

THE CHURCH AND CHARITY*

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THE Church and Charity are two realities which are intimately connected with one another: the community (*koinonia*) which is the Church is grounded in a loving union (*agape*) and the union which is charity (*agape*) is in turn based on a communion (*koinonia*). To state more precisely the relationship existing between the Church and charity will be our concern in what follows.

Of the many references in Holy Scripture to the bond which exists between the Church and charity the most notable is that of Ephesians 4, 15-16: 'Rather we should hold the truth in charity, and grow in all things into him who is the head, Christ. From him the whole body, welded and compacted together by means of every joint of the system, part working in harmony with part—from him the body deriveth its increase, unto the building up of itself in charity.'

It is charity which 'builds up the Church' (*koinonia*) and it is the Church which through Christ joins in fellowship the divine Persons, the angels and men (cf. 1 John 1, 3-7).

Christ our Lord prayed to his Father: 'that they all may be one, even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee—that they too may be in us' (John 17, 21). Those, then, who grow in Christ are 'perfected in unity' (John 17, 23), and the world knows that the Father loves mankind as he loves his Son because the love of the Father for the Son is in them.

It is the constant teaching of the Fathers and of tradition that the Holy Spirit is by appropriation the bond of love. Father and Son are fast knit together in the Holy Spirit who seals their unity of love. And it is the Holy Spirit who fills the hearts of the faithful with his love (cf. Rom. 5, 5). It is charity, 'that charity which is of the Spirit' (Rom. 15, 30), which unites and establishes in a single society (*koinonia*) the three divine Persons and the members of Christ's mystical body. It was because of their mutual love

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that the early Christians called one another brothers and held all things in common (cf. Acts 2, 42-47; 4, 32-35). Having the same charity they loved the same things with one soul and one mind (Phil. 2, 2), and were fully united in the one mind and judgment (I Cor. 1, 10); it was because of their love that they confessed the same faith (Philemon 6) as co-partners in Jesus in the tribulation and in the kingdom and in patience (Apoc. 1, 9); being of a single mind one towards another they rejoiced with them that rejoiced and wept with them that wept (Rom. 11, 15); they were ready at all times to provide for the needs of others (Rom. 12, 13) and to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 2, 6); and at the heart of that life of fellowship (*koinonia*) in charity, giving meaning to it, was the breaking of the bread and the common life of prayer. The Eucharist is the perfect communion in fellowship of Christ and all his members: 'The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not fellowship (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not fellowship (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? We many are one bread, one body, for we all partake of the same bread' (I Cor. 10, 16-17); and this bread of which we all partake is both the sacrament of the unity of the Church and the sacrament of love. As the sacrament of love the Eucharist gives what it manifests, namely, love; and it is this same charity which gives unity to the Church; charity, to use St Thomas's metaphor, is the cement which binds each of Christ's members one to another and all together to Christ.¹

There, very briefly, is what faith tells us of the place of charity in the Church and of the role of fellowship in charity. We must now see what contribution theology can make to our study.

I

THE CHURCH (KOINONIA) AS THE BASIS OF CHARITY

Charity is something supernatural and that not merely so far as our knowledge of it is concerned but also in itself, for it is something divine. Hence it is impossible, strictly speaking, to give a definition of charity. The nearest we can get to an understanding of it is by thinking of it in terms

¹ in Eph. 2, lec. 5.

of friendship. This is St Thomas's approach; for him charity is a 'kind of friendship': *quaedam amicitia* (unfortunately too many of the textbooks on this subject forget the *quaedam*). Friendship is the highest form of human love: in willing the good of the person loved it is utterly selfless and disinterested, the other is loved for his own sake; and it is something communicative, for friendship is necessarily a mutual love between two or more persons. Now charity lacks none of the perfections which are essential to the notion of friendship; furthermore it is something richer and fuller in content. Hence we may rightly speak of charity as friendship, but always with this rider: that no human concept is adequate to express fully the truth of this, or any other, divine reality.

Nevertheless charity is truly said to be friendship since the unity-community relationship in charity is analogical to that which exists in friendship.

The more friends are alive to one another's presence, the more they are drawn together; there is a greater urge to unite in fellowship and a deeper desire in each to give to the other what is best in himself; the perfection of this movement of love is the desire to share life together; but living together does not mean that the limit of friendship has been reached, for the process goes on deepening and increasing those qualities which first attracted the partners to one another. These are facts of experience and Aristotle argued from the facts to the conclusion that friendship is based on a community (*koinonia*), a community of mind, will, action and life. It is this community which gives birth to friendship, nourishes it and brings it to its perfection.

Since charity is a kind of friendship we can apply to it the same criterion whereby we judge of friendship; and so we can say that charity is based on a community (*koinonia*). But the community, the common good, in this case is divine beatitude, the blessedness of the three divine Persons offered to angels and men as a life they are invited to share. Thus St Thomas describes this friendship (*koinonia*) which is charity as: 'the society of the blessed and of those who are on the way to beatitude'.²

² IIIa qu. 144.

Charity, then, is something built upon the communication (*koinonia*) of the divine beatitude.³ The notion of basis or foundation is not one which has excited the attention of theologians to any great extent. All that St Thomas says about it is that the foundation is what lies at the bottom of a building, whose support is necessary for the holding together of the various parts of the building.⁴ It is not, in his view, just a material cause⁵; it is also something which contains within itself, virtually, the whole building.⁶ St Thomas, in fact, likens the foundation of anything to the roots of a tree which support and nourish the tree.⁷

Yet much more is implied in the idea of foundation when we say that a sharing in the divine life (*koinonia*) is the foundation upon which charity builds. St Thomas several times speaks of this divine friendship (*koinonia*) as the cause of our charity.⁸ He goes further and says that charity is to be identified with this divine community or society.⁹ What does this mean if not that *koinonia* must amount to the essence and substance of charity, is made up of charity?

II

THE CHURCH AS THE OBJECT OF CHARITY

If we consider now the object of charity we find new light thrown on the relationship between the Church and charity.

It is characteristic of love that it bears upon two objects in one and the same movement—or rather we should say that it bears on two aspects of one and the same reality: there is *the good* that I love and the *person to whom* I will the good. St Thomas, following Aristotle, describes the act of love as ‘willing good to someone’. Health for instance is one such good; I love health as a perfection to be possessed by some person, either by myself or by my friend, or by any human being.

If I love my friend it is because of some good quality that I find in him (or want him to have); the good quality

³ For ‘communicatio’ cf. IIa IIae 24, 2, c; 12, c; c. 25, 5 obj. 2, 25, 8, 1m, 10 1m, 12 c; 26, 1, c; 2 c; III S. 18, 1, 7, c. in Joa. 13, 34 lec. 7.

⁴ IIa IIae, 4, 7, 4m. ⁵ IIa IIae, 23, 8, 2m. ⁶ IIIa 90, 3, 2m.

⁷ IIa IIae 3, 8, 2, m. ⁸ IIa IIae, 26, 4 c; 5 c.

⁹ IIIa C.G. 144, IIa IIae 25, 2 c, et 2m; III S. 29, 1, 6, De Car. 2 c. fine. Contra imp. De cultum c. 3.

is (or will be) really and truly his. In other words, the movement of the love of friendship is always directed towards a person. When I love my friend I desire *his* good; that is what is meant by saying that a friend is loved for his own sake¹⁰ with a love that is called benevolence. Because of my friendship for a person I want him to have such-and-such a thing. The good in question I love only in reference to the friend as recipient—my love for the good is known as love of concupiscence, but it is better called simply desire.¹¹

Hence, in every love of friendship these two aspects cannot be separated: benevolence and desire; desire for a good, and benevolence for a person.

There are as many kinds of love as there are reasons for desiring any particular good. A thing may be desired because it is useful; or, because it is pleasurable; or again, because it is lovable in itself (*utile, delectabile, honestum*). These three aspects of the object of desire give the three different species of love. In the love of friendship the object of desire is a good lovable in itself and not merely useful or pleasurable, but neither of these aspects can be the motive for our desire of the good in an act of the love of friendship.¹² We ought to give to the word friend a wider extension than we normally do: the love which exists between parents and children can be love of friends; so, too, can be the love between citizens of the same state. In short, friendship exists wherever there is a mutual love between persons based on the common desire of an object as something good in itself. It is this truth which supplies the clue to St Thomas's teaching on charity in terms of friendship.

But further, there are as many kinds of friendship as there are things desirable in themselves. The thing desired is the formal object of the act of the love of friendship; that is, it specifies the kind of friendship; the persons who are friends are, as theologians used to say, the 'material' object. What they want to say will be explained by an example. The various sciences are differentiated according to that aspect of reality which is their proper and peculiar object of study: it is their 'formal' object (medicine, for example,

¹⁰ De Car. II, 6m; Ia IIae, 32, 6. III S. 27, 2, 1, II m; 29, 4.

¹¹ I C.G. 91. De perf. vit. spirit. c. 13. ¹² De perf. vit. spirit. c. 13.

deals with the human body from the point of view of health; art, too, has the human body as its material object but its own proper interest in the human body is beauty of form; medicine and art have the same material object: the human body). In the same way, our love for one another is different according to the different good we desire in or for the friend. Thus I love one friend for his beauty, another for his musical abilities and another for his sweetness of disposition. These different formal object can be loved in the same person; or we can have the same love of formal objects in many persons. The persons concerned, then, are the material objects of the love of friendship and they are such precisely by their relationship, as subjects of reference, to what is formal in the act of love. But we must never think of the material and formal objects of friendship as two distinct things: they are two facets of the same, indivisible reality; and the more spiritual and divine is the good desired, the more is it intimately related to the person (this is true of God in whom there is no real distinction between essence and existence or between substance and accident).

The truth that friendship is specified by the different good desired should not blind us to the other truth that what specifies love as friendship is that it terminates in a person.

Hence what distinguishes charity from every other form of friendship is the unique nature of the good desired by charity, namely, the divine beatitude, or more correctly, the divine goodness considered as the cause of beatitude. St Thomas completes his description of charity by adding¹³ that the divine beatitude is a 'common good': it is the common bond of unity possessed by the community of the blessed. And so he defines charity as 'a desire for the common good of the Church, namely, divine beatitude which consists in the possession of the divine goodness'.¹⁴

We can say, then, that the formal object of charity is the common good of the Church, namely, the beatitude of her members, that beatitude which belongs by nature to the three Persons of the Trinity, to men and angels by participation in the divine life. This marks a further advance in the study of our problem.

¹³ Ia IIae 109, 4, 1m. ¹⁴ De Car. 2, c.

But we can get a still clearer picture if we turn our attention to the so-called material object of charity: the persons whom we love and whose good we desire. These are the three divine Persons, the saints and all who are called to share in the divine beatitude. By charity I love all individually, but I also love all the sharers as parts of that totality which Augustine calls the 'Whole Christ'.

Charity is directed towards the whole Christ. Of course, like friendship, charity can only be for a person. But the person of Christ is also the Head of the mystical body of Christ. If we have charity for the person of Christ, for the head, have we not also at the same time charity for all the members of that body? But here we have reached the point when the divine-human society (*koinonia*) of the Church can no longer be cramped by our idea of a purely human society (*koinomia*). However, granted that we recognise our limitations when we are attempting to express the divine, it would seem in order to say that charity goes out not only to all those persons who, in their different ways, make up the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the blessed, but also to that divine society (*koinonia*) itself, seen as a kind of person, the whole Christ, at the centre of which is, to use Augustine's phrase,¹⁵ 'a single Christ who loves himself'—and, we may add, who loves his Father.

On this view the Church is seen as the object of charity in two ways: as the common good loved by charity, and as the whole Christ, that is, Christ and his members joined together in a mysterious union to form a person who is loved by charity. The Church herself can be loved with the love we bear to persons. So St Paul writes that husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the Church.

III

THE CHURCH AS THE MYSTERION OF CHARITY¹⁶

To see the Church (*koinonia*) as a '*mysterion*' of God is yet another approach to this same problem of the relationship between the Church and charity.

¹⁵ St Augustine: In Epist. ad Parthos, 10, 3, 8, 35, 2055, 56.

¹⁶ I use the word *mysterion* from the Greek because it seems impossible to translate it adequately.

Mysterion is to be understood in the sense in which it is taken in the Bible and in the liturgy: a thing created by God and used by him as an instrument of his revelation, the thing itself being a sign of the reality which faith alone enables us to grasp.

When Christ ascended into heaven we were deprived of his physical presence. Since that day the mystical body of Christ has been God's *mysterion*, the symbol of his revelation; and the human element in the Church is the sensible sign of that *mysterion*.

It follows from this that whatever is evident to the senses in the charity which unites the members of Christ is the sign of the *mysterion* of divine charity. We recognise those who are disciples of Christ by their manifest love for one another (cf. John 13, 35); and we recognise the Church of Christ by the charity, peace, loving kindness and apostolic zeal which we find in her. The Church is the visible sign of the love of God: of the love which is God himself and of his love for men 'That they may be perfected in unity, in order that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and that thou lovest them, even as thou hast loved me'.

But a mystery does more than reveal the hidden truths of God; it opens the way to God and brings us into his presence. Whoever loves Christ, the mystery of God, loves the Father and is loved by the Father (John 14, 21-24; 16, 27); and the Father and the Son send him the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14, 15-16). Whoever loves Christ loves his members; hence our love for Christ is the sign of our love for God and our neighbour. Our love for Christ is in a special way the sign of our call to the work of the apostolate: 'Lord, thou knowest that I love thee', said St Peter to Jesus. And our Lord's answer was: 'Feed my sheep'.

It would seem, then, that what can be said of Christ himself can be said of the whole Christ, that is, of the Church: hence the Church is the *mysterion* of charity. To love the Church is to love Christ, to be loved by the Father and to receive the Holy Spirit; it is to love our neighbour and to receive the commission to be an apostle.

The Church is indeed charity: she is at once the essence of charity, the object of charity and the *mysterion* of charity.