

The Great Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ

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Conversion of Saint Paul

The desert sun was sinking in a blaze of glory and all the western sky was coloured golden. Although the day had been too hot for travel, the group of horsemen had been riding since the dawn. As they rode along the old Damascus Road, there was something feverish and excited in their pace.

The notorious Saul of Tarsus rode in front, and on his face was grim determination. His jaws were set and his fierce eyes pierced the gathering shadows of the night. The day was now far spent, and all was darkening, but a new and glorious day was about to dawn.

Suddenly it came! A shaft of blinding light struck out from the blackness of the night. Knocked to the ground, Saul lay in trembling panic. Then from above there spoke a loud and solemn voice :

" Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me ? "

" Who are You, Lord ? " he murmured.

" I am Jesus Christ, Whom you persecute."

These mysterious words baffled Saul. Jesus Christ had long since been crucified on Calvary. Christ was dead ! How then, could he be persecuting Christ ? Are dead men sensitive to persecution ? He sat and cudgelled his tormented brain, while his companions stood about in silent wonder.

Saul was blind. Those fierce piercing eyes of his were now clouded and blank. He could not see the stars above him, or the moonlit hills about him. He staggered to his feet and with assistance managed to mount his horse. They then rode on in the moonlight, Saul being led like a blind, aimless rider.

But the voice kept on resounding in his ears. How could he be persecuting Christ ? He had, indeed, persecuted the Christians with a wild and savage fury, but never had he persecuted Christ.

And then a new and marvellous truth began to dawn upon him. His eyes were blind, but yet he saw, in dim outline, a most tremendous truth. As in a heavenly vision he saw the marvellous union which unites all Christians with Christ. So complete is this union, that to persecute the Christians is to persecute Christ Himself.

This intimate union of Christians with Christ now dawned upon Saul, but over the years to come it was to take on a fuller vividness and assume all the bright splendour of a great revelation. Saul was changed into St. Paul, the Apostle. He arrived at Damascus, not as a cruel persecutor of the Christians, but as an ardent champion for the cause of Christ.

When his blindness was cured, his fierce eyes were blazing once again, but now they blazed with flames of zeal. That loud, clear Voice kept re-echoing down the years, to remind him that he was once a persecutor of Christ. This tragic thought pressed him on to a passionate zeal that was a force invincible, and kept before his mind that marvellous mystery of the union of all Christians in Christ. In almost every sermon he preached, and in every letter he wrote, he constantly referred back to this wondrous mystery. This union in Christ was his central idea, and the very hub of his thought. He set out to tell the whole world about the Mystical Body of Christ.

Christ's Body is the Church

So close and so complete is this union of Christians with Christ, that St. Paul calls the Church the "Body of Christ." Just as all the different parts of a human body are united, and share in the life of one body, so also are the Christians united in Christ. They all share in the Life of Christ and form one living body.

The Mystical Body, therefore, is simply the Church. We Catholics are so united to Christ that we form one body with Him. In his Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul tells us that Christ is "Head over all the Church, which is, indeed his Body." (1, 23).

When Our Lord departed from this world on Ascension Thursday, He did not leave us orphans. We need not envy those friends of Jesus who lived with Him at Galilee. We enjoy a union with Him which is far more intimate than simple acquaintance. They walked in the pleasant company of Jesus, but we are united as one Body with Him.

The Church makes it possible for Jesus to extend Himself and prolong His influence to all time and to all men. Christ belongs to every age and to every nation, for He is living on in the members of His Body. The life of Jesus was not all spent between the Crib and the Cross. Christ is our contemporary.

Born on Calvary

Good Friday is the birthday of the Mystical Body. When Jesus died on the Cross, the Body was born and humanity began to live in Him. His death brought forth an abundance of life !

Jesus Himself said: "When I am lifted up I will, draw all things to myself." (John, 12 : 32). These words were fulfilled when, lifted up on the Cross, He drew us all to Himself and united us all as one Body with Himself. The aching arms of Jesus were stretched out to embrace the whole human race.

See then, how Christ has loved us ! He desired, not only to die for us, but also to embrace us all and unite us as one Body with Himself. Such ardent love could not suffer separation. All true love tends towards union.

Our Baptism

We are born into the Mystical Body at our Baptism. When the clear Baptismal waters flow, the life of Jesus floods our souls. Baptism is like a second birth, for it is then that our life in Christ begins. "Amen, Amen, I say to you," says Jesus, "unless a man be born again, he will not see the Kingdom of God." (John 3, 3).

There is a profound relationship between our Baptism and the death of Christ on the Cross. It was at the moment of Christ's death on the Cross that the Mystical Body was born. It is at the moment of

Baptism that we are born into the Mystical Body. In both instances there is a birth. On the Cross the Body was born, while at Baptism we are born into the Body.

"Do you not know," says St. Paul, "that all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" (Rom. 6, 3). The Apostle's meaning is quite clear when we consider our birth into the Body of Christ. By being baptized into Christ we are, indeed, baptized into His death. It was that death that made it possible for us to live in Him.

In his Epistles, St. Paul uses the expression "In Christ Jesus," or its equivalent, over one hundred and fifty times. We might call it his favourite expression, and we need not wonder at this, for it is an expression of deep significance. A person is said to be "In Christ" when, by Baptism, he has become a member of the Mystical Body. It is a truly marvellous thing, therefore, to be a Catholic, for a Catholic is a person in Christ.

By heresy, apostasy or schism, we Catholics can cut ourselves off from the Mystical Body of Christ. The Pope has the power to cut members off by a decree of excommunication. Not all excommunications, however, have this dire effect, since the severity of the penalty depends on the intention of the Pontiff in each case.

Mortal sin will not cut a Catholic off from the Body unless, of course, it is a sin of heresy, apostasy or schism. When a Catholic is in mortal sin he is like a corrupt member of the Body, but he is still a member. By a good confession he can have his sins forgiven, and the life of Jesus Christ will flood his soul again.

The Soul of the Body

The Holy Spirit is the Soul of the Mystical Body. Just as the human soul gives life and unity to all the parts of a human body, so also the Holy Spirit gives life and unity to the Mystical Body.

The late Roman Pontiff, Pius XII, in his Encyclical on the Mystical body, elaborated on the role played by the Holy Spirit as Soul of the Body. In the Encyclical, he said: "If we examine closely the Divine Principle of life and power given by Christ, insofar as it constitutes the very source of every gift and created grace, we can easily see that it is nothing else than the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete."

In speaking of the presence of the Holy Spirit as Soul of the Mystical Body, St. Augustine calls it a "corporate presence." Every member of the Body enjoys this corporate presence of the Holy Spirit. Even though a Catholic falls into mortal sin, he does not lose this corporate presence, for he still continues to be a part of the Mystical Body.

This corporate presence is not the same as the Divine Indwelling which always accompanies sanctifying grace. This Divine Indwelling is enjoyed by all persons in the state of grace whether they are members of the Body or not. The corporate presence is enjoyed by all members of the Body, whether they are in the State of Grace or not.

This "corporate presence" is simply the presence of the Holy Spirit as soul of the Mystical Body, ready to influence even the members who are dead.

A Doctrine of Love

The Mystical Body is a world-wide union of love. No wonder it was said of the early Christians, "See how they love one another!" They loved one another because they saw Christ in each other. It

is much easier to love people when you see Jesus in them. "Extend your love over the whole world," says St. Augustine, "for the members of Christ are to be found everywhere in the world."

Because of our intimate union as one Body in Christ, it follows that when we love one another, we are kind and generous to Christ. "Amen, amen, I say to you, so long as you did it to one of these the least of My brethren, you did it to Me" (Mat. 25: 40). By these words, Jesus identifies Himself with His brethren.

The doctrine of the Mystical Body fills our hearts with a deep and sincere love of the people. It throws a resplendent light upon humanity, so that our attitude towards people becomes our attitude towards Christ. It is, indeed, a doctrine for the people.

The Body Prays

The members of the Body co-operate in all things and share all things. Especially do they co-operate in prayer and in the Mass. The official prayer of the Mystical Body is the Divine Office, which is, therefore, a prayer of mighty power. A priest or anyone else praying the Divine Office prays with the voice of the Mystical Christ. He prays through Christ, with Christ and in Christ.

But it is not only in the Divine Office that Catholics co-operate in prayer. Every pious "Hail Mary" benefits the entire Body. This is why the Little Flower was able to do so much for the foreign missions even though she herself never sailed away to savage lands. While spending her days within the convent walls she was able to send a flood of grace flowing out to the mission fields.

The Mystical Body needs an atmosphere of prayer in which to live and breathe. The only way to live a life in Jesus Christ is to live a life of prayer. When we realize that Jesus is living on in us, our devotion is inflamed and we are always inclined to pray.

Suffering With Jesus

"With Christ I am nailed to the Cross," cries St. Paul, and all worthy Catholics ought to be able to say the same. Just as Jesus lives on in His members, so also He suffers on in His members. Christ is in agony till the end of the world.

Since we are members of the Body of Christ, we must share in His sufferings. As St. Bernard says, "We are members of a thorn-crowned Head." Jesus is no mere spectator to our sufferings and neither are we mere spectators to His. We share in His sufferings and He in ours. As St. Paul says, "The sufferings of Christ abound in us" (2 Cor. 1 : 5).

All through the ages, the sufferings of Christ have abounded in the Church, and this age is no exception. Catholics are suffering terrible persecution in many lands. To suffer with Jesus should be our glory and our joy, for suffering is the uniform of Christ. Suffering is the uniform of the Mystical Body, which is the Church.

A Doctrine of Purity

Modern life is sex-charged and sex-appeal is sprinkled over everything like pepper and salt. The difficulty involved in trying to keep pure in such surroundings is only too apparent. When a young man starts to move about in this modern world he soon finds himself faced with grave temptations.

It is only too true that today sex is glamorized and the beauty of the human body is commercialized. The art of advertising has in many places degenerated into disgusting display. Advertisers realize

that a young woman is the most beautiful thing in God's creation, so they snatch at this beauty and abuse it for their own cheap business.

On this entire problem the Mystical Body casts a radiant light. The human body is a sacred thing, for it is united to the Body of Jesus. Our humanity has become a new humanity for Christ, for we are united to Him, not only in our souls, but in our bodies also. To dishonour a human body is to dishonour Christ Himself.

A boy, therefore, should have the greatest respect for the body of a girl, and vice versa. Boys and girls would learn to respect each other if they realized that their bodies are members of Christ. It is clearly a terrible thing to bring impurity into the Body of Jesus. Impurity is forever outlawed !

Dignity of Man

Many of our social problems arise from the fact that, while we make great industrial progress, the dignity of man is often ignored. Human beings are made a mere commodity on the market, even less valuable than stocks and bonds. Human dignity is lost.

By being a member of the Mystical Body a man is so exalted that he shares in the infinite dignity of Christ. Even the poorest man on earth becomes a spiritual millionaire for he carries about with him all the riches of Jesus. Even those who are forced to live in wretched city slums do not have to drag out a dreary existence. By living the life of Christ they are all caught up into the drama of divine adventure. Each one of them can say with St. Paul, "For me to live is Christ " (Phil. 1: 21).

Class Distinction

In modern times there is a tendency to break down class distinctions. The basic equality of men is something which we like to insist upon. In his Epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul speaks of the equality of men in no uncertain terms. "There is neither Jew nor Greek ; there is neither slave nor freeman ; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Jesus Christ " (3: 28).

Here we have a remarkable unity and an even more remarkable equality. So complete is our union in Jesus that even the distinction between the sexes is minimized. In St. Paul's day, especially in the East, there was a very marked difference between the social standing of the sexes. Women were on a much lower level than men. St. Paul points out that the Mystical Body tends to abolish such exaggerated distinctions.

An utterly classless society, however, does not exist, and cannot exist. In society there is a basis for equality and also a basis for inequality. Human beings are all equally human, but yet they differ one from another. There is no monotonous sameness, and it is this variety that gives zest to human life. If people were all the same, then life would be dull indeed.

The Mystical Body is a marvellous expression of unity in variety. All the parts of the Body are not the same yet they all form but one Body, and all freely co-operate for the good of the whole. Here we have a perfect harmony within variety. It is the blue-print of a perfect society.

Millions Call Her " Mother "

Mary is the Mother of Christ, of the Whole Christ, both Head and members. She is truly our Mother, because we are the Body of her Son. We are, as St. Paul tells us, "made from His flesh and from His bones " (Eph. 5 : 30).

Millions, therefore, call her "Mother," and rightly so. When we thus address her as our Mother we are not playing a game of make-believe. The Motherhood of Mary- is not a flight of fancy. It is firmly based on truth and in reality.

It was on the Hill of Calvary that she gave us birth, and it was in great pain and agony that she became our Mother. The Mystical Body was born on Calvary and Mary was its Mother. She is the Mother of the Whole Christ.

The Catholic Mother

When a Catholic Mother nurses her baptized baby, then it is just as though she was carrying the Infant Jesus in her arms. Her love and tender care is counted as having been given to Christ. "So long as you did it to one of these, the least of My brethren, you did it to Me " (Matt. 25: 40).

Every good Catholic home is like the little home at Nazareth, for Jesus is there. He lives on in the members of His Body, and the family life of Nazareth lingers; still. It is the duty of every Catholic mother to mould her children into the likeness of Christ.

Baptism is only the beginning of our life in Christ and not the climax. The divine life of Jesus begins in us like a glowing spark, but over the years that little spark will grow into a burning flame and finally into a raging furnace which consumes us entirely in him. So intense can this divine Life become that St. Paul cried out, "I live now, not I, but Christ lives on in me" (Gal. 2 : 20).

When a Catholic mother, therefore, is exasperated by the bad behaviour of her children, then perhaps it will console her to recall that the Life of Jesus is indeed in them, however impeded. The purpose of her maternal care is to develop the character of Christ in her children by helping them to overcome themselves.

Mary, the Mother of Christ, is the model of all Catholic mothers, and it is to her that they should look for light and guidance. Like Mary, they, too, are mothering Christ.

Christ, The Church and Matrimony

The Sacrament of Matrimony symbolizes the union between Christ and the Church. St. Paul tells us this when he writes: "A husband is head of his wife, just as Christ is Head of the Church, being Himself Saviour of the Body. But just as the Church is subject to Christ, so also let wives be subject to their husbands in all things. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the Church " (Eph. 5 : 22-25).

The union of husband and wife as "two in one flesh " is a symbol of that marvellous union by which Christ and the Church are united in one Body. Since there is only one Christ and one Church, so also there should be only one husband and one wife. Otherwise the symbolism of the Sacraments would be destroyed.

Divorce is violently opposed to the Sacrament of Matrimony because, just as Christ and the Church cannot be separated, so also the bond of marriage cannot be broken, except by the death of one of the parties.

In modern times matrimony is the most abused of all the Sacraments. With Hollywood setting the pace, men and women are beginning to look upon marriage as a brief adventure. With the least excuse they clamour for divorce.

Very little knowledge of Sociology is needed to make us realize that the health of a nation depends on the stability of the family. It is an historical fact that great and powerful nations have crumbled in dust because of the collapse of family life.

We Catholics, therefore, must stand firm if we are to avert the avalanche of Godlessness which threatens to overwhelm the world. Ignoring all this modern madness, we must uphold the Christian Family and defend the Faith.

The Food of the Mystical Body

A living body needs food, so Christ has provided lavishly for the nourishment of His Mystical Body. He instituted the Blessed Eucharist. The life of Jesus in us is nourished and strengthened in us when we consume this Body and Blood. No other food could strengthen us in Christ. Unless we eat the Flesh of Jesus and drink His Blood, then we shall languish in spiritual hunger and perish from starvation.

"Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you shall not have life in you. He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has life everlasting and I will raise him up on the last day. For My Flesh is food indeed and My Blood is drink indeed. He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me and I in him " (John 6 : 54-57).

The Holy Eucharist makes it possible for us to abide in Jesus and for Him to abide in us. This Sacrament unites us to Jesus Christ in the unity of His Mystical Body.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching to the people, says, "What is the Eucharist ? Why was it given ? What is its purpose ? That we may become one Body; members formed from His Flesh and from His Bones."

It is the Blessed Eucharist, therefore, that unites all Catholics into the marvellous unity of the Mystical Body. The great effect of this Sacrament is unity in Christ. As St. Augustine cries, "O Sacrament of filial devotion ! O Symbol of Unity ! O Bond of Charity ! "

In our reception of the Eucharist we should remember that it is a social Sacrament as well as a personal matter. We must open our hearts in love to all the other members of Christ, with whom we are so intimately united because so personally joined to Christ.

"If you would Would receive the Holy Eucharist with profit," says St. Augustine, " then above all else, be yourselves what it symbolizes. Be united to the Church ; be united among yourselves ; be the Mystical Body of Christ."

Sacrifice of the Mystical Body

The Mass is the Sacrifice of the Mystical Body. It is Christ the Head, Who, together with all His members, offers to God the Sacrifice of the Altar. When Jesus offers Himself up as Victim, He does not separate Himself from those who are united to Him in His Mystical Body. The Mass is the Sacrifice of the whole Christ.

All the faithful, therefore, have a very real share in the Mass. It is their own Sacrifice. They are not mere spectators looking on, but rather they are actors in the drama. Because of our world-wide union in Christ, with such dispositions we can all profit by every Mass celebrated anywhere in the world.

The Mass is the same Sacrifice as that of the Cross. The Mass sets the scene of Calvary in our midst. On the altar we see the drama of the Cross extended down to us, with all its love, all its power and all its pardon. Just as the Mystical Body is an extension of Christ down through the ages, so also the Mass is an extension of Calvary.

The Mass is the same Sacrifice as that of the Cross, but it is offered in a different manner. The drama of the death of Jesus was a drama drenched in Blood. In contradistinction with Calvary we have in the Mass a clean oblation. "From the rising of the sun, even to the going down, My Name is great amongst the Gentiles, and in every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered in My Name a clean oblation ; for My Name is great amongst the Gentiles, says the Lord of Hosts " (Mal. 1: 11).

This beautiful prophecy is marvellously fulfilled in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In many parts of the world, and at all hours of the day, priests are offering up this clean Oblation on our altars. The Mystical Body does not cease to worship God, to adore Him, and to glorify Him in Sacrifice.

Every Catholic, therefore, should love the Mass, for the Mass brings him closer to Calvary, and therefore closer to Christ. It was on the Cross that the Mystical Body was born, and so, by going to Mass a Catholic is returning to a source of life. He goes back to the scene of humanity's re-birth, and plays an active part in it. All Christian restoration is centred in the Mass.

The Power of Catholicism

In the Apostolic Age, the power of Catholicism was very manifest. The Faith resounded like a blaring trumpet, which shook the foundations of the pagan temples. The twelve Apostles came like ardent flames into a world of sensuality and sin. In every corner of that Roman world, they preached Catholicism by which they smashed paganism to pieces. The Faith came as a force that was mighty and all-conquering.

But our modern world is just as pagan as that Roman world and just as sensual. Body-culture has now become a mania, to the neglect of the soul. Many modern women make bodily beauty their life's work. All they think about is glamour, money and sex, while the pattern of their life becomes increasingly pagan.

The only cure for all this modern madness is the fullness of the Faith. If our Catholic Faith were fully lived, then it would run all irreligion from the modern scene, and stride this muddled world like a Colossus.

Down through the ages, Catholicism has moulded the hearts and minds of millions. It has formed and fashioned the cultural instincts of civilization. The power of Catholicism is unparalleled !

"This is the victory which overcomes the world, our faith " (John 5: 4). In these few words we have a summary of all Christian history. The story of the Catholic Church is the dramatic story of a conquering Faith which, in the face of all opposition, has invariably triumphed, even in the midst of seeming failure. Our Faith has overcome the world! And even in these modern times, when the Church is being ground into the dust by armoured heels, we can still see and feel the mighty power of Catholicism, which in the end will most certainly rise victorious.

Unite the World !

Religion alone can unite the world! The very foundation of lasting peace is a spirit of love and mutual trust. This spirit can be fostered only by religion. Both science and politics are helpless without the all-pervading influence of religion.

The Mystical Body is a plan to unite the world. The incorporation of mankind into the Body of Christ is, above all else a work of unity; unity of all men with Christ, and unity of all men amongst themselves. Christians are not a mere crowd. The unity of Christ has permeated them, and united them into a corporeal oneness. Humanity becomes united as one Body, one Church, one Christ, one World.

The doctrine of the Mystical Body is explosive, dynamic, expansive. The modern world is unconsciously seeking this truth. Influenced by this inspiring doctrine, men would soon learn to live together in harmony and love. All the hard walls of hatred and discrimination would come tumbling down like the ancient walls of Jericho. We would see a new dawn : a new era.

We Catholics ought to be the most world-conscious people on earth. Let us not confine our Faith to the four walls of a home! Throw back those wide horizons and do not rest content until all the world is Christian. The Mystical Body was meant to grow, and keep on growing, until it has absorbed all humanity into itself. We must build up the Mystical Body! We know no horizons in Christ!

Nihil Obstat : JOSEPH P. NEWTH, C.C., Censor Theol. Deput. Imprimi Potest : + JOANNES CAROLUS, Archiep. Dublinen., Hiberniae Primas.