



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY ON THE OCCASION OF THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CLOSING OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL* (1984)

III. THE CHURCH AS “MYSTERY” AND AS “HISTORIC SUBJECT”

III.1. *The Church as Simultaneously “Mystery” and “Historic Subject”*

The deep intention of the conciliar Constitution *Lumen gentium*—an intention by no means contradicted in postconciliar reflection—was that the expression “people of God”, used conjointly with other ecclesiological terms, should underline the character of the Church as “mystery” and as “historic subject”, for at all levels of her action the Church effectively brings both of these characteristics into play, and that in such a way that one cannot separate the one from the other. “Mystery” here refers to the Church as deriving from the Trinity, while “historic subject” has to do with the Church as a historical agent, contributing to history’s overall direction.

Avoiding the dangers of seeing these aspects in a dualistic fashion or as opposed terms, we must reach a more profound view of that correlation in “the Church as people of God”, which gives the relationship between “mystery” and “historic subject” its basis. In fact, it is the Church’s mystery character that determines her nature as a historic subject. But also, and correlatively, the historic subject angle serves in turn to express the nature of this mystery. In other words, the people of God is simultaneously mystery and historic subject, in such a fashion that the mystery constitutes the historic subject and the historic subject discloses the mystery. It would be sheer nominalism to separate out, in “the Church as people of God”, these two aspects.

“Mystery” when applied to the Church refers to the free choice of the Father’s wisdom and goodness to communicate himself, something that he does in the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, “for us men and for our salvation”. Creation and human history take their rise from this divine act, whose “principle”, in the most pregnant sense of the word (Jn 1:1), lies in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Now exalted at the Father’s right hand, Christ pours out the Holy Spirit to become the “principle” of the Church, constituting her as Christ’s Body and Spouse. Thus the Church has a particular, unique, and exclusive reference to Christ, and so her meaning is not indefinitely open.

It follows, then, that the trinitarian mystery is made present and operative within the Church. From one point of view, the mystery of Christ as Head, the wholly universal, inclusive, and recapitulating principle of the *Christus totus*, encompasses and involves the mystery of the Church. Yet from another point of view, Christ's mystery does not purely and simply subsume that of the Church within itself. Thus we must recognize that the Church possesses an eschatological character. The continuity between Jesus Christ and the Church is therefore not direct but "mediate". It is assured by the Holy Spirit, who, being the Spirit of Jesus, acts in order to bring about in the Church the Lordship of Jesus Christ, itself realized through obedience to the will of the Father.

III.2. *The Church as "Historic Subject"*

The Church's "mystery", as her creation by the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment and fullness of the mystery of Jesus Christ her Head, and so the revelation of the Trinity, is truly a historic subject. The Council's desire to underline this aspect of the Church comes through clearly in its recourse to the category of "people of God", on which we have already reported. In its Old Testament antecedents, that expression carries the exact connotation of a historic subject in relation to the Covenant with God. Furthermore, this characteristic is confirmed in the New Testament fullness of time. Taking her stand on Christ, by the Spirit, the "new" people of God broadens her horizons, giving them a universal bearing. It is precisely by reference to Jesus Christ and the Spirit that the new people of God is constituted in her identity as a historic subject.

The fundamental property of this people, a property that distinguishes her from all others, lies in a corporate life lived in remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ and so in commitment to mission. Certainly, this new people of God actualizes this fundamental property through the free and responsible choice of each of her members. Yet this is only possible because of the support provided by an institutional structure ordered to this end (the Word of God, the New Law, the Eucharist, and the other sacraments, charisms, and ministries). At every level, remembrance and expectation provide the people of God with her exact specificity, giving her a historic identity that of its nature preserves her in every situation from the perils of disintegration and loss of corporate selfhood. Remembrance and expectation cannot be severed from the mission for whose sake the people of God is permanently assembled. In fact, one can say that the mission derives essentially from the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ in the sense that the latter dispositions are the foundation of the former. For the people of God knows by faith, and from her remembrance and expectation of Jesus, what other peoples do not know and will never be able to know about the meaning of existence and human history. This knowledge, this Good News, the people of God must announce to all men by virtue of the mission laid upon her by Jesus himself (Mt 28:19). Should she fail, then despite human wisdom, that “wisdom of the Greeks” to which Paul refers, and notwithstanding scientific and technological progress, men will remain in slavery and darkness. Seen in this light, the mission that constitutes the historic goal of the people of God generates a kind of activity that no other human activity

can replace. This special activity is at one and the same time negatively critical and positively stimulating. It realizes that human life way through which the salvation of each man can be worked out. To underestimate the proper function of mission and so to reduce it to something less than itself can only aggravate the sum total of the problems and evils that this world has to suffer.

III.3. Fullness and Relativity of the Historic Subject

But approached from another angle, a stress on the people of God as historic subject and on that people's constitutive reference to the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ enables one to take in the relative and incomplete quality of the Church's life. "Remembrance" and "expectation" speak in the same breath of "identity" and "difference".

“Remembrance” and “expectation” express “identity” in the sense that the reference of the new people of God to Christ through the Spirit renders this people not a “different”, independent, and diverse reality but a reality filled with that “remembrance” and “expectation” that attach her to Jesus Christ. In this perspective, the purely relative character of the new people of God stands out strikingly: that people cannot become an autonomous body since she is totally dependent on Jesus Christ. It follows that the new people of God is not concerned with the validation of her own genius or with proposing or imposing such a genius on the world at large. Rather, the Church can do nothing more than proclaim and communicate in the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ, her own life-giving source: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20a). Correspondingly, if “remembrance” and “expectation” bestow the presence of an Other, and through that express a “relativity” in relation to that Other, then they also imply incompleteness. For this reason, the new people of God, whether in the case of her individual members or of the totality that those members compose, remains always “on the way” (*in via*), in a situation that here below will never be finished. The destination of God’s people is simply to make herself ever more faithful and obedient in her remembrance and expectation. Her true position is incompatible, therefore, with any kind of arrogance or feeling of superiority. Her situation vis-à-vis Christ must, on the contrary, arouse her to a humble effort of conversion. The new people of God does not ask of others more that she requires of herself. What she offers, indeed, is

not what belongs to her in her own right but what she has received from God irrespective of previous merit.

III.4. The New People of God in Her Historical Existence

It is from the Holy Spirit that the new people of God receives her “consistency” as a people. If one may refer to the words of the apostle Peter, that which “was no people” can only become a “people” (cf. 1 Pet 2:10) through him who unites her from above and from within so as to realize her union in God. The Holy Spirit brings the new people of God to life in the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ and gives her the task of proclaiming the Good News of this remembrance and expectation to all mankind. It is not a question in this remembrance, expectation, and mission of a reality that is imposed on top of or laid side by side with a preexisting existence and activity. In this respect, the members of the people of God do not form a particular group differentiated from other human groups at the level of their daily activities and occupations. The activity of Christians is no different from that by which all men, whoever they may be, “humanize” the world. For the members of God’s people as for everyone else, there are only the ordinary, common conditions of human living, which all are called to share in solidarity, though also in the diversity of their various callings.

And yet being members of the people of God *does* give Christians a special responsibility in regard to this world. “What the soul is in the body, let Christians be in the world!” (LG 38, cf *Letter to Diognetus* 6). Since the Holy Spirit is himself termed the Soul of the Church (LG 7), Christians receive in this selfsame Spirit the mission to realize in the world something as vital as that which the Spirit realizes in the Church. This is not a matter of an additional action over and above the preexisting technological, artistic, and social action of mankind but rather the confronting of human activity in all its forms with the Christian hope, or, to keep the preferred vocabulary of this document, with the demands of the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ. It is from “within” human projects that Christians, and especially the laity, are so called that “being led by the spirit of the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope, and charity, they must manifest Christ to others” (LG 31).

And so the new people of God is not marked by a mode of existence or mission that can substitute for what is already given in human existence and its many projects. Rather, the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ should serve to convert or transform from within that human mode of existing and acting already lived out in a given group of men. One might say here that the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ whence the new people of God draws her life constitutes the “formal” element (in the Scholastic sense of that term), giving structure to the concrete existence of human beings. That concrete existence may then be called the “matter” (once more, in the Scholastic sense): a material element that, while of course endowed with responsibility and freedom, can receive one of a variety of further determinations in order to fashion a way of life that is “according to the Holy Spirit”. Such ways of life enjoy no a priori existence. They cannot be determined in advance. They come in a rich diversity and cannot be foreseen even though they can all be referred to the constant action of a single Holy Spirit. But what these diverse ways of life have in common as a recurring constant in their makeup is that all express “in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, which, as it were, constitute their very existence” (cf. *LG* 31), the demands and the joy of the Gospel of Christ.