

# THE CHURCH: *Mystical Body of Jesus Christ*

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church 659 – 682, 737 - 810)*

## **Christ's ministry - The Word of God from all eternity**

There is an essential continuity between God's dealings with ancient Israel (over 2,000 years ago), the life on earth of Jesus Christ (2,000 years ago) and the life of the Church from the time of Christ right up until today (in the Third Millennium). In a critical way, these are not three different time periods that should be contrasted with each other: they are one great continuous growth. In ancient Israel, God formed, freed and led his people through the trials of slavery, oppression, famine, persecution, civil war, military catastrophe, national humiliation, foreign invasion, and mass slaughter. But remember that it was the same God who led and taught them as the God who leads and teaches us - the Most Holy Trinity. Even if the people of Israel were unaware of the hidden nature of God's life, or even of the existence of Christ and the Holy Spirit as distinct persons from the Father, nevertheless the Three-in-One Godhead was the one who led Israel. The ancient Fathers of the Church like St. Basil the Great, St. Ephraim, St. Irenaeus, St. Ambrose & St. Epiphanius all read the Old Testament accounts of God's dealings with Israel and saw in them the work of Christ. Their perspective is quite beautiful: Christ is the eternal Word of the Father. This Word fully expresses all that the Father is - it communicates the fullness of Truth for all times and ages. To put it another way, the person of Christ is the communication of the Father to all peoples and ages. When we speak, we utter sounds and words - when God speaks, he sends his Son. SO, they argue, whenever God spoke, it was Christ (the Second Person of the Trinity) who spoke. This puts a wholly new perspective on the Burning Bush narrative of Exodus 3 - Moses speaks to CHRIST although he only knows him as God. Equally, when the prophets speak about what God has said to them, they often begin "*The Word of the Lord was addressed to me as follows...*" To the Fathers, this was a clear indication of what was going on. The Word of the Lord is Jesus Christ (so speaks St. John in his Gospel). This Word, Christ himself, is addressed to the prophets. It is Christ who inspires the prophets with heavenly wisdom to teach the people the paths of holiness. Nor is this way of looking at the Old Testament without biblical foundation. St. Paul regarded the trials of Israel in the wilderness as being overcome by the mercy of Christ - he says that when Israel was dying of thirst, God provided water from the rock for them to drink (and then adds a rather oblique comment that this rock followed the people as they wandered, presumably to water the people wherever they went). He ends with his own interpretation: "*and the rock was Christ.*" (1 Cor. 10:4) Don't forget, this interpretation is inspired by the Holy Spirit. It was Christ who was feeding the people in the desert, who led them in a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day. It was Christ

whose voice was heard by Moses on Sinai in the giving of the Ten Commandments and Christ whose voice was heard as thunder by the people below.

- ***When God spoke to his people in Old Testament times it was through Christ, although they did not know him then.***

What of the communication of God to his people *today*? Just as we shouldn't think of the Old Testament events and teaching without recognising Christ's pivotal role, so we should not look at the history of the Church without seeing Christ at the very heart of the continuing life of the Church. It is a great mistake to think of the Church as living after Christ: the Church lives in Christ - this is A.D., Anno Domini - the year of the Lord 2008. In other words, the visible presence of the Church is not separate from the person of Christ even though it is made up of members who may be very much separated from Christ through their actions at one time in their lives or another. The Church is the direct successor to the life, ministry and authority exercised by Christ during his human lifetime: this is so not because Christ has handed over this authority to us (to let us use as we like), but because through the ministry of the members of the Church, Christ continues his own unique ministry as the one Saviour of mankind and mediator with the Father. ***This ministry did not begin in the stable at Bethlehem, when Christ adopted human nature, and it does not end with his ascension:*** Christ has been the mediator with the Father from the beginning of time, and has exercised this ministry within the confines of time through his incarnated presence according to the natural order as Jesus and now through his equally real presence according to the supernatural order in his mystical body - the Church.

This is one of the most critical principles of Catholic thought. The Christ of yesterday (in Old Testament) is the same person as the Christ of Bethlehem and Calvary, the same as the Christ who converted St. Paul on the road to Damascus and the same as the Christ who poured his life on me in Baptism. In all three ages (Old Testament, times of the Gospel and the age of the Church - from the Ascension to today) it is Christ who is dominantly at work. The visible Church is no more, and especially no less, than the continuation of Christ's work, still carried out by Christ, but now through the visible actions of the members of the Church and the Holy Spirit. What is so important here is that the Church is not just a human institution, made up of fallen human beings trying to live out God's law - this describes ancient Israel. The Church at its very nature and heart is the mystical body of Christ - it has Christ at its centre. The life of the Son of God has been given to the members of the Church.

***In other words, the essential continuity is Christ Himself:*** His role, with regard to creation, has always been to intercede with the Father on our behalf, to secure for us the protection and the graces we need. The only thing that has differed is the way in which Christ has carried out this ministry:

1. BEFORE HE BECAME MAN: Christ interceded for us at the right hand of the Father, in the glory of heaven and he communicated with man through chosen instruments - especially the prophets, Kings of Israel, the priests and in the sacred writings of the Old Testament.
2. AS THE INCARNATE WORD - THE GOD/MAN JESUS CHRIST: He interceded for us with the Father through the perfect prayer he offered on earth, "*aloud and in silent tears ... and he submitted so humbly that his prayer*

*was heard." (Hebrews 5:7).* This perfect prayer was not simply the time he spent in praying on his knees, such as in his time in the desert after his Baptism, or in the garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion - his perfect prayer reaches a climax on the cross itself, when he offered his entire life in a single perfect sacrifice for our sins. This prayer is the most powerful prayer man has ever known - it has brought forgiveness of sin to all humanity and the opportunity to regain all that was lost through Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the words of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, *"He has offered one single sacrifice for sins ... By virtue of that single offering, he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying."* (Hebrews 10:12, 14). Christ's work went further: he instructed us in the life of perfection - the way to live our lives not as the descendants of Adam - in disobedience to God - but as the children of God, in freely-chosen obedience to the loving will of the Father. For this, we have only to read the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the parables and the numerous recorded saying of Christ.

3. AFTER HIS ASCENSION: Christ continues interceding for man. The Book of Revelation shows the single sacrifice of the cross being offered by Christ to the Father in the eternity of heaven - Christ never stops offering the once and for all sacrifice of the cross so that we may achieve the *"eternal perfection"* which the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of. We enter into this single and unrepeatable sacrifice whenever we offer the sacrifice of the Mass. In other words, when we celebrate the Mass, Christ's eternal prayer for us takes place through the work of the Church: for this reason, the Church has always believed that Christ established the Church of his disciples not just to repeat the words and advice of his own preaching, or to continue the memory of his actions, but to be the visible human means through which Christ continues to offer intercession his to the Father. In the worship of God, which the Church offers, it is more truly Christ who is worshipping the Father, and we join him, in a human way. In effect, the Church is the making-present today of the invisible prayer of Christ to the Father.

Through the Catholic Church, we believe Christ continues to teach and sanctify the world. The Church is his mystical body - she is joined to him inseparably, and she is the instrument he uses to continue his work on earth. The Church is therefore, at her origin, a mystery: she is the creation of God (for only the Holy Spirit could forge unity of the different peoples, cultures and nations which comprise the Church) and she is the visible way that God makes himself present - through her God speaks (i.e., in the solemn teaching of the Church), through her God gives grace (i.e., the sacraments). Boiling this down, we are saying that the Church is effective: she distributes the graces and blessings of the Father because she is the visible presence of the Son, on whom the Father's favour rests.

### **1. How God communicates: the Word**

God communicates as we do: through the Word. For human beings, the word is no more than our language. For God, the process of communication is not just the expression of a message ("come here", "do that", "what fantastic weather"). This is human expression. It is partial. We express what we are thinking in the form of words. God goes further. Instead of trying to put his thoughts into words, which as we know

are poor reflections of what we are thinking, God expresses his Word – his actual nature, his very person - by speaking not a collection of words but by actually giving himself. When God speaks, he is not translating thought into audible noises, as we do - he is communicating fully. There is no translation into words because the communication is complete. You could say he doesn't inform us of what he is thinking, he gives us the actual thought: thus he does not say to us "Let me inform you of something: I am happy" - he simply gives us the joy which he is experiencing. Not "I love you" but the actual love he has for us. We summarise this by saying that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity is the Word of God. This means that whenever the Trinity wished to communicate with creation, God did not simply talk to it & thus show them what to do: he revealed himself to it (i.e., he spoke the Word - Christ), and this communicated his will.

## **2. The Word in History**

In the Old Testament, God spoke his Word through the Prophets, Judges, Kings etc. In other words, the Father revealed himself by inspiring his chosen individuals through the Holy Spirit to speak his Word (Christ). During the lifetime of Jesus Christ, that Word was still the means through which God communicated with his people (i.e., gave himself to them): only now, it wasn't through inspiration of human beings but through incarnation as a human being. The Word itself became flesh and took human nature & human form. The Word wasn't just audibly given, as it was through the prophets, but visibly given as well, through the human nature of Jesus Christ.

## **3. The Word in the Church**

After the Ascension, the Word of God (Jesus Christ) is still given to his people. But now it is through a combination of inspiration and incarnation. God doesn't just speak his Word through us as baptised Christians - he makes this Word visibly present through the visible & historical presence of the Church. In a sense, Christ is still incarnated through the human beings who are grafted on to him through Baptism.

That is why the Church can claim to be called THE BODY OF CHRIST. That is why we can make sense of the close identification Christ makes between himself and his group of followers. He says that they are not just imitators of him, but his visible instruments: "*In so far as you do this to one of the least of these, you do it to me*" (Mt. 25:40, 45), and "*He who hears you hears me, & he who rejects you rejects me, & he who rejects me rejects the one who sent me*" (Lk. 10:16). He confirms this to St. Paul at the great moment of his conversion: he asks Saul, who is busy rounding up members of the Church "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" Saul answers, "*Who are you, Lord?*" to which Christ replies "*I am Jesus and you are persecuting me*" (Acts 9:1-5). Christ's words to Saul make no sense unless we already have a clear sense of the real and effective presence of Christ within his Church: if this were not so, Christ would have asked Saul "Why are you persecuting my followers?" or "my disciples/faithful/people."

Clearly, for Christ, for the Holy Spirit (who inspired these words) and for the early Church, there was a fundamental identification between Christ and the Church, which was so profound that what was done to one, was done to the other. Thus, when

Ananias and Saphira sell their property and bring the money to the Apostles for the community to use, and they hold some of the money back while claiming that they have given over the whole cost, St. Peter says *"Ananias, how can Satan have possessed you that you should lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the money from the land?"* (Acts 5:3) He concludes, *"It is not to men that you have lied but to God."* (Acts 5:4) This is an outrageous claim - Ananias had lied to St. Peter, not to God, surely. Either St. Peter is claiming to be God - or he has assumed what the entire early Church took for granted: the body of the Church is not just human but also the residence of the Holy Spirit and the mystical Body of Christ. To lie to the Church is to lie to Christ's own body - to Christ himself. What we do to the body of the Church we do to Christ because Christ and his Church are inseparable.

NOTE: St. Peter's words are never disputed in this account - no one says "Wait, that judgement is a little harsh" or "That is blasphemy - you are claiming that the Church has a divine character." What he says is undisputed, unchallenged and universally accepted: what is more, it is confirmed by the power of God himself - Ananias drops down, dead. To reject the Church is to reject Christ - to rob the Church is to rob Christ: this is the implicit teaching of these passages and no-where is this disputed, either in the Scriptures or the constant teaching of the Church.

This teaching remained normative and universal until the Reformation, when the reformers denied the divine character of the Church. They argued that the Church was not divine in origin, taking its identity from Christ, but was essentially a human construct. God deals with individuals in the private of their souls. If they come together, it is merely for social interaction and mutual reassurance - but not to receive divine grace or to hear the teaching of Christ given with Christ's authority. The Church is simply a social construct, a convenient clubbing together of like-minded people: it is a human thing, not necessarily willed by Christ or even necessary for salvation.

Today, sadly, this view is widely popular: in some ways, it has been helped by the stories of scandals within the Church (priests and nuns who left the Church to marry, funds embezzled, clergy and parents alike who have been convicted of abusing children etc.). In the wake of these stories, many have decided that there can be nothing divine about the character of the Church. In fairness to them, we should recognise that our behaviour and actions are the strongest descriptions of our faith. The notorious sins of prominent people and the scandalous sins, which are present at every level of Church life, damage beyond words the Church's ability to present the faith. She seems just like any other society of human beings - essentially flawed (even if she means well), untrustworthy in anything she says, more interested in power politics than in real holiness etc.

However, the mystery of Christ challenges us to look beyond this - not to deny the sins that do take place (and not just the notorious ones, reported in the media, but also the smaller but no less destructive sins of little people like you and me: envy, pride, adultery, lies, rivalry, competition, slander and gossip etc.). We are called to see beneath the obvious and superficial to the deeper reality of the Church - the incarnate Son of God who chose to adopt human nature and never to abandon it but to use human nature to communicate his teaching and his life to all generations. This is not something we have invented in the twentieth century to get around all these scandals.

The early Church had even worse scandals to cope with - if the betrayal of one's people is regarded as appalling for any priest to do, how should we judge the betrayal of Christ himself. Don't forget, the Church has been trying to cope with this type of scandal since Judas sold Christ to the Pharisees. AND YET, even in the face of this, the early Church were very clear about the divine character of the Church - for this does not depend of the holiness of the members of the Church to be true, or the holiness of the clergy, but on the holiness of GOD. The Church carries the enormous authority it does not because its members are worthy of that authority or collectively holier than any other body but because they are the MYSTICAL BODY OF THE SON OF GOD. Christ stands at the very centre of the Church, constantly giving her his own life and holiness, and eternally offering his life to the Father for the forgiveness of our sins.

For this reason, the Church cannot be adequately spoken of without reference to Christ. He is her Head, her bridegroom. He is what she is called to, and she has been made for him - she is a part of him and he fills her as air fills a room. He gives his life to her continuously, without ceasing, so that she becomes a bride worthy of him (*Rev. 19:7-8*). Whatever she does involves him because she cannot separate herself from him. This is so not because she is so alluring in her holiness that he can't bear to be parted from her but because he has sworn to remain with her, to the end of time (*Mt. 28:20*), and Christ is true to his promise. We can be certain of Christ's unbreakable union with the Church because we can trust the promise of he who is "*the Truth*" (*Jn. 14:6*): it was he who swore it, and his nature as God precludes any possibility of deception or later retraction.

The mystery of the Church is the mystery of Christ. Remove one and the other is compromised. Without the existence of the Church, we would doubt Christ's sincerity (he gave us his teaching, which is life itself, and the command to eat his Body and drink his Blood if we desire to live - but he leaves no structure which guarantees that we will ever hear his teaching or receive his sacraments - in which case, thank God that fallible and guilty human beings thought to institute what Christ neglected to do!). BUT without Christ at the heart of the Church, we could never trust anything she taught or gave us as being authentically of Christ - even the Scriptures would be doubtful. Without Christ, the Church is impossible and inconceivable - without the Church, Christ is unreliable because we can never be certain we have truly received what he taught.

Christ is the key, whole and entire, to the mystery of the Church. She is his chosen method of continuing his work, and through her he continues to bring the nations to faith, and eternal life.

1. Before Christ, God spoke his Word (Christ) to people (Israel), through people (Prophets & Kings).
2. In Christ's lifetime, God spoke his Word (Christ) to all peoples, through a human being (the God-man Jesus Christ).
3. After the Ascension, God speaks his Word (Christ) to all creation, through human beings (his disciples) whom he has drawn into unity by the Holy Spirit (the Church).

All is the work of Christ: His words are faithfully transmitted to the world today by the Church through the preaching of the Gospel, meditation on the Sacred Scriptures ("This is the Word of the Lord"), the living witness of the members of the Church (whether ordained or lay, married or single), and the solemn teaching of the Catholic Church. In these, Christ is teaching his creation by giving himself to them as truly as he did through the prophets of Sacred Scripture and as he did in his own life on earth. The Church is simply the most recent form God has chosen for the conveying of his message of salvation. More than that, however - the Church is the body of people he has drawn to himself - he gives them his own divine life, the life of holiness and grace, which belongs only to the Godhead. This makes the Church greater than ancient Israel: not because its members are holier (although they should be) but because something infinitely richer lies at the heart of the Church - God's infinite and perfect Son. Thus we claim for our own the beautiful words of St. Paul - "*I live, or rather it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me*"(Gal 2:20).

This means that the Church is the historical continuation of what God has always been doing - speaking to & sanctifying his people through revealing to them not only his words but his Word, first through the prophets, then in the person of Christ himself, and now through the Body of Christ, the visible Church in the fullness of Christ's teaching. The Church is Christ made present in human form in much the same way that Jesus is Christ made present of the form of a human being. This is the Catholic Church. And when God gives himself to us, we are not simply better informed about him, we receive him - and that means we are changed in a radical and sublime way.

cf. the ninth article of the Creed: "*I believe in the holy Catholic Church*" (C.C.C. 748-975)

1. The nature of the Church (C.C.C. 748-810)
2. The four marks of the Church - One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic (C.C.C. 811-870)
3. The members of the Church (C.C.C. 871-945)
4. The Church Triumphant - Mary & the Saints (C.C.C. 946-975)

- cf. also, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, from the Second Vatican Council (1964), esp. ch. 1 "The mystery of the Church"*.

As you can see, the whole issue of the Church is a highly complex one. The Second Vatican Council described the Church as a mystery - and rightly so. This is not meant in the sense of a conundrum that we cannot solve, rather like the Bermuda Triangle or the assassination of President Kennedy. It means that the nature of the Church is rooted in God himself - and that goes far deeper than the human mind can penetrate: yet, just like God, this extraordinary truth has been revealed to us so that we can understand it and live in it as deeply as we are able. Perhaps the best way of thinking about the Church is in relation to Christ, since, after all, St. Paul describes the Church as his Body. Jesus Christ is both God and man in perfect unity. As the Church is

Christ visibly present on earth, it too is both human and divine - human, because it is made up of human parts (ourselves), but divine also, because it is called into unity and maintained as one by the power of the Holy Spirit, because through the human members of the Church, Christ continues to teach creation the path of holiness (in the Sacred Scriptures and in the authoritative teachings of the Magisterium - the Holy Father and the College of Bishops gathered around him), because through the human members of the Church we are given the life of the Holy Spirit by way of the seven holy sacraments, especially in the sacrament of the Mass, and because through the ministry of Christ in the Church we have access to the full potential of our nature - salvation.