

Spirituality of the Mystical Body of Christ

"The style of life and fundamental attitudes of the Society of the Missionaries of the Holy Apostles are based principally on the spirituality which is characteristic of the Society and which we call: 'Spirituality of the Mystical Body.'" (Constitution of the M.Ss.A., Art. 12)

INTRODUCTION:

We all form the Body of Christ.

"I am the vine, you are the branches..." (Jn 15, 1-17)

"You are the Body of Christ; every one of you is a member of it." (1 Cor 12, 27)

"There are, in the end, three things that last: faith, hope and love, and the greatest is love..." (1 Cor 13, 13)

- I -

The fact of being, all of us, the Body of Christ, means a mutual union both extensive and intensive.

St. Paul affirms - and this is the core of his predication - that the Church - ourselves - we are the Body Of Christ. In the beginning, he seems to use the metaphor that assimilates the society to a body which - through the diversity of members - is obviously one.

But later on Paul discovers that, in this metaphor is hidden more than a comparison: he thinks most especially of what has been the fundamental key of his conversion and of his faith:

"Saul, why do you persecute me?... I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting..." (Acts 9, 4 ff.)

"Treading on the foot, one makes the head scream..." (St. Augustine)

And so, the Apostle understands the impressive realism of the union between Christ and the Christians, so explicitly and frequently expressed by Christ:

"Just as the Father who has life sent me and I have life because of the Father, so the man who feeds on me will have life because of me." (Jn 6, 57)

"I am the vine, you are the branches; He who lives in me and I in him will produce abundantly, for apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn 15, 5)

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"That all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be (one) in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me that they may be one, as we are one... I living in them, you living in me - that their unity may be complete..." (Jn 17, 21-23)

Paul makes Christ's Resurrection the beginning of the new world, and Christianity will henceforward only be the progressive assimilation of his glory - or love - by the faithful.

"All of us, gazing on the Lord's glory with unveiled faces, are being transformed from glory to glory into his very image by the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Cor 3, 18)

- Through baptism, we are transformed into one only body:

"It was in one Spirit that all of us whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, were baptized into one body. All of us have been given to drink of the one Spirit." (1 Cor 12, 13)

- Through the Eucharist, the Body of Christ assimilates the faithful, the Church, to the Mystical Body of Christ. The Eucharist makes the Church.

"Is not the cup of blessing we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many as we are, are one body for we all partake of the one loaf." (1 Cor 10, 16-17)

The union, then, is such that not only are we one body in Christ: we are the body of Christ:

"You are the body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it." (1 Cor 12, 27)

- Our body itself belongs to the Lord:

"...the body is not for immortality; it is for the Lord and the Lord is for the body;

"Do you not see that your bodies are members of Christ?

"You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within, - the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at a price. So, glorify God in your body." (1 Cor 6, 13-20)

- Christ communicates a limitless fullness to the Church, - the Church which is:

"... his body: the fullness of him who fills the universe in all its parts..." (Eph 1, 23)

So that, being <the> universal beginning of the riches of salvation, he is head:

"In him, everything was created... all was created through him and for him. He is before

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all else that is. In him everything continues in being.

“It is he who is the head of the body, the Church. He who is the beginning, the first-born of the dead, so that primacy may be his in everything.

“It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him...” (Col 1, 16-19)

- We are one in Christ in such a way that the deep human differences - poor-rich, man-woman, slave-freeman, - find themselves canceled when facing the important priority of what we meet in Christ:

"All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with him. There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3, 28)

- We are, then, all one in divine unity, through the reality of Christ's life, which penetrates more within ourselves than our own selves. In each of us, in the intimacy of all, there is an identical reality: Christ in us; We in Christ.

He is our life, our love, our hope, our beatitude, our fullness.

- But if we are one with divine unity, it is essential that, before anything, there be unity in what, within us, constitutes our humanity: our mentality, our affections, our activity. If they are not identified as Christian features between ourselves, <it> would mean that we are not incorporated in Christ.

It is man, as man, who unites himself with Christ. This is why what must be united is, above all, his mind, his heart, his action. For man to escape from them is to evade human existence. And not to unite ourselves with others means not to have communion with them in Christ.

Communion in the same mentality, in the same cordiality, in the same action, is the guarantee of our communion with Christ, and an effective, visible translation, in fact, of this same communion.

As a consequence, we are all the more one in Christ than we are in mutual communion with our brothers.

Only in communion with others can we live a really Christian life.

- II -

This fact of being mutually "in Christ" "members of each other" obliges us to live, in every way, the most intense communitarian spirit.

- All together we form the Body of Christ. In Christ we are one.

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Our spiritual life possesses a dimension of deep verticality, which submerges us all in the mystery of the life of Christ. Us all, as I said. And because we all have our roots in Christ, the vertical dimension creates another one, a new horizontal one, through which we, Christians, find ourselves transformed "in Christ," as "members one of another" (Rom 12, 5).

- St. Paul explains profusely to us this deep inhesion of one with another, starting with his universal principle of the union of all with Christ. From his description, we may deduct with great clarity these main conclusions:
 1. the Christian must abandon the feeling of independence, of individualism and of auto-sufficiency;
 2. on the contrary, he must acquire the conviction that - whatever is personal and specific in his own make-up, has no other 'raison d'être' than the common good, the whole, so that we act wrongly not only when we do wrong, but also when we are absent from positive cooperation, with all our forces - in the service of all.
- Let's see a few texts. The first one is given to us by the Epistle to the Romans (Rom 12, 4 ff.). It goes on the principle that our union to Christ joins us well to all. From this, it will deduct very concrete norms of fraternity, coming down to minute details that insist again and again at each step:

"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and not all the members have the same function, so too we, though many, are one in body in Christ and individually members one of another."

It follows with the enumeration of certain charisms and the best way to exercise them, concluding with some advice:

"Your love must be sincere. Detest what is evil. Cling to what is good. Love one another with the affection of brothers... Anticipate each other in showing respect.

"Do not grow slack, but be fervent in spirit. He whom you serve is the Lord.

"Rejoice in hope, - be patient under trial, persevere in prayer. Look on the needs of the saints as your own; be generous in offering hospitality."

- As he goes on, St. Paul reaches the extremes of the exigencies of our union with Christ: to love our enemies. The reason for this is obvious: what must take first place for us is more the consideration of what joins us to Christ than what separates us one from the other through human dissensions...

"Bless your persecutors; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those that rejoice, weep with those that weep. Have the same attitude toward all. Put away ambitious

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thoughts and associate with those who are lowly.

“Do not be wise in your own estimation; never repay injury with injury. If possible live peaceably with every one.

“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves: leave that to God's wrath, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay,’ says the Lord.

But:

"...if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty give him something to drink." By doing this, you will heap burning coals upon his head.

“Do not be conquered by evil but conquered evil with good."

- Let us see another text of St. Paul's. In this, <it> appears with still more force the fact that the 'raison d'être' of our individuality and of what we hold as personal, is in the service of, and <in> communication with, the others.

St. Paul starts with the simile of the human body:

"The body is one and has many members but all the members, many as they are, are one body. And so it is with Christ. It was in one Spirit that all of us, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, were baptized into one body. All of us have been given to drink of the one Spirit.

“Now the body is not one member, it is many. If the foot should say ‘because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ could it, then, no longer belong to the body? If the ear should say: ‘Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,’ could it, then, no longer belong to the body? “If the body were all eye, what would happen to our hearing? If it were all ear, what would happen to our sense of smelling? As it is, God has set each member of the body in the place he wanted it to be. If all the members were alike where would the body be? There are, indeed, many different members, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand: ‘I do not need you,’ any more than the head can say to the feet: ‘I do not need you.’ “Even these members of the body which seem less important are in fact indispensable. We honor the members we considered less honorable by clothing them with greater care, thus bestowing on the less presentable a propriety which the more presentable already have. God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to the lowly members, that there may be no dissension in the body, but that all the members may be concerned for one another. If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy.

You, then, are the body of Christ; every one of you is a member of it." (1 Cor 12, 12-27)

- The conclusion is obvious: we cease to be members one of another when we create disunion in

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what constitutes the human-divine circuit.

To be "members one of another" means community of goods, of hopes, of efforts, of illusions. As Christians, it is not possible to live in isolation, but only in a universal, maximum solidarity, which we shall not be able to reach without an acute conscience of the same.

- This is the foundation of true fraternity; which supposes all the fraternal bonds in this world, in order to elevate them to becoming a new bond, made of divine and eternal force: the universal fraternity of all in Christ.

- III -

The Spirit makes the body of Christ from the diversity of men,
and transfers to them the union of the Father with the Son.
The divine union of all with all is incompatible with human discord.

- The Holy Spirit characterizes the new alliance realized by Christ in us. Pentecost is the earthly reflection of the glory of Christ in Heaven.

"There was no Spirit as yet, since Jesus had not yet been glorified." (Jn 7, 39)

"Exalted at God's right-hand,... he poured the Spirit out on us." (Acts 2, 33)

"... and God made him 'a life-giving Spirit'." (1 Cor 15, 45)

To unite himself to Christ, the Christian does not need to look at the earthly figure of the Christ of Palestine. He must look into his own self.

- To the earthly presence of Christ in the world, <there> follows his spiritual presence, through his own Spirit, within man.

"It is much better for you that I go. If I fail to go the Paraclete will never come to you, whereas if I go I will send him to you..." (Jn 16, 7)

There is no question of exchanging one person for another; but rather of exchanging one way of being for another. After an earthly presence in the world, <there> follows a spiritual presence within man.

<This is the> presence of the same Christ, since the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ:

"God has send forth into our hearts the Spirit of his Son..." (Gal 4, 6)

"If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." (Rom 8, 9)

- This Spirit of Jesus Christ inhabits the body of the Christian:

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"You must know that your body is a temple of the Spirit, who is within, - the Spirit you have received from God." (1 Cor 6, 19)

he inhabits and unites himself to the spirit of the Christian,

"The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit." (Rom 8, 16)

and makes of the Christian a body in Christ:

"It was in one Spirit that all of us were baptized into one body." (1 Cor 12, 13)

- To have the Spirit is to be the body of Christ. Only if we have his Spirit, are we <the> body of Christ.

God has reconciled us with all the people,

"in one body through his cross, which put that enmity to death.... Through him, we all have access in one Spirit to the Father." (Eph 2, 16-18)

There is

"but one body and one Spirit..." (Eph 4, 4)

But,

"whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him." (1 Cor 6, 17)

- We possess the Spirit if we live according to the Spirit of Jesus Christ. If he is the interior principle of our life, our behavior will show clearly that we are of Christ and that we work in harmony with him: this will be seen most clearly in our relationships with <the?, our> neighbor...

"You should live in accordance with the Spirit and you will not yield to the craving of the flesh: the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.

"It is obvious what proceeds from the flesh: hostilities, bickering, jealousy, outbursts of rage, selfish rivalries, dissensions, envy...

"In contrast, the fruit of the spirit is love, peace, joy, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith..., mildness.

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. "Since we live by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's lead." (Gal 5, 16-25)

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- The Spirit does not stay outside ourselves, or inactive. He penetrates in the depth of our intimacy in order to make himself the principle of the knowledge with which God himself knows:

"The Spirit scrutinizes all matters, even the deep things of God.... The Spirit we have received is not the world's spirit but God's spirit, helping us to recognize the gifts he has given us.... We have the mind of Christ." (1 Cor 2, 10-16)

- And he (the Spirit) makes himself, as well, in us, principle of the love of God.

"... the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Rom 5, 5)

- There is no reason to wonder <at> the fact that our Christian life represents the presence in ourselves of the knowledge and of the love that Christ has for men: it is God loving God in men, and from men.

This is the "law of the Spirit" (Rom 8, 2) which reflects itself in us through fraternal love, not lived anyhow, but "as I have loved you..." (Jn 13, 14).

Living ourselves in the world, with men, we reflect the love of God in the measure we possess it.

St. Paul affirms that the whole law reaches its fullness in this only precept:

"You will love your neighbor as yourself." (Gal 5, 14)

- To <resume?, summarize>: to have the Spirit of Christ is to be all together in the same divine depth, to possess the same knowledge and the same love: that of God in ourselves.

We possess the Spirit inasmuch as we form a unity: unity that overruns the human unions.

The same human unity, the greatest that is possible on all grounds, must be the sign of our possessing the Spirit.

- IV -

The gifts of the Spirit create an affinity and above all a maximum communication, which goes well over and above all difference or distinction, and it creates such affinity, not as an obligation, but rather as an expression of joy and of mirth.

- If, in the revelation, everything points to Christ, in Christ everything points to the communication of his Spirit.

"It is much better for you that I go. If I fail to go the Paraclete will never come to you."

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(Jn 16, 7)

- In the Spirit, everything points to a new situation in man, <a> situation created by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which suppress the duality between the old man, with his passions, and the new one, invaded by the overflowing love of the Spirit.
- Perfection is a process of interior unification. This unification, in its last degrees, is the work of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, characterized as:
 - absolute <disponibility?> in man when faced by action,
 - special docility, of mind and heart, which overrides easily the difficulties and external obstacles, so creating a full, exultant adhesion to the Spirit. Thus the Spirit himself appears as the author and main motor of this divine receptivity.
- In fact, it is nothing else but an accentuated participation of the divine nature, intelligence and infinite love.

Men who so participate are "those led by the Spirit of God..." (Rom 8, 14).

- For St. John, the observation of the commandments, summed up in that of fraternal charity, is the sign of our perfect communion with God, and of the highest docility towards the Spirit.

This is the most often repeated, and the central affirmation of his First Epistle:

"... His commandment is this: ... we are to love one another as he commanded us; Those who keep his commandments remain in him and he in them; ... and this is how we know that he remains in us: from the Spirit that he gave us." (1 Jn 3, 23-24)

And the fact of living together, - living a full self-donation, without reserves, - is what is the most difficult for man, always shut up in his own self and in his own things:

- when man acquires the highest form of generosity,
 - when he does not live any longer for himself alone,
 - when all in him is communication,...
- this man is possessed by the gift of the Spirit.

Then, it is no longer He: it is Christ who lives in him through the Spirit who makes himself his spirit.

- To love man in such a way is the historical <way>, the only way to love God, Who - in the world - exists either already in man, or is communicating Himself to man.

Whoever loves God must love Him at the moment He communicates Himself. He must love this communication itself, and seek it 'with all his forces', - since this act of communication with men is the reason and the end of God's presence in the world, and in universal as well as

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individual history!

- God does not exist for us except in the act of his infinite communication with men. This is why it is impossible to love God and not love men; because:

"One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. The commandment we have from Him is this: whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 Jn 4, 20-21)

- In the same impulse with which we love and approach God, we must love all men.

We are with God in the measure and intensity of our communion, deep and universal, with all our brothers.

- V -

To realize unity is to realize eternal life.

- If, on earth, we are not independent, isolated beings, - we shall be still less so in heaven. In us all, and in each one of us:

"God will be all in all of us." (1 Cor 15, 28)

This earthly life, this Christian life, has no other end: to go to God is to reach our goal - unity. Not unity of simple juxtaposition, of pure harmony, but rather real, internal unity. We shall all be one because we shall meet in the one and same, one an infinite Good:

"...that they may be one, even as we are one..." (Jn 17, 11)

affirmed Christ in the supreme moment.

This was the most decisive theme, and the most demanding exigency, - the meaning and the very contents of the Eucharist.

- It is, as well, the supreme gift, because to approach unity is to approach indivisibility, infinity...

Christian life has in itself a markedly Trinitarian stamp, and this fact tends to unify us, within ourselves and also with others, in God's own unity.

To be one with Christ, as Christ is one with the Father: this is eternal life.

- To unify in all fields, most especially in the depths of our mentality, of our cordiality, - this is the real, the ultimate meaning of Christian life. In fact, this is the acceleration, in the measure of what is possible, and right now, - of our Beatitude.

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- If we were not to do all in our power to promote this union in all different phases of human and religious activity, we would be neglecting one of our fundamental obligations - freely accepted by each one of us - concerning Christian life and eternal life.

He who creates unity gets nearer to God and causes God to be nearer to the whole world and to himself.

- VI -

The Church continues in us the Incarnation, and the Incarnation is the most complete and most perfect synthesis and unity between all that has been created, and the uncreated.

- To be the Church is to continue the Incarnation.

And the Incarnation continues, in a new way, as far as the world, - God in three persons, in whom unity in community is the origin, the model and the end of Christian existence.

The very Incarnation is the supreme model of this synthesis and of this union. Christ, in his human condition, is the re-union and the synthesis of the universe.

Through the fact of his personal union with God, he is the universal union by excellence.

- Christ did not only come to the world. He came, and is still coming, principally to man. The 'mission' of the Word is an internal event which also reaches us.

In the Word's mission to the world, God gives us God.

- The external generation of the Word is continued in his temporal 'mission' to the world. And this is continued in all transmission of faith, and of grace.

Christ, who came, goes on coming...

- The comings of Christ are the soul and the growth of the Church. And this, not only in the interior of faith: all human communication is implicitly communication of Christ, and inasmuch is continuation of the Incarnation.

In fact, there is only one 'mission,' - only one oblation which contains them all. From the offering of the Word to the world, made by the Father, to the most ordinary gift, there <is> a real continuity. Human offerings do not represent in themselves the maximum intensity of God's own gift, - but given the climate of incarnation in which we live - all the divine coming to us through what is sensible and human - divine communication is difficult without human communication. This is why - in order for God to communicate himself to man - it is necessary for man to live with others in total communication.

It is only by reaching unity in communion, in Christ and from Christ, and this in all human and

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divine ways, in the highest possible degree, - that we bring about incarnation. Then, even human communication becomes part of the gift of God to man.

- The law of incarnation prepares the being and the Mission of the Church. All in the Church, and the Church itself, must have an immense verticality towards the world. The superior levels must be entirely inclined towards the inferior levels, in the very proportion of the difference of level.

In the measure in which we are not inclination, communication, towards all - especially towards those who are the lowest in all possible regards, - the historical process of the Incarnation is cut off, - and we are not the Church.

It is necessary for us to recognize ourselves 'as a supplementary humanity', in which Christ continues his work and his love, precisely through us and from us.

- The Word, in the Incarnation, has needed a humanity so that the invisible God might offer himself to men under a human form, and that - speaking and acting as man - he might easily be understood by men.

Now, the heavenly Christ needs us who - being the Church - are his Body, his earthly prolongation near men.

This is why our comportment, our love, has for others value and force of Gospel: when they know it, they will know Christ.

"I give you a new commandment: love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other.

"This is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another." (Jn 13, 34-35)

Thus, if we continue Christ in the world, we continue at the same time his love - and we must love in the manner and the proportion - not only of our own love, - but of the love of Christ Jesus.

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CONCLUSION:

Prayer:

May we, Lord,
live a life worthy of the calling we have received,
with perfect humility, meekness and patience.

May we bear with each other lovingly,
preserving the unity which has the Spirit as its origin,
and peace as its binding force.

There is but one Body and one Spirit,
just as there is but one hope;
There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

You are the unique God and the father of all,
who is over all,
works through all,
and is in all.

Help us to work,
each one at our own post,
to the building of the Body of Christ,
till we become
one in faith and in the knowledge of God's Son
and form that perfect man,
who is Christ come to full stature.

Let us, Lord,
profess the truth in love
and grow to the full maturity of Christ, the head.
(cf. Eph 4, 1-15)

Prayer:

"God of love,
who, through your only Son,
have given us the new commandment to love one another:

Returning the love with which you yourself have loved us,
in spite of our poverty, our misery and our misguided ways,

Returning the love which prompted you
to send your only Son for our salvation and our life,

We implore you, Lord,

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to grant us, during our entire stay on earth,
a heart that forgets all ill-will,
a clear conscience, and noble thoughts.

Grant us also
a heart capable of loving all our brothers."
(Coptic Liturgy)

A V E M A R I A !

Together in Christ Jesus...

Eusebe H. Ménard

Fraternal Encounter -
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