

CATECHISM FOR ADULTS: X. 'The Holy Catholic Church'

IAN HISLOP, O.P.

IN Christ all things are reconciled to the Father for he makes peace 'through the blood of his cross, both as to the things that are on earth and the things that are in heaven' (Col. 1, 20). As the second Adam he brings to mankind the forgiveness of God. The work of redemption is accomplished in that the redemptive deed has taken place. In order that the deed may be brought to bear on human beings who live a time-conditioned existence the saving rule of God, established in Christ, is given a temporal character. So that human souls may become 'holy' Christ is constituted as the 'head of the body the church', for God 'hath subjected all things under his feet and hath made him head over all the church, which is his body, and the fulness of him who is filled all in all' (Ephesians 1, 22-23). Christ is thus present to men in and by the Church.

The Church is the assembly of those, who believing by faith in Christ, live under the rule of Christ. Christ is 'in' the Church in that the Church teaches in obedience to his command. Christ, the head of the body, rules as King and the directive work of the Church, her leadership of man towards God, is a sharing, in the Spirit, of Christ's supreme governance. Her voice as she represents in each age the teaching of Christ, is the voice of Christ speaking to man. The Church does not only bring teaching and direction, she also brings life to the soul. In the sacraments, veiled in material signs, the power and presence of Christ is with the people of God. Through the waters of baptism the soul is given a new life before God, through each of the other sacramental signs man is brought into the presence of the redemptive activity of Christ, who acts on the soul in and through those chosen instruments of grace—the sacraments.

Israel was constituted as a holy and elect people by the choice of God. Israel did not choose God but she becomes the people of God because the presence of the glory of God dwelt in the Tabernacle and the temple, because God taught and directed Israel through the Law and the Prophets. The true being of Israel consisted in her unique relation to God, who was to her a King and a Saviour. In Christ the promises of God are fulfilled. It is the same

God who 'of old time' spoke to the fathers by the prophets and who has now 'at the end of these days' spoken to us in Christ Jesus (cf. Hebrews 1, 1-2). The Church is the new Israel for she is the assembly of those whom God has called to witness to his truth and glory 'Ye are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people' (1 Peter 2, 9)—the new Israel is, in Jesus Christ, the possession of God—her very existence is constituted by her relation to Christ as her Head and King. She is holy because she shares in the life of Christ poured out through the Holy Spirit in the sacraments, presented in every aspect of the life of the people of God. St Peter applies the words of the prophet Osee (2, 23), when he teaches that the chaos of human life that is the world of sin, is recreated into the assembly of the people of God, so that those who were not a people are now the people of God.

The old temple—the place where the sanctifying presence of God dwelt (1 Kings 8, 14), the place where God ruled—'I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated and his train filled the temple' (Isaiah 6, 1) has now given place to the presence of Christ among his people, 'for one greater than the temple is here' (Mt 12, 6). This is the vision of which St John tells us (Apocalypse 4-5), 'behold there was a throne set in heaven, and upon the throne one sitting . . . and round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats, four and twenty ancients sitting, clothed in white garments. . . . And I saw and behold in the midst of the throne . . . and in the midst of the ancients, a Lamb standing, as it were slain. . . . And I beheld and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne. . .'. The meaning is clear. The bishop and his presbyters: the altar of sacrifice and the people of God united in worship, are the image of the court of heaven, because through Christ Jesus they share, in faith, in the life of God. As united to God through the mediator Jesus Christ they belong to the family of God, being sons and daughters of adoption.

Hence St Peter says (1 Peter 2, 5), we are built up as 'living stones' into a spiritual house; that is, into the new Temple, which is Christ and his holy people. 'You are no more strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and the domestics of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone: in whom all the building, being framed together, groweth up into an holy temple in the Lord' (Ephesians 2, 19-21).

The temple of the Church is built upon the apostles and the prophets, because they have authority from God to teach. The prophet is one whom God uses as his mouthpiece; under the direction of the Spirit he speaks for God. This personal junction is taken over by the Church, which, through those who have received the special gift of the Spirit by the laying on of hands, teaches and rules the faithful with the authority of Christ.

The little flock of Christ, the royal shepherd is promised the kingdom (Luke 12, 32), for it is this faithful 'remnant' which the Lord has recovered and preserved (Isaiah 11, 11): or, to change the metaphor, these are the branches that are grafted in to the root of faith and election. (cf. Romans 11.)

The Church is the people of God. In the beginning the unity of the people of God was destroyed by Adam's sin and shattered at Babel. Through Abraham 'our father' God promises blessing to all the nations—when his descendants come out of Egypt, God chooses them as 'his' people. The serfs of Pharaoh, the divine king, are constituted, in faith, the people of God, the ones who can use by right his holy name. They are 'separated' from other peoples (Leviticus 20, 26), for their destiny is witness, to be a holy people. Since they are chosen by God they may worship no other (Exodus 20, 2)—they are to serve no other. 'I am the Lord thy God, mighty jealous' (Exodus 20, 5). The purpose for Israel led to the destruction of the old Israel, or rather to its transformation in the new. The new Israel, living by Christ, overcomes the death of sin, but she too belongs to God, who cannot accept any substitute for his eternal truth, for his life-giving word.

The Church teaching, as she was commanded to do by Christ, must always act in obedience to the one Lord and giver of faith—as the voice of Christ is one, so is the voice of the Church against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. Each local church is representative of the whole in that, in every assembly of the people of God, the whole of the Body of Christ is present in the Spirit. For each local church the sign of this fundamental unity in Christ is union with the bishop, the representative of the apostles, who is both teacher and priest. The Church is united in faith and in life. 'Do nothing without the bishop: watch over your flesh as the temple of God; love union, flee from divisions . . . take care to use one Eucharist, for the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ is one and one chalice for the union of his blood, one altar, as there is one

bishop with the priests and the deacons' (St Ignatius of Antioch). The sacrifice of the Mass offered by, or in union with the bishop, is the great proclamation of the unity of the Church. Departure from this unity is to listen to the false prophets, even to the prophets of Baal.

The Church is Catholic. In the new Israel there is no racial or national principle of discrimination. The old Israel was a witness because she was chosen by God—her history as a nation has a providential purpose lacking in that of any other nation. The new Israel is different—now the choice of God falls not on a people but on persons, who, chosen from an infinity of peoples, now constitute a new people. There is in Christ, neither Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free—because these divisions, after Christ, rest on the way the world divides things and people. In Christ they are not black, white, yellow, rich, poor, proletarian, capitalist. If these divisions are carried into the Church by Catholics then in so far as they are accepted they imply an imposition of worldly standards and to that extent those Catholics cease to be Catholics and become schismatics departing from Christ. It is the task of the Church Catholic to witness through the world to the teaching of Christ: the Spirit guards from error, the bishop must speak. It is the task of the Catholic Christian to carry out in each aspect of his life the implications of that teaching. For, if he does not, then knowledge is sundered from life and the division grace is given to heal is torn open in an act of practical apostasy.

The Church is apostolic for she is sent, she is in the world as the representative of Christ, and each of her many members is also sent—some to witness in their personal being to Christ, others with an added institutional function of official witness. The apostolic work of the Church is dependent on our Lord's commission to his apostles, for their successors, the bishops, not only teach with authority but are also the source of the continuous renewal of the Church life through time to the end of time. When the bishop lays on his hands, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given and the Church renews her spiritual potential. Here, too, though the divine promise does not mean that the Church will prevail or even persist in any one region, by faith we have confidence that the faith of Peter for which our Lord prayed will not fail and to the end of time Peter's successors will confirm the brethren in their faith.