

## THE CHURCH

Throughout these talks I have been making the point that God's plan in creating humanity was that the two communities – the Trinity and humanity – will be integrated into one community. When I spoke to you about Jesus and the Holy Spirit I pointed out that they were the two links binding the two communities to each other. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, therefore, the God humankind community began to exist on this Earth. As it was put traditionally: Pentecost is the Church's birthday.

But if that is so, where can we see this God humankind community? And the answer is: the Church. For the Church is a community of people who profess God Father as their father, God the Son as their brother, and the Holy Spirit as the bond of love binding them all together. The Church therefore is where we see this united community taking shape and growing down the ages.

The second Vatican Council called the Church 'a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind. Note the words 'the visible Church is the sign of the unity *of all humankind*'. The Church's lifestyle and structures should be in themselves a testimony to the unity God has destined for the whole of humanity and not only for people of a particular race or culture.

There is so much to say about the Church that some 80 images or titles of the Church can be found in the scriptures. But three of them sum up its essential nature.

The *first one* is 'The People of God'. This image emphasises the relationship between the members of the Church and God the Father. The title 'People of God' was Israel's proudest one. However, Christians believed that membership of that people was now extended to all who embraced Christ, whether they be Jews or not. And so they felt entitled to take over the title and call themselves the new people of God.

This title also stresses the continuity between Judaism and Christianity. Even if Judaism sees us as an heretical offshoot of it, we see ourselves as embodying and thereby proclaiming the good news that the promises made to Israel by God have been fulfilled. Anti-Semitism is perhaps the ugliest cancer on the Christian body. For by it we attack and defile our deep Jewish roots. It may not look very Jewish to most people but many of our practices and symbols, even the way parts of the mass are structured, are derived from our Jewish origins.

Calling the Church 'the people of God' also stresses that it is the people who are the Church, all the people and not just those who have been ordained to care for it. And this in turn means that it should look like a people, a community. For centuries the Church was defined as an organisation, structured hierarchically. The authority for running the Church and ultimately for the salvation of souls flowed from the Pope, who gave some of it to the bishops and its last drops ended up with the priests. Unfortunately this contributed to the gradual stripping from the laity of their dignity and rights as members of God's people. They lost the right to vote for whom they wanted as Bishop, for whom they wanted as a priest to serve them and for what was or was not in conformity with the Church's faith. In the end they were reduced to being nothing more than sheep, whose sole duty was to follow their shepherds. That was how Pope Pius IX described them. Vatican II's stress on the fact that the Church was first and foremost a community, God's community, the people of God, laid the foundations for restoring those rights. Many of you here will remember the excitement and the joy of people when they became aware of all that that title implied. People started repeating with pride and dignity but also with an unfortunate degree of militancy: 'we are the Church', forgetting at times that so too are the clergy.

The Church's *second* title highlights the relationship between the Church and Christ. The title is "the Body of Christ. What is new about the new People of God is that they are bound together by Christ's Spirit of Love and not by descent from Abraham or by the Law of Moses. The new people of God form one living body with Christ and through Christ with each other. Love unites and by uniting transforms all it unites. We are therefore transformed by the presence of God within us, the three persons who have brought us into their

communal life. When **St Paul** first used this image of the body, he did so simply to illustrate unity in diversity: just as a body as many parts but remains one body so too is it with Christ. But as he thought more deeply about the matter it ceased to be simply an image to illustrate a point. Instead, he came to see us as been living parts of Christ's risen body. If Paul had lived in our era, in which we can transplant organs from someone's dead body into the body of a living person, in which this organ, unlike a steel implant, now lives with the life of the new body, I'm sure that Paul would have said 'you have all been *transplanted* into the body of the risen Christ.' So close and so deep is the unity that Christ forges between him and us.

The *third title* for the Church expresses its relationship to the Holy Spirit. It is "The Temple of the Holy Spirit". Jesus spoke of himself as God's temple. He shares with us that gift of the Holy Spirit's presence within us. As members of Christ's Body and therefore the people of God, we are the true temples of the Holy Spirit. By dwelling within us, the Holy Spirit envelopes us in God's love that little by little transforms us into people whose love will one day transform them as totally as Christ was transformed the day he rose from the dead. The real place where Father, Son and the Holy Spirit expect us to look for them is in other people. If that is so, then every human being has a right to our deepest respect.

So, the Church is where we see the God-human community taking shape in this world . But there's another question lurking in the shadows. Where do I find this Church? When one looks a bit more closely at Christianity, there are many different organisations, with different teachings, different structures – and some don't even recognise others as being part of Christ's Church. At one end of the spectrum, there is the view that as long as a community confesses Jesus as Lord and Saviour, then they are part of Christ's Church. At the other end of the spectrum there are those who say that only that denomination which has preserved intact all the essential structures of Christ's Church can claim to be Christ's Church in all its fullness. This is the position of the Catholic Church. But note the words "in all its fullness". This means that other Christian communities can be part of the Church but lack one or other item which we regard as essential to the full visible structuring in this life of the God-humankind community. Such communities can deserve the name Church or the lesser name "ecclesial community", depending on the extent to which they lack essential items.

This way of viewing our separated brethren was developed and proclaimed at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council. Prior to that the official position was that most of the other Churches were not Churches at all. Moreover their official worship was false and Catholics could not participate in it. This conviction was summed up in the saying “we are the one true Church of Christ”.

This gave the impression that outside the Catholic Church there is nothing but error. Which of course was not true. So the Council positively affirmed the truth and values that radiated from these communities - and above all it acknowledged the obvious working of the Holy Spirit in their midst. The old idea that a community either is or is not Christ’s Church was therefore replaced by the idea that Christ’s Church could have different degrees of visible expression.

But the Council also did not want to deny the core of truth in the old attitude. That was the conviction that in the Catholic Church alone was there to be found all the essential elements for the visible structuring of Christ’s Church. So instead of saying that Christ’s Church IS the Catholic Church they said that Christ’s Church ‘SUBSISTS IN’ the Catholic Church. This indicated that other Churches could be parts of Christ’s Church. But it also implied that the Catholic church was not just a *part of Christ’s Church but rather its full visible expression* because the Catholic Church alone contained all the structures essential for the visible shaping of the Church. For example, in the Catholic Church alone is there a divinely instituted ministry, whereby one of the bishops takes over Peter’s ministry of care for the visible unity of the entire church. That Bishop has traditionally been the Bishop of Rome and everybody calls him the Pope.

The replacing of “IS” with “SUBSISTS IN” was responsible for the huge changes in the Catholic Church’s attitude towards other Christian Churches, other religions, and even atheists, that became characteristic of Catholicism after Vatican II. It is one of the foundations of contemporary Catholicism.