

THE CHURCH AS THE SACRAMENT OF SALVATION

'By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achieving of such union and unity' (LG, n. 1).

With these words the Second Vatican Council, which was convened by Pope John for the purpose of making the Church reflect on herself and acquire a new awareness of herself as a mystery of salvation, gives us a definition of the Church that is both existential and dynamic. Up to Vatican II most of the Church's teachings about herself were mostly conditioned by a static legalistic attitude and inspired by a certain preoccupation, not altogether unwarranted perhaps, to protect both revealed truth and age-old institutions within her from dangerous doctrines and the impact of relativism. Now, however, that the Church has caught the signs of the times and has realized more than ever that she is made up of men and for men, Vatican II describes the Church of Christ in terms of the sacramental principle, which is basic in the present economy of salvation.¹

The Church, the Council tells us, is the primordial sacrament of salvation.² In this paper we shall first consider the relationship between the Church and Salvation, secondly we shall look at the Church as a sign of salvation, and finally we shall see in what way is the Church an efficacious sign or instrument of salvation.

1. SALVATION AND THE CHURCH

If Christ has founded a Church, it was for the sake of our salvation, that is, in order to give us the possibility of attaining that union with God which was envisaged for all mankind and was to flourish forth in the beatific vision. This salvation, formally consisting in the fulfilment of man's spiritual faculties of intellect and will and to be realized by the help of God's supernatural grace, was then to be achieved through the Church, which is the new People of God.

(a) Such a thing could only have been possible by the application of

¹O. Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* (Frankfurt a.M., 1953).

²*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1.

the *incarnational principle* and its concrete realization in the history of salvation. Just as the one mediator between God and men was the Son of God made Man, so also the medium for the continuation of Christ's salvific effect could only be an instrument in which the spiritual and the material, the divine and the human would be fused into one reality. In saving us through Jesus Christ, God the Saviour has made use of the created humanity of Christ; and this humanity of Jesus, without ceasing to be material as well as spiritual, has produced a supernatural effect in all of us. Using matter to produce an effect on the level of spirit, using something natural for the sake of something supernatural: this is the sacramental principle at work, which was verified to begin with in the Incarnation of the Son of God.³

(b) Thus the Church, which was to continue Christ's salvific mission on earth, will be the *prolongation* of Christ to the extent that she will realize and give life to this incarnational principle within herself, in her own living reality. And this the Church does in history during this last phase of the history of salvation. The Church is material in so far as she is made up of men, and in that sense she is also human; but the Church is also divine, because of her divine institution, her supernatural finality, the grace that gives divine life to her members, and most of all because of the Spirit of Christ who lives in her and makes her live. Because of her twofold nature, the Church can continue in history the very same work of Christ and perform Christ's threefold function as priest, prophet and king. All of which is at length and clearly illustrated by *Lumen Gentium*, which proclaims the Church of Christ as a fellowship of love (*koinonia*), a living witness of truth (*martyria*) and a ministry of service (*diakonia*). By fulfilling this threefold mission on earth, the Church manifests and brings about God's salvation.⁴

(c) From this it is already clear why the Church is *necessary* for salvation. Christ and the Church are one. Without Christ there can be no salvation, because Christ is God with us, the Emmanuel, and salvation is union with God in a supernatural way. What is more, in the present historical context salvation implies redemption from sin, because man is born in a sinful world, he is saved from a sinful world, he is

³ E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 11-13.

truly sinful himself. The Church, then, is necessary for salvation, because the grace of Christ is only in the Church: not indeed in the Church considered as a juridical institution, but in her in so far as she is the prolongation of Christ and the channel of divine life here on earth. God saves only through the Church in the present order of salvation, and without the Church there is no salvation. If anyone is saved, it is through and by the Church that he is saved. *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. The relationship between the Church and salvation is transcendental: it is a dimension of the Church, in such a way that, were she not equipped to save (and she alone with the exclusion of everything else besides Christ), she would be utterly unintelligible as a historical reality.⁵

2. SIGN OF SALVATION

The manifestation of God's salvific plan and its realization in history are two distinct concepts, but not two distinct realities. This same plan, existing in God's mind from all eternity, was revealed to man gradually, reaching its climax in the Incarnation of the Son of God and in his Death and Resurrection.⁶ In the process of this manifestation of God's plan we also have its gradual realization in history and in the person of each individual who freely associates himself in this plan.

(a) Thus the Church, while carrying out the work of salvation, manifests it to mankind at the same time. She is a *sign* of salvation. And she can be a sign in so far as she is *visible* to men. In pre-Vatican II ecclesiology the visible aspect of the Church, without which she cannot ever be a sign, was studied in connection with its institutional aspect as a society. As a juridical society, endowed with a complex juridical structure and therefore liable to institutional intricacies and political implications, the Church did not fail to signify her presence in the world of men. There were times, however, when in doing so she

⁵*Lumen Gentium*, n. 14, Cfr. e.g. L. Caperan, *Le problème du salut des infidèles*, 2 vols (Toulouse: Grand Séminaire, 1934); R. Lombardi, *La salvezza di chi non ha fede* (Rome: Civ. Catt., 1949); M. Eminyán, S.J., *The Theology of Salvation* (Boston: St. Paul's Edit., 1960); M. Eminyán, S.J., 'Necessity of the Church for Salvation', *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1967), vol. 12, pp. 995-997; H. Nys, *Le salut l'Évangile* (Paris: Cerf, 1966).

⁶*Dei Verbum*, n. 2.

belied her own very nature and the purpose of her existence: too much of the legal aspect at the expense of the charismatic aspect, too much centralization at the expense of freedom and private initiative of both the clergy and the laity.⁷ That is why the Second Vatican Council thought it fit to give us a new image of the Church in order to bring out its visible and 'sign' aspect. The Church, then, comes out of the Council as the new People of God, the fellowship of Christ's followers, the community of salvation.

(b) The Church is not only a sign of God's salvific will in regard to mankind, but she is the *concrete expression* of it. Being the prolongation of Christ and God's people gathered and kept united by the Holy Spirit, the Church is the permanent sign of a salvation that has already taken place, of a union with God that has already reached its climax and its fulfilment in the Incarnation. In the Church, too, is continually offered and re-enacted the redemptive sacrifice of Christ in the eucharistic celebration. Redemption *has* taken place in the history of mankind, and the graces that man needs for his own individual and eschatological salvation *have* already been acquired.⁸ All that man needs to do is to be inserted into this flow of salvation through faith and baptism and to remain united to Christ and the community of the faithful in authentic love.

(c) The Church is a sign of salvation in everything within her that tells of *God's presence* and interest in her. This may strike a strange note of triumphalism, which is far from popular today. But the Council, which has spoken in today's language, has not failed to tell us something about the Church as a mystery, about her specious claims to teach and proclaim the Gospel to all mankind, about the *beneficial effects* of her presence in the world throughout the ages. All this means that God is with the Church, and in this sense the Church is also a sign of salvation.

⁷Cfr. R.A. Mackenzie, 'The function of scholars in forming the judgment of the Church', *Theology for Renewal*, vol.2 Montreal: Palm Publ., 1968), pp. 118ff.

⁸K. Rahner, 'Membership of the Church according to the Teaching of Pius XII's encyclical "Mystici Corporis"', *Theological Investigations*, vol.2 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 1-88; K. Reisenhuber, 'Der anonyme Christ nach Karl Rahner', *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 86 (1964) 286-303, summarized in *Theology Digest* 13 (1965) 163-171.

3. EFFICACIOUS SIGN OF SALVATION

Here at last we come to the full mechanical meaning of sacrament: as an external reality that signifies and produces an internal supernatural effect. God, of course, could have instituted the Church or some other reality as a mere sign, as an institution that would keep God's message alive and make it relevant throughout the ages. But God has done more than that: He has made the Church a salvific and life-giving reality.

(a) Salvation is in fact already *realized here on earth* through the Church and in the Church. We have here the social aspect of salvation, which is an essential aspect of it as we learn about it in the Bible and especially in the Old Testament.⁹ Being in the Church, or at least belonging to the Church through participation in the salvific means that are dispensed by her, means being in Christ; it means having made a fundamental option for God and opened one's heart for the grace of Christ. One is saved by the Church and in the Church. Salvation, rather than an event, is a process; we can also say that it is a reality attained through a series of stages. All of these stages are reached by the ministration of the Church.

(b) And to do this, Christ the founder of the Church has equipped her with seven rites which, in their turn, are in the true sense *sacraments*: efficacious signs of grace. At baptism the first encounter of the individual with Christ takes place: the neophyte meets the Church, is admitted into the Church, and in the Church He meets Christ. In a similar way, as the Christian progresses through life, the other six sacraments provide him with opportunities of meeting Christ in the Church. These seven sacraments were given by Christ to the Church, and through them the Church activates her salvific function and realizes herself ever more fully as she brings the Christian closer to Christ and renders salvation more all-embracing and significant in his life. Talking in more Scholastic terms, one might mention here the theory of the 'res et sacramentum' as a symbolic reality; a number of modern theologians today, relying on St. Thomas, hold that the 'res et sacramentum' in each sacrament is a specific way of realizing union with the Church, which un-

⁹Cfr. Y. Congar, *The Mystery of the Church* (London, 1960); H. de Lubac, *Catholicism* (London: Burns & Oates, 1958); E. Schillebeeckx, 'The Church and Mankind', *Concilium* 1 (1965) 34-50.

ion is of its nature dynamic and tends to bring about union with Christ, thus guaranteeing the reviviscence of the sacrament in the case of a valid but illicit reception of it.¹⁰

(c) *Eschatological* salvation is salvation attained in its definitive stage, although here too one can distinguish different stages of realization. At death the Christian's salvation is made definitive, but not yet fully realized. There is the intermediate stage of Purgatory before the soul can enjoy the vision of God. And when heaven is reached, there is the Parousia still to come, when the resurrection of the glorified body takes place and the human person in its entirety can benefit from Christ's victory over sin and death. In all of these stages the Church is operating all the time: the pilgrim Church here on earth, the triumphant Church in heaven.

CONCLUSION

We have seen the meaning of the Council's teaching on the Church as the sacrament of salvation. It might be interesting still more to see the implications of such a teaching in the actual life of the Church, in her pastoral ministry, in her contribution to the ecumenical movement. There is no doubt that, for the dogmatic theologian, this doctrine throws new light on the entire theology of the Church and opens new possibilities for the revaluation and restructuring of theology as a whole.

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¹⁰B. Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology* (London: Longmans, 1960) pp. 251-279.