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POLITICS AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

To choose this title is to court criticism from those who only tolerate religion when excluded from politics, more justifiably also from those who realize the harmonies and undertones of the relationship between religion and politics that demand the most delicate treatment if they are to be sung truly. The title is however topical and important. His Holiness Pius XII. on June 29th issued a penetrating encyclical on the subject of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, a pontifical utterance that has come to crown the considerable labours of modern theologians who have approached the doctrine from many different angles, and it will provide also a guide for those outside the Church who have been inspired by St. Paul's great theme of incorporation in Christ. But this pontifical teaching and these theological enquiries are not simply the speculations of a leisured body of clergy. With a new urgency and under a fresh light they call attention to the one ship of salvation. As men become conscious of the desperate storm into which they have drifted, they search the horizon and send out signals for help that should be answered by

the one Church. In the storm men see queer will-o'-the-whisps and strange mirages so that they must be continually reminded of the concrete reality of the saving craft. Ship, Kingdom, City, Body, whatever metaphor we choose, we shall find that the bond of unity which is expressed in these varying terms is the one hope of restoring unity to the present disintegrating civilisation. His Holiness gives this as one of his chief reasons for sending this encyclical forth to the world at this juncture. Politics, which arranges the things of the world, must take account of the Church, the Body of Christ, if politics is to guide temporal man out of present chaos into anything like a human *civitas*.

By the politics of the Mystical Body we may mean either the internal composition and government of the Church as the Body, a supernatural *polis*, the City of God, or the relation of the Church as a compact body of men to the human and changing politics of the nations in which she finds herself. Both questions have been treated often enough before under different aspects, but we need not apologise for returning to the theme to-day.

In the first place there are many who do not understand or recognise the internal policy of the Church because of false conceptions of the Mystical Body. These errors His Holiness has included under two heads: the rationalistic view that the Church is only a human society made up of men united in purpose (i.e. morally and under authority), and secondly the false mysticism which sweeps into this Body everyone who makes any pretence at loving God. In other words there are those who see the 'Body' as any other body of men, and those whose idea of 'Mystical' leads them to forget all outward forms. It is this latter error that is most frequently met in this country, and among other things it makes it impossible to relate politics to the Mystical Body in any definite sense. At its worst, as the Holy Father indicates, it removes all barriers between the Creator and his creatures, leading to a sort of pantheism in which the *vinculum unitatis* ceases to bind the units together because there are no individual units to be held within the organism of the Body. In another form, common among non-Catholics in this country, the idea of the Body of Christ would gather to itself 'all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ,' the members are all 'born again of the Spirit . . . possess 'repentance' . . . holiness of life . . . hate sin . . . love Christ.. .¹ The differences of worship are unable to cause

¹ These quotations are taken from a pamphlet, *The True Church*, by the late J. C. Ryle, D.D., Lord Bishop of Liverpool.

any real division in *Mystical Body* of lovers. Explicitly or implicitly the vast majority of religious-minded and charitable non-Catholics in England live and act according to this conviction. 'It does not matter what you believe; we are all seeking the same good God.'

Modern Anglican thought avoids the main error in this position. Following up the vital doctrine of the *Mystical Body* in reference to their own particular position they have not omitted the necessity of Baptism and of Faith for real incorporation in Christ. They have seen that the Church is a body and not simply a misty agglomeration of 'lovers of Christ and haters of sin.' In this respect no Catholic student of the doctrine can afford to ignore the principal of these Anglican works, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ*, by L. S. Thornton², for it throws the whole doctrine back into the perspective of the earliest Christian documents. On the point we are here considering the author shows the connection between baptism and the public confession of faith at the sacrament of initiation, a theme which is shown to be running through the whole of the New Testament (chapter viii). St. Peter's confession of faith is the 'initiation of the Church' and it bears an intimate relation to Christian baptism. The neophyte must believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God; he must profess his faith before the waters are poured over him, and thus he enters fully into the common life of the Body of Christ. This confession of faith is subsequently drawn up as the Creeds and these formulae become the test of true incorporation, an external expression of a very precise belief which makes a clear-cut distinction between those in the Body and those out of it, however much good-will these two groups may have in common. This truth was not overlooked by the compilers of the Prayer Book who made recital of the Apostles' Creed a condition of admission to the Church, and the Church of England has on the whole insisted also on the Nicene and the Athanasian creeds.³ But it is just here that the diver-

² The Dacre Press; 30s. This study is difficult reading, at least for the Catholic, for no use is apparently made of the considerable Catholic works on the subject, so that the familiar features do not appear in their expected places, and the general theme wanders through many intricacies. But the New Testament as a whole and the writings of the earliest Christians are brought into relation to the *Mystical Body* with the result that numerous fresh ideas are there to deepen and vitalise the student's conception of the doctrine.

³ Cf. for example *Darwell Stone, Churchman and Counsellor*, by Dr. F. L. Cross, pp. 49-50. This is another book for which we are indebted to the Dacre Press (price 30s.). Many Catholics have expressed themselves puzzled by the half-way position of Anglo-Catholicism. Here are the Life and Letters of an Anglican theologian of profound intellectual honesty and dynamic piety whose knowledge of Christian doctrine embraced all the main points of divergence between Rome

gence occurs between the full Catholic teaching and the Anglican view of the nature of the Mystical Body. The germ of the over-mystical view is still present in spite of the insistence on faith and baptism.

The difficulty of the mystical view of the Church lies in the complete division it makes between the Church and the world, so that there can be no politics in the Mystical Body. If a man can only be a member while he loves God and hates sin he will often have to cross the chasm which divides the Church from the world. When he commits sin he will step across into the world; when he repents he will re-enter the Church. He remains securely a member of this Body only so long as he has the Spirit and he in no way belies it. The Church militant is thus holy and separated from the world in an absolute sense that makes it impossible for Christ to work as the living and healing force in his own Mystical Body. In truth the relation between the Church and the world is far more complex, while membership of the Church is far more secure. Christ lives as the Saviour of the world in the Church. His vital power brings peace and unity to all men who come within his influence; the unity of Christendom (when it was in being) spread out from the unity of his Body. But it demanded physical contact with this visible and concrete being, Christ living in the world. Contact came through the faith and the sacraments.

Thus His Holiness defines the true member of Christ; they only are members who have received the saving waters of baptism, who profess the one true faith and who have not cut themselves off from the society and legitimate authority of the Church. The member will on this earth be always more or less a sinner receiving salvation and redemption through his membership. Perfection is not the prerequisite of membership; membership is intended to bring perfection. Christ embraces sinners; the Church is in the world and the Head prays not that his members should be removed from the world. Faith even without charity is, though in a minimal sense, a supernatural grace which links the (dead) member to the rest of the Body. But to live the life of the Body of Christ the member must not only receive the grace of the sacraments; he must profess the same faith which is an adhesion to the whole truth proposed by the Church, and

and Canterbury. He remained convinced of the truth of his position to the end of his long and devout life. Any Catholic then who desires a sympathetic understanding of the Anglican position should study Dr. Cross's excellent summary of Darwell Stone's belief as well as the letters and papers he has gathered into this book.

he must also live according to the same *regimen* or rule of the Church. His Holiness, in one of the most striking passages of the Encyclical describes how the Body is the Perfect Society, since the Mystical Body is endowed with the best unifying attributes of the physical and of the 'moral' bodies but wholly elevated to the supernatural order. The members preserve their own personality (unlike the physical body) but the same unifying Spirit is wholly in the whole and wholly in every individual member (unlike the 'moral' body).

In short the Mystical Body of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church presided over and directed by the Vicar of Christ, the Bishop of Rome and successor of St. Peter. It is a visible society guided by a tangible authority—but it is also vastly more than that. The Anglican view of the Body is so attracted by this altogether higher and invisible reality that it will not come down to the practical need of a visible society with civil rights and an international existence. However unconsciously, it seeks to justify radical divisions in the Body, divisions of faith and *regimen*; and it is in that sense that it tends towards the falsely mystical interpretation of the doctrine. It allows of conflicting policies within the Body itself; of divisions among the churches, of one national church against another while preserving all the time the *vinculum unitatis*. In that case, the Church is not one single society except invisibly; there is then no one policy of the Mystical Body except outside the world altogether.

The doctrine of the Mystical Body, however, describes most accurately the perfection of this society which, though not wholly summed up by the civil position and rights, nevertheless includes these as an effect of the perfect cohesion among the members held together by the one Spirit. Of necessity, therefore, a relationship springs up between this Society and the other natural human societies of which the State is the chief example. Of necessity there is a relation between politics and the Mystical Body. That relation is often misunderstood and a dispute follows between, for example, the political Minister of Education and the Hierarchy. The Mystical Body works in the world, fulfilling the work of Christ; and Christ, as His Holiness points out, *needs* his members in order to fulfil his saving mission. He is of himself invisible, in his members visible and to that extent also political.

The civil and the ecclesiastical each have their own proper field and scope for action—Professor Leibholz makes this clear. But since the ecclesiastical sphere is that of the perfect and supernatural society it follows that the ecclesiastical enjoys some superiority. It means that politics is secular only in so far as it is concerned with

less than supernatural human needs and arrangements. It is never secular in the sense of unrelated to, or independent of, the Church. True politics will be related to the divine-human working of Christ in his Mystical Body.

But, it will be asked, is any of this 'practical politics' at a time of Moscow Conferences and the inauguration of Ministries of Reconstruction in the realms of 'secular' politics? We answer forlornly, without human hope of being heard, that it is the only way in which politics can achieve in the realms of practice its appointed end, the common well-being of men in their nations and of those nations among themselves. There can be little hope of reconstruction, despite the wild exclamations of delight, in a conference that lays down principles for restoring order to civilisation after the war when one of its only references to religion—i.e., remotely to the Church and to the Mystical Body—is that the victorious powers will restore freedom of worship in Italy. The tones of that sentence send forth an echo of futility and insincerity which calls forth doubts and hesitations about the rest of the decisions.⁴ It may seem hopeless, but the words of Pius XII in reality give the only basis for a stable reconstruction; 'Especially at the present juncture it seems not so much timely as necessary that fervent prayers should be poured out for all kings and princes, indeed for all governors of peoples who are able to help the Church by their external protection that with things set in their due order, peace . . . may emerge from the awful waves of this storm, and our Holy Mother the Church be able to "lead a quiet and peaceable life in all piety and chastity."' If all governors were to allow the Church to work in the world so that supernatural reconstruction through grace became their final goal, politics would not be the mockery it so often is today, and peace would begin to permeate the world through this Christian politics. For the Body of Christ is the true city, the *polis*, of peace. 'For Christ is our peace, who hath made both one, and breaking down the middle wall of partition, the enmities in his flesh; making void the law of commandments contained in decrees: that he might make the two in himself into one new man, making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body by the cross, killing the enmities in himself . . .' (Ephesians ii, 14-22).

EDITOR.

⁴ Hence the Catholic bishops of America have felt bound to issue a note of warning regarding the declarations of the Moscow Conference which showed signs of compromising a 'peace with justice to all.' Yet they were careful to point out that they clearly desired 'not to enter the domain of statesmanship.'