

SALVATION THROUGH THE CHURCH

'THE Church,' said an ancient writer,¹ 'was created first of all, and for Her sake was the world made.' Nowadays we seem to have lost much of that lofty sense, that divine view, of the Church in the purposes of God. We tend to consider Her empirically only, as one sect among many, as one section only of the human race. It is one of the functions of the revival of ecclesiology—of that branch of theology which treats of the nature and purpose of the Church—to restore that ancient sense of the Catholicity of the Church, the all-embracing society of redeemed humanity, the Kingdom of God on earth.

Amongst recent literature on the Church, *Catholicisme; les Aspects Sociaux du Dogme*, by Henry de Lubac, S.J.,² is of first importance. Based entirely upon the living theology of the Fathers, this excellent book gives a comprehensive account of the social implications of Catholicism. In an important chapter, *Le Salut par l'Eglise*, Father de Lubac recalls to mind the fact that mankind is naturally and instinctively a social organism, living a single, simple life; disunion and discord, the cancerous growths of sin, have rent asunder this unity, which was a spiritual harmony rooted in the love of God, and its restoration is only possible now, in the existing state of things, through Christ and His Church. 'Seul l'Idéal que le Christ a transmis à son Eglise est assez pur et assez puissant . . . pour inspirer aux hommes de travailler à leur unité spirituelle, comme seul le Sacrifice de son Sang peut donner l'efficace à leur

¹ *Pastor of Hermas*. Vis. ii, c. 4.

² *Catholicisme; Les Aspects Sociaux du Dogme*, par Henri de Lubac, S.J. (Les Editions du Cerf; 'Unam Sanctam,' 3).

travail."³ There is no permanent unity or peace possible save that which is based upon the love of God. Nothing human or limited can satisfy all our needs and longings. Not wealth; were all men rich, then no one would be rich. Not power; for power implies its opposite, and cannot be the property of all. Nor could distributed human perfections bring universal happiness, for human interests overlap and clash and breed their own destruction. Hence Infinity alone is sufficient for us. It is God, and only God, who can satisfy all desire and the desires of all. By fellowship with God, and loving, docile service in His Kingdom, harmony and peace will come. 'Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in Thee.'

The human race is a single, corporate society, fundamentally one in virtue of the common aims and identity of nature of its individual members. National or racial differences, diverse customs, changing cultures are but the superficial disguises concealing a nature which is everywhere the same. All societies within the great society are interdependent, from families which depend upon each other for their sustenance, to countries which must share and barter their peculiar resources. A selfish and exclusive way of living between beings who, in fact, however unconscious they may be of it, have the same appointed destiny, is quite unreasonable. 'Le genre humain est un. Par notre nature première et plus encore en vertu de notre commune destinée, nous sommes les membres d'un même corps. Or les membres vivent de la vie du corps.' If, then, the Vision of God is for some men, and we know it is, must it not, in view of this social unity, be for all? 'Comment donc y-aurait-il un salut pour les membres, si, par impossible, le corps n'était lui-même sauvé?' A society has one aim. Human beings form a society, a society made by God who has given it its aim, the knowledge and vision of Himself. Every member in that society is called to the

³ *Op. cit.* p. 166.

same end; God's desire for the salvation of men applies to all, for the love of God extends to all men; if it did not, He would not have created them, since love is the reason of creation. 'I desire, therefore, first of all, that supplications, prayers and intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men . . . for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, Who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.'⁴ All men without exception—and all in the same way, 'For there is one God; and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus.'⁵ 'Mais le salut pour ce corps—pour l'humanité—consiste à recevoir la forme du Christ, et cela ne se peut que par le moyen de l'Eglise catholique.' Salvation, living the Christ Life, and approaching the Father through Christ, is only to be accomplished in the Catholic Church. This is a dogma of the Faith, of which the evidence need not be examined here. A short and lucid exposition of it may be found in *Anakephalaisios*, by A. M. van der Mensbrugge,⁶ another valuable ecclesiological work (*cf. esp.* Proposition II, Dieu veut le salut universel, and Proposition V, Nécessité urgente de favoriser les missions).

Salvation through the Church is the way befitting human dignity. 'Dieu n'a pas voulu opérer le sauvetage de l'humanité, comme d'une épave; Il a voulu susciter en elle une vie, sa propre Vie.' It is not as a mass of wreckage that we are to be dragged to God; it is as human beings living a life, the life of Christ, that we are to find Him freely. The privilege of co-operating with Christ in His redemptive work is ours. Degraded indeed would we be, if we should ever wish it otherwise, if ever we should think that we had been better off had Christ not left us free to co-operate with Him.

⁴ *I Tim.*, ii, 1, 3-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, v. 5.

⁶ *Anakephalaisios*, par A. M. van der Mensbrugge. (Cour du Prince, 65, Gand; pr. 12 fr. belg.)

Not every person who hears a symphony, however, knows that it is the rhythm underlying it which causes its unity and splendour. Nor does every person who lives justly know that he is living by the grace of Christ, imparted through His Church. But known or not, the rhythm of the world is there, and it is She who brings all men, even those who do not know Her, to the end which they are blindly seeking.

Hence it follows that outside the Catholic Church there is no salvation, a harsh, unpleasant-sounding doctrine. A stumbling-block for many who misunderstand it, or do not see it in its true perspective. They think it means that apart from visible communion with the Bishop of Rome all souls are lost. As Father de Lubac suggests, it might be taken to imply '*hors de l'Eglise vous êtes damné*'—'outside the Church you are damned!' But in this the emphasis is quite distorted. There is nothing narrow or exclusive about this teaching, which is capable of positive expression in some such words as these: '*c'est par l'Eglise, par l'Eglise seule que vous serez sauvé*'—'it is by the Church, and by the Church alone that you will be saved,' and here the emphasis is very different from the preceding one. The Church is not a smug society ringed about in unapproachable superiority; not a fortress bristling with dogmatic guns to repel the hordes of infidels against whom She wages a perpetual warfare. No! Her doors are open to all and sundry, to sinners even, though not to sin. Her boundaries extend as far as the furthestmost limits of the universe, for She is Universal and Divine. If we lift our eyes above ourselves, above this world, and see the Church as Christ sees Her, She is not only an instrument, not only a tool, something by means of which we, in visible communion with Her, work our way to God, whilst others not so fortunate are left aside. The Church is God's—not instrument nor means, for in a sense the Church is Christ Himself and, as such, an end—but it is God present in the world, it is God draw-

ing men to Himself. So there cannot be a question of salvation outside the Church; God cannot lead us to Himself save by Himself, by Christ.

From this, the great truth, first glimpsed in the age of the Apostolic Fathers, emerges, 'The Books and the Apostles plainly declare that the Church existeth not now for the first time, but hath been from the beginning; for She was spiritual as our Jesus was spiritual, but was manifested in the last days that He might save us. Now the Church was manifested in the Flesh of Christ.' The Church is Catholic, Universal and eternally so. Christ as Head rules His members from all eternity. And after creation all men, whether living before His coming, or contemporary with Him, or living now to-day, are members of His Church if they have not separated themselves from Him by sin. Grace is everywhere, is given to all; grace is from Christ; it is the mortar which welds His elect together in the building of His Church. Like burning embers from a fire, which glow and sparkle with the life of the parent flame, even when they are separated from it, men who are leading a good life, though it be outside the communion of the visible Church, derive their goodness from Her, and are bound to Her by bonds which are real and strong. So long as their goodness prevails, they live by Her grace, and are Her members, even though Her existence be concealed from them. If throughout their lives they never actually encounter Her on earth, with death they are admitted to the full communion of that kingdom to which they have always unwittingly belonged.

How difficult, and yet how simple it is to see Christ as He really is, as God, raised high above all temporal succession, and Head of every man in every age. Like the Dynamic Link in a Gregorian antiphon, which has existence only at a given point in the melody and yet controls the phrases which come before and after it, and unites

* An Ancient Homily (*II Ep. of Clement*, so called) 14.

them into the harmony of the whole, so Christ, taking human flesh and manifesting Himself at a given time, is Head and ruler of all mankind. With mind alive to every particle of truth to be drawn from the Scriptures, St. Augustine sees in the birth of Jacob a striking illustration of this dogma. 'For Jacob, at the time when he was being born, first put forth his hand from the womb, and with it grasped the heel of his brother who had preceded him in birth; then his head followed, and after that, and necessarily, all the other members; but the head was superior in dignity not only to the members which followed after it, but also to the hand which had preceded it, and though it did not appear first in time, yet by nature was it prior. And in the same way the Lord Jesus Christ, put forth in the persons of His Prophets and Patriarchs, a portion of His Body to announce His coming birth, even though He had not yet appeared in the flesh But although, as I have said, the Lord Christ did thus send before Him a certain portion of His Body, in the person of those holy men who came before Him as regards the time of birth, nevertheless He is Himself the Head of the Body, the Church, and all these have been attached to that same Body of which He is the Head, in virtue of their believing in Him whom they announced prophetically. For they were not sundered from that body because they came before Him, but rather were they made one with it by reason of their obedience. For although the hand may be put forward before the head, still it is connected beneath it.'⁶

Faith is the link which unites us to Christ. With the people who preceded Him it was Faith in the Redeemer to come which made them members of His Body. Our Faith is in the Christ Who *came*, and Who is still with us. Always it is Faith; even the apostles and disciples of Our Lord knew Him for what He really was only by their Faith. And to-day those who do not visibly belong

⁶ *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, 6.

to the visible, external Church, may yet be members in an invisible manner by the implicit Faith they show when they recognise a power above themselves shaping their ends and claiming their allegiance. Perhaps they do not know in point of fact that the power is Christ; no matter, they know there is a power, and whatever it is submit to it. And so Christ draws them to Himself. Their fellowship with Him, although imperfect and incomplete, is real notwithstanding.

It is precisely because the membership of these latter is imperfect and incomplete that the apostolate is enjoined upon all Catholics. The teaching outlined above might seem to remove the necessity for missionary expansion in the Church. If implicit Faith alone is sufficient for a man's salvation, if he can belong to the Church invisibly, why seek to bring him into external communion? But the buds do not sufficiently manifest the perfection of the tree, which does not reach its full growth nor its most perfect expression until all its buds are unfolded into leaves. Always the same principle holds good. The world and all things in it have existence for one purpose, and one only, to make manifest the perfections of God. By visible communion with the Church, and through the graces which She can offer in the name of Christ, a man is better able to show forth the perfections of Christ in himself, and through Christ is made a more perfect image of God than he is by nature alone. And so as long as there are men outside Her communion, the Church must grow. 'Tant qu'elle n'a pas recouvert toute la terre et cimenté toutes les âmes, croître est pour l'Eglise une nécessité de nature Sa Catholicité, qui est en elle une force, est aussi une perpétuelle exigence. Elle sait qu'elle n'est pas née pour autre chose que pour propager partout le Règne du Christ, afin de faire participer tous les hommes à sa redemption salutaire,' et que c'est là, non la seule tâche de quelques ouvriers spécialisés, mais le principal office de ses pasteurs Tant qu'elle n'aura pas recouvert et pénétré

l'humanité tout entière pour lui prendre la forme du Christ, l'Eglise ne peut être en repos.⁹ Moreover, the apostolate is of precept; Our Lord has left express commands which the Church must obey, the injunctions to carry the Gospel to every nation, and to preach it to every creature. Baptism and the other sacraments confer on Christians graces which cannot lie idle; they are given for the benefit of others, and unless they are used for this purpose their possession will be dangerous to the person upon whom they are bestowed. Such graces given to us are not ours to keep; they are given to us to bestow upon others, and if we refuse to hand them on we are guilty of injustice. 'Ceux qui, en recevant le Christ, ont tout reçu, sont établis pour le salut de ceux qui n'ont pu le connaître. "Leur privilège est une mission. Point d'autre moyen pour eux de conserver leur richesse, car dans l'ordre spirituelle on ne possède que ce que l'on donne, on ne le retient qu'en le donnant encore et nul ne sera trouvé plus vide, au dernier jour, que le gaspilleur qui s'était cru comblé." ' ¹⁰

And lastly, from their own point of view, external communion with the Church is, for those who do not belong to Her, not only desirable, but even, normally speaking, necessary for their salvation. The way in the Church is easier and safer; it is the right, the normal way, the way appointed. All the means are there. Foolish would he be, who, knowing this, chose rather to ignore the main road laid open before him, and attempted to follow out a course for himself by dangerous paths. He would find the going difficult. Let him follow Christ if he would be saved—'I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life'—always; now to-day and until the end of the world, through My Church.

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⁹ *Catholicisme*, p. 169.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.