

The Church: The People of God

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As a result of an intervention by the Co-ordinating Commission of Vatican II, a chapter *De Populo Dei in genere* was inserted in what is now the Constitution *De Ecclesia*, between the first chapter "On the Mystery of the Church" and the chapter "On the Hierarchy and especially the Bishops". The intention was, after having shown the divine causes of the Church in the Holy Trinity and in the incarnation of the Son of God: (1) to show this Church also in the process of constructing itself in human history; (2) to show this Church expanding and reaching various categories of men who are unequally situated in relation to the fullness of life that is in Christ and of which the Church is the sacrament; (3) to explain what all the members of the People of God hold in common on the plane of the dignity of Christian existence, prior to any distinctions among them based on office or state.

There was only the briefest of hints of the first aim in the conciliar text. Therefore, it can scarcely satisfy the request made by Pope Paul VI in his allocution to the Observers on 17 October 1963: "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." The third aim is fairly well attained, though it stops short of the formulation of a Christian anthropology, an image of the Christian man. As a result, after a substantial first part corresponding to this third aim, the chapter *De Populo Dei* discusses the second aim *De Membris Ecclesiae* without, however, using the term that would have occasioned interminable debates. A paragraph on the universality or the catholicity of the People of God links these two parts.

This initiative of the Co-ordinating Commission was momentous. The new chapter is important not only because of its content, but also because of its title and its place in the Constitution. Words have their own value; one can even say that they have their own vitality. The expression "People of God" has such depth of meaning and such dynamism that it is impossible to use it in reference to the reality that is the Church, without also referring to certain other concepts. As for the place assigned to this chapter, everyone knows the often decisive doctrinal significance that may result from the order in which questions are arranged and from the place assigned to one of them.

In the *Summa* of St Thomas Aquinas, order and place contribute to the intelligibility of a given fact. In the Constitution *De Ecclesia* the sequence might have been: Mystery of the Church, Hierarchy, the People of God in general. This would have meant a failure to honour the third aim expressed above: to discuss what

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affects the quality that is shared by all the members of the Church, *before* examining how they are differentiated by their function or state of life. This would also have suggested the idea that the hierarchical organization represents the first value in the Church, that is, the grading of members according to an order of superiority or subordination. But the sequence adopted was: Mystery of the Church, People of God, Hierarchy. Thus, the highest value was given to the quality of disciple, the dignity attached to Christian existence as such or the reality of an ontology of grace, and then, to the interior of this reality, a hierarchical structure of social organization.

Is this not the path followed by the Lord who first assembled and trained his disciples, then from these disciples chose twelve whom he made his apostles, and then from these twelve apostles selected Simon Peter and made him the head of the apostolic college and of the Church? Is this not, also, what we find when we study the very important theme of service and of the hierarchy as service in the New Testament?¹ It is within a whole people characterized by service as by its own proper form of existence that certain members are placed in a position of command which is, in the last analysis, a post of responsibility for service.

Only time can tell what consequences will follow from the option made when the chapter *De Populo Dei* was placed in the sequence that we have indicated. It is our conviction that these consequences will be considerable. A wholly new balance will be introduced in the treatise on the Church, along the lines of Ephesians 4. 12, where St Paul states the place of the hierarchy and the role of its functions: "... to perfect the saints [that is, the Christians] for a work of ministry [which is the work of the whole body and which St Paul defines as], the building up of the Body of Christ."

Yet, in Chapter II of the Constitution *De Ecclesia*, the council only partially undertook the work of recovering the biblical idea of the People of God, which was one of the characteris-

tic marks of Catholic ecclesiology in the years 1937-57.²

I. RENEWAL OF THE IDEA OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

It is not always possible to pinpoint the first expression, the origin of the ideas, which, in a few years, have won general acceptance. Between 1937 and 1942 the idea of the People of God was firmly re-established in Catholic theology. This re-discovery was the work of men who wished to go beyond the rather juridical concept of the foundation of the Church made once by Christ, and they sought in the whole Bible a development of God's Plan. This led them to re-discover the continuity of the Church with Israel, to locate the fact of the Church in the larger perspective of the history of salvation and to see the Church as the People of God of messianic times. This was connected with the re-discovery of the nature or the historic dimension and the salvific institution of revelation, which culminated in the re-discovery of eschatology. All this occurred at a time when, thanks to the liturgical movement and especially to Catholic Action, it became clear in a new way that the Church is not only the institution, the totality of the objective means of grace, but that it is made up of men whom God calls and who answer his call.

The liturgical movement, still in its early stages, and Catholic Action, then already well established, were jointly responsible for the re-discovery of the idea of the Mystical Body. Then came critical studies. In a short but incisive study, M. D. Koster questioned a concept of the Church as the Mystical Body (1940).³ He held that this idea was responsible for keeping ecclesiology in a pre-scientific state. The time had come, he declared, to elaborate a true definition of the nature of the Church which should begin with the idea of the People of God (of Christ), in which men enter by baptism and take their place by confirmation and orders. These sacraments imprint a character;

at the same time they are juridical signs that give visible structure to the People of God and are supernatural, efficacious symbols of grace bringing men supernatural life and salvation.

Shortly after, starting from an entirely different point of view, employing an entirely different technique, that of philological-exegetical analysis, Canon L. Cerfaux showed that the concept of the (Mystical) Body was not, for St Paul, the *fundamental* concept to be used in *defining* the Church.⁴ St Paul began with the Jewish idea of Israel as the People of God to whom had been given the testament and the promises, the knowledge and worship of the true God, and finally, his presence. Christians are the *new* People, profoundly linked with Israel; and their assembly, just like that of Israel, is called "the Church of God". It was merely to express on the one hand the deep unity in Christ of the communities or "Churches", and on the other hand the heavenly existence of the Church, its mystical union with Christ, that St Paul had called the new Israel according to the Spirit, the Body of Christ. This was but a transcendent attribute of the Church whose definition, if we wish to use the word, remains on the level of the fundamental concept, the People of God.

The Protestant exegete, A. Oepke, agrees with Cerfaux's conclusions though he would quarrel with some of his technical considerations.⁵ There is no need now to present the many strictly exegetical studies devoted to the theme of the People of God.⁶ More than one recent ecclesiology refers to the idea of the People of God or is structured according to this term. After writing *The Spirit and the Bride* (London, 1935), in which he presented the Church in the absolute terms of its supernatural existence as the spotless Bride of the Lord of Glory, Don Anscar Vonier published a much smaller book entitled *The People of God* (London, 1937), in which he studied or at least looked at the human and historical aspects of this Church. According

to him the "Church" means what is sacramental and cultic, while "People of God" denotes the element of life. God's total life in mankind. Our idea, therefore, was taken both in the sense of the history of salvation and as a compensating concept for an exaggeratedly perfect notion, even though a glorious one, of the Church.

The theme is treated more biblically by Frank B. Norris in *God's Own People. An Introductory Study of the Church* (Baltimore, 1962). The Church is this People whom God made for himself, which was in process of formation throughout the history of Israel and was given the form of the Church as we know it through the action of the Incarnate Word and the sending of his Spirit.

German theologians have done most to introduce the theme of the People of God into ecclesiology. M. Schmaus in his *Dogmatik* devotes a section filled with positive facts to this theme.⁷ I. Backes earned even higher esteem for this concept by supporting it with abundant documentation.⁸ Many other authors could be cited.⁹ Let us merely point out the vigorous work of Canonist K. Mörsdorf who follows M. D. Koster quite closely.¹⁰ He defines the Church as a People of God structured according to the type of an organic body possessing members and a head and therefore with a certain hierarchical order. In other words, the Church is a People called together to bring about the kingdom of God. This People of God is structured and organized on a sacramental basis through the consecrations of baptism, confirmation (completing baptism) and orders (which is itself divided hierarchically into diaconate, priesthood and episcopate). All the members of this People share in the activity of the Church. Here Mörsdorf develops a complete and altogether positive theology of the laity. He points out that some of the People of God are set apart from the rest by a special way of exercising this activity in the triple domain of worship, teaching and pastorate.

II. THE INTEREST AND VALUE OF THE IDEA OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN THINKING ABOUT AND EXPLAINING THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

Historical Value

The idea of the People of God, in the first place, enables us to express the continuity of the Church with Israel. It at once invites us to consider the Church inserted in a history dominated and defined by God's Plan for man. This Plan is one of covenant and salvation: People of God connotes Plan of God, therefore sacred history. We know that this Plan and this history are translated into a positive and gracious historical intervention. Unique though this intervention may be (this note is essential to its historical character), its object is all men and even all of that creation which is linked with their destiny.

To relate the Church in this way to the Old Testament, is to ascribe to it at once all the values that belong to the biblical notion of the People of God and that determine their religious status:

(a) The idea of *election and call* (*ecclesia* and *convocatio*). This idea had been too often forgotten in the classical *De Ecclesia* treatise. In fact, how were the treatises on Predestination and Grace related with the Church? Election in Scripture is not just a privilege, it always involves service and mission. Someone is selected and set aside to fulfil a plan of God that is beyond the power of the one chosen. The whole Bible is permeated with the idea of *Pars pro toto* that is also found in the idea of first-fruits.

(b) The pregnant idea of *covenant*.

(c) The idea of consecration to God. The People of God is dedicated to his praise, to be his witness, to live in order to serve him, to glorify and to help others to glorify his name. The People of God belongs to him: *populus acquisitionis* (cf. 1 Peter 2. 9).

(d) Lastly, the idea of the promises. This does not mean merely promises of assistance ("I will be with you", Ex. 3. 12; Matt. 28. 20), but

promises of fulfilment in a tension towards the future and finally towards eschatology.

The meaning of eschatology is one of the greatest re-discoveries of contemporary Catholic theology. This supposes an orientation of history and of God's Plan bringing all to a final consummation. This means much more than a static study *De Novissimis* such as was usually found in manuals of theology. It seems that the presentation of religion primarily as worship and moral obligations, the classic heritage bequeathed by the seventeenth century, deprived us in some ways of the realization that Christianity presents a *hope*, a total hope, even for the material world.

This religion of reason allowed eschatology to be laicized. In fact, at a time when Christians were neglecting this aspect of their message, philosophies of history were coming into being (Vico, Montesquieu) that were the preparation for the great modern interpretations of a history of the world without God and without Christ (Hegel, Marx). Confronted by religion without a world, men formulated the idea of a world without religion. We are now emerging from this wretched situation; the People of God is re-discovering once again that it possesses a messianic character and that it bears the hope of a fulfilment of the world in Jesus Christ.

The idea of the People of God, therefore, introduces something dynamic into the concept of the Church. This People possesses life and is advancing towards an end established for it by God. Chosen, established, consecrated by God to be his servant and his witness, the People of God is, in the world, the sacrament of salvation offered to the world. By this we mean to say that God who has willed (according to an antecedent will) the salvation of all men, has placed in the world a cause, of itself sufficient to achieve this purpose effectively. Thus, he has sent Jesus Christ into the world, and has made the Church, dependent on him and derived from him, a messianic People formed according to the new and definitive Dispensation of the covenant and living on the blessings of this

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covenant by the means chosen by the Lord for this purpose. The People of God formed by revelation and by all the institutions and the sacraments of the new and definitive Dispensation of the covenant, is in the midst of the world and is for the world, the sign and, as it were, the sacrament of salvation offered to all men.

The People of God is a people advancing towards the complete fulfilment of its destiny, a servant and witness people, dedicated to the furtherance of its own growth, according to the admirable term that describes this mission in many an ancient text. *Populus* or *populi* are precisely the correct words found in this connection in liturgical books.

Placing the Church in the context of the history of salvation, the idea of the People of God makes it possible to examine the difficult but important question of Israel, that is, of the Jewish people according to the flesh who actually did stumble (Rom. 11. 11) but who continue to be the people chosen and loved by God.¹² The relation of the "mystery" of Israel to the "mystery" of the Church is one we should try to understand and it can be envisaged adequately only in a perspective of the history of salvation; this includes the question of the Church's roots in Israel and the destiny of the Jewish people in the eschatological context (cf. Rom. 9-11).

Anthropological Value

When using the word "Church" in speaking or writing, the reference is usually to the institution as such. Sometimes this has meant, and even now may mean, that the Church is being considered apart from men, as if it were not composed essentially of Christians. As a result, a distinction is made in some texts between "the Church" and men. This practically places the mediating institution in opposition to those for whose sake it functions.¹³ There is some reality, some truth in this. Yet, to speak in this way is to ignore an essential aspect of the Church, because the Church is composed of men who are

converted to the Gospel. This aspect of the Church was especially dear to the Fathers. A thorough examination of their ecclesiological thought shows that their ecclesiology included an anthropology.¹⁴ This is why the Fathers so often described their vision of the Church in terms of typical biblical personages (Abraham, Rahab, Mary, Magdalene, etc.), or of some Gospel parable. The Church indeed is composed of men who open themselves to God's call, Christians who live the religious relation with God into which we are introduced by loving faith. The liturgy parallels this and sees the Church as the community of the faithful who walk along the paths of salvation and frequently refers to this Church as *populus tuus*.¹⁵

In the community in which the Christian works out his salvation and sanctifies himself, he brings to all the benefit of the spiritual gifts he has received. We are here re-discovering the variety of the charisms or spiritual gifts given to so many of the faithful as well as to the salvific action of true spiritual motherhood exercised by the Christian community.¹⁶ Certainly the idea of the People of God most appropriately sums up these realities, but it is only just to recognize that this is equally true of the "(Mystical) Body".

Historicity Value

The liturgy many times uses the expression *populus tuus* in a context of penance, for example, in the Lenten collects (see texts in Schmaus, *op. cit.*, pp. 205 f., and A. Schaut cited in note 14). There, *Populus Dei* denotes the community of men for whom one implores God's help, his mercy, graces of fidelity or conversion. This community is the beneficiary of God's pardoning and saving act frequently with a typological reference to the various salvations from which Israel benefited, beginning with the departure from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. People of God, therefore, describes the Church as composed of men advancing towards the kingdom and enables us to express the values of historicity.

As Dom Anscar Vonier saw so well, this is the *locus* in the Church where there are failures and sins, the struggle for a more perfect fidelity, the permanent need for reform and for the efforts this involves. The Church as an institution does not need to be converted. Reform may be needed, at least in some of its parts, if it concerns the institution's very existence or its historical forms. But is it not remarkable that in the patristic period, which may be considered here as lasting until the middle of the eleventh century, the Fathers knew nothing of the medieval and modern theme of the "reform of the Church" but spoke of the restoration of *man* or of that Christian in whom the image of God had been obscured?¹⁶ This is the anthropological point of view.

III. INTEREST OF THE TERM PEOPLE OF GOD IN THE QUESTION OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH

The category People of God as it is found in Scripture makes it possible to affirm *both* the equality of the faithful in the dignity of Christian existence and the organic or functional inequality of the members. Israel had realized that the priestly and kingly character of the people as such (cf. Ex. 19. 5-6) did not prevent but rather required the existence of a priesthood instituted and ordered for the service of public worship. The priestly, kingly and prophetic people, the people wholly consecrated and witnessing, was organized according to priestly, kingly and prophetic functions. The whole history of Israel is illustrated and, as it were, condensed and systematized in a passage of Deut. 17. 14-18, 22. In this connection the concept of "body" would serve equally well as that of "people". It is likewise a kind of type or model for Christian realities, according to which these realities are conceived.¹⁷ There is always a totality of members, all living and active, all sharing in the quality or dignity of the life of the body and a structure of functions with a head that gives unity and controls the conduct

of all. In a people, all citizens participate in the life of the city and perform specific tasks.¹⁸

In this connection we have already seen the significance of the chapter *De Populo Dei in genere* in the conciliar Constitution *De Ecclesia*. Let us here add a thought that is not foreign to this chapter and is related to the idea of the sacrament of salvation alluded to earlier. It is the People of God, structured in this way, which continues the mission and represents in the world *the sign of salvation* that God established definitively, totally, adequately *in Christo et in Ecclesia*.¹⁹

IV. THE VALUE OF THE TERM PEOPLE OF GOD IN RELATION TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

The subject is treated most happily several times in the Constitution *De Ecclesia* under two different aspects.²⁰ The first is the consideration of the local community as the assembly of the eucharistic celebration (German theologians like to accentuate this aspect). The second is the consideration of individual Churches as representing in a certain way the different peoples and cultures in the Church. Obviously this is a vital topic in pastoral, ecumenical and missionary fields where it is very important to propose within the whole Church and in reference to the whole Church, a theology of the local community as the realization of the *Ecclesia* and a theology of individual Churches, for example, national Churches in their relation to its catholicity.

In patristic and liturgical texts, *populus* often denotes the local assembly, above all, the eucharistic assembly in which the deep mystery of the Church is to be found here and now.²¹ Exegetes agree to interpret in this sense the terms used in the salutations of St Paul's epistles: "To the Church of God insofar as it exists or is realized at Corinth." He might just as well have said: "To the People of God insofar as it exists in Corinth." But it is a People uniquely one that is being recruited throughout

the whole world for the kingdom of God. As for the peoples of the earth, inasmuch as they are conditioned by a certain special way of being and possess their own values of culture or humanity, all these plainly have a place in the catholicity of the People of God or of the Church. This follows from a theology of catholicity that can be supported by dozens of patristic and even liturgical texts,²² and is to be found in the chapter *De Populo Dei* of the Constitution *De Ecclesia*.

This chapter, then, seems to contain, in one way or another, all the chief values of the idea of the People of God, especially the value of the equality of the dignity of Christian existence as well as those values that belong to the chapter *De Membris*. The other values that we have just described are suggested or mentioned in passing, rather than fully developed.

From the pastoral point of view, the idea of the People of God lends itself to an extremely realistic catechesis and it communicates an understanding of the Church that is both concrete and dynamic. It can be shown how, in the midst of all the peoples of the world, God assembles a People that is his—a *People of God*. Not only in the midst of these peoples in an anthropological and almost political sense of the word (in this respect faith and charity, transcending all differences, destroy no valuable natural bond; on the contrary, they purify and confirm all authentic values), but this People is to be found in the midst of every population unit—my village, my city, the block of flats in which I live, the train on which I am travelling, the hospital in which I am sick. In any given group of people, each of the different human gods recruits a people to serve him: Mercury, the god of commerce; Mars, the god of war and force; Venus, the goddess of love, etc.

The true God and Jesus Christ, his beloved Son whom he sent into the world, also wished to recruit a People to serve them, a holy People bound by the law of a love that is all humility and service. This People is recruited from employers and employees, from men and women,

from Greeks and barbarians, but in it, above and beyond all this, is Christ (cf. Gal. 3. 28). This People has its law, the love of God and the love of neighbour. It has its assemblies, its hierarchy, its insignia, its customs. This People is called to give witness to Christ and to his charity. It is a People composed of sinners who do penance and try to walk along the path of conversion. This is a point that many "classical" presentations of the Church neglect, static and juridical as they often are.

Dialogue with Protestants

The ecumenical interest of the idea of the People of God is obvious, especially in the dialogue with Protestants.²³ Let us speak of this dialogue. This idea provides many points of agreement and encounter. What Protestants like about the category of People of God is first, the idea of election and of call, everything depends on God's initiative. Then it is the historicity that it involves in the sense of incompleteness and of movement towards eschatology. It suggests less sharply defined frontiers, because it is composed of a multitude assembled by God himself. On the one hand, Protestants are happy to find in the frank use of People of God, a way of avoiding institutionalism with its intemperate use of ideas of "power" and infallibility, and on the other hand, the romanticism of a biological concept of the Mystical Body whose favourite expression is that of "continued incarnation"; just as if the Church were literally "Jesus Christ extended and communicated".²⁴

The idea of the People of God, according to some Protestant authors, would make it possible to avoid an ontological concept of the Church, what Professor R. Mehl used to call "*Ecclesia quoad substantiam*", and to see the Church simply as the assembly for God's eschatological kingdom. This is not a substantial body with fixed contents but the result of grace which, because it selects, may also reject. Under these conditions, U. Valeske asks whether it is still possible to speak of the infallibility or the irreformability of the structure.²⁵

It seems to us that Protestant thought fails to see what the incarnation of the Son of God has introduced that is new and definitive. No doubt it is on the christological level that this inadequacy begins. As a result the idea of the Body of Christ is not given its full value. There is a tendency to reduce the Church of the Word Incarnate to the conditions of the People of God under the old Dispensation.²⁸ In the dialectic of *is now* and *not yet* that is characteristic of the Church in its itinerant condition, it seems in Protestant thought, that the *not yet* diminishes or overshadows the truth of the *is now*. All this suggests to us that the idea of the People of God, rich and true though it may be, is insufficient of itself to give an adequate idea of the mystery of the Church here and now.

V. THE LIMITS OF THE IDEA OF PEOPLE OF GOD AND ITS COMPLETION BY THE IDEA OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

Composing his epistle, perhaps as early as the year 48, James, the "brother of the Lord", addressed himself to "the twelve tribes of the dispersion". This is a title that is derived from the theme of the People of God. James, no doubt, was writing to the dispersed Judaeo-Christians. But is it enough to think of the Church as the People of God, in the sense of the ancient Israel who might merely have received and acknowledged its Messiah? It certainly seems that the answer is no. Since the category People of God, within its own proper limits, means no more than this, it would seem that, to define or to designate the Church, this idea should be transcended and completed by another which can add all that is new in the Church in relation to Israel, while at the same time continuing the notion of the People of God.

What is truly new is clearly the fact of Jesus Christ and this means that Christ is not only a Messiah, but the Son or the Word of God himself made man: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16. 16). Admittedly, Jesus is "the son of David, the son of Abraham"

(Matt. 1. 1; cf. Luke 3. 31, 34). This is to be expected because of the continuity between the covenant and the promises. But Jesus Christ, fulfilling the promises, is made minister of the heavenly eschatological blessings that are to come (cf. Heb. 9. 11) of which the Law could offer but the shadow (10. 1). He is the Son of God. Incorporated in him, we can become sons like him through grace. We can become his co-heirs and enter into the joy, not of a world of this creation, but of the patrimony of God himself (cf. Rom. 8. 17). Granted that one alone ascended into heaven to take possession, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven (cf. John 3. 15); but if we are incorporated in him, we become with him and in him, the unique subject of filial life and we enjoy the right to God's heritage. The Fathers often repeat that we ascend to heaven with him and in him, glossing in this way St Paul (cf. Eph. 2. 6; Col. 3. 1-4).

We see how even the programme of the life of the People of God as it was announced in the old Dispensation of the covenant, when it is realized in the Christ-Son of God made man and become our head, means that the People of God constitute the Body of Christ: a new title that is given to it under the new and definitive Dispensation ("*novi et aeterni Testamenti*").²⁹

Israel has sometimes been called "son" of God in the Old Testament,³⁰ just as Yahweh is sometimes called "Father". But this fatherhood consists in a relation of special intimacy and provident attention that is the result of Yahweh's election and his covenant with Israel. This filiation is not a personal or natural filiation. It denotes a particular relation of the People as a People, in virtue of which, having been specially chosen by God, it enjoys his powerful care and shares in his heritage.³¹ In the New Testament there is a filiation through the communication of the Spirit of God and through a true participation in the divine life.³² Is it not significant that, having quoted the typical expression: "They will be his people and he, God-with-them, will be their God," the

Apocalypse adds, alluding to and far transcending the literal meaning of the words of the prophecy of Nathan, "He who overcomes shall possess these things (i.e., the source of life) and I will be his God and he shall be my son" (cf. Apoc. 21. 3, 7)?

To tell the truth, the inheritance, which here is life itself, has been largely transposed in the course of the Old Testament.²¹ In the promises made to Abraham, it meant the land of Canaan (cf. Gen. 15. 1 f.). The idea of inheritance, and correlatively that of heir, became progressively spiritualized in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. The blessings connected with the observance of the covenant were promised to a group of the pious whose hearts were circumcised (cf. Deut. 30. 5; Jer. 30. 3). After the exile this theme was repeated by Zachariah (8. 12) and Isaiah (57. 13; 60. 21; 75. 8-9). Eventually Yahweh himself became the heritage of the just (cf. Lam. 3. 24; Pss. 16 and 73). In the New Testament men may inherit the kingdom of God or of eternal life.²² This is the land promised as a heritage to the humble (Matt. 5. 5). In the liturgy for the dead, this is the light that is promised to Abraham and to his descendants.

Throughout the Old Testament runs the theme of the promise that God will dwell with his people. In their midst he will make his home in the Temple at Jerusalem. But it is not in a material place, nor in a temple made by the hand of man, that God wishes to dwell. His true presence, his true temple is himself. That is why in the new Dispensation, God dwells, as in his temple, in the disciple who loves him, in the Body of Christ offered and glorified (cf. John 2. 21), in the community of those who belong to him.²³

Under the old Dispensation the Spirit of God was not revealed as a Person. The Spirit acted as a power in the men whom God called to execute his plans on special occasions. As early as the exile, through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who announced a religious restoration, an interiorization of the Law was promised as the fruit of the gift of a new Spirit. Mention

was even made of a new covenant (Jeremiah) and of a liberal outpouring of the Spirit (Isa. 32. 15; Ez. 29. 29; Joel 2. 28-29). This last text is the one Peter recalled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2. 16 f.). The promise was thereupon to be realized. The Spirit not only acts but he also dwells. His interventions are not only occasional, he has been given to the Church as the very principle of its life.

The encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, citing St Augustine, developed the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the "soul" of the ecclesial body of Christ, making the bond uniting Pentecost and the Cross, uniting the pneumatological moment and the christological moment. The Holy Spirit is given personally to the disciples, he dwells in them, but he is also given to the Church as such, not merely because it is the People of God, but because it is the Body of Christ.

The Church "in via"

Let us consider this ecclesiological aspect. The gift of the Spirit as a principle of life in the Church changes the conditions under which it is possible to speak of sin, lying and repentance in connection with the Church.²⁴ In one way or another, a distinction is introduced between the Church, inasmuch as it is a certain superimposed reality united to Christ by the bonds of an unbreakable union—spouse, Body of Christ, and the Church inasmuch as it is the totality of Christians who, each and all, are sinful and weak. These we may call with Dom Vonier the People of God. Nevertheless, just as it is legitimate to speak of the Church in the first sense and to attribute to it, under certain conditions, indefectibility and infallibility, it is equally necessary to recognize the duality of these aspects. The Church is not yet completely holy, as St Augustine acknowledged when considering the interpretation of Eph. 5. 27 ("without spot or wrinkle").²⁵ Here we have one of the many and very fruitful applications of the truth in dialectical form in which is described the condition of the Church *in via* between Pentecost and the Parousia, what *is now* and what is

not yet. But just as we noted above, we must not allow the *not yet* to take all truth from the *is now*.

Let us add a last characteristic of the Church as People of God in messianic times, during the new Dispensation of the covenant. This is the result of the coming in the flesh of the Son of God and of the sending of the Holy Spirit, which makes it possible to call the Church the Body of Christ.³⁶ Under the old Dispensation of the covenant, the People of God existed in a special people, in the human, social and ethnic sense of the word. Under the new Dispensation, it is established through faith in the apostolic Word, on a spiritual plane that made it possible to draw new members from all peoples in the ethnic sense of the word, while preserving its own special existence and character. Therefore, it is not for the same reason that the People of God under the new Dispensation is spiritual and that it has *its own* social structure and *its own* formal visibility, independent of all purely temporal society, of all human reality of race, culture and power.³⁷

Henceforth it is established not only in a new community but in a body *sui juris* and in the Church. From the beginning Christians were aware they formed a *tertium genus*, unlike the Jews and the pagans.³⁸ As soon as the Church could be free, it was characterized in an edict of a still pagan emperor as "*Corpus Christianorum*".³⁹ In reality this Church was the Body of Christ. Charles Journet has cogently shown that the visibility and the spirituality of the Church grow in strength together and are inseparable.⁴⁰ This is a deep theological truth that history confirms in a remarkable way, especially the history of the Gregorian reform in the eleventh century when the Church, confronted by temporal society and Roman law, affirmed its own position as a spiritual society with its own law.

The People of God under the New Dispensation

We see how the idea of the People of God, however rich pastorally and theologically it may be, is alone unable to express the reality of the Church. Under the new Dispensation, that of the promises realized through the incarnation of the Son and the gift of the Spirit (the "Promised One"), the People of God was given a status that can be expressed only in the categories and in the theology of the Body of Christ. This is, moreover, what exegetes have been saying recently, N. A. Dahl,⁴¹ R. Schnackenburg,⁴² Catholic theologians like M. Schmaus,⁴³ I. Backes,⁴⁴ J. Ratzinger,⁴⁵ K. Algermissen,⁴⁶ L. Bouyer,⁴⁷ and Orthodox like the excellent patrologist, Father Georges Florovsky.⁴⁸

Father Koster, whose book was really worthwhile, made the mistake of not encouraging the use of the category, People of God, considering it as opposed to the category of the Body of Christ, because he was influenced by medieval practice. Canon Cerfaux restricted the Pauline idea of the Church to the concept of the People of God and made the Body of Christ as a simple attribute of this Church, inasmuch as it is united and mystically identified on earth with the heavenly Christ. In doing this Canon Cerfaux failed to give full *ecclesiological* value to the idea of the Body of Christ. St Paul never contented himself with adding the attribute "the Body of Christ" to the concept of the People of God, just as he had received it from Judaism. He introduced the idea of the Body of Christ as the essential concept in treating of the Church. This idea was needed to explain what the People of God had become since the incarnation, Easter and Pentecost. The People of God *was* truly the Body of Christ. Only thus does it secure its adequate Christological reference.

NOTES

¹ See "La Hierarchie comme service d'après le Nouveau Testament et les documents de la Tradition", in *L'Épiscopat et l'Église universelle* (Unam Sanctam, 39), Paris, 1962, pp. 67-99. Reprinted in *Pour une Église servante et pauvre* (Paris, 1963).

² The idea of the People of God had been discovered prior to the works of Koster and Cerfaux, as the simple fruit of the little effort made everywhere to relate the Church to its biblical bases and to the Plan of God begun with Abraham. See the references given in U. Valeske, *Votum Ecclesiae* (Munich, 1962), p. 202, n. 62. Our own study cited there, published in French in *Esquisses du Mystère de l'Église* (Paris, 1941), pp. 11 f., was written in May 1937. An English version is now available: *The Mystery of the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1960).

³ M. D. Koster, *o.p.*, *Ekklesiologie im Werden* (Paderborn, 1940). K. Adams sharply criticized this book in *Theol. Quartalschrift* (Tübingen, 1941-4), pp. 145-66. Also *Volk Gottes im Wachstum des Glaubens* (Heidelberg, 1950); "Von den Grundlagen der Kirchengliedschaft," in *Die Neue Ordnung*, 4 (1950), pp. 206 f.

⁴ L. Cerfaux, *La théologie de l'Église suivant saint Paul* (Unam Sanctam, 10), Paris, 1942. English version: *The Church in the Theology of St Paul*, trans. by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (London: Nelson, 1959).

⁵ A. Oepke, *Das neue Gottesvolk in Schrifttum, Schauspiel, bildender Kunst und Weltgestaltung* (Gütersloh, 1950), then in "Leib Christi oder Volk Gottes bei Paulus", in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 79 (1954), col. 363-8. Oepke shows that, even in Jewish thought there is a logical movement from the *people to the body*, but not vice versa. The idea of body is a construction, an elaboration, not a primary concept. St Paul began with the idea of the People of God. This was the subject of his missionary preaching and of his proposal of the doctrine of justification. Only later did he move, as to a deeper doctrine, to the use of the idea of the faithful, to the affirmation of Christ *in us* and to all the ethical consequences of *vita in Christo*.

⁶ Let us cite especially H. F. Hamilton, *The People of God*, 2 Vols. (Oxford, 1912). This author has an ecclesiological interest. He shows the permanent significance of the Old Testament and its religion, the origin and meaning of the functions or of the ecclesiastical ministry. E. Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk. Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief* (Göttingen, 1938); H. Strathmann, "Laos", in *Theolog. Wörterbuch zum N.T.* of Kittel, 14, pp. 29-57 (Fasc. appeared in 1938); N. A. Dahl, *Das Volk Gottes. Eine Untersuchung zum Kirchenbewusstsein des Urchristentums* (Oslo, 1941): this is a basic study, too little known because of the war but re-edited in 1962; C. Spieg, "L'Église du Christ", in *La Sainte Église universelle* (*Cahiers théol. de l'actualité protest.*, Neuchâtel et Paris, 1948), pp. 175-219 (Cath.); F. Asensio, *Yahveh y su Pueblo* (Rome, 1953) (Cath.); J. M. Nielen, *Gottesvolk und Gottes Sohn. zum Christlichen Verständnis des Alten Testaments* (Frankfurt, 1954) (Cath.); G. von Rad, *Das Gottesvolk im*

Deuteronomium (Stuttgart, 1929) and *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 1 (Munich, 1957); H. J. Kraus, *Das Volk Gottes im Alten Testament* (1958), trans. into French: *Le Peuple de Dieu dans l'A.T.* (Neuchâtel-Paris, 1960); W. Trilling, *Das wahre Israel. Studien zur Theologie des Matthäus Evangeliums* (Leipzig, 1959); H. Wildberger, *Jahwes Eigentumvolk. Eine Studie zur Traditionsgeschichte und Theologie des Erwählungsgedankens* (Zurich-Stuttgart, 1960).

⁷ *Katholische Dogmatik*, III/1, *Die Lehre von der Kirche* (Munich, 1958), pp. 204-39.

⁸ "Die Kirche ist das Volk Gottes im Neuen Bund", in *Trierer Theolog. Zeitschrift*, 69 (1960), pp. 111-17; "Gottesvolk im Neuen Bund", *ibid.*, 70 (1961), pp. 80-93; "Das Volk Gottes im Neuen Bunde", in *Die Kirche: Volk Gottes*, H. Asmussen, ed. (Stuttgart, 1961), pp. 97-129.

⁹ H. Hanssler, *Das Gottesvolk der Kirche* (Düsseldorf, 1960). He does not really discuss our theme. Rather he provides a popular explanation of the actions of Christians in the world. O. Semmelroth, "Um die Einheit des Kirchenbegriffs", in *Fragen der Theologie heute* (Einsiedeln-Cologne, 1957), pp. 319-35, esp. pp. 321-3. Father Karl Rahner uses the term "People of God" in a special way, to denote mankind in so far as it is now consecrated to God, because of the fact of Christ, and in a situation of salvation objectively possible for every man. The Church is called to establish this redeemed mankind in a formal society. See *Theological Investigations*, vol. 11 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), pp. 82 f.

¹⁰ "Die Kirchengliedschaft im Lichte der kirchlichen Rechtsordnung", in *Theologie und Seelsorge* (1944), pp. 115 f. "Die Stellung der Laien in der Kirche", in *Revue de Droit canonique*, 10-11 (Mélanges en l'honneur de S. E. le Cardinal Julien, 1960-1), pp. 214-34. In his *Lehrbuch des Kirchenrechts*, 7th ed. (1953), p. 25, Mörsdorf defines the Church as "the new People of God existing according to a certain hierarchical order and assembled to realize the kingdom of God".

¹¹ Cf. P. Démann, "Israël et l'unité de l'Église", in *Cahiers Sioniens*, 1 (1953), p. 23.

¹² Here is an example from the Austrian catechism of 1894 which was repeated in the German catechism of 1925. Since then there have been changes: *Why did Jesus Christ found the Church?* Jesus Christ founded the Church so that it may lead men to eternal happiness. *How does the Church lead men to eternal happiness?* The Church leads men to eternal happiness through the exercise, with God's help, of Christ's threefold function, namely his teaching power, his priesthood and his royal prerogative (cf. M. Ramsauer, "Die Kirche in den Katechismen", in *Zeitschr. f. kath. Theol.*, 73 [1951], pp. 129-69, 313-46, 330).

¹³ Patristic ecclesiology might well be still alive in Orthodox thought. During the discussion of the schema *De Ecclesia* at the second session of the Council, we were speaking one day with two friends who were Orthodox Observers, Father Nissiotis and Father Alexander Schmeeman. They said to us: If we had to write a *De Ecclesia*, we would write one chapter on the Holy Spirit and one

chapter on the Christian man. Then we could stop. We would have said what was essential. . . This is just the opposite of an ecclesiology such as we had known, which was practically reduced to a somewhat juridical theory of an institution, or a "hierarchiology".

¹⁴ See *Ausdrucksformen der lateinischen Liturgiesprache bis Elften Jahrhundert*, ges.u.dargeb.v.V. (Manz, Beuron, 1941); A. Schaut, "Die Kirche als Volk Gottes: Selbstaussagen d. Kirche im römischen Messbuch", in *Benediktinische Monatsschrift*, 25 (1949), pp. 187-96; *populus* is found 90 times in the Roman missal; *ecclesia* 80 times, *familia* 12 times. For the Leonine, see P. T. Garriga, *La Palabra Ekklesia, Estudio historico-teologico* (Barcelona, 1958), pp. 300 f.

¹⁵ On this point, see K. Delahaye, *Erneuerung der Seelsorgsformen aus der Sicht der Frühen Patristik* (Freiburg, 1958), trans. into French with a Preface by us: *Ecclesia Mater chez les Pères des trois premiers siècles. Pour une renouvellement de la Pastorale d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1964).

¹⁶ See also G. B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform, Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (O.U.P., 1960).

¹⁷ On this subject, see J. Auer, "Corpus Christi Mysticum", in *Die Kirche und ihre Ämter. Festgabe Cardinal J. Frings* (Cologne, 1960), pp. 1-23; "Das Leib-Modell und der Kirchenbegriff der katholischen Kirche", in *Münchener Theolog. Zeitschr.*, 12 (1961), pp. 14-38.

¹⁸ St Thomas insists on this point in one of the texts in which he speaks of the Church as People and City of God: *Com. in Ephes.*, c. 2, lect. 5, in connection with his doctrine of the city and its political rulers.

¹⁹ See P. Barrau, "Le Laïcat, signe d'Eglise", in *Masses Ouvrières*, 135 (Nov. 1957), pp. 130-88; Father Crespin, "Qu'est-ce qu'un laïc?" in *Lettre aux Communautés de la Mission de France* (Feb. 1962).

²⁰ In the chapter *De Populo Dei* and in the chapter *De Episcopis*, either in reference to individual Churches or to the priesthood and its exercise in local communities.

²¹ See J. Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (Munich, 1954), pp. 159 f.

²² In the writings of the Fathers and often in the Latin liturgy, especially in reference to baptism and to the motherhood the Church exercises there, *populi* (in the plural) denotes the faithful in so far as they enter the Christian community and form themselves into communities. The expression denotes either the Church as community or the Church expanding among men. On this point there are many texts.

²³ See Bo Reicke, "Die Bedeutung des Gottesvolksgedanken für den neutestamentl. Kirchenbegriff", in *Kirchenblatt für die Reformierte Schweiz* (1955), fasc. 17; N. A. Dahl, "The People of God", in *Ecumenical Review*, 9 (Jan. 1957), pp. 154-61; *Die Kirche, Volk Gottes*, edited by H. Asmussen (Stuttgart, 1961), dialogue between Protestant and Catholic theologians. On the role of this notion in the ecumenical dialogue, Th. Sartory, *Die Ökumenische Bewegung und die Einheit der Kirche. Ein Beitrag im Dienste einer ökumenischen Ekklesiologie* (Meitingen, 1955), pp. 51, 57, 60, 61, 70, 71, 104, 105, 127, 128, 129, 130, 145, 156, 180. See other references in U. Valeske, *Votum Ecclesiae* (Munich, 1962), p. 239, n. 11.

²⁴ See H. Asmussen, *op. cit.*, pp. 33 f.; U. Valeske, *op. cit.*, pp. 202 f., 233 f., 248-9. Criticism by Protestant theologians of the idea of "continued incarnation" is constant.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 249.

²⁶ See our *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Eglise* (Unam Sanctam, 20), Paris, 1950, pp. 466-82; "Pour le dialogue avec le Mouvement œcuménique", in *Verbum Caro*, 4 (1950), pp. 111-23; *Le Christ, Marie et l'Eglise* (Paris, 1952); "Regards et réflexions sur la Christologie de Luther", in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Würzburg, 1954), III, pp. 457-86, reprod. in *Chrétiens en dialogue* (Unam Sanctam, 50), Paris, 1964, pp. 453-89; *The Mystery of the Temple* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), Appendix III.

²⁷ See Appendix III, *The Mystery of the Temple*.

²⁸ See Ex. 4. 22; Os. 11. 1; Deut. 14. 1; 32. 5-6; Jer. 3. 4, 14, 19, 22; 31. 9, 22; Is. 45. 11; 63. 16; Mal. 2. 10; Wis. 2. 16-18; Eccclus. 23. 4; 51. 10.

²⁹ See *Bible de Jerusalem* note on Matt. 4. 3 and J. de Fraine, *Adam et son Lignage* (Paris, 1959), pp. 116 f.; Origen, *De Oratione*, 22, 2 (ed. P. Koetschau, pp. 346-7).

³⁰ Cf. Rom. 8. 14-17; Eph. 1. 5; John 1. 12; John 3. 1; 2 Pet. 1. 4.

³¹ Cf. L. Cerfaux, "L'Eglise et le règne de Dieu d'après S. Paul", in *Ephem. Théol. Lovan.*, 2 (1925), pp. 181-98 (reprod. in *Recueil Lucien Cerfaux*, Gembloux, 1954, pp. 365-87); F. Dreyfus, "Le thème de l'héritage dans l'A.T.", in *RSPT*, 42 (1958), pp. 3-49.

³² The Kingdom: Matt. 25. 34; 1 Cor. 6. 9-10; 25. 50; Gal. 5. 21; Eph. 5. 5; John 2. 5. Eternal life: Matt. 29. 29; Mark 10. 17; Luke 10. 25 and 28. 18.

³³ See our *The Mystery of the Temple* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962).

³⁴ For the first and last reference of note 26, see "Comment l'Eglise sainte doit se renouveler sans cesse", in *Irenikon*, 34 (1961), pp. 322-45 (reprod. in *Sainte Eglise*, Paris, 1963, pp. 131-54).

³⁵ "Ubiicumque autem in his libris commemoravi Ecclesiam non habentem maculam aut rugam, non sic accipiendum est quasi iam sit, sed quae praeparatur ut sit, quando apparebit etiam gloriosa. Nunc enim propter quosdam ignorantiae et infirmitates membrorum suorum habet unde quotidie tota dicat: Dimitte nobis debita nostra." (*Retract.*, II, 18: PL, 32, 637-8). Com. S. Thomas, *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 2.

³⁶ For what follows, see A. Chavasse, "Du Peuple de Dieu à l'Eglise du Christ", in *La Maison-Dieu*, 32 (1952), pp. 40-52.

³⁷ This was one of the reasons for the victory of Christianity over Judaism, which was then engaged in effective proselytizing, but which had to go through the Law of Moses.

³⁸ Testimony in Ad. Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*, 4 (1924), pp. 259 f.; P. Batiffol, *L'Eglise naissant*, 7th ed., p. 92; M. Simon, *Verus Israel* (Paris, 1948), pp. 135 f.; A. Oepke, *op. cit. supra* (n. 5).

³⁹ See the Edict of Licinius, apud Lanctantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 48 (Kirch, *Enchir. Fontium Hist. ecl. ant.*, no. 353) and the studies of M. Roberti, "Il Corpus mysticum di S. Paolo nella storia della persona giuridica", in *Studi di Storia e Diritto in onore di Enrico Besta*, IV

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(Milan, 1939) and of A. Ehrhardt "Das Corpus Christi und die Korporationen im spät römischen Recht", in *Zeitschr. d. Savigny-St. f. Rechtsgesch., Röm. Abt.*, 70 (1953).

⁴¹ Charles Journet, *L'Église du Verbe Incarné. II. Sa Structure interne et son unité catholique* (Paris, 1951), p. 8 and following, 40, 44-9, etc. English title: *The Church of the Word Incarnate*, trans. by A. H. C. Dounes (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955).

⁴² Speaking of the Pauline notion of the Church, he writes: "The difference is that the concept of the Church in the Old Testament is perfectly expressed by the concept of the People of God, while the Church in the New Testament is the People of God only because at the same time it is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit."

⁴³ He writes: "The Church in the New Testament remains God's People but it is a People of God newly constituted in Christ. The Church is the People of God because it is the body of Christ and it is the Body of Christ in a sense determined by, or grounded in, a concept of the People of God."—*Die Kirche im Neuen Testament, Quaest. Disp.*, 14 (Freiburg, 1961), p. 147. (English translation in preparation.)

⁴⁴ "The Church is the New Testament People of God, founded by Jesus Christ, hierarchically structured, minister-

ing to the advance of God's kingdom and the salvation of men, and this is the Mystical Body of Christ" (*op. cit.*, p. 48).

⁴⁵ See the studies cited *supra*, note 8 (in the vol. of 1961, pp. 119 f.).

⁴⁶ *Op. cit.* (note 21), p. 327.

⁴⁷ *Konfessionskunde* (Paderborn, 1950), pp. 78 f.: "The Church is the People of God consisting of the baptized, given life by the Holy Spirit, made visible in the Mystical Body of Christ, held together by the bond of faith taught by Christ as well as by the magisterium, liturgy, and sacramental system instituted by him."

⁴⁸ "Où en est la théologie du Corps mystique?" in *Rev. des Sciences relig.*, 22 (1948), pp. 313 f., 330 f.

⁴⁹ "Christ and His Church. Suggestions and Comments", in *L'Église et les Églises. Mélanges Dom L. Beauduin* (Chevetogne, 1954), II, pp. 159-70: "The continuous existence of the 'Church' throughout the whole of the biblical 'Heilsgeschichte' should be conceived and interpreted in such a way as to include the unique 'newness' of Christ, the incarnate Lord. And the notion of the 'People of God' is obviously inadequate for the purpose. Nor does it provide a sufficient link with the mystery of the cross and resurrection. . . ." (p. 166).

Translated by Kathryn Sullivan, R.S.C.I.