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THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH: SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ECCLESIOLOGY¹

It is a commonplace, and to a large extent deserved criticism of much of Catholic ecclesiology, that it has concentrated too much on the Church's institutional structure, and has paid too little attention to its inner, spiritual life. Another way of expressing this criticism (frequently heard from our Orthodox brethren) is that Catholic ecclesiology is too exclusively Christocentric, not sufficiently pneumatological. The typical Catholic treatise on the Church spends most of its time on such questions as the institution of the Church by Christ, his choice and commissioning of the Apostles, the special mission given to Peter, the succession in the episcopacy and the primacy, etc. The Church is presented as the 'Church of Christ', the 'Church of the Incarnate Word', the 'Mystical Body of Christ', perhaps even in some sense the 'continuation' or 'prolongation' of Christ on earth. But the place and role of the Holy Spirit has generally remained somewhat obscure. At best one will find a section in the treatment of the doctrine of the Mystical Body where the Holy Spirit will be called the 'Soul' of this body. But one would have to admit that in the typical Catholic treatise it has not been evident that the existence of the Church is the result of the sending of *two* Divine Persons: *both* the incarnation of the Son *and* the sending of the Holy Spirit. It has not been clear that the coming of the Holy Spirit is constitutive of the Church: that it is precisely the Holy Spirit that makes the human community of the faithful *become* the Body of Christ and the universal sacrament of salvation for mankind.

To tell the truth, all of this was not very evident in the first, preliminary draft of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the

¹Text of lecture given at the Accademia in honour of St. Thomas, April 21, 1971.

Church, either. But some very real progress was made, between the first draft and the final text, towards a more adequate recognition of the pneumatological aspect of ecclesiology. In the Constitution *Lumen Gentium* as it was finally approved we find some very significant statements that make it clear how essential the sending of the Holy Spirit is to the very existence of the Church.

While there are many other passages that deserve comment, I would like to mention just two statements in *Lumen Gentium* that will bear out what I have been saying.

In Chapter I, n. 7, we read: 'In the human nature which He united to Himself, the Son of God redeemed man and transformed him into a new creation by overcoming death through His own death and resurrection. By communicating His Spirit to His brothers, called together from all peoples, Christ made them mystically into His own body.' Note that the gathered disciples, Christ's 'brothers', become 'the body of Christ' only when Christ communicates His Spirit to them. The sending of the Holy Spirit is clearly constitutive of the Church as body of Christ.

Similarly, in Chapter 7, n. 48, we read: 'Christ, having been lifted up from the earth, is drawing all men to Himself. Rising from the dead, He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples, and through this Spirit has established His body, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation.' What was before merely a group of disciples, becomes the Church, the efficacious sign of salvation for mankind, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, given by the glorious Lord.

In these two texts we see the decisive importance attributed to the coming of the Holy Spirit for the very existence of the Church as 'body of Christ' and 'sacrament of salvation for the world'. The Constitution by no means ignores the work of Christ in choosing, preparing and sending His Apostles. But all of this is preparatory to the crowning act of the risen Christ who, now Himself become a 'life-giving Spirit' (1 Cor 15, 45) sends His own Spirit upon his disciples. One cannot help thinking of the analogy with the Genesis account of the creation of man: 'Yahweh God fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into his nostrils a breath of life, and thus man became a living being.' (Gen 2, 7). Perhaps St. John had this parallel in mind when he described the act of the risen Christ giving the Holy Spirit to His disciples on Easter Sunday: 'He said to them: Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. After saying this he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit' (Jo 20, 21-22). In any case, we see in *Acts II* the extraordinary transformation which the coming of the

Holy Spirit at Pentecost worked on the group of the one hundred and twenty disciples. It would perhaps not be too far-fetched to see a parallel here to the vision of Ezechiel: of the field of dry bones which became a living army at hearing the word of the Lord (Ezech 37, 1-10).

It is not surprising that the Fathers of the Church, seeking to express the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church, described the Spirit as the 'soul of the body of Christ'. When, following the lead of St. Augustine, we speak of the Holy Spirit as the 'soul of the Church', we have to keep in mind that this is an analogy; hence we must be careful to note the differences as well as the elements of likeness. The role of the Holy Spirit in the Church is like that of the soul in a living body, because the Spirit really is the inner principle of life, unity and vital activity of the body which is the Church. But the Spirit does not enter into a physical union with the Church, to form with it one composite being, as our soul does with our body. Nor is the life-giving activity of the Spirit circumscribed by the visible limits of the Church, as our soul is limited in many of its vital activities by our body. I shall return to this point later on.

For the moment I wish to speak of another analogy by which the Second Vatican Council has tried to express the mysterious relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Church. In *Lumen Gentium* the Council proposes the Incarnate Word Himself as offering such an analogy: that is, the union of the sacred humanity of Christ with the Divine Word is similar to the union of the human community of the Church with the Holy Spirit. 'The Church is one complex reality, comprising both a human and a divine element. For this reason, by an excellent analogy, this reality can be compared to the mystery of the Incarnate Word. Just as the assumed nature inseparably united to the divine Word serves Him as a living instrument of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the social organism of the Church serve Christ's Spirit, who vivifies it, for the building up of His body' (Chapter 1, n. 8).

Here again, of course, we are dealing with an analogy, and must stop to note the differences. The mission of the Divine Word is to an individual human nature, which He assumes into hypostatic union with Himself; hence there is only one person, one subject of attribution of all that the God-Man does. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to a community of persons, who do not lose their own personhood by their union with him. Hence the union of the Church with the Holy Spirit is not a hypostatic union; the Spirit does not 'become the Church' as the Word 'became man'.⁶

Still, keeping in mind these differences, there remains a rich theological content to this analogy between Christ (union of human nature and Divine Word) and the Church (union of human community and Holy Spirit). It suggests that the sending of the Holy Spirit, the mission of the Third Person of the Trinity, is just as essential to the constitution of the Church as the sending of the Divine Son, the mission of the Second Person, was to the constitution of the God-Man. As the assumed humanity is inseparably united to the Word, so the human community of the Church is inseparably united to the Holy Spirit. As the sacred humanity of Christ is the instrument of the Divine Word in his work of our redemption, so the Church is the instrument of the Holy Spirit in communicating the fruits of the redemption to mankind.

Previous documents of the magisterium had invoked the analogy between the Church and the Incarnate Word, to bring out the union of human and divine elements in the Church. But it is extremely significant, I think, that heretofore no statement of the magisterium had presented this analogy as *Lumen Gentium* does: that is, by comparing the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church to the role of the Divine Word in the God-Man. This surely marks a breakthrough in the direction of a more thoroughly pneumatological ecclesiology: one that recognizes the decisive importance of the sending of the Holy Spirit for the very constitution of the Church as Body of Christ and universal sacrament of salvation.

There are many implications of this new development for our ecclesiology. Given the impossibility of considering all of them in one lecture, I shall choose one which I think particularly interesting and important today: it is this. The recognition of the decisive role of the Holy Spirit in the very constitution of the Church means also giving full value to the 'charismatic' element in the Church's structure and life.

Giving full value to the 'charismatic' in the Church is a consequence of recognizing that the Holy Spirit, while the pre-eminent gift of the Risen Christ to His Church, never becomes the possession of the Church; never becomes a kind of power over which the Church has control; never is a kind of tool which the Church can manipulate at its will. No, the Holy Spirit is a Divine Person, with all the absolute and sovereign freedom of God with regard to his creatures. He is, as we confess in the Creed: 'the Lord and Giver of life.'

This sovereign freedom, this Lordship, of the Holy Spirit means that while He is faithful to the covenant with the Church into which He has

freely entered, and hence works his divine effects through and with the appointed ministers of the Church and her sacraments — still He is not bound or limited to these official, hierarchical channels in his direction of the life of the Church. As Vatican II teaches us in *Lumen Gentium*: 'It is not only through the sacraments and Church ministries that the same Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the People of God and enriches it with virtues. Allotting His gifts "to everyone according as he will", He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks or offices advantageous for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit." These charismatic gifts, whether they be the most outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation, for they are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church.' (Chapter 2, n. 12).

I would like to point out just a couple of things in this text. The first is: the Council uses the present tense: the Holy Spirit *distributes* His gifts, He *makes* people fit and ready, his gifts *are* to be received with thanksgiving. In other words, the charismatic is not just a phase in the early history of the Church, a curious relic of antiquity, that disappeared when the hierarchical structure got well enough established to take things completely in hand. No, the Church, always, in every age, has a charismatic as well as a hierarchical structure, because the Holy Spirit is always sovereignly free. He can never be tied down with red tape or forced to follow official channels. St. Paul insists on this freedom of the Spirit: after enumerating various gifts of the Spirit, he concludes: 'All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually *as he wills*.' (I Cor 12, 11).

The second point I would like to make is that when the Council speaks of charismatic gifts it does not mean just the extraordinary phenomena that we meet sometimes in the lives of the saints. No, it speaks also of charisms that are 'ordinary, simple, rather widely diffused'. And it states that such gifts are to be found among the faithful of every rank. The Holy Spirit is Lord of his gifts; he is free to give them to whomever he chooses.

My third point is that the hierarchical ministry itself, to be truly effective, depends not only on the sacramental grace of orders, but on the charismatic grace of vocation to the service of God's people. History tells us only too clearly what a sorry state the Church has gotten

into when many men were ordained priests and consecrated bishops who did not have the interior, charismatic gift of a genuine vocation to serve the Church in this state. What we call a 'vocation', to the priesthood or the religious life, is I think a good example of a genuine charisma in the original Pauline sense. But such vocations to priesthood or religious life are not the only examples of truly charismatic gifts. The Holy Spirit is at work everywhere in the Church, stirring up men and women to all kinds of works of charity, of service, giving to each the grace that equips him or her for the work the Spirit wants to be done. All of this is an essential part of the Church's life, and an abiding proof that the Holy Spirit is at work in Her, exercising his sovereign freedom to give his gifts to whom he chooses.

This same freedom of the Spirit means also that He is not circumscribed by the visible limits of the Church in his distribution of grace to mankind. The Risen Christ is Lord of the whole cosmos; his gracious reign extends over the whole of mankind, and wherever the grace of Christ is operative, there also His Spirit is at work. This is particularly true, of course, of the effective presence of the Holy Spirit in the Churches and ecclesial communities of our separated Christian brethren. Vatican II in its *Decree on Ecumenism* teaches that the Holy Spirit is not only present in individual Christians, but He makes use of their Churches and communities as means of grace and salvation for their members. (Chapter 1, n. 3). The Spirit likewise gives his charismatic gifts to members of these Churches, giving to some even the grace of martyrdom (*Lumen Gentium* n. 15). We can no longer think of the presence of charismatic gifts as a 'mark of the one true Church', which the exigencies of apologetics would require us to deny to other churches. Indeed, there is no reason to deny that the Holy Spirit grants charismatic gifts to non-Christians as well, since He is present wherever the grace of Christ is given. But this question would require separate treatment, and we shall not develop it here. What I would like to discuss, as the third and final point of this lecture, is this question: which has perhaps already occurred to many of you:

Would not this emphasis on the pneumatological aspect of the Church, and especially this emphasis on the freedom of the Spirit and hence on the charismatic element in the Church, involve some danger of bypassing or rejecting the 'institutional Church' in favor of a purely spiritual, charismatic fellowship? Or, to put the question another way, isn't there a danger here of going from a one-sidedly Christocentric ecclesiology to an equally one-sided pneumatocentric one?

It seems to me that the solution to this question lies in recognizing and then applying all that is contained in the truth that the Holy Spirit, as given to the Church and guiding its life, is the Spirit of Christ. This term, in fact, occurs with great frequency in the documents of Vatican II, where it speaks of the Holy Spirit. You may have noticed that it appears in pronomial form in the two passages we quoted earlier: 'By communicating *His Spirit* to his brethren, Christ made them mystically into His own body' (LG 7), and 'Christ, rising from the dead, sent *His life-giving Spirit* upon his disciples, and through this Spirit established His body the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. (LG 48). Examples could easily be multiplied. What does this mean? And why is it important?

First of all, there is no question but that when these texts speak of the 'Spirit of Christ', or 'His Spirit', they refer to the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. But they refer to the Holy Spirit precisely as the gift of the Risen Christ to his Church. What are the grounds for calling the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ? There are two reasons for this. The first is that Christ, the 'Anointed', at the very first moment of his human existence, received in his soul the very fulness of the Holy Spirit. And secondly, by the paschal mystery of his death, resurrection and glorification, Christ received the power to communicate this fulness of the Holy Spirit to his brethren. As St. Peter told his hearers on the first Pentecost, 'This Jesus God raised up: being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear' (Acts 2, 33). It is the risen, glorious Christ who now shares with his disciples the fruit of his victory; and the crowning fruit, the gift which contains all other gifts, is none other than the Holy Spirit. But it is Christ's own Spirit, it is of his fulness that we have all received. (Jo 1, 16).

In his discourse at the Last Supper, Christ told his disciples about this new Paraclete whom he was going to send them from the Father. He told them that it was expedient for them that he himself should leave them, because if he didn't leave them, this 'other Paraclete' could not come to them. He told them, too, what the role of the Paraclete would be: 'He will take of what is mine and declare it to you', 'He will call to your mind all that I have taught you'.² In other words,

²Cf. Jo 16, 7-14; 14, 26.

the coming Paraclete is not going to inaugurate a new economy of salvation, different from the work of Christ, No, rather, it is evident that His role will be completely homogeneous with the work of Christ; he will come to give life to the structure that Christ has established, to bring to fruition the seed that Christ has planted.

From all this it is evident that there can be no question of having to choose between a Church of Christ and a Church of the Holy Spirit: between an institutional Church and a charismatic Church, between a Christocentric ecclesiology and a pneumatocentric ecclesiology. If the Holy Spirit is indeed the gift of the risen Christ to his Church, if He is indeed Christ's own Spirit, then it can only redound to the glory of Christ if, in our ecclesiology and in our life in the Church we give to the Holy Spirit, and to his free, charismatic interventions, the attention which they rightly deserve, but have so often failed to receive.

At the same time it is equally true that no movement or tendency in the Church can be truly inspired by the Holy Spirit or be genuinely charismatic if it does not lead to greater devotion to Christ and contribute to the upbuilding of his body which is the Church. The Holy Spirit does inspire legitimate criticism of what is amiss in the Church, because such criticism is often needed to spur the Church to undertake reform. But we can be sure that it will never be the Holy Spirit that will lead anyone to abandon the 'institutional Church' and go seeking for a purely spiritual fellowship. The institutional Church will always be Christ's Church, and hence will always be the temple where Christ's spirit dwells. Not, to be sure, as a possession over which the Church can claim or exercise control. But as the 'Lord and giver of life', for whose grace and inspiration the Church must constantly pray, and whose direction the Church must constantly seek more closely to follow.

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