



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY

X. THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH: KINGDOM AND CHURCH

X.1. *The Church as Simultaneously Earthly and Heavenly*

Chapter VII of *Lumen gentium*, entitled “The Eschatological Character of the Church *in via* and Its Union with the Church in Heaven”,¹ has not proved of much interest to those commenting on the Second Vatican Council. Yet it is in a certain sense the key to a reading of Chapter II, since it defines the goal toward which the people of God is moving. That goal is already outlined in *Lumen gentium* 9. The messianic people has for her destiny “the Kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth and which must be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him at the end of time”. This goal is reaffirmed at the start of paragraph 48 of the same conciliar Constitution: “The Church, to whom we are all called in Christ Jesus and in whom by the grace of God we acquire holiness, will receive her perfection only in the glory of heaven, when will come the time of the renewal of all things”.

Moreover, the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* offers the same teaching: “Proceeding from the love of the eternal Father, the Church was founded by Christ in time and gathered into one by the Holy Spirit. She has a saving and eschatological purpose that can only be fully attained in the next life” (*GS* 40). In addition, Chapter VII of *Lumen gentium* broadens the perspective on the Church by reminding us that the people of God, in her present condition as a historic subject, is already eschatological and that the pilgrim Church is one with the Church of heaven. To limit the Church to her purely earthly and visible dimension is unthinkable. While she journeys on this earth, the invisible founts from which she lives and by which she is ceaselessly refreshed are located “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, where the life of the Church is hidden with Christ in God until she appears in glory with her Spouse (cf. Col 3:1-4)” (*LG* 6). Such is the work that the Holy Spirit accomplishes “by the power of the Gospel [permitting] the Church to keep the freshness of youth. Constantly he renews her and leads her to perfect union with her Spouse” (*LG* 4). This goal toward which the Holy Spirit impels the Church is what determines at the deepest level the life of the pilgrim Church. It is for this reason that believers from now on have their citizenship (*politeuma*) “in heaven” (Phil 3:20; *LG* 13, 48). Even now, “the Jerusalem above ... is our mother” (Gal 4:26; cf. *LG* 6). It is part of the Church’s mystery that this goal is already secretly present in the pilgrim Church. This eschatological character of the Church does not lead to any downplaying of temporal responsibility. On the contrary, it guides the Church into the way of imitating Christ, the Poor

Man and Servant. It is from her intimate union with Christ and from the gifts of his Spirit that the Church receives the strength to offer herself up in the service of all men and of the whole man. As she “presses onward toward the Kingdom of the Father” (cf. *GS* 1), the Church weighs, nevertheless, the distance still to be traversed before her final fulfillment. She recognizes, therefore, that she counts sinners among her children and that she stands in continuous need of repentance (cf. *LG* 8). Yet this distance, often painful to experience as it is, cannot suppress the fact that in all her different stages of life the Church is essentially one: this is true whether we think of the Church’s prefiguration in creation, her preparation in the Old Testament, her constitution in “these, the last, times”, her manifestation by the Holy Spirit, or, lastly, her fulfillment in glory at the end of the ages (cf. *LG* 2). Moreover, if the Church is one at different stages of the divine economy, she is also one in her three dimensions: wayfaring, undergoing purgation, and glorification: “All ... who are of Christ and who have his Spirit form one Church and in Christ cleave together (cf. Eph 4:16)” (*LG* 49).

X.2. *Church and Kingdom* It is this perspective of unity that we must bear in mind as we tackle the difficult question of the relation between the Church and the Kingdom. Although many Church Fathers, medieval theologians, and sixteenth-century Reformers were generally happy to identify Church and Kingdom, we have come since then, and especially in the last two hundred years, to put a greater or lesser distance between them[^] accentuating somewhat unilaterally the eschatological aspect of the Kingdom and the historical aspect of the Church. The Council did not treat this question explicitly, but the interrelation of its various texts enables us to discern the effective teaching of *Lumen gentium* in this matter.

Examining the texts that deal with the final consummation, one finds no difference between Church and Kingdom. On the one hand, we read that “while she slowly grows to maturity, the Church longs for the completed Kingdom” (*LG* 5). On the other, the final fulfillment will be realized “when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal Kingdom” (*GS* 39; cf. 1 Cor 15:24; *PO* 2). Yet again, the Council affirms that the Church “will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time”: “At that moment, as the Fathers put it, all the just from the time of Adam, ‘from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect’, will be gathered together with the Father in the universal Church” (*LG* 2). It is the Holy Spirit who leads the Church to “perfect union with her Spouse” (*LG* 4). The same Church “with all her strength hopes and desires to be united in glory with her King” (*LG* 5). Moreover, the Council can say of the people of God that “her destiny is the Kingdom of God”, adding that she will be “brought to perfection by him at the end of time” (*LG* 9). It is clear that in the Council’s teaching there is no difference so far as eschatological reality is concerned between the final realization of the Church (as *consummata*) and of the Kingdom (as *consummatum*).

What, then, is their relation at the present time? The most explicit text on this subject (*LG 5*) offers a glimpse of how subtle the relation between the ideas of Kingdom and Church really is. In their beginnings, the destinies of the Church and the Kingdom seem inseparable: “For the Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Kingdom of God” (*LG 5*). The origins of the Church and the advent of the Kingdom of God are presented here in perfect synchronicity. The same is true of the growth of each. Those who receive the word of Christ in faith and “are numbered among the little flock of Christ (cf. Lk 12:32) have truly received the Kingdom” (*LG 5*). We find the same thing, once again, where belonging to the Church is concerned: “He determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ” (*LG 2*). And so one can use the same terms for describing the growth both of Kingdom and of Church. It is, in fact, in the growth of the Church that the Council discerns the growth of the Kingdom: “To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth.... The Church—that is, the Kingdom of Christ already present in mystery—grows visibly through the power of God in the world” (*LG 3*; cf. *DV 17*; *LG 13*). The pilgrim Church is therefore “the Kingdom of God already mysteriously present”, and in growing she moves toward the final Kingdom. Yet her growth is nothing other than the accomplishing of her mission: “The Church ... receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is, on earth, the seed and the beginning of that Kingdom” (*LG 5, 9*). This evocation of the Church as “seed” and “beginning” of

the Kingdom expresses their simultaneous unity and difference.

So Church and Kingdom converge in their own mode of growth, a growth only realized in and through conformation to the Christ who gave his life for the life of the world. The Kingdom suffers violence (cf. Mt 11:12), and in this, the Church has no different destiny. She “presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God” (St. Augustine, cited in *LG* 8). The Church is the holy Church, though including sinners among her own (*LG* 8). The Kingdom itself, “mysteriously present” (*in mysterio*), is hidden in the world and history, and so not yet purified of elements that are a stranger to it (cf. Mt 13:24-30, 47-49). As a divine-human mystery, the Church transcends the *socialis compago* or sociological configuration of the Catholic Church (*LG* 8, 13-17). Belonging to the Kingdom cannot *not be* belonging—at least implicitly—to the Church.

X.3. Is the Church the Sacrament of the Kingdom?

To complete the previous chapter devoted to the Church as sacrament, it may be of use to ask here whether one can call the Church the sacrament of the Kingdom. This is not just a question of terminology. It is a truly theological question to which our work in its entirety enables us to offer a circumstantial answer.

We note first of all that the Council has nowhere used this expression, even if the word “sacrament” is, as we have seen, utilized in a variety of contexts. However, the expression “the Church, sacrament of the Kingdom”, appears to be valid when understood in the following perspective:

1. In its ecclesiological application, the term “sacrament” is used analogically, as the first paragraph of *Lumen gentium* stresses: “*Veluti sacramentum ...*”
2. The expressions aim is to relate, on the one hand, the Kingdom, understood in the plenary sense of its final realization, with, on the other hand, the Church in its “wayfaring” aspect.
3. The term “sacrament” here is understood in its full sense of *jam praesens in mysterio* (cf. *LG* 3), where the reality present in the sacrament (the pilgrim Church) is the Kingdom itself.
4. The Church is not a mere sign (*sacramentum tantum*) but a sign in which the reality signified is present (*res et sacramentum*) as the reality of the Kingdom.
5. The notion of the Church cannot be limited to its temporal and earthly aspect alone. Conversely, the notion of the Kingdom includes a presence “already” *in mysterio*.

X.4. Mary: The Realized Church One could not offer a true reading of the Constitution *Lumen gentium* without integrating somehow the bearing of its eighth chapter into our understanding of the mystery of the Church. Church and Kingdom find their highest realization in Mary. The Church's identity as the presence in *mysterio* of the Kingdom is illuminated in an unsurpassable way when we look at Mary, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, model of faith, the Realsymbol of the Church. This is why the Council affirms of her that "in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph 5:27)" (LG 65). The often painful distance between the pilgrim Church and the final Kingdom is already transcended in Mary. As the *assumpta*, she "became like her Son who himself rose from the dead, anticipating thereby the destiny of the just" (Paul VI, Profession of Faith, 15). Because of this, the Mother of Jesus "is the image and beginning of the Church as she is to be perfected in the world to come" (LG 68; cf. SC 103).

* This document was approved by the Commission "*in forma specifica*".