

BIBLICAL THEMES
IN THE CONSTITUTION
LUMEN GENTIUM

THE Second Vatican Council was convoked by Pope John to find ways and means for the pastoral needs of modern society in a state of an ever-going change in the social, cultural, economic, political and spiritual spheres. Such a programme presupposes a deep insight into the nature and mission of the Church such as we find in the Constitution *De Ecclesia; Lumen Gentium* which provides the basic theological principles for a healthy, efficient and effective pastoral action as envisaged by the Council Fathers.

The constitution is a serious attempt to enlarge upon and work out all the implications of the definition or description of the mystery of the Church as the sacrament or sign and instrument for the intimate union between God and men. It is divided into eight chapters; the first chapter deals with the *mystery of the Church* as the work of the Holy Trinity; the second with the *people of God*; the third with the *Hierarchy, especially the Bishops*; the fourth with *laymen*; the fifth with the *call for holiness*; the sixth with *Religious* and the seventh with the *eschatological character of the Church*; the eighth and final one with *Our Lady* in her relations with the mystery of Christ and the Church.

It is not the purpose of this paper to outline the history of this important document, useful as it may be for its correct understanding and assessment in its true historical perspective; we are rather concerned with the finished product and only under certain aspects, namely, in its relation to the Bible. Even a cursory reading would make one realise the deep influence of modern biblical research on the conception and formulation of this constitution: every other line one meets some biblical reminiscence, idiom, concept or whole quotations, direct or indirect. Also, here we are rather selective, that is, we propose to speak of four basic themes, namely, the *mystery of the Church*, the *people of God*, the *hierarchy or collegiality* of the Bishops, and finally the *eschatological nature of the Church*.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

The Church is called a mystery because it was hidden in the depths of the Deity from all eternity, and was made manifest in these last days through the prophets, Christ and his apostles: 'To me the least of all the saints, is given this grace, to preach among the gentiles, the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to enlighten all men, that they may see what is the *dispensation of the mystery* which hath been hidden from eternity in God who created all things' (Eph. 3,8.9). It is this mystery that the Council Fathers open before us, in so far as it is possible to fathom the mysteries of God, at its source in the three Persons of the Holy Trinity: namely the Father who elects, the Son who saves, and the Holy Spirit who sanctifies.

Redemption starts with an act of the will of the Father: it is he who decreed that all would be restored in his Son: 'Giving thanks to God the Father, who hath made us worthy to be partakers of the lot of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the remission of sins' (Col. 1,12-14). Add to this Rom. 8,29: For whom he foreknew, he also predestinated to be made conformable to the image of his son; that he might be the firstborn amongst many brethren.

This doctrine of election runs through the whole Bible, Old and New Testament, revealing itself not through theoretical exposition but through history: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Judges, Samuel, Prophets John the Baptist, Mary, the Apostles, the individual Christians, are all elected and called by God the Father to conform to the image of his Son.

This divine plan of salvation was executed by the Son, who became man and shed his own blood for men. Through him men become the adopted sons of the Father: 'Thus Christ, declares the Council, in order to fulfil the will of the Father, has inaugurated on earth the kingdom of heaven and revealed to us this *mystery* and through his obedience he worked out our redemption'. The Church, that is, the kingdom of Christ is a mystery, made visible in the world through the power of Christ. Each time the sacrifice of Christ is offered on our altars, the work of our redemption is renewed. All men are united thereby with Christ: 'For we, being many, are one bread, one body all that partake of one bread' (1 Cor. 10,17).

When the Son had completed his mission in this world in a 'visible manner' and was glorified by the Father in heaven, the Holy Spirit was

outpoured upon us all to sanctify the Church and move the believers in Christ from within: 'But I tell you the truth: it is expedient to you that I go: for if I go not, the paraclete will not come to you: but if I go I will send him to you', (Jh. 16,7). This Spirit dwells in the Church as if in a temple (cf. 1 Cor. 3,16; 6,19); He prays in and through them (cf. Gal. 4, 6; Rom. 8,15-16).

Thus the Church is a people, in the words of St. Cyprian, gathered into the union of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. This mystery of the Church is made manifest right up from its foundation through Christ's preaching, deeds and above all through his presence: the Son of God, who came into this world not to be served but to serve and give his life for the redemption of many (Cf. Mk. 10,45). After his death and, resurrection he appeared as the Lord, the Saviour and the Priest of the New people of God (Cf. Hebr. 5,6; 7,17-21).

Throughout the whole Bible one finds several different figures to illustrate one or more aspects of this mystery of the Church: it is the sheepfold of God (Jh. 10,1-10); the flock predicted by the prophets (Cf. Ez. 34, 11ff; Is. 40,11); Jesus is the good shepherd who gave his life for his sheep (cf. Jh. 10,11-15; 1 Pt. 5,4). It is the vineyard planted by God (1 Cor. 3,9; Mt. 21,33-43; Is. 5,1); Christ is the vine of which the Christians are the branches (Jh. 15,1-5). It is the building of God (1 Cor. 3,9); Christ is the corner stone, rejected by the builders, but chosen by the Father (Cf. Acts 4,11; 1 Pt. 2,7; Ps. 117,22); it is built on the foundation of the Apostles (cf. 1 Cor. 3,11). It is the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4, 26), and our heavenly mother (Apoc. 12,17). It is the immaculate bride of Christ (Eph. 5,25-26). Above all it is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12,27; Rom. 12,5).

Thus the Church is in a way a prolongation of the mystery of the Incarnation; Christ is carrying on his mission even now through her as his visible organ through which he radiates truth and grace on all mankind. This Church carries out her mission through humiliations as her Divine Founder (Phil. 2,6-7; 2 Cor. 8,9).

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The Church in chapter two is considered as a people in its relations to God. This is a thoroughly Scriptural concept, which has been steadily gaining ground in contemporary theology. The Pope himself in his allocution to the Non-Catholic Observers, Oct. 17, 1963 said: 'Your hope, that a theology will be developed that is both concrete and historical

and centred on Salvation history is one which we gladly support. We believe that this suggestion deserves to be studied in depth'. Modern theologians want to go beyond the strict juridical concept of the Church; they have discovered a dynamic historical concept based on the fundamental fact that God *calls* and man *responds*; and since the response of man is not static, but is subject to human free endeavour, with all its limitations and ups and downs, we see unfolding before us what is known as the salvation history of the people of God, until God's salvific plans are fully carried out. To call the Church the people of God is to link it with the Old Testament people of Israel and to transfer all that was positive and of permanent value to the New Israel of the New Testament.

There are five biblical texts each marking a progressive step in the execution of God's plan:

1. The Call of Abraham: 'And he (God) brought him (Abraham) forth abroad and said to him: look up to heaven and number the stars, if thou canst. And he said to him: so shall thy seed be. Abram believed God and it was reputed to him unto justice' (Gn. 15, 5-6).

2. The call of the whole people of Israel in the desert of Sinai: 'If you will hear my voice, and keep my covenant, you shall be my peculiar possession above all people... you shall be to me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Ex. 19, 4-6). The people accepted the pact of Sinai, which was ratified by the sprinkling of the blood of the victims offered to God by Moses, who sprinkled the people with their blood saying: 'This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words' (Ex. 24, 8).

3. Jeremiah 31, 31-34: 'Behold the days shall come, saith the Lord, and I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt: the covenant which they made void and I had dominion over them, saith the Lord. But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after these days, saith the Lord: I will give my law in their bowels, and I will write it in their heart: and I will be their God and they shall be my people'.

4. Our Lord, passing on the consecrated wine to the Apostles at the last Supper, said: 'This is the chalice, the new testament in my blood, which shall be shed for you' (Lk. 22, 20).

5. And finally St. Peter writes to the Christians in Asia Minor: 'But you are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a pur-

chased people: that you may declare his virtues, who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (Pt. 2,9-10).

The line of development is quite clear: Abraham is *elected*, and promised to be a father of a numerous posterity and to possess the land of Canaan; Israel is bound to God by the pact at Sinai, Moses being the mediator, membership is restricted to the descendants of Abraham; Jeremiah foretells a future covenant written not on stone tablets but in the hearts of the new people; Jesus then just a few hours before his supreme sacrifice, making an express allusion to the Old Alliance, declares the immediate institution of the New one; Peter then transfers all the titles, prerogatives and mission of the Old People to the New. This new community is open to all those who would believe in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This brings us to another important point, namely that henceforth membership is no more restricted to the descendants of Abraham in the flesh but to all who would make an act of faith in Christ; thus one returns to the basic reason for Israel's election; the faith of Abraham in the promises, that is the future Christ. It is not an automatic election, but depends on man's own response to God's call.

Peter's transference of prerogatives and titles of Israel to the Church of Christ shows us that what was positive in the old dispensation, shorn of its imperfections and limitations, is applicable to the New Christian Community '*quae iam ab origine mundi praefigurata, in historia populi Israel ac foedere antiquo mirabiliter praeparata, in novissimis temporibus constituta*' (De Ecclesia § 2). The Israel community was a 'model' to what was to follow; just as the model is to the sculptor or painter, so Israel was to God for the institution of the church. A consideration of one aspect of the Church makes this clear.

The people of Israel are called the people of God; their interrelations are illustrated by the relations between the bridegroom and the bride: but there is never an identification between Israel and God, just as there is when the Church is called the body of Christ, which implies something more than the bride of Christ. There was not a preparation for this concept, except for the idea of the Servant of the Lord, who at times is identified with the whole community of Israel (cf. Is. 42, 1; 44, 1-3; 49, 3) and the Son of Man in Dan 7, identified with the people of the saints (cf. Dan. 7, 13-27). Paul identifies the *semen* in Gen. 12, indicating the whole posterity of Abraham, with Christ (Gal. 3, 16. 26-29). The titles in Romans 1, 6-7: elected, beloved, saints, are the same ones applied to Christ by Paul in Galatians; 'Blessed be the God and Father of Our Jesus

Christ, who hath blessed us with spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and unspotted in his sight in charity, who hath predestined us with the adoption of children through Jesus Christ unto himself according to the purpose of his will' (1,3-5).

We are his sons because we are united with Christ. The same is implied in St. John's figure of the vine — a figure with its prototype in Isaiah's metaphor of the vineyard and Ezechiel's image of the temple (Ez. 40-48) whence the living water flows to enliven the whole land of the new people of God.

This dignity is due to a purely gratuitous election by God: 'Not because you surpass all nations in number, is the Lord joined unto you, and hath chosen you, for you are the fewest of any people, but because the Lord hath loved you, and hath kept his oath, which he swore to your fathers: and hath brought you out with a strong hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, out of the hand of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt (Dt. 7,7-8). This doctrine of election runs through the biblical history as the woof and the web of the whole cloth on which salvation history is embroidered. And what is said in this respect about the community as a whole is applicable to all the individuals who had some effective contribution to make in the evolution of this history: Abraham, Moses, the prophets, John the Baptist, the Apostles. (Cf. Ex. 6,2-8; Dt. 7, 7; Jos. 24,3; Gal. 3,15-18; Gen. 15,6; Rom. 4). Faith was the only condition required in these men of God.

This predilection brings with it a number of important responsibilities: this people is the firstborn of God (Ex. 4,22), hence they must obey the orders of the Father; as consecrated people, they must be separated from other people (Cf. Act 10,28); as a priestly people, they must serve God by the observance of the Law, through which they are constituted a kingly people (Ex. 19,5; 24,4-8; Dt. 4,1-40; Jos. 24,2-28. All in all, their life is summed up in the service of God, animated by a deep faith in his all embracing love and power.

This means that the people of Israel, notwithstanding its connexions with a definite race and a definite place, yet remain a religious people, because their very existence depends on a free act of election on the part of God; in fact Ismael and Esau, both descendants of Abraham, himself freely elected by God, were excluded from this people. God is the chief mover in this history, moving the people towards higher perfection; their history becomes a symbol pointing towards a higher real-

ity that was to come; their history is educative and prophetic; Law, cult public institutions, and everything else point towards more perfect institutions in the future dispensation. For this reason did the Apostles and the first Christians consider themselves as the true heirs of the promises of the Old Testament; they were one with their forefathers; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, were their fathers. They were convinced that in Christ Israel reached its culminating heights. He was the end of the Old Economy and the beginning of the New, both eras and both Churches were united into one single whole through the basic act of God, that is, divine election and the response of the people to this divine initiative. Only those who believe can share the blessings of this divine plan of salvation.

COLLEGIALITY

This people however is not an amorphous mass of individuals bound together by a common faith and mutual love; they are organised into a visible institution in which there are various grades and diverse offices as Israel of Old was before Christ. The basic structure is the episcopacy under the headship of the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter, himself chosen by Christ to be the head of the Apostolic college. The problem arises as to the definition of the relations between the Pope and the Bishops his brethren. Vatican Council I defined the primacy and the infallibility of the Pope; Vatican II had to complete this definition by defining the position of the Bishops in relation to him. Hence the theory of the Collegiality of the Bishops in union with the Supreme Pontiff, formulated in these words: The bishops successors of the Apostles, together with the successor of St Peter, Vicar of Christ, and visible head of the whole Church, rule the house of the living God. In the same way as one finds the 70 elders with Moses in the Old Testament, so the 12 Apostles with Peter are in the New.

The question arises: did the Apostles really act together as a body in the apostolic period? This fundamental point was the storm centre during the hectic days of the great debate. Let us have a look at a selection of texts in the Acts and in the Epistles of Paul.

The first collegial act is the election of St. Matthias to replace Judas who betrayed the Master, as reported in Acts 1,15-26. They show themselves deeply concerned with retaining the original number of twelve, chosen by Jesus himself on the model of the twelve tribes of Israel (Mk. 3,13-14; Lk. 6, 12-13; Jh. 6,71). The election is presented as a divine election, but the initiative is taken by the apostles together.

After Pentecost Peter is consistently presented acting as the head of *the twelve*, who are shown to act together no less than twenty times, as the ruling body of the whole church. These examples bear us out:

a) Peter is the spokesman of the twelve in the Gospels (Mt. 16,13-17; Jh. 6,67; Acts 1,15-22; 2,14-36; 4,8-12.19; 15,7-11).

b) The election of the seven deacons is attributed to the *twelve apostles*, the name of Peter is absent: 'Then the twelve calling together the multitude of the disciples said: It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. (Acts 6,2).

c) The Council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, 6-29 and Galatians 2,2-10, in spite of a number of obscure and debatable points, definitely shows that the vital problem of the conditions for the admission of pagans into the Church was thoroughly discussed, studied and decided upon by the whole Church under the direction of the Twelve Apostles under the guidance of Peter.

d) St. Paul is ever anxious, in spite of his independent character and spirit of initiative, to have his Gospel approved by the twelve in Jerusalem (Gal. 2,7-10; 1 Cor. 15, 1-11).

This evidence, necessarily selective in this context, points unmistakably to the fact that in the primitive Church one finds the supreme authority of Peter as the head of the Apostolic College; the action of the Twelve as a controlling body of the Church; also the action of the individual persons entrusted with specific missions for the guidance and rule of particular churches as in the case of St. Paul. Thus one finds a balance between the primacy of Peter and the collective authority of the twelve, and add to this, individual initiative in particular churches is in no way crowded out.

ESCHATOLOGY

Another biblical theme in this decree is the doctrine of the eschatological nature of the Church, namely that this Christian community is steadily moving forward towards the final restoration of all things in Christ; it is not a static organisation anxious to retain the status quo within itself or a given social order, be it spiritual or temporal. It is rather a dynamic body moving towards its final perfection until it finds final consummation in the restoration of all things in Christ (Cf. Eph. 1, 10; Col. 1, 16-20; 2 Pt. 3,10-13).

This process has been already in action as from the glorification of Christ through the Resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on

the whole Church on the first Pentecost. St. Paul takes the figure of the mother in travail to illustrate this truth: 'For we know that every creature groaneth and travaileth in pain, even till now. And not only it, but ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit even we ourselves groan within ourselves waiting for the adoption of the sons of God, the redemption of our bodies. For we are saved by hope'. (Rom. 8,21-24).

We are the adoptive sons of God, and not yet sharing in the glory of the Son; in the meantime we are struggling to free ourselves from the serfdom of sin and its consequences especially death. We are working out our salvation, with the help of the spirit of Christ dwelling in us waiting for the blessed hope and glorious manifestation of our God and saviour Jesus Christ (cf. Titus 2, 13).

Thus the whole Church in the various stadia of this upward progress – the Church militant in this world, the Church in a state of purification in purgatory and the glorious church in heaven – is one church, one body of Christ living of one spirit. They are all members of one another, able to help one another until all are living in the future city that is awaiting us all (cf. Heb. 13,14; 11,10).

This doctrine or concept of a forward-looking moving Church has its roots in the Old Testament messianism preached so insistently and uncompromisingly by the prophets; they did not look backwards except to find inspiration and encouragement to work hard and keep on the main track for the final restoration of all things in the person of the future Messiah: the day of the Lord, of which the Incarnation is the beginning; we are already in the 'last days'.

Thus in the Constitution *De Ecclesia* one finds four main biblical themes: the initiative of God for the Salvation of mankind: the call from the Father, the revelation and the execution of the salvific plan by the Son and the sanctification of mankind by the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the souls of men. The Church is the visible sign for the constant reminding of men of this basic mystery once hidden in the infinite depth of God and an instrument for the salvation of men, until all are gathered and glorified in heaven in union with the Son. This Church is the new people of God, of which all believers and baptised in Christ, are members, sharing in the same dignity and having the same responsibilities before any distinction amongst them arising out of status or office. This people however is an organised body governed and guided by the Episcopal body or college in union with the Pope, the successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ; he is the visible head of the Church. This

whole body of Christ is steadily advancing towards perfection and reserved for all true believers in Christ, by whom they will be glorified with that same glory of his Resurrection.

The practical consequences of these principles or truths are far reaching. We just point them out:

a) The Church is placed in the concrete historical reality of the whole human race; it has a definite part to play in the history of men. It becomes the servant of men helping them to reach their final goal, in sanctifying the whole human endeavour in all spheres of life here on earth; hence the permanent need for reform, or to use a more traditional term, for striving for the restoration of man.

b) as the Church is formed of men who responded generously to the call of God, these men sanctify themselves and are moved by their indwelling spiritual gifts – charisms – for the good of others; the basis for catholic lay action whereby the Church sanctifies the world.

c) the concept of the people of God organised under and ruled by the bishops under and in union with the Pope makes it possible to affirm both the equality of the faithful in Christian dignity and the organic or functional inequality of its members, much as the Old Israel was structured in the three orders of kings, priests and prophets. It is the people of God built in this way, which continues the mission and represents in the world the sign of salvation that God established in Christ: *in Christo et in ecclesia*;

d) the local churches gathered around their bishop gain in importance and strengthen their personality as centres for the radiation of Christian truth and life throughout the world:

e) this concept of the people of God helps to encounter our brethren in Christ outside our Catholic communion, the Protestants and the Orthodox especially.

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