

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS

By PATRICK FANNON

IT CAN EASILY escape our notice that the gospel of Matthew – ‘the evangelist of the Church’ (Renan) – is polarized between two texts, the first the emphatic words of the whole story of the infancy of Jesus ‘his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)’,¹ the other the concluding words of the gospel itself, ‘I am with you always, to the close of the age’.² The ancient hope of Israel, the *shekinah*, God’s glorious presence, is now an abiding reality for men.

Our problem is to explain just how the mystery of Christ’s presence is continued among men. Obviously it cannot be described in the terms of his historic presence in the streets of Capernaum two thousand and more years ago, on the hillsides of Galilee, among the temple courts in Jerusalem. We shall have to see if the concept of mystery or sacrament can help us. Then, too, John and Paul have much to say about Christ’s presence through the Spirit; Paul even goes as far as to say, ‘The Lord is the Spirit’.³ Some examination of the role of the Spirit is evidently indicated in order to clarify this presence of Christ. Thirdly, if we are members of Christ’s body through our baptism, we must try to express this presence of Christ in terms of the union which the image of the body implies. Thus ‘sacrament’, ‘Spirit’ and ‘body’ offer us guide-lines in our attempt to understand the presence of Christ to the Church and the individual christian.

Sacrament

It is generally recognized that when Vatican II described the Church as ‘a kind of sacrament or sign’,⁴ official recognition was given to an older and wider notion of sacrament than the one used in more recent times. We had been too inclined to limit ‘sacrament’ to those seven rites which mark focal points in the movement from birth to death of a christian’s existence. But the biblical *mysterion* (translated into latin as *sacramentum*, whence our ‘sacrament’)

¹ Mt 1, 23.

² Mt 28, 20.

³ 2 Cor 3, 17.

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

applies to the whole economy of God to bring the world into a communion of salvation with himself through Christ. In patristic theology we find, for example, that Christ, scripture, the Church and its liturgical rites were all similarly designated as *mysterion* or *sacramentum*. What is at stake in all this is that underlying man's day-to-day existence, not along-side of it but precisely at work in it, is a saving action of God, first and foremost made visible in that union of the human and the divine in Christ which is the primal sacrament: the sign of union and commerce between God and man visibly and historically manifested by the Church and particularized in her specific symbolic actions.

Two observations must be made before we can proceed further. One is that for many, particularly continental, non-catholics the cultic emphasis we catholics have placed on the notion of sacrament seems to have blurred – if not to have effectively emptied of content – the wider and deeper implications of that biblical *mysterion*. We have been too 'churchy' about God's dealings with man, more concerned for rites than for realities. (Look how careful we had to be to say the right words and perform the exact gestures.) A second observation is that even in our present recovery of an understanding of both Christ and the Church as 'sacraments', we are still in danger of forgetting that what we do in Church, in our 'encounter with Christ', must re-enact that divine commerce of salvation at work in the world at large. The sequence God-Church-World must give way before that of God-World-Church. The dominant category in both the Old and the New Testaments is not the Church nor even the people of God. It is God's kingdom, his reign among men, with man striving to achieve authentic human living as defined by God's ordinances. Of this kingdom of God the Church is but sign and instrument, and her own sacramentality a showing forth that this whole world belongs to God; a sign, in fact, that everywhere – not in Jerusalem alone, but in spirit and truth – God is being adored, experienced, accepted.⁵ We can celebrate our liturgy in church authentically, and prevent it – as far as our participation goes – from degenerating into a totally unworthy, man-made ritual *only* if we approach it from this liturgy of the world.⁶

Thus, the person-to-person relationship symbolized and effected in our ritual sacraments re-presents the very real saving action of Christ at work in the world – re-creating it, perpetually strengthen-

⁵ Jn 4, 21-24.

⁶ Karl Rahner.

ing it, renewing it, enkindling love, promoting forgiveness and reconciliation, establishing a ministry of service, safeguarding human sexuality, healing man's burden of mortality: all of which man without Christ could never realize.

Spirit

But even given God's self-communication to man, the whole divine-human commerce, as focused in Christ, the outstanding sign and primal sacrament of God's meeting with man whose instrumentality is continued in the Church, it still remains to consider how this function of Christ is, in fact, continued. It is here that we must turn to the Spirit. While it is obvious that to apportion specific roles to Christ and the Spirit drastically eviscerates the reality with which we are dealing in favour of an ordered clarity, nonetheless a distinct examination of the role of the Spirit in the life of the Church is necessary if we are to grasp in some way this presence of Christ. In Christ, God addresses man (by his Word), whereas the Spirit is his presence in power. God summons man in Christ; through the Spirit he empowers man. And just as God's dealings with man would be too restrictedly described in terms of the Word becoming flesh (in the same way that our 'seven sacraments' would limit too much the whole sacramentality of life), so too the total divine action in the world, incalculable, unpredictable, unlimited in dynamism, is preserved by our doctrine of the Spirit.

There is some support for the view that the original form of the Apostles' Creed included the phrase 'I believe in the holy Spirit in the holy catholic Church'; and the repeated teaching of *Lumen Gentium* is that the mystery of the Church cannot be understood without reference to this Spirit of God which searches all things. At first, the constitution merely enumerates the activities of the Spirit; sanctification, life, resurrection, the leading of men to the Father, his praying within the hearts of the faithful, teaching, fortifying, inspiring and uniting them into a community of worship;⁷ but it goes on to analyse more profoundly that role of his, in striking contrast to the first (1961) draft of the constitution, in which little was said about the role of the Spirit in the Church. *Lumen Gentium* clearly recognizes how the Spirit 'gives life to, unifies and moves the whole body',⁸ not only giving love and growth in holiness to the whole faithful, but bestowing countless charisms, graces, vocations

⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

for the building up of the whole body.⁹ A distinctive note is sounded in the decree on the Church's missionary activity, where it is stated that 'he anticipates the action of those whose task it is to rule the life of the Church';¹⁰ so much so that the hierarchy must recognize how the Spirit may lead through unexpected ways.

In all this the Spirit must not be considered as any fixed, unchanging point of reference, but rather as a dynamic power at work in the Church from Pentecost onwards, in her pilgrim process of becoming all that she should be in her renewals and reformations, in her ever grasping anew the freshness of her youth.¹¹

To comprehend more fully these statements about the working and presence of the Spirit in the Church, we must examine also what the scriptures offer us. First the Spirit is understood as the breath (or wind) of God; then he is viewed as a principle of vital activity, a divine creative energy – particularly at work among men, from kings to craftsmen,¹² a mysterious divine force lurking behind the unpredictable in human behaviour. (Remarkable, however, is the fact that he is rarely associated with prophecy until rather late in Israel's history: the charism of the prophet is God's word.)

In the New Testament this divine power becomes increasingly portrayed as a person. It is significant that in the synoptic gospels sayings about the Spirit come from others than Jesus; and indeed, except for the baptismal theophany,¹³ it is to Paul, John and the Acts of the Apostles that we have to turn for our doctrine on the Spirit.

While Paul has the more developed doctrine of the holy Spirit, we have to acknowledge that this is given us by way of a series of insights, fragmentary, unstructured and not always consistent. We can note how Jesus has a unique relationship with the Spirit, but it is the risen Jesus who shares fully in the Spirit's power and glory. The Church, as either members and body, or as members and head, is one with Jesus *in the Spirit*, not with Jesus in the flesh, and because of this the Spirit dwells in each member, creating in him a new life. Thus the Spirit is the operative principle of the christian life, enabling the christian to pray, a Spirit of faith, of hope and of love. A Spirit, too, opposed to sin and to the corruption to which all flesh is heir; and in the famous list of the gifts of the Spirit,¹⁴ what

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² Exod 31, 1–5.

¹⁴ Gal 5, 22–23.

¹⁰ *Ad Gentes*, 29.

¹³ Mt 3, 13–17 and parallels.

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

we get is a pinpointing of those virtues and life-style which belong to a christian who lives according to that Spirit and not according to the flesh. In a word, for Paul the Spirit is the life of the Church.

While in Paul the New Testament's understanding of the Spirit reaches its furthest boundaries, there remain aspects of John's doctrine of the Spirit which are immensely important. Without entirely identifying Jesus and the Spirit, John does approach a closer assimilation than Paul. But where Paul insists on the Spirit as dwelling in the individual believer, John considers him more as One who operates upon the believer from the outside, continuing the work of Jesus, as revealer, teacher, witness. And (peculiar to John) it is as paraclete, advocate, intercessor that the Spirit is sent by Jesus.

It is decisive for Paul and Luke that no Church existed in the lifetime of Jesus. Only with the pentecostal event did a new power and presence of God make itself undeniably felt. This is the clear, down-to-earth proclamation of the acts of the apostles. Where Luke opened the first part of his writing with the theophany of God's word, he now begins his second part with the theophany of God's Spirit. It is the Spirit now who is the moving force behind the activity of the apostolic group; his impulse is there at every turn of events, so that the growth of the Church is in no sense the work of man.¹⁵ Men simply became instruments of that Spirit dwelling within them. Yet Acts is also careful to show that this same Spirit is the possession of the individual believer.

One final point deserves mention: the New Testament could easily speak of the Father or Jesus in definite personal terms; and consequently it has been easy for us to categorize their activities within human ways of thinking. But with the Spirit it had to be different. The Old Testament had spoken of the Spirit of God as an incalculable force, impersonal, mysterious, unpredictable, and Paul himself is often driven to use Old Testament terms when speaking of the Spirit. As has been noted above, we cannot put any limits to his action, nor can we plot the course of his presence. But in that power and presence is made effective for us the redeeming power and presence of Christ.

Yet if in the incarnation God's saving meeting with man was made palpable, and if, with the holy Spirit's dynamism in the Church, the overpowering presence and grace of God throughout

¹⁵ Cf Acts 5, 38-40.

the whole world is crystallized but not constricted, it still remains to see how Word and Spirit conspire together for the individual christian in his everyday existence. It is here that we have to bring in the concept of the Church as Body of Christ.

Body

The greeting which introduces our reformed celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with you all',¹⁶ might well serve as a starting point for understanding the role of the Spirit in relation to the body. That word 'fellowship' (to which catholics have now become accustomed) translates a greek word *koinonia*. Bishop John Robinson has a very pertinent comment to make in this connection:

It is noteworthy that the Church is never decribed in the New Testament as 'a community'. *Koinonia* is not a group of persons but a quality of relationship, a sharing, a participation. It is well known among students of the New Testament that the primary reference of *koinonia* is participation in a divine reality – in God, in Christ, and above all in holy Spirit . . . The Church is meant to be the embodiment, the carrier, the incarnation of this *koinonia* of holy Spirit, as it is of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the love of God.¹⁷

(Commentators on the documents of Vatican II have noted the great use made of the notion of *koinonia* – especially in the decree on Ecumenism; but it is difficult to avoid the impression that the secondary and derivatory sense of 'fellowship' between christians is uppermost. Our present ecumenical 'slump' may well be traceable to a failure to recognize priorities.)

What, then, is basic is this invisible communion of the believer with the Spirit of God. The first letter of St John describes the life of the Church as a participation in the communion of Father and Son (*koinonia* is the word used). The visible Church is no more than the concrete, historical sign or sacrament of that eternal and invisible communion with God, incarnated in Christ and effected by the Spirit. Only on account of this arises that 'being together' of christians described by Luke,¹⁸ and that sharing in the Lord's body

¹⁶ 2 Cor 13, 13.

¹⁷ *Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society* (London 1970), p 148.

¹⁸ Acts 2, 42.

and blood (again, *koinonia*).¹⁹ And this brings us to the heart of the matter: the invisible communion with God is shown forth in a communion with the body of Christ, its visible sign and effective instrument. 'In the sacrament of the eucharistic bread, the unity of all believers is both expressed and brought about';²⁰ similarly, 'partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the eucharistic bread, we are taken into communion with him and with one another'.²¹ Thus the eucharistic celebration is the 'centre and culmination of the whole life of the community',²² with the altar community of the local church united in depth – not merely superficially linked – through its eucharist with the Church universal, the one body of Christ.

It has often been remarked how *Lumen Gentium* gives a variety of biblical images in an attempt to describe the multiplicity of riches in the Church²³ (even if 'sheepfold', 'flock', 'olive tree', 'vineyard' have lost much of their meaning in our industrialized society, and 'temple of God', 'holy city' much of their appeal in a secularized world). But in a world in which, through the speed of the communications media, the growing sense of responsibility for suffering and want in far-flung parts of the world and a deepening sense of human solidarity is being felt, the image of the Church as body of Christ responds to a need. It is more than a social description of a body politic (too often the emphasis in the past on the Church as a visible society governed by Christ's law); it goes deeper, too, than St Paul's allegory of the human body, emphasizing the Church's diversity in unity.²⁴ The reality that is the union of Christ and the Church either collectively or individually is the sacramental sharing in the body of Christ: 'The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf'.²⁵ This text is quoted twice in the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium*,²⁶ in a clear attempt to show the formative factor of the eucharist in making up the body of Christ.²⁷ We are recovering again what Paul and the primitive Church had come to realize: that 'he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I

¹⁹ 1 Cor 10, 16.

²² *Christus Dominus*, 30.

²⁵ 1 Cor 10, 16–17.

²⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, 3.

²³ *Lumen Gentium*, 6.

²⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 3 & 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ 1 Cor 12, 12–31.

²⁷ It is significant that the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* nowhere quotes 1 Cor 10, 17.

in him'.²⁸ Through the eucharist the Church becomes more and more what she essentially is, the body of Christ; failure to participate worthily in the eucharist is failure to discern the Church.

One final aspect of Christ's presence in his body, the Church, needs to be noted: the cosmic implications of the incarnation as deriving from Christ as 'head' of the body. This doctrine is found in the post-pauline letters to the colossians and ephesians and is taken up in *Lumen Gentium*.²⁹ To Christ, as first-born of creation and first-fruits of the resurrection, belong both Church and universe, which both receive their completion from him. He is human destiny itself. A growing conformity to him via suffering (which turns to glory) is demanded from the Church as a whole and from each individual member precisely as part of that whole movement towards fulfilment in Christ. To this end, grace upon grace is bestowed by Christ; and this sharing in Christ's fulness brings forth from each member personal and mutual service for the salvation of all. The dynamic principle at work in union of head and members is, once more, the Spirit. This mention of the Spirit, the mysterious imponderable of God, should caution us against speaking too readily of a 'mystical body' in terms of an unbiblical 'mysticism'. What is at stake here is that *mysterion* to which we have earlier referred, that sacrament, which is the Church, of man's union with God: 'This is a great mystery (*mysterion*), and I take it to mean Christ and the Church'.³⁰

In this same chapter of ephesians, the marriage imagery employed to illustrate Christ's relationship to the Church warns us against identifying Christ and the Church too closely, by setting up a contrast in roles. In this way we avoid such distortions as viewing the Church as a new hypostatic union, as an 'extension of the incarnation', as 'Christ living on'. The body of Christ subsists in the Church; it is not co-terminous with it. The cosmic perspectives of colossians and ephesians see the Church as the moving force behind the whole of creation's destiny in Christ.

But what the teaching of these letters is really getting at is the role of the Church in what is the governing factor of human existence: that commerce between God and man, salvific, sacramentalized in incarnation, Church and sacraments, within a dynamism of the Spirit that extends beyond Church, sacraments, historical incarnation even, towards that full human and cosmic destiny of all

²⁸ Jn 6, 56.

²⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 7.

³⁰ Eph 5, 32.

things, within that fulness of Christ in his glorified body.³¹ Let us recall once more with Rahner how our liturgy in Church must single out and celebrate that very liturgy of creation itself, the convergence of all things on God.

Presence of Christ

Pius XII, in his encyclical on the liturgy, spoke of a fourfold presence of Christ.³² The Constitution on the Liturgy took up a corresponding position: Christ 'is present in the sacrifice of the Mass . . . is present in the sacraments . . . is present in his word . . . is present when the Church prays and sings'.³³ Some resistance to thus combining the different manners of Christ's presence derived, among the council fathers, from an anxiety that faith in the eucharistic presence might appear belittled. But, in line with all we have discussed above, the primary manner of Christ's existence is as the Lord Jesus in the glory of his transfigured humanity, the first-born of creation, the first-fruits of the resurrection.

The radical meaning of all liturgy is this celebration of Christ's existence as Lord, embracing an 'ascending' worship and a 'descending' sanctification. Any external form that liturgy may take is simply a making visible – a sacramentalizing – of a hidden reality, which possesses its effectiveness from God's Spirit. This basic presence of Christ to all creation, all humanity, is focused in a particular way within the community of all the baptized, especially, as we have seen, through the eucharist: he 'abides' with the Church, with the individual christian within the Church. Because the Church is not only an institution but also an 'event' – something ever happening afresh in the summons to accept, to renew God's saving grace, Christ's presence is active in the assembled community at prayer, in its proclamation of God's word in salvation or in judgment.

We may try to summarize all that has been said by stating that Christ's presence in the eucharist is for the sake of his presence in the Church, and his presence in the Church is for the sake of his presence in the world. His presence in the world as past event, present experience and future hope is for the sake of that God who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that the world might be saved through him',³⁴ the Emmanuel, 'God with us'.³⁵

³¹ Col 1, 18–20.

³² *Mediator Dei*, 142.

³³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 17.

³⁴ Jn 3, 16–17.

³⁵ Mt 1, 23.