

UNDERSTANDING THE MYSTICAL BODY

A while ago, a Protestant mission was held in Cork on the theme, "The Church is the Body, the Bride, the Building of Christ." It may surprise us to see Protestants propounding this doctrine, which we are accustomed to regard as essentially Catholic. But actually it is a strange fact that Protestants are seldom found referring to that doctrine, which we would expect to find frequently, indeed constantly, on their lips, having regard to the fact that St. Paul was obsessed by it. The Church and the Body of Christ was his special theme. In one form or another, he makes 163 references to it in his Epistles. And as Protestants do, or at least until some time ago used to, read the Scriptures, one would expect to find them thinking in terms of that scriptural expression. So it is extraordinary that they dwell so little on it. I was much surprised myself when I read in one of their evangelical journals the other day an account of this Mission.

"PLUCK ONE THREAD AND THE WEB YE MAR"

Why is it that they dwell so little on that doctrine? The reason is that they do not take it seriously. They allow only a metaphorical sense to it. And, of course, if that be all, then they don't understand it at all. It is outside their grasp. If it is only a picturesque image it is an unreality. Then it is interesting to reflect that they are simultaneously treating another kindred doctrine in much the same limited way - that is the doctrine of the Eucharist. Here are Our Lord's words, as plain as plain can be, in the Scripture: This is My Body. But Protestants maintain that those words mean: This is not really My Body. There, too, they cannot bring themselves to believe that there is question of a reality. It is only a metaphor, a picturesque image placed before people. When Our Lord said: This is My Body, how could He mean that? How could this Man give us His Body to eat and His Blood to drink, as the objectors said on the occasion some time prior to Our Lord's institution of the sacrament? The human reasoning proves absolute. Whatever Our Lord said in words, well, He could not mean that reality, because how could He do it? There could be question only, as they argue today, of a spiritual presence, of grace coming to people. When they receive the bread and wine of their Communion, He comes to them in a spiritual way; there is a grace, but there is no more to it than that. That is how they explain the Eucharistic Presence, and much the same would be their notion of the presence of Christ in the Mystical Body. This double rejection brings us face to

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face with a feature of Catholic doctrine. It is, that if you meddle with one thing in it, you find you are interfering with nearly everything. I quote a little verse, here particularly apt:

Pluck one thread and the web ye mar;
Break but one of a thousand keys, and the paining jar
Through all will run.

If you distort the system at one point, you throw the whole lot out of line.

There is no unreality either in the Eucharist or in the Mystical Body. Christ in the Eucharist and Christ in the Mystical Body represent two different modes of presence. But both are real. It was the necessity to distinguish between those two modes that led to the introduction by the Church, somewhere in the Middle Ages, of that expression, "Mystical Body." It was not used in the earlier ages where bluntly St. Paul, and those who adopted His image, said "Body of Christ." But then when heresy began to raise its head, it became necessary to distinguish, and this led to the introduction of that expression which so many are found objecting to - Mystical Body. Again and again, we hear dislike of that phrase expressed and the wish that it could be improved upon. Unfortunately, it does in a way suggest a misty business, and unreality. But when you get down to it and try to find another term, it seems impossible. But no matter how little we like the name, we cannot repudiate the idea just because we dislike the name! That would be very much as if we were to reject the Pope because we did not like his name.

Now, having referred to that inadequate Protestant conception of the Mystical Body, we are rather shocked to realise that the outlook of many Catholics errs in the same way. How many Catholics? One trembles to estimate. It is uncomfortable, it is worse, to find a large proportion of Catholics with no higher estimation of the Mystical Body than that held by heretics. Thereby how much are they missing! They are missing the dynamism which is in that doctrine, a transforming one, and they may be missing a great deal more by virtue of that principle that I have just enunciated, that distorting one part of the fabric throws the whole lot of it out of line. In other words, you cannot disturb the Mystical Body idea in any way (and remember you disturb it by not understanding it). You cannot do that without paying a great price. And that is the theme to which I here apply myself.

THE CENTRAL DOGMA OF THE CHURCH

It seems to me that the person who is ignorant of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, giving it only that picturesque significance, is missing things that are

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vital. If we held the defective view of the Eucharist that the Protestants hold, we would not be Catholics at all. Then what is our status if we misunderstand the doctrine of the Mystical Body, which St. Thomas pronounces to be the central dogma of the Catholic Church? If we only understand it in a partial or picturesque sense, we may have reduced our belief to that of the Protestant preacher in the Mission. The summary of his talks showed that he believed that relation is established with Christ by believing in Him, by submitting to His Will, and by expressing His mind. It is an intellectual thing, or an emotional thing which God honours by giving some sort of special grace of union or grace of conversion! And actually in that Mission in Cork, many persons came forward at the end of the session and declared that they had thus received Christ during the meeting! One might be inclined to laugh at that, which is so typical of these revivalist meetings. But we would want to be sure that our own conception of the Mystical Body, and of the life of Christ in us, is not just as inadequate.

It would be inadequate to regard the Church as merely a visible society gifted with infallibility. It is a visible society, with its rulers, its laws, its membership. And it is gifted with that tremendous prerogative. But it is almost infinitely more. That society aspect is only, so to speak, the frame of the sublime reality. That conception would reduce the Church's role to the status of a sacred university empowered to rule and to teach the truth, whereas it is really the living Body of Christ, His up-to-date mode of existence, of which we are the members - true members, and not merely pupils. Through that Body, Our Lord lives His life in us and extends His mission into other lives and into all things. In that Body the Lord does much the same sort of things as He did long ago in His native Judea. If we lend ourselves to Him, He is enabled to exhibit His might. If we hold back, He is fettered, and souls have to pay the price, just because we will not realise what our function is. When we are inert, the Gospel is not preached to whole multitudes of people somewhere or other.

COMMUNION OF LIFE WITH CHRIST

In that Mystical Body there is a communion of lives and benefits and, in a certain sense, of disadvantages also between the Lord and the members. The word "disadvantages" rings peculiarly in that context. But we must remember that while Christ is now incapable of suffering, His life on earth included great labour and painfulness, and these must always mark the Christian life. On the other hand, the life of Christ was one of power and attraction and victory. Therefore, I repeat that it is imperative that we grasp the general idea of what is meant by the Mystical Body.

It is vital to our existence, to our life, to the whole question of the salvation of

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souls. Without it, it is impossible to get an idea or understanding of what is at stake in Redemption and in apostleship. Sometimes it is said that this doctrine of the Mystical Body represents inaccessible doctrine. That used to be said much more often before the advent of the Legion. The Legion has opened people's eyes to it because the operation of the Legion have made it plain that the ordinary man and woman, even the ordinary young person, is well able to get a working idea of the doctrine. And that is how we would expect things to be. If the truth is vital, it must be comprehensible. Actually I would go so far as to say that it is a simpler doctrine to glimpse than the Eucharist, yet the Eucharist is proposed to little children for their practice.

I have said that apostleship depends upon this doctrine of the Mystical Body. If that idea be taken away, what is apostleship? You and I going out to people in our own feebleness trying to tell them something about the Lord and His way? Not at all; it is the Lord going out in us, which is a different thing altogether. The Head depends on His members. If they do not lend themselves to Him, His purposes are frustrated. And on the other hand, without Him we are nothing, and we can do nothing. With Him we can literally do all things. Life becomes an adventure comparable to Christ's own life on earth. If Our Lord is carrying on His life in the Mystical Body, His full life, then we should find in that Body the exhibition of all His special features. One of these features, the apostolate, we have discussed.

MARY AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

A second one, of vital moment to us, is His extraordinary relation to His mother. That relationship must appear in the Mystical Body! If what I am saying is true - and it certainly is - if Our Lord is really living on in the Mystical Body in the same way and with the same characteristics and purpose as He did His life on earth, then we must find that wonderful relation which he had to Mary, His mother, prominently shown forth in the life of the Mystical Body. That relation was not a purely physical and sentimental one. Primarily it was in the order of faith and grace. So that the union between Our Lord and His Mother persisted and deepened throughout their lives. In other words, it was quite different from the union of the ordinary person with his mother. The union in the latter case is of completeness until the time of birth; then there is a modified and diminished union; the physical union diminishes, and in time ceases. It would be the greatest of all mistakes to think that this was what took place as between Our Lord and His Mother; that there was borne in her womb - that quasi-identity, but that after the time of the Nativity there was that lessening which takes place in the human relation. Not so at all. For the union of soul was the chief thing. There was no lessening, but rather an intensification as time went on, because Our Lady grew

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prodigiously in grace with every moment, so that quickly a degree of union between Son and Mother was reached with was beyond all possible imagining. She was *far* more united to Him in later life, even when they were not seeing each other - say during the three years' mission - than she was during the time when He dwelt in her womb.

She had started that amazing relation by acting as the representative of mankind in its reception of the Messiah. That reception was built on a stupendous act of faith which we cannot appreciate, but which reason tells us could have proceeded from her alone of all persons ever to be born. That relation gave her special rights over Him all His life. In other words, the relation of Jesus and Mary was a totally different character from that which exists or could exist between any other man and his mother. Those rights were similar to, but indeed greater than, those which a parent has over its very young child. And the divine arrangement established those rights, and indeed was built upon them. It looked to Mary to offer her child freely in sacrifice, and simultaneously with the offering of that same Child by His Heavenly Father for our salvation. Therefore, all through her life He is, in a strange sense, subjected to her. You will recall the use of the word in the Gospel of St. Luke. And she was offering Him all the time, even though only at certain special epochs in her life did that offering emerge into visibility. There was her offering in the Presentation, and then the surrender of Him on Calvary, which formed an integral part of the offering up of the Victim.

If we contemplate that wonderful situation and then apply to it the theory which I have been presenting to you, it becomes obvious that this relation between Son and Mother must continue in the Mystical Body, and be a most prominent characteristic of it. How? The Mystical Body must be found subject to Mary, acknowledging her, submitting to her maternal office and recognising her rights, living in utter union with her, so that all things are done with her. What does that come to in practice? It seems to come to the sort of devotion which the Legion proposes - nothing more and nothing less. Further, it seems to suggest that those who give her less are erring by defect. They are not reproducing the attitude of Christ. If others acted as they do, then that essential characteristic of Jesus Christ, which should be found in the Mystical Body, would be falsified. Because the Mystical Body would not then be exhibited as faithfully carrying on the life of Our Lord.

THE COMPLETE MOTHER

The moment that we fail in appreciation of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, it seems to become very difficult to place Our Lady in her proper setting. Her

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true place, doctrinally, rests on the fact that she is the Mother of the Mystical Body with the same completeness with which she was mother of Christ. If we lose sight of this, we edge dangerously towards not merely defect but towards common Protestantism. The more enlightened type of Protestant is willing to give a sort of devotion to Mary as the Mother of Christ. They speak of her in what looks to be a beautiful strain, and one could easily be deceived. She is the Woman, that exquisite Woman, who brought Christ to us, and to whom He owed His correct upbringing. And then they say: Of course we must love her and be grateful to her for that. Which does not sound so bad; and perhaps by comparison with other things it is not so bad. Nevertheless, it is ridiculously inadequate. It is so insufficient as to be nothing at all. They are willing to give her a historical reverence. Just because she played that creditable part in the distant past, she is surrounded with a sentimental glamour in their eyes and in their mind. That is nothing, or at least it is little better than nothing. Because if that is all she is, why should we worship her? Why should we assign to her what looks like a half place in our prayers? When we mention Jesus we mention Mary. Why? Protestants do not understand that, and accordingly they cut her out of their prayers altogether. They give her lip service based on sentiment, but they give her no prayer. Because that is in a different order. Therein they are logical - if she is only the mother of the historical Christ. They do not understand her because they do not understand the Mystical Body. They regard our attitude towards her as one of inexcusable sentimentality; inexcusable because it causes us to give her so much attention which they say we should be giving to the Lord.

But indeed there is no sentimentality whatever in the transaction. Our Lady has her relation to us just as Our Lord has His relation to us. We depend on Him, we depend on her. We get our life from Him and from her, and therefore, we owe her as well as Him the tribute of our worship. She is infinitely less than Christ; she is dependent on Him. She gets her life from Him. But that said, she is necessary to Him by the arrangement of God, and she is necessary to us.

AUTHORITY AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

I have quoted the inadequate view Protestants have of Our Lady and I have ventured to ascribe it to their imperfect understanding of the idea of the Mystical Body. To the same cause I assign their inability to grasp the doctrine of the authority and the infallibility of the Church. They have a different notion of the Church altogether from what we have, so different that there is no likeness between the two. We hold lengthy arguments with them on those subjects. We quote to them the texts of Scripture which relate to those points, and which seem to us to be so clear and convincing. What could be more plain? We do not understand what their difficulty is, and we are inclined to regard them as

completely perverse, which no doubt a certain proportion of them are. But not all. Many of them are earnest people really seeking the truth. So let us for the moment shift away from the texts, and let us look at this particular problem from the point of view that we have been discussing, that is, from the angle of the Mystical Body.

We understand that Our Lord is living in His fullness in the Church. Protestants express the same idea in words, but do not give it the proper substance. If they did, they would be constrained to admit that Jesus continues to speak in the Church, and that the teaching and the quality of that teaching must be in clear evidence. He must be found speaking through the Church as He did on earth, that is, as one having authority and as one teaching unerring truth. This can amount to nothing else but that the Church is infallible. There is no escape from that reasoning. If the Church is really understood as the Mystical Body of Christ, then infallibility must be there as an absolute consequence. There is the further consequence that if infallibility is in the Mystical Body, then the latter must be the Catholic Church. For the Church, like Our Lord Himself, must be found claiming to be the sole representative of the Father, and to be delivering the whole Truth. And there is only one claimant. Among the churches, or so-called churches of the world, there is only one claimant, and it is the Church of which we have the unutterable privilege of being members.

THE MASS AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

And now to speak of another feature of Our Lord's life that is His Passion and His sacrifice which redeemed us. Apply once more that pivotal reasoning from the Mystical Body, and it is clear that the full sacrifice of Christ simply must be found showing itself in the Christian life - yesterday, today, tomorrow and forever. Not as a symbolic or shadowy representation, not as the symbolic ceremonial called the Holy Communion Service in the Protestant Church, but as sheer reality. Not as a new separate ceremony, but as a prolongation or continuation of the Great Sacrifice. In a word, Calvary must continue among us in a very real way, hidden, of course, from our eyes as Christ Himself is hidden from our eyes today, but just as really present in the Mystical Body as Christ Himself is present in it. The Mass conforms to all this, and nothing less would meet those requirements. Through our priest, Christ exercises His function as High Priest, and the Victim is the Mystical Body which includes Christ and ourselves. The Mass carries on the sacrifice of Christ. Without the Mass, according to our doctrine, the Mystical Body would not be the fullness of Christ, as St. Paul proclaims it to be. Here again we perceive the all-importance of inviting Protestants to look deeper into *their* doctrine of the Mystical Body, so as to see in it not a picturesque phrase but a stern truth, not a mere image but a

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reality, not a metaphor but a living thing - a living Body, and that Body the Body of Christ, living on earth today as actively, as lovingly, as potently, as painfully, as miraculously, as victoriously, as Christ did in His earthly career.

If it is important that Protestants be made to see that, it is still more important that all Catholics should. It is indeed sad that Protestants should be without those truths; it is intolerable that Catholics should be in ignorance of the heritage which the Church possesses. If Protestants, by reason of their shadowy conception of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, exclude themselves from a comprehension of vital Christian truths, what effect would that same shadowy conception have on Catholics? Is it not likely to cut them off more or less effectively from the proper understanding of the Blessed Virgin, and of her pivotal place in Redemption and in the application of Redemption? Likewise, would it not cut them off from a proper idea of the Mass; likewise, from the true aspect of the Church, its nature, its authority, its infallibility, and its apostolate? In a word, would not the weakening of the truth of the Mystical Body mean that we were unconsciously being Protestantised?