

of us, Catholics included, must let past history, which represents our old selves, die if English Christians, and those millions of Englishmen who have no faith, are to find reconciliation in Christ. The convert's principal contribution to Christian unity is made by being converted; his further conversion, revealing the nature of the Church to those who still seek unity, will be the best thing he can offer to the ecumenical cause.



## BOSSUET'S LETTER ON THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

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### *Introductory Note*

**J**ACQUES-BÉNIGNE BOSSUET, bishop of Meaux (1681-1704) and the most outstanding French ecclesiastic of his time, is probably best known as an orator and controversialist. But he was also the author of several important spiritual treatises and an experienced director of souls. This letter, here translated into English for the first time, is an early work, written at the age of thirty-two during Pentecost week of 1659. It is the last of a series of four letters written to 'Une demoiselle de Metz' who has since been identified as Alix Clerginet, foundress of a religious house there of the Propagation of the Faith, whose purpose was the conversion of Jews and Protestants. Bossuet, then archdeacon of Metz (to which office he had been appointed at the age of twenty-seven), was the director and co-founder of this house. The letter is remarkable for its elevation of thought, its close dependence on Holy Scripture, and its deep sense of the Mystery of the Church, without any trace of the author's later Gallicanism. The autograph has unfortunately not survived. This translation has been made from the text printed in *La Correspondance de Bossuet* (ed. Urbain et Levesque, Paris 1909, in the series *Les Grands Écrivains de la France*): a few notes have been added and the main divisions indicated, but the numbering of the paragraphs is that of the printed text.

## THE LETTER

**T**HIS morning I found I had both the time and an eager inclination to satisfy you about the questions you asked me. So I thought about them in God's sight, and here is what he gave me. He knows why he did so, as he also knows what fruit he will take from it to sustain you; may his will be done.

I. The exemplar of the unity of the Church is the unity of the three divine Persons; Jesus said: *that they all may be one like us.*<sup>1</sup> Now these three are one in essence and consequently one among themselves.

II. All the faithful are one in Jesus Christ, and by Jesus Christ are one among themselves. This unity is the glory of God through Jesus Christ and the effect of his Sacrifice.

III. Jesus Christ is one with the Church, carrying her sins with her: the Church is one with Jesus Christ, carrying his cross with him.

IV. The Church, says the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles, has but *one heart and one soul,*<sup>2</sup> and this unity of heart of all Christians is a great mystery. In it charity makes no distinctions: in internal intention it embraces all men equally because it sees them only as members of Christ, even though its external application differs according to the needs of each.

V. Jesus Christ will be all in all in Heaven, but will be seen most where there is most glory: here below too Jesus Christ is all in all, but is seen most where there is most weakness. This is the mystery of the Cross; Amen to God who revealed it to us.

VI. We should fix our eyes on Jesus Christ in all our weaknesses because he has experienced them all, and even in all sins, both our own and our neighbours', because he has borne them all.<sup>3</sup>

VII. The Trinity in Unity is seen in the unity of the Church: the Father as the principle to which we are united, the Son as the centre in which we are united, the Holy Spirit as the link by which we are united; and all these are one. Amen to God, so be it.

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<sup>1</sup> John 17, 11.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 4, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Isaias 53, 4 and 11.

VIII. All creatures are united in the unity of the Church; every creature, both visible and invisible, is related to her. The angels are ministers of her salvation, and the Church fills up the places left empty in their ranks by the defection of Satan and his companions. But in this new recruitment it is not so much we who are incorporated with the angels as they who come to our unity because of Jesus, our common Head, who is even more our Head than theirs.

IX. Even rebellious and wayward creatures like Satan and his angels are pressed into service for the utility and sanctification of the Church, for God makes use of their own defection and malice in spite of them, and he wills that everything should contribute to unity, even schism, division and revolt. Let us praise God for the efficacy of his power, but fear his judgments in our hearts.

X. Inanimate creatures speak to the Church of God's wonders. As they cannot praise him themselves, they praise him in the Church. She is the universal temple where God is offered the sacrifice of due homage from all creatures, for she delivers them all from their unhappy subjection to sin by making use of them in the service of God.

XI. But men are even closer to the Church, for they are all either already incorporated with her or else are at least called to that feast where everything is made one.<sup>4</sup>

XII. Even unbelievers belong to the Church; she sees in them that abyss of ignorance and aversion from God's ways whence she was delivered by his grace. They exercise her hope as she awaits the promises which will bring them back to the blessed unity of Christ, and they enlarge her heart as she desires to call them all to herself.

XIII. Heretics too belong to the Church's unity in a certain way: when they leave her, and even while they cut themselves off, they take with them the seal of her unity which is Baptism, the visible proof of their desertion.<sup>5</sup> So they tear her very vitals, and thus they redouble her motherly love for her children who persevere. They separate themselves from her and thus provide an object-lesson of God's just judgments for those who remain.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Luke 14, 16-24.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. St Augustine, *Tractatus 6 in Joannem*, No. 15 (P.L. 35, 1432), and *Contra Litteras Petilianas*, lib. II, c. cvii (P.L. 43, 345-6).

XIV. By despising and profaning the Church's priesthood they urge true priests to purify God's altar with a holy competition.<sup>6</sup> They also cause the Church's faith and the authority of her *magisterium* to blaze forth, and this strengthens the faith of both weak and strong. Their 'clearsightedness' which blinds them, shews strong and weak members of the Church that we can see clearly only in the Church's unity, for the light of true doctrine shines forth from the centre of this unity. Amen to God.

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XV. The elect and the reprobate are both in the body of the Church: the elect as the higher and spiritual part, the reprobate as the lower and sensual part, like the flesh which lusts against the spirit<sup>7</sup> or the animal man who does not hearken to God's ways but fights against them.<sup>8</sup> As an individual's strength is refined by this fight against weakness, so is the spiritual part of the universal man (which is the Church) purified by the torments inflicted on her by the reprobate. In them the Church suffers unbelievable pain, greater than the pangs of childbirth, because she feels them in the unity of her body and is in anguish to bring them to the unity of her spirit. Their obstinate resistance is harder for her to bear than any persecution.

XVI. In the just who are her heavenly part she sighs incessantly for the sinners who are the earthly and animal part; the conversion of sinners is the result of these perpetual interior sighs. God does not allow himself to be turned aside except by the sighing of this Dove,<sup>9</sup> I mean by the prayers mingled with sighs which the Church offers for sinners in the just, and God hears the Church because he listens to the voice of his Son in her. Everything done by the Church is done by Jesus Christ; everything done by Jesus Christ in the faithful is done through his holy Church. Amen to God; this is true. You have caught a glimpse of this truth, that she is one and apostolic.

XVII. In these same just members the Church sighs for all suffering souls, or rather she suffers *in* all suffering and tormented souls for all suffering and tormented souls. Their sufferings and distress bring grace, support and consolation for one another.

XVIII. Jesus Christ is in his Church and does everything by

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Leviticus 4.

<sup>7</sup> Gal. 5, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 2, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. St Augustine, *Tractatus 6 in Joannem*, No. 17 (P.L. 35, 1433).

her; the Church is in Jesus Christ and does everything with him. This is true and so very true: he who has seen it has given witness to it;<sup>10</sup> glory be to the faithful witness who is Jesus Christ Son of the Father!

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XIX. This then is the composition of the Church: it is a mixture of strong and weak members, good and evil ones, those who sin by hypocrisy and those who sin by scandal; the unity of the Church includes all and gains from all. In a few the faithful see everything which should be imitated; in the others they see what they themselves should courageously excel, vigorously reprove, patiently endure, charitably assist, listen to with condescension and consider with awe. Both those who remain and those who lapse serve the Church; the faithful see in the lapsed the parallel to their own tepidity, and in the fervent their own true convictions. Thus everything astonishes them, everything edifies them, everything both amazes and encourages them—the impulses of grace as well as the strokes of justice and severity. Let us adore God for his unsearchable ways.<sup>11</sup> Everything works together for the salvation of those who love him,<sup>12</sup> even tepidity, failures and lack of generosity in loving. Let him who can understand, understand; let him who has ear to hear,<sup>13</sup> listen: God opens the ears of whomsoever he pleases, but we must be faithful to him: woe to those who are not!

XX. The Church, thus composed of such a dreadful medley, is sorted out little by little and gets rid of the tares. A day is appointed when she will contain good grain only;<sup>14</sup> all the rest shall be burnt by fire. One element of this separation takes place visibly in this world through schisms and heresies, the other element takes place in the heart of each individual, and it will be confirmed on the day of his death when each will go to his appointed place. The great, universal, public separation will be made at the end of the world by the sentence of the Judge. The whole Church longs for this separation: after it she will contain only living members of Jesus Christ as the others will have been cut off by that terrible *Discedite*, which our Lord Jesus Christ, to

<sup>10</sup> John 19, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rom. 11, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Rom. 8, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Matt 13, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Matt. 13, 24-30.

complete his work as he has begun it—by the Church—will pronounce in her, with her and through her. The Apostles will be in session with all the elect of God, and will condemn to eternal fire all the rebel angels<sup>15</sup> and all those who have taken their part and imitated their pride. Then the Church will go to the place where she will reign; only her spiritual members will be with her, distinguished and separated for ever from all that is sinful. Then she will be a truly holy city, a triumphant city, the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and she will reign with him for ever.

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XXI. While she awaits this day, she sighs here below like an exile. She is seated, in the words of the psalmist, by the rivers of Babylon and weeps and sighs when she remembers Sion.<sup>16</sup> Firmly established on the waves and stable amidst change, she is not carried away by the rivers. Instead she sighs on their banks, realizing that everything passes away, and she longs for Sion where everything is permanent. She weeps because she finds herself amidst what is transient or does not exist, but in her heart she remembers what subsists and what truly exists: such is her lamentation in exile.

XXII. Nevertheless she also sings for her consolation the same canticle of the heavenly Jerusalem: *Alleluia*, God be praised, *Amen*, so be it, as it is written in the Apocalypse.<sup>17</sup> 'God be praised for his great glory; so be it in the creature by its irrevocable assent to the will of God': this is the Church's song. One part of the Church, already living with God, sings it in all its fullness; the other part, impatient and eager in its holy desire, faithfully echoes it.

*Alleluia* for the Church, God be praised for the Church! God be praised for his punishments as well as for his gifts! *Amen*, so be it, through the Church, who says incessantly, as you know, sister: *He has done all things well*.

XXIII. The Church is persecuted; God be praised, so be it. The Church is at peace; God be praised, so be it. Let us say this for the whole body of the Church; let us say it for all souls who suffer persecution or similar vicissitudes.

XXIV. When the Church is persecuted, she is fortified within

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Matt. 19, 28 and I Cor. 6, 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 136, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Apoc. 19, 1-4.

by the blows which strike her from without. When the Church is at peace, she can be disciplined even more intimately by God's hand.

XXV. The Church seems submerged in the flood of bad morals; sometimes she seems to be given up as a prey to those errors which threaten to drown her. Nevertheless her holiness remains complete; her faith shines out so brilliantly that even her enemies realize by the power of God that they cannot crush her; and the Church knows well by this very fact that it is God alone who sustains her.

XXVI. *Alleluia* for the Church, *Amen* to God for the Church, and *Amen* for all those souls whom God enables to share this guidance. Jesus Christ is strong and faithful, and we must hope in him even to the very gates of Hell. Our whole heart and soul, our inmost feelings, even the very marrow of our bones cry after him: *Come, Lord Jesus, come!*<sup>18</sup>

XXVII. I cry now, and I would cry for ever, but I must cease: *How goodly are thy tents O Jacob, and thy tabernacles O Israel! Let my soul die the death of the righteous!*<sup>19</sup> The Church herself is in these tents, always at war, always on the march, always ready to depart or remain at the slightest sign from her head, in accordance with the needs of the spiritual warfare.

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XXVIII. You ask me: 'What is the Church?' The Church is Jesus Christ poured forth and communicated; it is Jesus Christ whole and entire, it is Jesus Christ the perfect man, Jesus Christ in all his fullness.

XXIX. 'How is the Church his body and his bride at the same time?' The Holy Spirit shews us the simple unity of truth in different expressions and images: let us adore this divine dispensation.

XXX. The mind of the creature can only represent by *several* concepts together the boundless unity whence it came: thus in the sacred images given us by the Holy Spirit we should notice the particular nuance brought by each, so that we may put them all together and thus may contemplate this revealed truth in all its fullness. Later we should go beyond all images, realizing that there is a deeper reality in the truth which is not shewn us by the

<sup>18</sup> Apoc. 22, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Num. 24, 5 and 23, 10.

images individually or collectively. At this point we should lose ourselves in the depths of God's Mystery, where we can see nothing more than that we do not see things as they are. Such is our knowledge as long as we are guided by faith. In this general rule include the particular truths which we meditate on before God. Lord, grant that we may enter in, as you have given us the key.

XXXI. The Church is the Bride, the Church is the Body. These sentences each mean something distinct, but they also fundamentally mean the same thing, namely the unity of the Church with Jesus Christ, but proposed in different ways and from different points of view. The door is ajar; let us go in and see, let us adore with faith and joyfully proclaim God's holy truth.

XXXII. A man chooses a wife for himself, but he is formed of his own members: Jesus chose the Church as an individual man, but as perfect man he was formed and still is being formed in and with the Church.<sup>20</sup> The Church as Bride belongs to Jesus Christ by his own free choice; the Church as Body belongs to Jesus Christ by a most intimate action of the Holy Spirit. The mystery of Election by the pledge of promises is seen in the name of Bride; the mystery of Unity accomplished by the infusion of the Holy Spirit is seen in the name of Body. This name makes us realize how much the Church is Christ's; the name of Bride enables us to see that she was something separate from him, and that he has sought her by his own choice. Hence the name of Bride enables us to see their unity of will and of love, and the name of Body leads us to understand that their unity is natural; thus the unity of the Body is seen as something closer, and the union with the Bride as something more tender and sensitive. Fundamentally it is all the same thing: Jesus Christ loved the Church and made her his Bride, Jesus Christ has fulfilled his marriage with the Church and has made her his Body. This is the truth: *Two in one flesh, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*<sup>21</sup> as was said of Adam and Eve. And, says the Apostle, *it is a great sacrament in Jesus Christ and his Church.*<sup>22</sup> Thus the unity of body is the supreme confirmation of the name of Bride. Praise be to God

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Gal. 4, 19 and Eph. 2, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Gen. 2, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Eph. 5, 32.



for linking together these ever-adorable truths!

XXXIII. God's wisdom decreed that the Church should sometimes be seen by us as distinct from Jesus Christ, giving him dutiful homage; sometimes as being only one thing with Jesus Christ, living by his spirit and grace.

XXXIV. The name of Bride distinguishes to unite, the name of Body unites without confusion and also reveals the diversity of ministry.<sup>23</sup> The Church is unity in plurality, an image of the Trinity.

XXXV. Moreover I see in the name of Bride a proof of the Church's dignity. The Church as Body is subordinate to her Head, but the Church as Bride shares in his majesty, exercises his authority, honours his spiritual fertility. Hence the title of Bride was necessary to indicate that the Church is Jesus Christ's faithful consort, the distributor of his graces, the guide of his family, the ever-fruitful mother and ever-charitable nurse of all his children.

XXXVI. 'But how is she the mother of the faithful if she is only the union of all the faithful?' We have already answered this question: all is done by the Church, that is to say, all is done by her unity. The Church in her unity and by her spirit of universal catholic unity is the mother of all individuals who make up the body of the Church. She begets them for Jesus Christ, not like any other mother who brings them forth from her womb, but by bringing them in from outside to be received in her womb. Thus she incorporates them with herself, and with her to the Holy Spirit who gives her life, and by the Holy Spirit to the Son who has breathed him into us, and by the Son to the Father who has sent him, so that our fellowship may be in God and with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,<sup>24</sup> who lives and reigns in perfect and indivisible unity for ever and ever. Amen.

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You can understand from all this how the bishops and the Pope are each in their measure the spiritually prolific husbands of the Church.

XXXVII. The Church, as we have said, is fruitful by her unity. The mystery of the Church's unity is to be found in the bishops as heads of all the faithful; consequently the order of bishops

<sup>23</sup> Cf. I Cor. 12, 4-5.

<sup>24</sup> I John 1, 3.

includes within itself the spirit of the Church's fecundity in all its fullness. The episcopate is one just as the whole Church is one, the bishops collectively have only one flock, of which each bishop rules a part, which is inseparable from the whole, in such a way that each truly belongs to all; God has distributed the bishops only to facilitate their supervision. But he has also given a shepherd to the whole flock, that is, St Peter the Apostle and in him his successors, in order to consummate this whole in unity.

XXXVIII. So our Lord Jesus Christ, as he willed to form the mystery of unity, chose the Apostles from the whole body of his disciples. And as he willed to consummate this mystery of unity, he chose St Peter the Apostle alone to be in charge, not only of the whole flock but also of all the shepherds, so that the Church, which is one in its invisible condition under its invisible Head, should also be one in its visible condition of government and action under its visible head, who is St Peter and those who succeed him in the course of history. So the mystery of the universal unity of the Church is in the Church of Rome and the See of St Peter. As we should judge fecundity by unity, it is evident that the Pope is the common Holy Father of all the Church's children with a special prerogative of honour and charity. It was to complete the mystery of this unity that St Peter founded the Church of Rome by his preaching and his martyrdom, as all antiquity recognized. He first founded the church of Jerusalem for the Jews, to whom the kingdom of God had to be preached first, to honour the faith of their fathers to whom God had made the promises. Once this was established, the same St Peter left Jerusalem for Rome, to honour God's predestined preference for the Gentiles over the Jews in the grace of his Gospel. He then established Rome, the head of the Gentile world, as the head also of the Christian Church which was to be principally composed of scattered Gentiles; so that this same city, whose rule had united so many different peoples and monarchies, should also be the seat of spiritual rule which would unite all peoples from the rising of the sun to its setting, under the obedience of Jesus Christ. To this city, mistress of the world, was the true Gospel brought by St Peter, that she might become the servant of Jesus Christ, and by her faithful service mother of all his children. For with the true Gospel St Peter brought to this Church the prerogatives of his own apostleship, that, is, the preaching of the faith and the

authority of discipline.

XXXIX. When St Peter made his strong confession of faith, he heard these words from Jesus Christ: *Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church.*<sup>25</sup> And when St Peter declared his love for his Master, he received from him the command: *Feed my sheep, feed my lambs;*<sup>26</sup> feed the mothers, feed the little ones, feed the strong, feed the weak, feed the whole flock.<sup>27</sup> Feed: that is to say, guide. Do thou then, who art Peter, proclaim the faith and lay the foundations; feed the flock, thou who lovest me, and also maintain its discipline.

XL. For ever, then, and as long as the Church will be the Church, both the purity of the faith and the order of discipline will live in the see of St Peter, but with this difference, that the faith will always be unblemished but discipline will often falter. By the good pleasure of Jesus Christ who established his Church as a holy edifice some repairs will always be needed in the fabric of the building, but the foundation is so firm that it can never be shaken. By his grace men can help to keep it in good repair, but they will never be able to rebuild it anew; for this Jesus Christ would have to come into the world once again. Hence you can see the effrontery of the recent heretics who were not ashamed to say in their confession of faith that God had sent Luther and Calvin to reconstruct the Church. But this is the concern of Jesus Christ only: he alone could erect this building, and could only do so by coming into the world. But as he decided to come only once, he established this Church so firmly that it will never need to be rebuilt; all it will need is to be kept in repair.

XLI. From all this you will realize what the Pope and the bishops are to the Church of God. I have only this to add (and it seems to me a consequence of what I have already said): the grace of the Apostolic See, although it exists for all the faithful, exists specially for the bishops. And this is so much in accordance with the Church's discipline that I cannot doubt it is right.

I had other things to tell you also, but perhaps God will allow me to explain them better to you by word of mouth.

<sup>25</sup> Matt. 16, 16.

<sup>26</sup> John 21, 15-17.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. St Ambrose. Eusebius Emissenus, cited in Billot, *De Ecclesia Christi*, vol. I, p. 531.