

## VI. THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

So far we have seen that for the intelligent living of life, men need to know the purpose of their being and the laws by which they should govern their lives: and it has been established that man is totally incapable of finding these out for himself and can know them only if God reveals them. Further, we have seen that for the achievement of his purpose—namely, to live the life of Heaven—the natural life of man is not sufficient: that men need certain further powers in the soul, that these flow from the Supernatural Life, that men must acquire this Supernatural Life here upon earth; and again that they cannot acquire it for themselves, but can have it only if God gives it.

These three things—truth, law, life—we have seen, would have been necessary in any condition of the human race. But the first man—Adam—complicated the position by breaking the friendship of the human race with God and so closing heaven to the race. Heaven then had to be made once more a possibility, after which the three original requirements would still be in force. Christ came to offer Himself as sacrifice to God in atonement for the sin

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of the race, and so opened Heaven once more to man; and He brought the gifts man needed of truth, law and life. On the question how men were to obtain these gifts from Him the last chapter closed.

Now to this question there is a very simple and satisfying answer. While He was upon this earth, Christ gathered a small band of followers, the disciples. Of these He selected twelve—the Apostles, of whom one, Peter, was singled out from the others—took them about with Him, taught them, and when He was about to leave the earth gave them a commission to teach the truths and the laws He wished men to know: to administer the sacraments by which His life might flow to the souls of men. Thus, when He left the world, He left His followers as a body among whom were officials, with Peter at their head, who could transmit the truth, law, life men needed: by joining this body, then, men could receive from its officials what all men need. Christ extended their commission to all nations: that it might survive the ages, He extended it to the end of the world: that the teaching and the life might never fail, He promised to be with them in the work He had given them to do. Thus, then, you have His arrangement. His followers, still united with the successor of Peter, the visible point of unity, were to be one body till the end of time: and in that body they should receive teaching which is infallible, because Christ is with it, and sacraments which are channels of true life, because Christ is with them.

The Church, thus understood, is a great thing: a thing immeasurably beyond man's deserts, and fulfilling the three primary needs. But that is not all. He who sees only that is missing the depth of it.

For observe that, as stated, it leaves two questions unsettled. The first is this: the work of God among men is a close-knit, deeply-intertwined thing without loose ends. Why then should men share in the benefits of Christ's atonement? He offered a redeeming sacrifice—but where do men come in? How can they share in His act?

And the second is this: Christ said: "I *am* the Way, and Truth and the Life." The description of the Church set out above would be perfect if He had said *have*: but He said *am*. What has become of that mysterious word?

"I AM THE LIFE"

Let us consider the second question first: Christ is the life, the life that must live in us if we are to be capable of Heaven. *Christ then must live in us*. How? How can one being live in another? Here we must follow very closely. We dare not abandon the phrase with a vague feeling that its general meaning is obvious and edifying, but that it will not bear too close inspection. For He comes back to this idea of His living in men again and again, literally scores of times. Like every word of Christ, this one demands the closest scrutiny. No words were ever weighed as His were, and if by chance we should

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forget that, St. Paul shocks us back to attention: "I live, yet now not I, but *Christ liveth in me.*"

At the same time Our Lord constantly speaks of our living in Him. There is then a twofold *in*. He must live in us. We must live in Him.

In our own natures we find the clue to the answer. Our bodies are composed of countless cells, living cells. The cells, we say, are living in the body. It would be truer to the order of real values to say that the body is living in the cells. That is the right order of thought. The cells live not with their own life, but with the life of the body. There is one life of the whole man and by it the cells of his body live. Somehow then we must be in Christ as the cells are in our body: then Christ will live in us as we live in our bodily cells. Here again thought might falter: but St. Paul works it out very clearly. Christ, living on this earth, had a human body, in which He worked among men. He taught with His lips, healed with His hands, converted sinners with the look of His eyes, gave Supernatural Life with His breath, made atonement with the suffering of His body. And all this, done through His body, was done by Himself, God. He has left the earth: He is eternally in Heaven at the right-hand of the Father: but He still works among men in His body, no longer in His *natural body*, the body that was brought into being in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Ghost, but in His *mystical body*, the Church, the body that was brought into being in the Upper

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Room after His ascension by the power of the Holy Ghost. The Church, then, is His body, linked to Him really, organically, inseparably, as a body to its head: His life flows through the Church as my life flows through my body. My body has cells: and so has His. And as I live in the individual cells of *my* body, so He lives in the individual cells of His body. Membership of His Church then means more than joining up with a useful organization from which many spiritual benefits may be derived. His Church is—mysteriously but *really*—His body. Joining it means being built into His body—that is to say incorporated with Him. Once we are thus incorporated with Him, we are cells in His body, He can live in us.

That is the Church—the living body of Christ. Because of this, Christ could say to Saul when he was persecuting the Church—“Why persecutest thou Me?” So, Christ’s own words, “I am with you all days even to the end of the world,” have a more immense depth of meaning than we at first knew. So we see the meaning of that strange word *am*—“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” To be in the way we must be in Him: to possess the truth we must possess Him: to have the life in us, He must live in us.

## REDEEMED HUMANITY

To this idea of the Church we have come, following up the second of the two questions left unsolved:



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it will now be seen that we have found the answer to the first as well—how can Christ's atonement be shared in by us? It is easy enough to see how we are involved in Adam's loss: for Adam is the representative man, the ancestor of all men. In him, by nature all men were incorporated. But men may be incorporated in Christ too, not by nature but by super-nature, not by birth but by baptism, the first of the sacraments (treated more fully in Chapter XI). That is the immense importance of baptism,\* repeated again and again by St. Paul: "Being baptized in Christ we have put on Christ." Incorporated with Adam by birth, which makes us men, we share in his loss: incorporated with Christ by baptism, which makes us Christians, we share in His act of redemption. Both Adam and Christ are representative men: Adam because he is the first man, Christ because He is the perfect man. Adam was the head of the human race: Christ is the head of redeemed humanity. We come from Adam: we come to Christ.

In this view of the Church we see how all our needs are met. Incorporated, built into the mystical body of Christ, we share in the benefits of His atonement, we are reconciled with God, and to us, as members of redeemed humanity, Heaven is once more open. From that Church, which is thus

\* This book is concerned with God's plan for mankind in what may be called its normal working. There is no discussion here of the position of those who are not baptized or of baptized non-Catholics.

united with Christ, we receive Christ's teaching—so that we may know the truths bearing on the meaning and purpose of our lives, and the laws by which we may live rightly. In that Church we are so united to Christ that the Supernatural Life pours into our souls. The whole of man's needs are thus met, those needs which have been kept constantly in mind from the beginning of this book.

But there is a wider horizon yet. This mystical body of Christ is the Church. But the Church is not only a thing of this world. It contains not only its members still in this life, but also all who have died with the Supernatural Life in their souls—whether having attained their goal they are in heaven, or in final preparation for Heaven they are in Purgatory.

The mystical body is a growing body. All who die with the Supernatural Life are in it for ever: each new member is a new cell. There will come a point, St. Paul tells us, when the mystical body will have grown to its perfect stature, in some such way as a natural body reaches its fullest development. When that time comes, the human race will have achieved its purpose and the world will come to an end. For there is a purpose for the whole race as well as for the individual man, and the end of the world will be not simply a decision by God that the world has gone on long enough, but will definitely mean that the race has achieved its purpose.

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But the end of the world is not yet. And meanwhile the Church is in the world, acting upon its members, acting upon the world at large. Not all its members here below are fully receptive of the life of Christ: some, as we shall see in a moment, while remaining members, have totally shut off from their souls the stream of Christ's life. Thus the Church, the actual visible Church here below, presents itself under a double aspect. In so far as it is Christ Himself living in men—for the teaching of truth, for the promulgation of the moral law, for the lifegiving work of the sacraments—it is perfect. In so far as it is considered in its human members (even its officials) vivified in their varying degrees or not vivified at all by the life of the Body, it is always short of perfection, sometimes very far short. But perfect it is one day to be.

## THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Meanwhile see how the map of life grows in the light of this fact of the Church. We have to live our lives not as isolated units, but as members of a living thing, united organically with Christ and with all men, living and dead, who are in the love of God. This is the full force of the Communion of Saints—the oneness of all men in Christ.

Because we are members of Christ's Body we are one with Him: and also we are one with one another. In a body, one member can help another: if the foot



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be hurt the hand can tend it. So in the mystical body: one man can help another, by prayer and teaching and sacrifice. Here upon earth our prayers for one another are thus fruitful: we can pray for the souls in Purgatory: the souls in Heaven can pray for us. It has to some been a difficulty that death should be no barrier to this stream of prayer. That one living Christian should pray for another, or ask another to pray for him, has always seemed obviously right. But within the Body of Christ, death makes no difference. The soul of one who has left this world is not less a member of the same body as we, but is living more intensely with the life of Christ which we also share. If we should have asked him to pray for us during his life, we do so now more than ever. One striking characteristic of the Catholic Church is that real friendships do exist between her children still upon earth and one or other of the saints in heaven. Sin is a barrier between souls: death is not. There is this constant flow of prayer throughout the whole body: for we are not members simply of one society, we are members of one thing—a living thing.

## LIFE IN THE BODY

It is necessary now to see what all this comes to in practical effect upon us. We are cells in the body of Christ, so that He lives in us and we have one life in common with all men, in this world and the next,

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who are in the love of God. But observe that all this refers to the *Supernatural Life*—the life by which man is to be able to live the life of heaven. *Supernaturally* we, the cells, live with the life of Christ. But our natural life is not destroyed: and *naturally* we live with our own lives. Now it is part of our nature that we have free will, and part of our natural life to exercise it. We can do so in one of three ways: we can yield our wills wholly to God: or we can yield them to God, but not wholly: or we can reject God. And according to the use we thus make will be our state in the mystical body. If we yield ourselves wholly to the Supernatural Life, the life of the mystical body, then we are living supernaturally at the fullest intensity. If our wills are not *wholly* yielded to God, then we hinder the flow of the Supernatural Life in us and though we are living supernaturally, though we are still sharing the life of the body so that Christ really lives in us, yet that life is not present in its fullest intensity.

And if, being once incorporated—that is, built into the body of Christ—our wills turn against God and reject Him for self—then we shut off the stream of life altogether and though we remain in the body we are dead cells\*—retaining our natural life, which is of no avail for salvation—but without the Supernatural Life. While we are still in this world, Super-

\* For a more detailed discussion of the state of those who have lost the Supernatural Life, see p. 125.

natural Life may be set flowing again, as we shall see. But if at the moment of our earthly death we are thus dead cells in the body, we are cut out from the body and eternally lost.

Sufficient has been said to show how our position in the Church lays open to us life and the knowledge of truth and law. It remains now to examine the truth, the law and the life in detail. Two chapters will be devoted to each of these.

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### *Discussion Aids*

Is it enough for man to know the purpose of his being and the laws by which to govern his life? Sketch the provision (the Church) Christ made while on earth by which men should obtain the gifts of truth, love and life. Has the Church a deeper meaning than the dispensing of these gifts? Does it enable men to share in the act of His redeeming sacrifice? (Yes) Does it make Christ live in men? Explain this, using as an analogy the body and the cells. Explain the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. Explain the texts "Why persecutest thou Me?" and "I am with you all days even to the end of the world" in the light of this doctrine. How does it clarify the text "I *am* the Way, the Truth and the Life?"

### *Redeemed Humanity*

To go back to an earlier question, does the Church enable men to share in the act of Christ's redeeming sacrifice? How are men incorporated in Adam? In Christ? What is the importance of Baptism? How does Baptism make us sharers in Christ's act of redemption?

## DISCUSSION OUTLINE FOR A MAP OF LIFE

Summarize the case for the Church as the answer to the whole of man's needs. Is the Church a thing of this world only? Is it a static body? Explain and discuss. Is the Church perfect? Explain.

### *The Communion of Saints*

What is the Communion of Saints? How does it bear out the doctrine of the social solidarity of the human race? What bonds unite the members? Is death a barrier to the bond of prayer? Why not?

### *Life in the Body*

Distinguish between Supernatural Life and natural life. Does free will belong to our natural life? In what three ways may we use it? How does our use of free will affect our state in the Mystical Body? When are we dead cells in this Body? What is our eternal status if we are dead cells at the time of death?

**Practice:** Be aware of your participation in Christ's redeeming act of sacrifice and assist at Mass as often as you can.