exist to participate in Christ's priesthood, which are mutually ordered to each other. This mutual ordering is not merely a moral condition for carrying out the Church's mission, but the way in which Christ's priesthood is made present on this earth (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 10 and 11).

The priesthood is not, therefore, reduced to a specific service within the Church, because all Christians have received a specific charism and recognise themselves as members of a royal lineage and sharers in Christ's priestly office (cf. Saint Leo the Great, Sermons, IV, 1: PL 54, 149). It is a condition common to all Christians, men and women, lay people and sacred ministers, which was received

in Baptism and has been reinforced by Confirmation. Therefore, all Christians have in common the condition of being faithful, who by being “incorporated in Christ through Baptism have been constituted as the people of God; for this reason, since they have become sharers in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and royal office in their own manner, they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church. There exists a true equality among them in their dignity as children of God.”^[8] The common priesthood is exercised in response to the call to holiness and to continue Christ’s mission, which all men and women have received in Baptism.

In the Jewish religion, in the religions that surrounded Israel and in many other religions, it is the priest who acts as mediator. Therefore, whoever wants to enter into a relationship with God has to ask the priest to act

on their behalf. The role of the priest is one of mediation: to unite men with God, and God with men, to offer sacrifices and to bless. To explain the priesthood of the faithful, the Fathers of the Church emphasised that every Christian has direct access to God. Because we all share in Christ's priesthood, all Christians can approach God directly and come close to Him.

In particular, all Christians – because of their union with Christ – are able to offer spiritual sacrifices, to bring the world to God and God to the world. All the baptised are called to bring men and women into a relationship with God. The common priesthood has an ascending and a descending dimension. The ascending one enables us to raise up everything in our life, in union with Christ, to God. In Him, in the Holy Mass, our small efforts and sacrifices take on eternal value. Later, in

Heaven, we will see them transfigured.

The descending dimension of the common priesthood involves the priest's role to communicate God's gifts to mankind. This is what makes us instruments for the holiness of others, for example, through our apostolate. This happens in the mission of parents when they help their children to grow in faith, hope and charity, and in the sanctification of marriage and family life. It also happens when we bring our friends and co-workers closer to God: "While you carry out your activities in the very heart of society, participating in all noble and upright human endeavours, you should never lose sight of the deep priestly meaning of your life. You need to be mediators in Christ Jesus to bring all earthly realities to God, so that divine grace may vivify everything."^[9] This sanctifying mission of non-ordained

Christians is intimately united to the sanctifying mission of sacred ministers, and stands in need of it. Saint Josemaría, speaking specifically of the apostolate of his sons and daughters, said that each one “strives to be an apostle in their own environment, bringing people closer to Christ by their example and word, by dialogue. But in the apostolate, in bringing souls along the paths of the interior life, they come up against the 'sacramental wall.' The sanctifying role of the lay person is incomplete without the sanctifying role of the priest, who administers the Sacrament of Penance, celebrates the Eucharist and proclaims the word of God in the name of the Church.”^[10]

The common priesthood also entails Christ’s royal mission, whereby all Christians make Christ reign in their lives and in their surroundings by serving others, especially the poor, the sick and all those in need. Service

is the way in which the royal dignity of Christians is exercised. It also helps us to discover and carry out what God has intended for the world.

God has wanted the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood to be mutually ordered to each other in the Church. His priesthood becomes present on earth in that mutual ordering. Clericalism, therefore, is an imbalance in this order. It occurs when ministers invade the field of the other faithful in questions that do not concern them, or when the non-ordained faithful invade the field of the ministerial priesthood by fulfilling functions belonging to sacred ministers.

4. Diversity of vocations in the Church

The Church has to proclaim and establish among all peoples the

Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ. On earth she is the seed and beginning of this Kingdom. After his Resurrection, our Lord sent the Apostles to proclaim the Gospel, to baptise and to teach people to fulfil all that He had commanded (cf. Mt 28:18 ff). Our Lord entrusted to his Church the same mission that the Father had given Him (cf. Jn 20:21). From the beginning of the Church, this mission has been carried out by all Christians (cf. Acts 8:4; 11:19), who have often gone to the extreme of sacrificing their own lives in order to fulfil it. Our Lord's missionary mandate has its source in God's eternal love, who sent his Son and his Spirit because "he desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4).

This missionary sending includes the three functions of the Church on earth: the *munus propheticum* (announcing the good news of

salvation in Christ), the *munus sacerdotale* (making present and transmitting the salvific life of Christ through the sacraments and grace), and the *munus regale* (helping Christians to fulfil the mission of bringing the world to God and to grow in holiness). Although all the faithful share this same mission, not all play the same role. Some sacraments and charisms shape and equip Christians for certain mission-related roles.

As we have seen, those who hold the common priesthood and those who also hold the ministerial priesthood are mutually ordered to each other in such a way that they make present on earth Christ's priesthood and mediation, the gifts of grace and the strength and light that all need to carry out the Church's mission. Some of them have been conformed to Christ the head of the Church in a specific way, distinct from the others.

Having received the sacrament of Holy Orders, they possess the ministerial priesthood in order to make Christ sacramentally present to all the other faithful. The fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders has been received by the bishops, successors of the Apostles. Priests, who directly assist the bishops, have received the sacrament of Holy Orders in its second degree. The third degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders, the diaconate, configures a Christian to Christ the servant, in order to assist the bishop and priests in preaching, in deeds of charity and in the celebration of certain sacraments.

With regard to the mission of bringing the world to God, two broad conditions of life are linked to this task. Some have the special vocation of bringing the world to God from within, the laity. They do so by directing to God the temporal affairs

with which their life is interwoven (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 31). Since they participate in the priesthood of Christ, the laity share in his sanctifying, prophetic and royal mission.^[11] They share in Christ's priestly mission when they offer as a spiritual sacrifice, especially at Mass, their own life with all their works. They share in Christ's prophetic mission when they accept the Word of Christ with faith and proclaim it to the world by the witness of their life and words. They share in Christ's kingly mission because they receive from Him the power to overcome sin in themselves and in the world through self-denial and holiness of life, and strive to imbue temporal activities and society with moral values.

Others have the special vocation of setting themselves apart from secular realities and activities, living according to a specific state of life

which resembles, as far as humanly possible, the life that all will have at the end (they do not marry and often live as brothers or sisters in communities; they do not own property; they often change their name to signify that they “die” to their former life, etc.). To enter this state of life they consecrate themselves in a special way to God by the profession of the evangelical counsels: chastity (in celibacy or virginity), poverty and obedience. Consecrated life is a state of life recognised by the Church, which helps fulfil her mission through a full dedication to Christ and to one’s brothers and sisters, giving witness to the hope of the Kingdom of heaven.^[12] In particular, by their state of life they remind everyone that we have no permanent abode in this world. They bear public witness that all human achievements must be transfigured on the day of the Lord’s coming. And they bring the

world to God as though by attraction, from outside the activities and affairs from which they have withdrawn (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 44; PC, 5).

Lay people and religious bring the world to God from different positions. The former do so from within, furthering the development of creation according to the divine plan (cf. Gen 2:15); the latter from without, drawing creation towards its consummation, which they anticipate symbolically in their way of life. The former need the latter to remind them that the world cannot be brought to God without the spirit of the beatitudes; the latter need the former to remind them that man's original vocation is to bring creation to the perfection God has intended for it. Both conditions, in communion, serve the building up of the Kingdom of God. Consecrated life also contributes greatly to the Christian enlivening of the world

through works of charity and social assistance, to which it devotes generous dedication.

In addition, in the Church's life many paths and means for carrying out the common mission are emerging. The 20th century has seen the birth of many movements, new monastic communities and other recent institutions, all of which help further evangelisation through their own charisms.

5. Octave for Christian Unity

The Church is One because her origin and model is the Holy Trinity; because Christ, her founder, re-establishes the unity of all in one body; because the Holy Spirit unites the faithful to the Head, who is Christ. This unity is manifested in the fact that the faithful profess the same faith, celebrate the same sacraments, are united in the same hierarchy,

have the same hope and the same charity.

The Church subsists as a constituted and organized society in the world in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 8). Only in her can the fullness of the means of salvation be obtained, since our Lord entrusted all the goods of the New Covenant to the Apostolic College alone, whose head is Peter. Christ has given unity to the Church and it subsists in the Catholic Church. This unity is not lost because of the disunity among Christians. Separations between Christians do, however, cause a wound in the Church, and can cause scandal and are an obstacle to evangelisation.

Those who are born in a state of separation from the Catholic Church cannot simply be considered

schismatics or heretics. In their communities and Churches they can receive grace through baptism. They possess many goods of sanctification and truth which proceed from Christ and impel to Catholic unity. And the Holy Spirit makes use of them as instruments of salvation, since their strength comes from the fullness of grace and truth which Christ gave to the Catholic Church. ^[13]

The members of these Churches and communities are incorporated into Christ in Baptism and therefore we recognise them as brothers and sisters. We are in a certain communion of prayer and other spiritual benefits, even a certain true union in the Holy Spirit, with Christians who do not belong to the Catholic Church (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 15). We can grow in unity: by drawing closer to Christ and helping other Christians to come closer to Him; by fostering unity in essentials,

freedom in accidentals and charity in all things; by making God's house more habitable for others; by growing in veneration and respect for the Pope and the hierarchy, assisting them and following their teachings.

The ecumenical movement is an ecclesial goal to seek visible unity among Christians in the one Church founded by Christ. It is a desire of our Lord (cf. Jn 17:21) that is brought about through prayer, conversion of heart, mutual fraternal knowledge and theological dialogue.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is one of the activities of the ecumenical movement, which is part of “spiritual ecumenism.” It was begun in the United States in 1908 by the Episcopalian Paul Watson, who later joined the Catholic Church. Popes Pius X and Benedict XV praised and encouraged all Catholics to join

in this initiative. It is celebrated from 18 January to 25 January, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. In addition to the Catholic Church, it is celebrated in several Orthodox Churches and in many Christian communities. In some places it may include prayer meetings or even a liturgical prayer, such as Vespers, with the presence of Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. However, the most widespread activity is personal prayer for the common intention for visible Christian unity during the days indicated.

Basic Bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 748-945.

Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 147-193.

Saint John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 25 May 1995.

^[1] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 777; cf. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 147.

^[2] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 149; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 778.

^[3] Cf. *Catechism*, 782-786.

^[4] Cf. *Catechism*, 787-795.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 755.

^[6] “For more than twenty-five years when I have recited the creed and asserted my faith in the divine origin

of the Church: ‘One, holy, catholic and apostolic,’ I have frequently added, ‘in spite of everything.’ When I mention this custom of mine and someone asks me what I mean, I answer, ‘I mean your sins and mine.’” (Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 131).

^[7] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, 131.

^[8] *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 177.

^[9] Saint Josemaría, *Letter 28 March 1955*, 4.

^[10] Saint Josemaría, *Conversations with Monsignor Josemaría Escrivá*, 69. “Whenever sanctity is genuine, it overflows from its vessel to fill other hearts, other souls, with its superabundance. We, the children of God, sanctify ourselves by sanctifying others. Is Christian life

growing around you? Consider this every day" (*The Forge*, 856).

[¹¹] Cf. *Compendium*, 189-191.

[¹²] Cf. *Compendium*, 192ff. "Our task as Christians is to proclaim this kingship of Christ, announcing it through what we say and do. Our Lord wants men and women of his own in all walks of life. Some he calls away from society, asking them to give up involvement in the world, so that they remind the rest of us by their example that God exists. To others he entrusts the priestly ministry. But he wants the vast majority to stay right where they are, in all earthly occupations in which they work: the factory, the laboratory, the farm, the trades, the streets of the big cities and the trails of the mountains" (Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, 105).

[¹³] Cf. *Catechism*, 819.

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