

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST IN US

MERE handling of these two volumes—the second edition of Père Mersch's unique book on the Mystical Body¹—gives one a good sensual delight through sight and touch. But within the attractive format lies still greater pleasure for the intellect, for not only is it accurate in textual and historical criticism complete with footnotes, bibliographies and indices, it is also written in an easy-flowing style. As the positive treatment of an actual and profound point of Christian doctrine it is a perfect work of its kind. With great skill P. Mersch leads the reader to the authentic sources of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, and once there the reader looks back perhaps to discover that in his previous attitude towards the Church as the Mystical Body he had been veering the wrong way.

We do believe in the Holy Catholic Church. Every time we repeat the Creed we profess our faith in that doctrine. But sometimes we forget what faith means, and try to put forward natural reasons as convincing evidence of the truths we profess. Particularly do we tend to see the total explanation of the Church within the limits of human knowledge, forgetting perhaps that faith is a special grace from God by which we are enabled to assent with utter certainty to divine mysteries, to supernatural truths inexplicable to the human mind. The Church is just such a mystery, ranking alongside of the blessed Trinity, the Incarnation or the Eucharist. Her nature, the intimate union of her members in Christ, cannot be wholly explained with any more convincing natural evidence than those other mysteries; nor shall we be able to analyze her more successfully than St. Paul who piled simile upon simile in his effort to describe this society which requires a divine light to be seen in its true colours.

Hence we need to renew our faith continually and to believe efficaciously in the Holy Catholic Church, against

¹ *Le Corps mystique du Christ: Etudes de Théologie historique*, par Emile Mersch, S.J. (2me édition, revue, corrigée et considérablement augmentée), 2 vols. (Bruxelles: Edition Universelle. 90 Belgian francs.)

BLACKFRIARS

which the gates of hell cannot prevail. And this is where P. Mersch's treatise will be found invaluable. In order to nourish our faith we should go to the primary sources which contain great powers for strengthening a weakening belief. These primary sources are of course the Gospels and the Epistles, the New Testament, the word of God as manifested through His Word. If however we are to find our way successfully in the search for these central mysteries in the revealed word, we need a guide to show us where and how to look for the path. As in the other great mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Sacraments, so in the mystery of the Mystical Body of Christ the ordinary Christian needs someone to show him the main passages containing the doctrine, their significance and development, and the relation between one inspired writer and another. Moreover, in the words of P. Mersch, "c'est l'Eglise qui va continuer l'Ecriture. Aussi, pour demeurer à l'école de l'Esprit-Saint qui parle dans l'Ecriture, faut-il que nous allions l'écouter là où il se met maintenant à parler: dans l'Eglise . . ." (Vol. I, p. 285). Consequently we must seek in tradition for the drawing out of the sense of these scriptural passages. The Councils and the Fathers will explain and develop these pregnant texts in such a way that we may penetrate with their assistance still deeper into the mystery. These two volumes provide all that is necessary by way of a guide through Scripture and tradition. Despite the modesty of the author, who calls his work a series of *études*, he has achieved an almost complete survey of the doctrine of the Mystical Body through its entire history, tracing it from its first vague shadows in the Old Testament and its seed in the Synoptics, past its youthful completion by the word of the last apostle, along through the ages of its increasing maturity, right up to the Encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* of His Holiness Pope Pius XI.

Many, even well-instructed, Christians, if left to themselves with the New Testament to select the main texts which teach the doctrine of the Mystical Body, would have completed their list after noting the parable of the vine and one or two verses in the Epistle to the Ephesians. In reality

they should begin with the idea set forth in the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Galatians that Christ is the Lord and Head of all creation, and so be led to understand how Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day, how the headship of Christ is not only the centre of the New Testament but the fulfilment of the Old. The solidarity of all men in Adam is the dark, complementary idea to the unity of the redeemed in our Lord, while the intense national unity of the Israelites under God's leadership prefigured the universal Christian "thing" which superseded it. (I, p. 3-21.)

The first revelation of the New Testament, contained in the Synoptics, shows the first seeds of the dogma of this prodigious unity. We may notice how all three evangelists adopt the plan of making the central fact of their recital the very moment when their subject disappears. The death of our Lord is the fact of supreme importance because His life does not end in death, but continues beyond the historic moment and Person, and is accomplished in that Person's mystical prolongation (I, p. 33). Then, of course, the preaching of the Kingdom of God is the first outline of the structure of the Church, which is not only a vital unity and in close relation with Christ—witness the parables of the mustard seed and the shepherd who goes to seek the one lost sheep—but also a mystery, for our Lord said to the apostles, "To you it is given to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God." The clearest proclamation of the doctrine, however, is to be found in St. Matthew immediately before the recital of the Passion. Our Lord in describing the last judgment shows that He is to be *identified* with His disciples, even with the least of His brethren—"I say to you as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me." (I, pp. 60-63.) Later, in the Acts of the Apostles, we are shown the first history of the new, mystical life of Christ in the world; Pentecost is the birth of the Mystical Body. The historic life of Christ is now re-enacted among His first followers. Of this a striking example is to be found in the parallel between the death of the Cross and the death of the protomartyr, Stephen, who was judged by the Jews, prayed for his assassins, commended his soul to God, and

BLACKFRIARS

in other ways reproduced the death of his Master. (I, p. 78 sq.)

It is in such passages as these that we may find a sufficient test of the strength of our faith in the Church, for if ours were a vital faith should we not see Jesus Christ in our neighbours as the saints have done? That we have not thus grasped the hidden reality beneath the doctrine of the Mystical Body is sufficiently proved by the continuation of the evils of industrialism, the lack of response to the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI, and even the spread of Communism. We could not stand by unmoved if we saw our Lord Himself in the slums, in the racket of the factory, or receiving the dole. Or again, if it is our Lord who dies once more in the death of His martyrs, we should view the terrible deaths of Christians in Spain, Mexico or Russia with a sympathy and depth of feeling that would over-ride ever other view of the situation. Jesus Christ suffers and dies to-day in a mysterious reality arising from the mystery of unity, His presence in His Church. And if He suffers in the individual, He must suffer at the same time in the whole Church, whose sympathy inculcates a true "co-suffering."

To return to the sources, we come now to the great teacher of this mystery, St. Paul. One of the central scenes in the Acts is that of the conversion of St. Paul when, falling to the ground, he hears a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*?" That revelation of the identification of Christ with His Church took root in his soul and developed during his life into an ever clearer expression of *the* Pauline mystery—"According to revelation, the mystery has been made known to me. . . . That the gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body and co-partners of his promise in Christ Jesus. . . . To me the least of all the saints, is given this grace, to preach among the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. iii, 3, 6, 8).

There can be no doubt that for St. Paul the doctrine was a profound mystery of faith, which the Holy Spirit allowed to be unfolded gradually before him. If taken chronologically his Epistles disclose a distinct growth of content in the expressions used to describe the unity of the Church, and P. Mersch

traces the expansion with skill and clarity up to the crowded and pregnant images St. Paul sent tumbling over each other from his place of captivity in Rome (I, pp. 99, 143, 152, etc.). "In Christ"—the simple phrase is so charged with meaning that it is used 164 times in many different contexts; the Church is *in* Christ, the faithful live *in* Him, they have their joys, sufferings, strength and salvation *in* Him. In its fullest sense the phrase stands for this mystic incorporation whereby the faithful become the Body of Jesus Christ Himself (Part I, c. 5). St. Paul makes a double use of this term "body." For the Christian with living faith this again holds its lesson, since quite early in his teaching the Apostle told the Corinthians that their bodies were the members of Christ, and that to defile their bodies was akin to sacrilege (I, p. 143). We must see our Lord in ourselves as well as in others and preserve ourselves from sin lest we stain the very Church herself. We have always to attempt the ideal of representing Christ in our own lives, for such is the miracle of this unity that He is identified at once with the whole Church and with each member individually. St. Paul teaches this too in his doctrine of the Mystic Christ with his own contraction of words with "συν"—being co-crucified, co-resurrected with Christ—and in such an ideal as filling up those things that are wanting in His sufferings (I, pp. 173 sq.).

Finally² we turn to the words of the last apostle to reveal still greater depths in the doctrine from the more personal, individual side. St. John, putting the final expressive touches to the portrait of Christ, shows Him primarily as the light and the life of Christians. The Apocalypse, written first, is concerned mainly with the Mystical Body in the form of the new Jerusalem and the return to His own—"Behold the tabernacle of God with men, and he will dwell with them; and they shall be his people: and God himself with them shall be their God" (Apoc. xxi, 3; cf. I, p. 213). Then the crowning glory of the New Testament, St. John's Gospel,

² It is curious that P. Mersch passes over the Epistle to the Hebrews in complete silence. The doctrine of the Priesthood of Christ there contained would seem to add considerably to the general conception of the Head of the Church.

BLACKFRIARS

from Prologue to Epilogue, shows how the Life and the Light of the world has come to dwell, to make His home, in every Christian. Our Lord as the divine artist illustrates this in the parable of the vine, which emphasizes the fact that all our activity is vain unless it springs from Christ Himself (I, p. 249). Thus a living faith in this can alone give the right orientation to the incessant Catholic activity of to-day. The whole doctrine is brought to a climax in the sacerdotal prayer of the seventeenth chapter, where our Lord dares to draw the analogy between His unity in the Trinity and His union with the faithful. "That they all may be one, as thou, Father, in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us"; that is the purpose of the Incarnation and the Passion, that is the mystery of Christ in us (I, pp. 251 sq.).

The Fathers of the Church and Tradition . . . but space does not permit a sketch of the progress of this dogma after its completion in the New Testament. It is sufficient to note that in the continual restatement throughout the history of the Church the dogma has perhaps never received such emphasis as at the present moment, for, as P. Mersch notes, it offers a remedy to all the major evils of our disintegrating civilization: naturalism, individualism, nationalism, false conceptions of society, modernism (II, pp. 364-367). But in order to work the miracle of reorganization and rejuvenation the Church must be believed in and thus recognized with certainty as a body with theandric powers, as the Mystical Body of Christ Himself. With the certainty of a vital faith fed on the word of God in Scripture and tradition all fears for the ultimate victory of the Church will vanish, while we shall individually ensure its more immediate success by becoming, each one of us, a more living and virile member of the Body of Christ and thus showing to God the Father and to the world the re-enacting of the life of Christ, the Person of the Son, in our own persons. The Church is then not one society among many, but the unique supernatural society, indestructible and always conquering, with the source of its life and power hidden in a mystery of God's revelation.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.