

FULTON J. SHEEN

THE
MYSTICAL
BODY
of CHRIST

Foreword by Bishop Robert Barron

Introduction by Brandon Vogt

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TO MARY
MOTHER IMMACULATE
OF
THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

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Foreword

Bishop Robert Barron

One reason that Fulton J. Sheen was such a successful and persuasive evangelist is that he was exceptionally smart. He was a doctor of theology from the University of Louvain—in fact, one of the rare recipients of Louvain’s prestigious *agrégé* degree—an assiduous student of St. Thomas Aquinas, and a professor of philosophy and theology at The Catholic University of America. Sheen had a profound grasp of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

The book you are holding was first published in 1935, when Sheen was ensconced at Catholic University and just beginning his career as a popular evangelist, though long before he would emerge as a television personality. It reflects his thorough immersion in one of the most exciting theological projects of the time—namely, the exploration of the Church under the rubric of the “Mystical Body.”

In order to understand the significance of the moves Sheen is making in this book, we have to consider, however briefly, some major themes in the theological thought of the nineteenth century. At the commencement of the 1800s, Catholic theology was in the grip of an arid, tired, and hyper-rationalistic scholasticism that employed the terminology and conceptuality of Aquinas but exhibited little of the vitality and spirit of Thomas’ own writings. In regard to the theology of grace, for instance, the standard scholasticism held to an almost physicalistic conception of grace as a created substance infused into the soul. Likewise, the

prevalent ecclesiology revealed a highly juridical and hierarchical understanding of Church.

Posing a significant challenge to this regnant scholasticism were two intellectual movements within the German Catholic theology of the nineteenth century. The first of these movements, the so-called “Tübingen school,” was associated with two major figures, Johann Sebastian von Drey (1777–1853) and Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), both of whom taught on the Catholic faculty of Tübingen at key points in their careers. To some degree under the influence of their Protestant colleague Friedrich Schleiermacher, both Drey and Möhler sought to overcome the cramped rationalism of classical theology and to find a way to reintegrate theology and culture, doctrine and life.

Setting aside Schleiermacher’s excessive subjectivism, they attempted to revive two key patristic notions: (1) that the ordinary goal of the Christian life is a real participation in the divine nature, and (2) that the Church is best construed as the prolongation of the Incarnation through space and time. The first point is vital, for it represents an enormous improvement on the extrinsicist and mechanical construal of grace in much of the official theology of the time, and opens the way to understanding salvation as authentic “deification,” becoming a sharer in God’s own life. And the second point is indispensable in the measure that it permits us to push past an uninspiring ecclesiastical institutionalism and to appreciate the Church as the privileged vehicle by which the divine life is communicated to the people of God.

The second major theological movement I want to highlight is that associated with the patristic theologian Matthias Joseph Scheeben (1835–1888), whom Hans Urs von Balthasar called “the greatest German theologian to date” and to whom Pope Benedict XVI had a special devotion. Like the thinkers of the Tübingen school, Scheeben wanted to instill a greater patristic substance into the scholastic theology of grace. He emphasized, accordingly, that in giving the Holy Spirit, God does not simply

convey an isolated gift, but rather “the very Giver of the gifts and the very principle of supernatural power.”¹ In a word, the fruit of the sacramental life of the Church is true deification, for in receiving the Holy Spirit, one comes to share in the relationship that obtains between the Father and the Son. Through the Spirit, Scheeben said, we become not merely adopted children of God, but spouses of God.²

But then Scheeben went even further, insisting that the supernatural union between the soul and God in deification is like the natural union between the body and the soul. A key Christological implication of this spiritual anthropology is that the purpose of the Incarnation must be re-thought along patristic lines: the *raison d’être* of Christ’s coming into flesh is not merely the reparation of the sinful human condition but also the elevation and transformation of humanity into God: *Deus fit homo ut homo fieret Deus* (God became human that humans might become God).³

These two great theological streams flowed into twentieth-century Catholic thought and gave rise to the work of a number of thinkers who profoundly influenced Fulton Sheen. One of these was Karl Adam (1876–1966), a patristic specialist whose greatest work was *The Spirit of Catholicism*. Like his predecessors, Adam argues that the Church is the *locus deificandi* (the place of deifying), which communicates the divine life precisely through the sacraments. His entire approach to liturgy, sacraments, and ecclesiology is predicated on the assumption that the Church is not so much the perfect society as a living organism, the Mystical Body of which Jesus is the Head and the Holy Spirit the Life Force.

Another significant bearer of Mystical Body theology in the twentieth century was Romano Guardini (1885–1968), a theologian who profoundly marked both Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger and who had, consequently, a strong influence at the Second Vatican Council. Guardini’s *The Spirit of the Liturgy* is replete with themes from the Tübingen and Scheeben traditions,

and his devotional masterpiece *The Lord* is one of the clearest twentieth-century presentations of a Christology correlative to a Mystical Body ecclesiology.

In the United States, a number of pastors, theologians, and churchmen began to take in this theology and apply it in pastoral and liturgical contexts. I have in mind Virgil Michel, a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, who founded the journal *Orate Fratres*; Godfrey Diekmann, Michel's disciple, who helped to lead the American liturgical movement in the years prior to the council; and Reynold Hillenbrand, my predecessor as rector of Mundelein Seminary. Through teaching, preaching, lecturing, the conducting of workshops, and creative liturgical experimentation, these men brought Tübingen school, Mystical Body theology to a wide audience.

One of their most significant accomplishments—which we see reflected in the last chapter of Sheen's text—is the effecting of a link between the liturgy and the works of social justice, or what was called at the time "Catholic Action." Again and again, Hillenbrand preached that those who have been deified through the Church's sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are now obligated to go forth to effect the deification of the wider society.

It is fascinating to note that Sheen's 1935 text was composed in the midst of this extraordinary theological, liturgical, and pastoral ferment. Adam's *The Spirit of Catholicism* appeared just eleven years before *The Mystical Body of Christ*; Guardini's *The Spirit of the Liturgy* was published just twenty years before Sheen's book; and Hillenbrand became rector of Mundelein precisely one year after Sheen's opus appeared. And just eight years after the publication of *The Mystical Body of Christ*, Pope Pius XII issued his encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis*, which summed up and gave official ecclesiastical sanction to the very themes that Sheen and his colleagues had been exploring.

One would have to be obtuse indeed not to notice that so much of this theology—deification, sharing the divine life, the

Church as Mystical Body and extension of the Incarnation, Catholic Action, etc.—decidedly marked the texts of Vatican II. Even the most cursory glance at *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Dei Verbum*, and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* reveals the significant influence of the Tübingen school. And to take one more step: these same motifs and themes are on very obvious display in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* from 1992, a text that would be unthinkable apart from the neo-patristic revival of the last two centuries.

Fulton Sheen's *The Mystical Body of Christ* remains a serious and significant contribution to the Mystical Body theology of the twentieth century. And it provides an intriguing glimpse into the subtle and theologically acute mind of the greatest Catholic evangelist of the twentieth century.

Introduction

Brandon Vogt

In many ways this book finds its roots in 1903, at St. Mary's Cathedral in Peoria, Illinois. There a nervous eight-year-old Fulton Sheen served Mass for the great Bishop John Spalding, co-founder of The Catholic University of America and one of the most impressive churchmen of his day. As the service began, the young Sheen stood, intimidated by the bishop. Yet his anxiety worsened as it was time to carry over a glass cruet to the altar. Along the way, he tripped over his alb and dropped the cruet, which shattered on the cathedral floor.

Remembering this moment of humiliation, Sheen would later write: "There is no atomic explosion that can equal in intensity of decibels the noise and explosive force of a wine cruet falling on the marble floor of a cathedral in the presence of a bishop. I was frightened to death."

After Mass, the boy made his way back to the sacristy, prepared for the worst. Yet when the bishop arrived he knelt down, placed his arms on the nervous boy's shoulders, and said, "Young man, where are you going to school when you get big?"

Those weren't the words Sheen expected. But quick on his feet, the boy answered, "Spalding Institute," referencing the local Catholic high school named after the bishop.

Bishop Spalding clarified, "No, I said 'when you get big.' Did you ever hear of Louvain University?"

The boy answered: "No, Your Grace."

“Very well,” the bishop said. “You go home and tell your mother that I said when you get big, you are to go to Louvain, and someday you will be just as I am.”¹

Where that strange prophecy originated, nobody knows. What prompted a bishop in Peoria, Illinois, to predict that a clumsy young altar server would one day attend college in Belgium and someday “be just as I am”? Yet sure enough, the young boy was ordained a priest in 1919, and two years later he set foot in Louvain to attend the university. Then, in 1951, just as Bishop Spalding predicted, he was consecrated Bishop Fulton J. Sheen—“just as I am.”

By the time he became a bishop, Sheen was already a well-known preacher and evangelist. He launched his *Catholic Hour* radio program in 1930, which at its peak reached four million listeners. In 1952, decades before “televangelism” became mainstream, Sheen launched his *Life Is Worth Living* television show. Media executives didn’t expect much from the program, which they scheduled in the graveyard slot on Tuesday nights at 8:00 p.m. But Sheen’s charisma, clarity, and showmanship catapulted the program past ratings giants like Milton Berle, the father of modern television, and Frank Sinatra, the iconic singer. At its peak, the show drew over 30 million people each week and earned Sheen an Emmy award in 1953 for being Television’s Most Outstanding Personality. He remains the only religious figure ever to win the award.

In addition to Sheen’s radio and television work, the prolific evangelist authored over seventy books. Marked by precision and wit, his writing evokes other twentieth-century apologists like C.S. Lewis, Ronald Knox, Frank Sheed, and G.K. Chesterton (the latter of whom wrote the introduction to Sheen’s first book, *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy*). Sheen’s genius lay in communicating lofty ideas in down-to-earth prose, using an array of humorous anecdotes, clever metaphors, and memorable

one-liners. All this made him one of the most-quoted Catholics from the twentieth century.

Among his many books, *The Mystical Body of Christ* shines especially bright. First published in 1935, over twenty-five years before the groundbreaking Second Vatican Council, the book offered a major contribution to ecclesiology—the study of the Church—and preempted many of the council’s eventual declarations. For example, Sheen devotes a whole chapter to the Eucharist as the source of unity for the Mystical Body of Christ, a key theme in *Lumen Gentium*, the council’s major document on the Church.

Yet what of the book today? It may have foreshadowed Vatican II, but does it still have relevance?

One answer can be found by way of YouTube. Some years back, a young Evangelical Protestant named Jefferson Bethke uploaded a video titled “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus.” The four-minute video consists of spoken-word poetry, stirring music, and dramatic cinematography. Bethke professes that “Religion is man-centered, Jesus is God-centered.” He suggests that real Christianity focuses solely on Jesus while ignoring unnecessary accretions like doctrines, institutions, and liturgical norms.

While the video doesn’t explicitly condemn the Church, its subtle criticisms suggest as much. The video became an immediate hit, garnering over 35 million views and 145,000 comments, making it one of the most-watched religious videos in the history of the world.

The video especially resonated with the rapidly growing “spiritual but not religious” demographic. Although many in this group are still fascinated by Jesus, they want nothing to do with the Church. Cardinal Timothy Dolan described them well: they want to “believe without belonging,” and “they don’t mind being the sheep, but without a shepherd. They don’t mind the family, as long as they’re the only child. They don’t see the need

for a Church.”² In other words, they’re not keen on the Mystical Body of Christ.

And that’s partly why Sheen’s *Mystical Body of Christ* remains relevant. Within its pages, Sheen affirms that Jesus can never be separated from his Mystical Body any more than his divinity can be separated from his humanity. For the Mystical Body of Christ is Christ’s Incarnation prolonged through space and time. Sheen explains that the Church “continues Christ, expresses Christ, develops all the virtualities, potentialities of Christ, makes it possible for Him to extend Himself beyond the space of Palestine and the space of thirty-three years to prolong his influence unto all times and to all men—in a word, it de-temporalizes and de-localizes Christ so that He belongs to all ages and all souls.”³

He puts it even more pithily later in his book: “The Incarnate did not exhaust himself in the Incarnation.” This is why the Scriptures describe the Church as the fullness of Christ (Eph. 1:23). The Church is the new Body that Jesus assumed after his Ascension, the instrument he now uses to teach, govern, and sanctify the world.

The Church is not a roadblock to encountering Christ, a barrier to pure Christianity. The Church *is* Christ. As Sheen poetically observes, “[The Church] no more stands between Christ and me, than His feet stood between Magdalene and His forgiveness, or His hand stood between the little children and His blessing, or His Breast stood between John and the secrets of the Sacred Heart.”⁴

When we misunderstand the Church and her connection to Christ, we misunderstand Christ himself. That’s what has happened today among the “spiritual but not religious” crowd, and that’s why it’s important that we recommit ourselves to understanding who the Church is and why she matters. It’s important we rediscover the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

Sheen knew that one of the great difficulties toward that aim is the word “mystical.” In our day, just as in his, the word carries a

regrettable connotation, suggesting the “genuinely lofty spiritual states of a St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross,” but also “the vague, the undefined and the unpractical.”⁵ However, when the Church uses that term in reference to the Body of Christ, she refers to a hidden yet clear and concrete reality, a Body whose members are united not by external bonds but by an internal, invisible force. Christ’s Body is “Mystical” not because it is vague and undefined but because it is invisible and divine.

This confusion is common. As Sheen famously noted elsewhere, “There are not a hundred people in America who hate the Catholic Church. There are millions of people who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church.”⁶ Many people see the Church as an organization rather than an organism—as a “what” rather than a “who.” But the Church isn’t merely a collection of individuals who decide to form a club, united through common ideals and purposes. Instead, she’s a living body of cells, infused by the life of Christ and united by his will and purposes.

Like any living body, the Mystical Body of Christ requires three components to flourish: a head, a soul, and a source of unity. For the Church, her Head is Jesus Christ, who entrusts authority to a visible head on earth: his vicar, the pope. Her Soul is the Holy Spirit, the vivifying, energizing principle of life. And her Source of Unity is the Eucharist. Sheen reveals how each of these pieces fit together, the Head guiding the Body, the Soul enlivening the Body, and the Eucharist uniting the Body, together allowing Christ to move and act in our world.

After explaining how the Mystical Body of Christ operates, Sheen spends many chapters on her implications. For example, he devotes one chapter to scandals within the Body, which seems especially prescient in light of the abuse revelations in recent decades. If the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, and therefore the prolongation of God’s Incarnate Son, why does it seem plagued by sin? Sheen readily admits, along with St. Paul, that members of the Mystical Body are “treasures in clay”—a phrase

Sheen chose for the title of his own autobiography. “The graces of God are communicated through ‘frail vessels’ (2 Cor. 4:7),” he writes, “where mediocrity is the rule, genius the rarity, and saints the exception.”⁷

Therefore, scandals shouldn’t surprise us. Members of the Church regularly fall into sin, with few exceptions. But that no more sullies the Church’s holiness than dirty hands pollute an entire human body. The Mystical Body may contain sin-stained vessels, but the innate treasure has always remained pure.

Another implication concerns Mary. If Mary is the Mother of Christ’s human body, then she must naturally be the Mother of his Mystical Body, the Church. And since all Christians are incorporated into that Mystical Body, then the Mother of the Redeemer is also the Mother of the Redeemed. Her role in the Church today, Sheen writes, is just as active as her role in the Incarnation. Mary continues channeling her Son’s grace to us, and for that reason all Christians should draw close to her aid.

The Mystical Body also means that Christians live as the visible, active expression of Christ in the world. Without his Mystical Body he would have no physical presence beyond Jesus’ short life in first-century Judea:

How else could He, as the Incarnate God, console other widows than those of Naim, visit other friends than those of Bethany, attend other nuptials than those of Cana, call other apostles than those of the lake, convert other women than those of Samaria, and other men than the centurions of Calvary? How could He the God-man show meekness to other soldiers’ executioners; patience to other timid disciples, love for other publicans, friendliness to other Judases, forgiveness to other malefactors, devotion to other Johns, affection to other Marys, wisdom to other doctors of the Law, except through another Body with whose Feet He could step from Jerusalem

to the world, with whose lips He could speak to us who call ourselves modern?⁸

Christ instituted his Mystical Body to continually serve on this earth and to unite all humanity to himself.

Sheen ends his book by noting, “The dominant religious error from the sixteenth century to the present day has been to believe that religion is a purely personal matter between God and man.”⁹ Religion has become a private pursuit—think of the “me and Jesus” language among many Protestants—disconnected from corporate expression or ecclesial responsibility.

Many of those drifting away from the Church, who now identify as “spiritual but not religious,” still seek an encounter with Christ. However, “they need not go back 1,900 years to meet Christ, for He is already living in His Church.”¹⁰ We know Christ best as Peter, Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Catherine, Newman, Thérèse, and millions of Christians have come to know him throughout history: through his Body. In a world bent on separating Jesus from his Church, Christ from his Body, Sheen’s masterful book bridges that divide, affirming that the two are really one.

Author's Introduction

I

Of all the tracts of Theology the one which has probably received the least development in modern times is the tract on the Church. A partial and insufficient explanation is that the Church has been subject to but little doctrinal attack in the last 150 years. Just as the spirit of the Church thrives by persecution, so does her mind develop by intellectual opposition. Pelagianism helped the development of the Grace tract; Arianism aided in the deeper study of the Incarnation; the Fideism of Protestantism did much to further a study of Justification; and Modernism, instead of weakening the Church, drew from her greater proof and assurance of the objectivity and historicity of Divine Life. Because the Church has been ignored rather than attacked, during the last century, there has been lacking the stimulus to expand its implications and sound its depths.

This, of course, is only a partial explanation and does not explain why, with a still greater decline of intellectual opposition at the present time, we are about to witness the most intensive study of the Church since the Reformation. The reason is not because logic has been used against us, but rather because it has ceased to be used at all. During the days when Protestantism was strong, it was necessary for apologists to emphasize the external structure of the Church, its hierarchy, its apostolicity and its visible marks. But now Protestantism has reached a stage where its churches no longer claim to be Divine or to be deposits of Divine Revelation. Protestantism has dissolved either into the (*a*) individualistic type of religion in which each man's subjective religious experiences

determine the God he will worship and the altar he will serve, or else (*b*) into the purely social form of religion as developed by the International Congresses of Stockholm and Lausanne, and National Federations in which the bond between churches is external and communal, but not internal and spiritual. In other words, Protestantism in great part has ceased to be Christian.

This should give us no great reason for rejoicing. About fifty years ago we could depend on our separated brethren to help us defend the fundamental dogmatic truths of Christianity, such as the Divinity of Christ, but we can depend on them no longer. About twenty-five years ago we could depend on them to help us defend the basic principles of the moral law, such as the evil of sin, eternal sanctions, and the sanctity of the marriage bond; but we can depend on them no longer. To-day we are fighting the battle practically alone. Whether we fully realize it yet or not, on the bloody anvil of the World War we began to beat out a new civilization in which there will be either brotherhood in Christ or comradeship in anti-Christ.

The surrender of Divinity among the prodigal children has left the Church very much to herself. No longer attacked from within the broad body of Christendom with its variety of opposing sects, she is now forced to look at herself, not from the *outside* where she was opposed, but from the *inside* where she lives her most spiritual life. And it is indeed a remarkable thing that every profound treatise on the Church written in the last few years has considered the Church as she is in herself, and not as she is to her opponents. In other words, the *Church is no longer on the defensive; she is no longer on the offensive; she is on the descriptive*—revealing herself to hungry hearts and minds as the Bread of Life. No longer are her theologians, with an eye to Protestantism, presenting a partial aspect of her; rather they are revealing her as an organic whole, or as what she was from the beginning, and what our Lord wished her to be. Already the signs portend such a presentation, and within the next twenty years

we will witness a general revision of our *De Ecclesia* manuals, not because they are incorrect, but because they have served their day. The time is ripe for the Church to enter into herself, to understand the spirit which binds her external communicants into a living whole, and to begin once more where she started: as a spiritual leaven in the mass of paganism. The Church will present herself to the world, not under the impersonal "it" as in the days when she struggled against heresy, but as the personal "she" as she was known to Paul, under the title of "The Body of Christ."

II

One of the great difficulties apologists will meet in presenting the Church as the Body of Christ is the use of the term "Mystical," which, unfortunately, has a bad connotation. It is used to embrace not only the genuinely lofty spiritual states of a St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross, but is identified also with the vague, the undefined and the unpractical. It sometimes is applied in derision to any priest, nun or layman who "prays too much." Despite these associations, the term "mystical" is finding more general acceptance. Those who scruple at its use should remember it is not a substantive, but an adjective modifying "Body," and therefore is not identical with Mysticism. The word is not found in St. Paul. Bishop Myers of London finds that the two words "Mystical Body" are first actually combined by St. John Chrysostom in speaking of the Eucharist. That patristic use of "Mystical Body" for the Eucharist persisted in Rabanus Maurus (856) and in Paschasius Radbertus (860); Alexander of Hales (1245) uses the term of the Church in his *Universae Theologiae Summa*, and it is generally known to be the common teaching in the early part of the thirteenth century.

One reason perhaps why the term "Mystical Body" was not used in the Apostolic Fathers is because they treated the Church with emphasis on the doctrine of ecclesiastical unity, which needed to be stressed in their day. The relatively late association

of the word “mystical” with the revealed word “Body” does not, of course, affect the substance of the doctrine. What is more important is to discover why the term “mystical” ever became associated with the word “Body.” The word “Body” we know definitely was used by St. Paul, but it is worth remarking that he did not build his theory of the Church on the analogy of a living body, composed of head and members, in order to define the reciprocal rights and duties of the Head and the members. Rather, for him, the Church *existed as a reality anterior to the comparison*. He employed the analogy only to facilitate the understanding of the *reality* which is *one, hierarchical and possessed of solidarity*, like a living body.

Furthermore, it must not be thought that the doctrine of the Church as the “Body of Christ” differs from the doctrine found in either the Synoptics or St. John. *A priori* such is impossible, for God could not be guilty of contradictory revelations. The different presentation of the Church in the three abovementioned sources is due rather to the audiences they had in mind in preaching the doctrine. In the synoptics, “kingdom” is used; St. Paul uses “mystery” and John uses “life.” These three terms at first sight seem quite different, but as Father Emile Mersch has pointed out in his profound historical study of the *Mystical Body of Christ*, these three terms apply to the same reality under different aspects. The first, that of “kingdom,” expresses the economy of salvation in function of the prophecies and Messianic expectations of the hearers our Lord met in His customary preachings. The second term, “mystery,” is a theology which opposes the immense splendour of Divine decrees to the narrowness and exclusive parochialism of our hearts. It is the word best suited to an apostle whose preoccupation was to vindicate the transcendence and infinite mercy of the Divine gift against the nationalism of the Jews and the short-sighted wisdom of the Greeks. Finally, the third term, “life,” shows Christianity in its interior aspects, as closer to us than we are to ourselves. The fundamental reality in

all three is the same. The “kingdom” speaks of a membership, a subjection and a consecration; “life” of a rejuvenation; and both imply that we are incorporated into Christ, made children of His kingdom, and the beneficiaries of the “mystery” hidden from the ages.

The doctrine of the “Body” is therefore Pauline only in the etymological sense of the term, but it is equally Synoptic and Johannine as regards its reality. Our unity with Christ and our unity with one another are expressed in the unforgettable words of the Last Supper, even though the word “body” was not explicitly used.

But why add the term “mystical”? Because there are various kinds of bodies, and therefore various kinds of unity. The Church, manifestly, is not the *physical body of Christ*, for that already enjoys its glory at the right hand of the Father. On the other hand, the Church is more than the *moral* body of Christ, e.g., a nation, for in a moral body, unity is achieved through the will of the members alone, that is, through their common service of common ideals and purposes. The Church manifestly has a higher unity than this, for, as our Lord explained, there would be oneness between the Church and Him as there is oneness between the branches and the vine. This oneness between Him and us, based on the unity of Him and His Father, was finally achieved by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit of Love binds Him and the Father in the unity, the Godhead, so the Spirit will bind Him and us in the unity of His Mystical Body. Now, in order to express the higher unity of the members of the Church one with another and with their Head, Christ, and in order to better distinguish the Church as a Body, from a physical or a moral body—because it is infused by a hidden, mysterious, unifying soul which is the Holy Spirit—tradition has coined the term “mystical.”

The term, then, is not opposed to the real, for there are realities besides those which we touch and weigh. It implies a sensible sign of a hidden reality, namely, a body whose members

are united not by external bonds, but by the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. Certainly such a unity of members had to be expressed by some specific term, and since none better fitted the transcendent, vivifying power of Christ's Spirit than the term "mystical," it became associated with the Pauline term "Body." The conjunction of the words "Mystical Body" then does not stand for an abstraction; it refers to something visible and invisible, something tangible and intangible, something human and something Divine; it refers to a reality which is the subject of attribution, of properties and rights, to an organism with a supernatural soul, to a prolonged Incarnation, to the extension of Bethlehem and Jerusalem to our own days, to the *contemporary Christ*: the Church.

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Occasionally one hears it said that the doctrine of the Mystical Body is "dangerous" and "novel." The work of Father Mersch leaves no doubt that it has always been the traditional doctrine of the Church. The Church of the Orient following Sacred Scripture, this author proves, affirmed that the Church is an organism in which Christ acts, or better still, it is His "mystical prolongation." The Greek Fathers in refuting the Christological heresies say that the Mystical Body is constituted by a union of our nature and eternal life, as Christ is constituted of the union of two natures in the unique Person of the Son. The Latin Fathers and particularly Augustine, and later the Scholastics, spoke of the Church as the expansion of Divine Life in our souls under the Headship of Christ. The Council of Trent stated: "Christus Dominus lavacro baptismi *sui corporis membra* semel effecit" (Sess. XIV., cp. 2). Eucharistica est "symbolum unius *illius corporis* cujus *ipse caput* existit, cuique nos tamquam *membra* . . . adstrictos esse voluit" (Sess. XIII., cp. 2). This was in keeping with the idea previously defined by the Council of Florence: "Per [baptismum] membra Christi, ac *de corpore* efficimur Ecclesiae." The Council of the

Vatican, at the time of its disruption, had a schema or draft on the dogmatic constitution of the Church awaiting definition which called the Church the "Mystical Body of Christ." Lest anyone should have further scruple, we recommend a diligent reading of the Encyclical of the Holy Father, Pius XI, *Miserentissimus Redemptor*. His Holiness does not give an *ex professo* treatment of the Mystical Body, but rather assumes it, in treating of devotion to the Sacred Heart. Having spoken of the union of the members one with another, and with their Head, Christ, he goes on to say: "The Passion of Christ is renewed, and in a certain manner continued and completed in His Mystical Body which is the Church. Thus Christ who suffers still in His Mystical Body asks us to be His companions of expiation. Our union with Him demands this."

Some excellent treatises are appearing at the present time on this important subject, among which may be noted: Jürgensmeier, *Der Mystische Leib Christi als Grundprinzip der Aszetik*; Anger-Burke, *The Mystical Body of Christ*; Duperray-Burke, *Christ in the Christian Life*; Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*; R. Plus, *God in Us, In Christ Jesus, Christ in His Brethren*; Dom Marmion, *Christ the Life of the Soul*; Emile Mersch, *Le Corps Mystique du Christ* (two vols.); E. Mura, *Le Corps Mystique du Christ* (two vols.).

This modest contribution to the subject was born of a study of St. Thomas' treatise on the Mystical Body of Christ in which the Angelic Doctor emphasizes the triple office of Christ as Teacher, King, and Priest, which offices are prolonged in the Church whose mission it is to teach, to govern, and to sanctify. This idea is fundamental to the whole book. The book is not a rigid theological proof of the Mystical Body, but rather a reasoned exposition. Its purpose is to inspire further study on the subject and also to introduce the subject to those not familiar with it. For this reason matter specially intended for the theologian will be found in notes. The book can be read without them. It seems clear that a thorough knowledge of the Mystical Body is the condition of not only a fruitful apostolate, but also a spiritual priesthood

and laity. It will help to make Catholics realize that they need not go back 1,900 years to meet Christ, for He is already living in His Church; it will inspire a love for the Mass or the Sacrifice of the Mystical Body of Christ in which we offer our sacrificial lives to prolong Calvary to the very hour; finally, it will make Catholicism operative in our lives, which is only another name for Catholic Action. If this book, under the protection of Mary, the Mother of the Mystical Body of Christ, brings a single soul to the feet of Christ living in the Church, the author will feel that the book has been a triumphant success. As the book is primarily for Catholics, the relation to the Mystical Body of Christians outside the visible unity of the Church is not made the subject of special treatment.

It is the author's wish to express a debt of thanks to Reverend Walter Farrell, O.P., S.T. Lr., D.D., of the Dominican House of Studies, Washington, D.C., whose help in writing this book has been commensurate not only with the profundity of his theological knowledge, but also with his willingness to share it with those who know much less. Thanks also are due to Mr. E.I. Watkin (author of *A Philosophy of Form*), who has written a beautiful treatise on the Mystical Body and contributed so intelligently to the final editing of this book.

CHAPTER I

The Whole Christ

Our Divine Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is not primarily a moral reformer, but a merciful Redeemer, and not only a good man, but the infinitely good God. We all know that His earthly Life was lived over nineteen hundred years ago, in a small obscure corner of the earth. Simply because it belongs to the past there is grave danger that we may think it has little relation to the present. Many of us, as practical-minded persons, have probably asked ourselves such questions as these: What possible relation can I, in this twentieth century, have to Him, who lived in the first? What influence can His Life of long ago have upon my life at the present? How can any bond of union that I have with Him, differ from my relation to Plato or Buddha or Confucius?

In order to understand the answer, we must remember that there are three ways in which man may influence posterity even long after his death. The first of these is by *teaching*. Anyone who ever wrote or spoke profound truths may yet be heard from the grave. The wisdom of the Greeks, thanks to their teaching, still lives amongst us. Plato and Aristotle are enshrined in our universities, and we talk of them as if we had walked with them through the market places and porches of Athens. Augustine of the fifth century and Aquinas of the thirteenth are made to come from their graves, and by their written word instruct our hearts, minds, and souls in the things of God and men. And who is there to deny that Washington and Lincoln live beyond their

day, in their state papers, so full of the finest political traditions of a free people?

Now, our Blessed Lord also can influence us by His teaching. His words of heavenly Wisdom were not allowed to fade away on an evening breeze, but were caught up by His four evangelists—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—so that all who could read or hear would know the Wisdom of One who spoke, not as the Scribes and Pharisees, but as One having authority, even the authority of God. The Scriptures, then, which contain the teaching of Christ, constitute the first great link between the past and the present, between His earthly Life and our modern existence.

There is a second way in which a character of the past may make himself felt in the present, and that is by *example*. Any man who has ever had a biographer may project the force of his personality into the future, long after his flesh has crumbled into dust. The military example of a Caesar or a Napoleon, the saintly life of a Vincent de Paul or a Don Bosco, the daring exploits of a Columbus or a Magellan, can be told and retold a thousand times, and thus become an inspiration and a challenge to brave and saintly men of other times and different nations.

In like manner, our Lord can influence our day, because He has left us the beautiful example of a holy, moral Life which we should follow. We too can be forgiving, as He forgave those who crucified Him; we can be gentle, as He was gentle to little children; humble, as He was before those who would make Him an earthly king; and prayerful, as He was in the long vigils on the mountain tops. Countless indeed are the heroic, self-sacrificing, and saintly deeds of our own day, which have had as their inspiration the example of Him who came down from the heavens to teach us what manner of men God from all eternity has wished us to be.

Such are the two ways—teaching and example—in which all men, and our Lord in particular, strike root even centuries after their death. But, and this is important, the pity is that there are so many who believe these are the *only* two ways that our Lord

could possibly stir the hearts and fire the minds of our day. As a matter of fact, if our Divine Saviour had no other way to project Himself into our day than by the Gospel records of what He said and what He did, how would He differ from Plato or Confucius, Mohammed or Caesar? They too live in the present by their teaching and by their example. I am willing to grant that the teaching and example of our Lord are nobler than those of other men, but if our Lord has no other way to project Himself than that which is common to all men, *then* He is only a *man* and not God. If He has no other way to energize our hearts and minds than by His teaching and His example, then Christianity is only the memory of a man who lived and died; then it can give only human consolation to hearts that cry out for the Divine; then it is just another *sect* and not a religion, only a point of view and not a heavenly gift.

Much modern Christianity is of this very type. It takes a purely emotional and sentimental outlook on Christ, as a humanitarian and nothing more. It bids us look back nineteen hundred years to Galilee; it repeats His words, interprets His actions, as it might those of Caesar or Aurelius—and because it does *only this*, it has lost its hold on the modern man. I think that there is no reason which so explains the decay of Christianity among sects, as this tendency to regard it only as a memory of a man who taught and lived. Indeed, if Christianity is only a memory of the teaching and example of a man, then it *should die*—and the sooner it dies the sooner we can welcome a religion which will put Divine Life into our veins.

Christianity, fortunately, is something more than a memory, because our Lord is something more than a man. He is true God and true man. Being God, He can perpetuate Himself not only by His teaching and His example, but also in a third way, which belongs to Him alone as God, namely by His continuing Life. Others may leave their titles, their wealth, their stocks and their bonds, their doctrines and their biographies, but only our Lord

can make a last will and testament bequeathing to posterity that which no one else on dying could ever leave: His Life as the Life of the World. He brought Divine Life to earth at the crib, but He willed not that this Life should be only a temporary visitation of a score and ten years and a localized experience confined to a few hundred square miles. He willed to diffuse it in time until time should be no more, and in space until all the thirsty hearts of earth had drunk of its refreshing draughts.

God is too good to circumscribe the gift of Divine Life to a brief human existence stretching between a crib and a cross. Did He not explicitly state: "Behold I am with you all days even to the consummation of the world"? And Saint John, speaking of the Divine Life prolonged and diffused in all men, says: "Of whose fullness we have all received." It is the fullness of that Christ-Life, beating and throbbing at this very hour in millions of souls, which gives flesh and blood to His teaching and His example. Because He lives to-day, His teaching is *not* a cold record written only on the pages of history, but a teaching bound up with life in a living mind; His example is not something that *has* happened, but something that *is* happening, not an antiquated historical phenomenon, but a living force active before our very eyes.

Naturally, our Lord does not live in the world to-day in exactly the same way as He lived in Galilee; forty days after His Resurrection He ascended into heaven where He sits at the right hand of the Father. He must live on earth to-day in a way different from His Life of nineteen hundred years ago, and in a way other than that in which He inhabits heaven. This new way is called His Mystical Life. There are therefore three phases in the complete Life of Christ or in the Life of the whole-Christ: first, His Earthly Life; second, His Glorified Life; third, His Mystical Life.

I. THE EARTHLY LIFE

From all eternity the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity is eternally generated by the heavenly Father in the ecstasy of the first and real paternity: "Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee." It was because of this Eternal Life in the Godhead that He could say, "Before Abraham was, I am." The Eternal generation of the Son of God has its temporal counterpart in the earthly generation of the Son of man in the womb of the Blessed Mother, of whom was born Jesus Christ, possessed of a Divine Nature from eternity, a human nature in time, and of both united in the oneness of the Person of the Son of God. This earthly Life began in the manger at Bethlehem, continued through the obedience of thirty years at Nazareth, the three years of teaching, the three hours on the cross, the three days in the grave, and the forty days of Risen Life before ascending into heaven, leaving us an example to walk in His steps. It was not a long Life, as we reckon a life; most of us would consider our work hardly begun at thirty. But it was a Life in which everything was accomplished according to His pre-ordained plan, neither hastened nor retarded by the iniquity of men. He came to give His Life for the Redemption of many, "laid it down" in the "hour of darkness" which He foretold, "took it up again" as He prophesied in the sign of Jonas, and then ascended into heaven, never again to be visible to the fleshly eyes of men. His earthly Life was finished.

2. THE GLORIFIED LIFE

The second phase of the complete Life of Christ is pursued in heaven. During the forty days which followed His Resurrection our Lord has completed His instructions concerning His Kingdom on earth, and now can say to His Father: "I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do, and now Glorify Thou Me, O Father, with the glory which I had, before the world was, with Thee" (John 17:4-5). The human nature taken from His pure Mother is ready to enjoy the reward of that earthly Life spent in

obedience to the Father's Will. On a Thursday, forty days after Easter, He assembles His apostles, leads them to the Mount of Olives, blesses them, and rises by His own Divine Power above the clouds, as He had told them: "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and so enter into His glory?" (Luke 24:26). Even as the planets sweep round their orbit and return to their starting point as if to salute Him who sent them on their way, so Christ, completing the orbit of an earthly Life, returns to His heavenly Father to enjoy the glory which was His before the foundation of the world.

St. Paul, speaking of this Glorification of Jesus, writes to the Ephesians: "What is the exceeding greatness of [God's] power toward us, who believe, according to the operation of the might of His power, which was wrought in Christ, raising Him up from the dead, and setting Him on the right hand in the heavenly places, above all principality, and power, and virtue, and dominion" (Eph. 1:19-21). The creed of the Church too describes Christ in His glory as "seated at the right hand of God." This is no more than a figurative way of expressing the eternal repose merited by His glorious triumphs and the continued exercise of those Powers, which His Father had given Him, to teach, govern and sanctify man. For we must not picture our Lord in His glorified state as indifferent to the world which He had come to redeem (cf. John 14:2-4, 17:24).

There are two reasons for Christ's Glorification. The first is because He is God's own Son. "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again I leave the world, and I go to the Father" (John 16:28). The second is because He has humbled Himself and therefore shall be exalted. "Who emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause God also hath exalted Him, and hath given Him a name which is above all names: That in the name of Jesus every knee should

bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. And that every tongue should confess that the Son Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:7–11).

3. THE MYSTICAL LIFE

This text of St. Paul brings us to the third phase of the Life of Christ, in which He begins again to live on earth in a new way, for He had told His apostles on the night of the Last Supper, “I will come again.” It was not best (He told them) that He abide with them in His visible earthly form, for He would thus be only something external to them, but if He left them to go to His Father and sent His Spirit, then He would be, not an example to be copied, but a Life to be lived. And so He said to them, while still in the flesh: “It is expedient to you that I go: for if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you” (John 16:7). The day of Pentecost, ten days after His Resurrection, was the birth of Christ’s new Life on earth, for on that day He sent His Spirit to His apostles, the nucleus of His Church, to make them, in the language of Holy Writ, His New Body, the Church of which He is the invisible Head (Rom. 8:9).

The new presence of Christ on earth in His Church is the third phase of the complete Life of Christ, and in order to demarcate it from His physical Life and from His Glorified Life tradition has called it the Mystical Life. Just as in His earthly Life He took a human body as an instrument for the exercise of His office as Prophet, King, and Priest, so now on Pentecost He assumes a new body, His Church, through the instrumentality of which He still fulfils the same triple role of teaching, governing, and sanctifying. In His earthly Life, He had only one human nature united to Him; in His Mystical Life, He unites to Himself all those human natures throughout the world who receive His Spirit. In His earthly Life, He was redeeming; in His Mystical Life, He is bestowing the fruits of Redemption on the members of His Mystical Body. In His earthly Life, *He* possessed the fullness of the

Godhead; in His Mystical Life, we receive of Its fullness. In His earthly Life, He was the Founder of the Kingdom; in His Mystical Life, He incorporates us into that Kingdom. In His earthly Life, He suffered and rejoiced in His physical body; in His Mystical Life, He suffers and rejoices in His Mystical Body. Then He was the Vine, now He is the Vine giving life to the branches; then He was the Leaven, now He is the Leaven in the Mass; then He was the Mustard Seed, now He is the Tree of Life; then He had a body taken from the womb of the Blessed Mother overshadowed by the Holy Ghost, now He has a Mystical Body, the Church, taken from the womb of humanity overshadowed by the same Pentecostal Spirit. Of course, the Mystical union between the Christian and Christ is not the same as the union of His Divine and human natures in His person. The former is by grace and accidental, the latter is personal and substantial. Remember, we always speak with this understanding.

The complete Life of Christ must include these three phases. Those who consider His physical Life alone, either develop a sentimental spirituality or else end by regarding Him merely as a good man and a teacher of humanitarian ethics; those who consider Him only in His heavenly Life of glory, regard Him as an absentee landlord, disregarding both His promise to send His Spirit, and His abiding interest in the souls which He came to save. Just as it would be wrong to limit *The New Testament* to *The Gospels*, so it would be wrong to limit Christ to an earthly career. *The Gospels* are the record of His earthly Life, and the promise of the Glorified and Mystical Lives; *The Acts of the Apostles* and *The Epistles* of Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude are the records of the Mystical Life. Christ is not divided; He is not past; He has not left us orphans; He is with us and more intimately than we are with ourselves. He is still living in the world, moving amongst its poor, instructing the ignorant, comforting the doubtful, and healing the souls of men. Such is His Mystical Life in the Church. As His human and Divine natures are one in the unity of His Person in

the Incarnation, so too in His Mystical Life the Church His Body and He the Head are one Person—the Mystical Christ.¹ Christ is our contemporary.

It is within the power of man to prolong himself through space and time by doctrine and example. It is within Christ's power to prolong Himself, not only by doctrine and example, but also by His Life. If you believe that He is God, you must believe this. If you do not believe that He is God, then you cannot believe Him to be a good man, for a good man does not lie, and He *said* that He was God. But if you *do* believe that He is God and consequently that He has projected His Life through all time and throughout the world, then you must seek out that Divine Life. You must discover where It is. And it must be very definitely somewhere, for life is not something vague and undefined like a fog. If that Life is on this earth, it must be found in some organism, since life on earth is never found divorced from a body. Now where is that Body in which Christ is living His Mystical Life? It is for the next chapter to attempt an answer.