The Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ in the works of St Thomas

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A modern English author (1) writing about Catholic Art and Culture has called our times the winter of Christianity and of religion in general. Since the French Revolution, he says, mankind in general has rebelled against God: the intelligentsia have been increasingly hostile to Christianity and even to theism; the workers have not merely become indifferent but actively hostile while the peasants so tenacious in their conservatism are now letting irreligion or pseudo religion to take possession of them. As years have passed anti-christian secularism has advanced and rapidly conquered Western civilization: in brief one might say that Christianity no longer influences Mankind. But we can never admit this — God's revealed truth can never become obsolete for God has made man for Himself and man's heart is restless unless it rests in God. Our times may be the winter of Christianity but "If winter comes can spring be far behind?" — Then must be and there will certainly be a new and peaceful rebirth of spiritual religion — the signs are not wanting."

Formerly a powerful state was the sole defence of culture and religion against the anarchy of warring chiefs when the masses were incapable of individual conversion: in these circumstances the Church could not but support this so-called Catholic State and often for the greater good of Christendom turned a blind eye to acts of oppression committed by monarchs who were considered as the guardians of Christian civilization. But now these circumstances no longer exist — the Catholic State is an institution of the past, modern states are no genuine friends of Christianity at best while many are its avowed foes. Under these conditions the Church can only conquer rebellious humanity if its members hold its doctrines with a strong and intelligent conviction because they see Truth from within and because they live the life of God Himself "diffused in them by

the Holy Ghost dwelling within them” (2). In other words the future of the Church of Christ lies with the living members of His Mystical Body. On this point we have the pronouncements of the supreme Pontiff himself. In fact Pius XII in his encyclical “Mystici Corporis” insists that a certain cure for all the evils which afflict mankind is to be found in the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ: the sublime beauty of this doctrine if well meditated and appreciated will certainly move us to perform all that is needed “till we attain to the unity of faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, to the perfect man, to the full measure of the stature of Christ” (3).

We must not expect to find in the works of St. Thomas a detailed and ordered exposition of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ as we find for example in the encyclical “Mystici Corporis”. It is only in our times that this point of Christian Dogma is being exhaustively studied for the renewed liturgical movement, frequent Communion and the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus have induced many to meditate more deeply on the infinite treasure of Christ in His Church, while the teachings of the Holy See on Catholic Action by uniting more firmly the faithful with the hierarchy have certainly contributed to concentrate our attention on this subject. Nevertheless the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ has been revealed to us by the Redeemer Himself who prayed after the Last Supper “that all be one as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee: that they too may be in us in order that they may believe that Thou hast sent me” (4).

In His farewell discourse to the disciples he illustrated the corporate vital and fruitful union between Himself and His disciples by the figure of the Vine, which conveys the same idea as the doctrine of the Mystical Body — but while the former insists more on the individual life of the faithful, Saint Paul above all considers the social life of the Church which regulates and measures the growth of each of the faithful in Christ (5).

And so in the various works of Saint Thomas we can find

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(2) Rom. 5, 5.  
(3) Eph. 4, 12.  
(4) John 17, 21.  
various references to this doctrine, especially when the Angelic Doctor speaks of Christ as Head of the Church and when he comments those parts of the letters of Saint Paul which speak about the Mystical Body of Christ.

In the human body (6), says Saint Thomas, commenting the words of the Apostle "sicut in uno corpore" (7), we must consider first its unity, then the variety of its organs and lastly the diversity of their functions, which, nevertheless, all act for the benefit of the whole body. The same thing is to be said of the Mystical Body of Christ: the Church is one, yet all men are members and these members have various functions to perform "for the perfecting of the saints...... unto the building of the body of Christ" (8).

It is quite evident, from the various passages in St. Paul, that in the Mystical Body there is a continual and real action of Christ in all members and in each individual member, and a continual and real interaction between the various members, through the Communion of Saints, and the vital influence of the Holy Ghost. The Mystical Body of Christ truly lives a fullness of life and the various organs are not only an element of beauty but an essential condition of the life it lives. And the life which the various members live and the various functions they exercise in His Body are not due to the fact that its members are Christians — in this there is no difference between them — nor to the fact that they are men — for human nature has nothing to do in this case — but they are due to the various gifts which the Holy Ghost ministers "for the general profit" (9). To each of us these various gifts are given not on account of our different merits but according to the grace which has been given to us (10). These gifts either refer to the works of God Himself or to our life on earth. They lighten our minds so that we might have a deeper penetration of the mysteries of God and a faith capable of moving mountains. They also give us the knowledge of a speculative and practical way of life and lead us to perform corporal works of mercy for the benefit of our neighbour. The chief

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(7) Rom. 12, 4.
(8) Eph. 4, 12.
(9) 1 Cor. 12, 7.
(10) Prat, 1. c.
of these gifts is charity, which is given to all and which must come directly from the heart to be truly effective, and must not be vitiated by any secondary ends and must be perfectly disinterested and honest.

These gifts are "apportioned severally to each as the spirit wills" (11), and this variety and diversity tends to strengthen the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. In fact the variety and diversity of the organs of the human body give it its perfection: for as St. Thomas observes (12), the perfection of the body does not consist in one particular organ, the more noble, but even the less noble organs are necessary for the perfection of the whole body. And St. Thomas with other schoolmen tries to see the various organs of the human body exemplified in the various offices in the Church of Christ.

The organs which move our human body indicate those, in the Church of Christ, who are given to active life: the feet are the laity, those who are subject, while the hands indicate the clergy, the prelates. The eyes and ears exemplify those who are given to Contemplative Life. Sight is more noble than hearing: for it is more spiritual and has a wider object: the eyes therefore are the Doctors, those namely who see truth by themselves, while the ears are the disciples, those who receive truth from the lips of a master. All are necessary for the Church of Christ. What would happen if all were teachers, doctors? If all were of the same condition and degree of perfection? The beauty and perfection of the Mystical Body of Christ would be destroyed. All members of the body are necessary: those leading a contemplative life require the labour of those in active life — while Mary was at the feet of Jesus hearing his words, Martha had to be about and doing — prelates require subjects as "in the multitude of people lies the dignity of a king" (13).

Besides, the less honourable members are more necessary: even in the Church of Christ without the labour of peasants and such like persons this life cannot last; while it could still exist if such excellent members as those leading contemplative lives were lacking — for these are in the Church so that it might be more beautiful and better. A thing in fact is necessary if it is

(11) 1 Cor. 12, 11.
(13) Prov. 14, 28.
useful for the attainment of our end: those things which are most noble are not to be considered as useful means to an end, but are to be desired as an end in themselves.

Another point is the difference of regards which we give to the various organs of our body, and this difference is also to be noticed in the Mystical Body of Christ. Some organs are less noble either because they are weaker, or less honourable or less comely. In the Church we have those members who are less perfect and therefore require greater consolation and care; those who are in a servile condition, and those who are in sin and therefore must be admonished and guarded.

After this the Angelic Doctor concludes that as each organ of our body has a certain natural inclination to help the other organs, for example the hand instinctively defends other parts of the body from hurt, in like manner, the members of the Mystical Body of Christ are to show solicitude for all “rejoicing with them that rejoice, weeping with them that weep” (14), and bearing one another’s burdens to fulfil the law of Christ” (15).

All this shows the marvellous unity existing in the Mystical Body of Christ. Though various are the organs of the human body yet it is one, for these organs are together in mutual contact and joined by means of nerves and so mutually reacting and interacting. Now in the Church of Christ the faithful are united together “in the bond of peace” (16), by means of faith and the knowledge of divine things; but this alone is not enough: a further bond of union is necessary — the bond of charity and the participation in the sacraments.

This unity is not in any way hindered by a difference of rites or of social conditions. “In him is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free.......... for ye are all one person in Christ Jesus’ (17).

It is therefore a spiritual unity by means of which with faith and charitable love we are united to God. This unity derives from Christ Himself, who through His spirit, which He gives us, unites us to God. And the spirit lives in us for our

(14) Rom. 12, 15.
(15) Gal. 6, 2.
(16) Eph. 4, 3.
(17) Gal. 3, 28.
bodies are the temples of the Most High, who therefore dwells in us by means of that faith which works through charity. This charity diffused in us by the Holy Ghost is both the love of God for us and the love with which we love God (18). And from the presence of the Holy Ghost in us we derive a double benefit, for by Him we are regenerated and by Him we are refreshed and restored to life either internally by the extinction of the thirst for carnal desires and concupiscences or externally through the sacraments.

This unity must grow, must tend to its perfection in manifold development that is in good works and in truth and charity, for it is not enough to learn or teach truth but truth must also be done, and it must be done in charity for otherwise it is useless (19).

This development must continue by means of the continual perfection and sanctification of all believers and by the conversion of the infidels, until we “all attain to the unity of the faith and to the full knowledge of the Son of God” (20), when all the dead shall arise and “we the living, who survive, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall be ever with the Lord (21) for then we will attain the perfect vision and cognition of God for we will have attained “the perfect man, the full measure of the stature of Christ” (22).

And through Him, and by Him and in Him must this growth be accomplished for “He is the head of the body, the Church: it is He who is the beginning, the firstborn from death, that he among all may stand first for in Him it hath pleased the Father that all the fulness should dwell, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, alike the things on earth and the things in heaven making peace through the blood of his cross” (23).

Christ is therefore, as God-Man, head of the Church Mili­tant and of the Church triumphant. In fact St. Thomas (24).

(20) Eph. 4, 15.
(21) 1 Thess. 4, 17.
(22) Eph. 4, 13.
(23) Col. 1, 18-20.
discussing what relations exist between the head and the rest of the human body, states that the head differs from the other organs because of its dignity: it fully possesses all the senses; secondly because it governs and regulates all the actions of the other organs by means of the external and internal senses whose seat is in the head; and lastly because it influences the other organs by sense and motion. On the other hand the head and the rest of the body are parts of the same natural body, there is a certain orderly union between them and lastly the head is joined to the rest of the body. Now applying all this to the Mystical Body of Christ, St. Thomas says that because Christ as Man has the same nature as all other men, He is head of the Church on account of His dignity for in Him grace more fully abounded — in fact “in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead” (25).

Besides, in the Church we can observe a certain unity of order, for the various members have a common care for each other and all are ordained towards God and so Christ is head of his Mystical Body as it is He from whom the well being of the whole body depends, for “we many are one body in Christ and members each of the other” (26). Lastly we can notice a certain continuity in the Church through the influence of the Holy Ghost who fills and unites the whole Church, and because through Christ the Holy Ghost has been given to us, members of His Mystical Body, Christ is also Head of the Church for this reason.

Therefore Christ is head of all men (27), for the Church consists of all men from the beginning of the world to its end — some therefore are united in Christ in glory, others in grace, while others still are only in potency united to Him, some in potency which will later on be reduced to act (those predestined yet at the moment in mortal sin) and some in potency never to be reduced to act (these not predestined who after their span of life on earth will be totally separated from the Body of Christ for then they will never be not even in potency united to Him.

Christ is head of all men in the state of grace on earth not only because He is God made Man but also because all men are

(26) Rom. 12, 5.
(27) Summa III, 8, 3.
justified by faith in Him, "he is the beginning and among all stands first" (28).

Christ is the head of all men in the state of glory for our resurrection from death is a second birth by means of which we open our eyes to life eternal for he is the first born from the dead, from among those who are born in life everlasting through the resurrection.

This dignity is due to Him for (29) he has reconciled all things: God and man, Jews and Gentiles. Discord between God and man had been caused by sin; discord between Jew and Gentiles was caused by the Law. But Christ destroyed sin and implemented the Law and so removed all causes of discord, sanctifying us and destroying in us all the effects of our former state of bondage which kept us in ignorance, enemies of justice and in manifold sins.

Christ God-Man is also head of the Angels (30) both as regards his dignity and as regards his influence. For the Mystical Body of Christ has as its end eternal glory, to which both men and angels are ordained and Christ being nearer God than either men or angels more perfectly participates of the gifts of God and so He is truly head of all angels for God the Father had seated him "at his right hand in the heavenly places above every principality and power and virtue and domination" (31). His dignity is greater than that of the Angels for he has "become as much greater than the Angels, as the name which he hath inherited surpasseth theirs" (32), Christ again illuminates the Angels as the Pseudo Dionysius, according to the Angelic Doctor, proves from Isaias "Who is he that cometh from Edom....." (33). This illumination of the Angels, according to St. Thomas, was not intended in the Incarnation whose primary scope was the liberation of man from the bondage of sin, but it is a consequence of it.

This sublime dignity of Our Redeemer to whom we are so intimately united by being living members of His Mystical Body,

(28) Col. 1, 18.
(31) Eph. 1, 21.
(32) Hebr. 1, 4.
(33) Is. 63, 1.
must fill us with an ardent desire to study and understand this doctrine so that we may live it more fully. This is the wish of the Supreme Pontiff and this is already being done abroad. Catholic Action is associating the laity with the Apostolic work of the Church. Catholic workers are bringing their religion as a living faith to their co-workers hitherto so often the nursery of every anti-Christian movement. Beyond this a revival of the liturgy, of that corporate worship which expresses and fosters the solidarity of Catholics. What about our own country? It is up to us to see that all our countrymen are living members of the Church of Christ, holding the Revealed truths with a strong and intelligent conviction which no specious argumentations can ever break down, living the life of God diffused in them by this Holy Ghost, and offering their sacrifice together with the Priest at the altar to God the Father almighty. The Archbishop is showing us the way, the laity marshalled in the ranks of Catholic Action and its auxiliary societies are ready to answer our call — shall we then remain “all the day idle?” (34).