

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF ACTUALIZING THE VISION OF *LUMEN GENTIUM*

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Introduction

The Second Vatican Council opened up many discussions especially on the Church. The last 51 years, since the Council began, have seen various developments in the self-understanding of the Church. In the last century, in understanding the Church, emphases have passed from understanding her as *Societas Perfectas*, to the Mystical Body of Christ, and from the Church as 'People of God' to the Church as 'communion.' Now the problem of actualising the vision of the Second Vatican Council is well expressed by one of the Fathers of the Council himself, Pope Benedict XVI, in 2005 as a problem of the "correct interpretation" of the Council or its "proper hermeneutics."¹ In front of the many discussions the Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Council has opened up, in the following paragraphs some possible perplexities in understanding the Church are highlighted.

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¹"The question arises: Why has the implementation of the Council, in large parts of the Church, thus far been so difficult? Well, it all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or – as we would say today – on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarrelled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit" (Pope Benedict, "Address to the Roman Curia – 22 December 2006", in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4th January 2006, pg. 3).

1. The Birth of the Church

Can we speak of the birth of the Church? We do not know with precision the exact moment of its birth. Many authors dealt with this theme: Whether the church was born or revealed, and if so when? If we try to speak of the birth of the Church, it would be very difficult to say when it was born: was it born on Pentecost, or was the community around the historical and physical Jesus Christ already the Church of God, or did it spring from the side of Christ on the cross,² or was it as St Augustine, St Gregory, and St Damascene said that the church existed "*jam ab Abel Justo*,"³ or was the group of shepherds in the manger in Bethlehem the beginning of the Church or do we need to go back in time all the more? As a matter of fact, the Church of God is *ecclesia tou theou*, which comes from *qahal Yahweh* (already mentioned in the book of Exodus).

In the first place, the Church appears as a community. Accordingly, in the NT, a community of disciples is convoked by Jesus Christ – there is a small nucleus/a group of disciple around the historical, tangible Jesus. After his Ascension and the Pentecost, however, when the disciples announced Christ (The KERYGMA is the apostles' announcement of Christ), Christ became present through their preaching and began to convoke a people. So, before Pentecost the centre of the community of disciples was the physical and historical Christ. After Pentecost a community is formed whose centre is the proclamation of Christ – that Christ had destroyed death. Hence, the Church is a people convoked by a person – Jesus Christ. She is formed through the preaching of the apostles that makes present Christ. She is a community of communion (seen in Acts as being one in heart and mind, and sharing their goods).

Secondly, if we go back in time, we cannot speak of the birth of the Church because in some way, on the one hand, it is a continuation or rather an extension of the *Qahal Yahweh*. Indeed, we need to rather speak of the revelation of the Church. On the other hand, St Augustine speaks of the Church as existing already "*jam ab Abel justo*"; from this we deduce that the Church already existed from the time of Abel the just man. St Gregory Nazianzen, Origen *et al* speak of

²S. Ioannes Chrysostom, *Catechesis* 3, 13-19; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, PG 8, 299 and Ambrose of Milan, *In Luc.2*, 85-89: PL 15, 1666-1668.

³S. Gregorius M., *Hom. in Evang.* 19, I: PL 76, 1154B. Cf. S. Augustine, *Serm.* 341, 9, 11: PL 39, 1499; S. Damascenus, *Adv. Iconocl.* II: PG 96, 1357.

the Church as the reversal of Babel.⁴ From this we can conclude that if sin was a rupture of communion with God and consequently among men, then the Church is the process of undoing this rupture; a work that can be done only by God. Also in this case we cannot speak of a moment in which the Church is born although we can certainly speak of the revelation of the Church. The paragraph 759 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church says that “the family of God is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history in keeping with the Father’s plan.” *Lumen Gentium* 2 affirms that,

the Church was already present in figure at the beginning of the world; this Church was prepared in a marvellous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and the old alliance. Established in this last age of the world and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to a glorious completion at the end of time.

“Thus the Church is the goal of everything.”⁵

From what has been said we can deduce that the Church was already there in the hidden plan of God (the *mysterion*), whose manifestation⁶ on the day of Pentecost was prepared for in the history of God’s people. Hence it is rather lopsided to speak of the birth of the Church. Rocchetta says, “such a ‘mystery’ has been revealed according to a historico-salvific ‘trajectory’ corresponding to the divine plan.”⁷ He proves his point relying on Penna⁸ who speaks of a trajectory of the *μυστήριον* in Pauline letters, identifying five stages of reciprocal access – the mystery accessing man and man accessing the mystery. This trajectory begins with the mystery being hidden, followed by its revelation, its missionary propagation, the means of knowing the mystery and the eschatological consummation of the

⁴Origenes, *In Genesim*, c. 1, in, PG vol. 12, 112; S. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio* 41, 16, in PG vol. 36, 449; S. Ioannes Chrysostom, *Homelia 2 in Pentec.*, 2, in, PG vol. 50, 467; S. Augustinus, *Ennarationes in Psalmi*, 54, 11, in, PL vol. 36, 636; *Sermo* 271, in, PL vol. 38, 1245; S. Cyrillus Alexandria, *Glaphyra in Genesim II*, in, PG vol. 69, 79; S. Gregorius Magnus, *Homelie in Evangelii*, Liber II, Hom. 30, 4, in, PL vol. 76, 1222; S. Beda, *In Hexæum*, Liber III, in, PL vol. 91, 125. (Cf. Also AG 4 and 7).

⁵St. Epiphanius in “*Pannarion*”, I, I, 5, in PG vol. 41, 181C.

⁶Most exegetes point to the revelatory dimension of *mysterion* in the New Testament. D. Deden (in “Le ‘Mystère’ paulinien,” in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 13 (1936) 415-420), points out that in the analysis of the Pauline texts where the unitary theme of mystery appears, it is always accompanied by verbs of revelation (ἀποκαλύπτειν, φανεροῦν, γνωρίζειν).

⁷Carlo Rocchetta, *Sacramentaria fondamentale: Dal «Mysterion» al «Sacramentum»*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 1989, 203.

⁸Romano Penna, *Il mysterion paolino*, Paideia, Brescia 1978, 23-49.

mystery.⁹ Therefore, rather than beginning its discourse on the Church, starting from the infallibility of the Pope (where the First Vatican Council stopped), or starting from the hierarchical nature of the Church, or starting from human or divine aspect of the Church, the second Vatican Council chooses to have as its starting point the “mystery of the Church,” which takes into account the human and divine elements implied in her.

2. Is the Church Human or Divine?

If we speak of the birth of the Church we would be speaking of her in terms of an organisation and of such a reality we can speak of its birth as an organization (that is purely human). The Church however is not merely human but it is permeated also by a divine element. She is thus a mystery like Christ himself. We need to, however, make a distinction when we say that the Church is a mystery similar to Christ. There have been authors in the past who have gone to the extent of saying that the Church is a ‘continuation’ of the Incarnation.¹⁰ There has been, in the last 51 years since the Council, a striking phenomenon (which is in fact an old phenomenon): the theological difficulty of understanding the Church with her human and divine elements. On one hand we know that the Church is constituted by human and divine elements together, as the Second Vatican Council says “by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word” (LG 8). However, in the period after the Council there has been a tendency to emphasize one of the two elements exclusively. The emphasis on the human element has produced results such as the Church taking up issues of social justice, the Church taking up political issues, identifying herself with the struggle for freedom of the people and human rights, and overlooking the element of the divine will, etc. Often such endeavours have gone to the extreme of the Church becoming involved in violence (e.g. the tribal conflicts in Uganda and Congo,

⁹Rocchetta, *Sacramentaria fondamentale*, 203-205. Militello instead identifies four stages of the revelation: 1) the mystery is mystery of God (his hidden design); 2) it is realised as mystery of Christ; 3) it is communicated to the apostles; 4) it is the mystery of the Church, through whom the mystery touches the whole humanity – including Jews and gentiles (Cettina Militello, *La Chiesa: Il corpo crismato*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 2003, 58).

¹⁰Aloys Grillmeier, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Chapter I,” in Herbert Vorgrimler (ed.), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, New York: Burns & Oates/Herder and Herder, 1967, 139.

the class struggle in South America and Asia, etc). On the other hand, on some occasions the ecclesiology that emphasizes the divine element has tended to become very hierarchical and clerical, dis-involved in the problems of man and dis-involved with the lost sheep – worried only about those who already belong to the Church and their pastoral care. When there is an over-emphasis of the divine element in the Church, the Church is looked at as something deprived of human contribution, the hierarchy is divinized, the Church's liturgy becomes untouchable, human error finds no place and the Church is reduced to yet another big religion. It is when the importance of both elements is kept in mind that we strike the right balance. Both the risks we see above are extremes and such extremes are often possible when we emphasize either the divine or the human element exclusively in the Church.

For Catholic theology the Church is a mystery similar to Christ. Just as in Christ there is the human and divine element, so also in the Church there is something human and something divine. Just as in Christ our over-emphasis on any one of the two elements could lead to an erroneous understanding of Christ, in the same way, the self understanding of the Church cannot give prominence to any one of the two elements exclusively. The Church comes into existence as an initiative of God yet it is made up of men. That is why Jesus says to Peter, "you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church." This promise of Jesus implies that 'it is God who builds the Church' on a human foundation. The expression "I will build" is not a reference to a future time but refers to the subject of the action, i.e. God. And of course it refers also to the fulfilment of God's plan. Thus the expression "I will build" implies that the one who listens to the promise is aware of God's salvific plan to undo the rupture of communion caused by man through sin. The rupture of communion between God and man and also among men becomes definite at Babel, thus the Fathers of the Church refer to Pentecost as the reversal of Babel.¹¹

3. The Mystery of the Church

3.1. Church as Sacrament

When we use the word "mystery" to refer to the Church, can it be compared to the mystery of God? In theology there is the mystery of

¹¹See footnote n. 3 above.

God, and also the mystery of the sacraments, in fact sacraments were called mysteries originally. The first one who used the term “*sacramentum*” was Tertullian, to substitute the word “mystery”. At which level do we have to put the mystery of the Church: at the level of God, or of the sacraments? We cannot deal with the mystery of God in the same way as we speak of the mystery of the Church, or of the mystery of the sacraments. They are three different realities: i) divine mystery, ii) human & divine mystery, iii) human realities raised in dignity to become the place of God’s action respectively. In the case of all the three we require faith to understand.

Cyprian was the first one to use the word “sacrament” to define the Church. He calls it the sacrament of unity.¹² But during patristic period the notion of sacrament did not have the same meaning as it has today (so we cannot project our understanding of sacrament into the patristic understanding of the Church as sacrament). Till Middle Ages the number ‘seven’ for the sacraments was not yet established. It was the scholastic theology that defined the word “sacrament” and the definite number of sacraments. After defining sacramental rites, they started to speak of sacraments in all its details till we have a complete scholastic sacramental theology. With this detailed scholastic sacramental theology in mind, Johan Adam Möhler was the first to speak of the Church as sacrament in his book *Symbolism*, vol. II,¹³ but in a passive manner. Möhler develops the idea of the Church as a sacrament alluding to her visible and invisible dimension with reference to the Incarnation. Like Christ became visible in his Incarnation and expressed himself in an outward *perceptible manner*,¹⁴

¹²St Cyprian, *Liber de Unitate Ecclesiae* VII, in Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume V*, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

¹³Cf. Johann A. Möhler, *Symbolism: or Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by their Symbolical Writings*, London: Gibbings, 1906, 36. There are two elements which highlight the importance of Möhler’s work. The *first* element is the perspective which Möhler opened, wherein the Church herself, considered as being the continuation of the Incarnation, was seen as an institution which ultimately derives from a divine and not a human source, that is, she is seen in a truly *theo*-logical way (258-259). The *second* element which points to the importance of Möhler’s works is the (supposed) ecumenical intentions behind his works. In the *Einheit in der Kirche*, Möhler proposes to study how this institution has as its goal and effect the expression and communication of the life of the Holy Spirit in souls. He demonstrates how the concrete, historical Church visibly manifests this spiritual and, more precisely, supernatural unity.

¹⁴Johann A. Möhler, *Symbolism...*, 258.

and like the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles in the *visible* form of fire,¹⁵ so also the Church has to be visible.¹⁶ Möhler was followed by Heinrich Klee, Johann H. Oswald on the same lines. Later, M.J. Scheeben (from the same school of Tübingen as Möhler), went little more into detail in his discussions on the Church as sacrament (1853). According to him, everything that the Cappadocian Fathers had called economy has a sacramental character: it is a penetration of the reality of this world by the celestial realities, an elevation of the reality of this world to participate in the heavenly realities.¹⁷ Odo Casel made a detailed study on the word "sacrament" and tries to find its deeper and original meaning in the word *Mysterion*.¹⁸ Similarly in 1951 Rahner calls the Church "sacrament" using a German term *Grundsakrament* (radical or root sacrament)¹⁹ and again Henri De Lubac in his *Méditation sur l'Eglise*.²⁰ However, in 1960 Rahner said that Christ is *Grundsakrament* (from him all the sacraments spring out).²¹ And again later in 1976 he changed his mind and went on to refer to Jesus as the *Ursakrament* (origin of sacraments), and to Church as *Grundsakrament* (root of the sacraments).²²

With these discussions on the sacramentality of the Church many authors began to draw attention to the word sacrament (in the sense of being visible sign of invisible reality) itself seeing in it an economy used by God in revealing progressively his hidden plan of salvation.

However, it must be remembered that Christ cannot be called a sacrament in the sense mentioned above (visible sign of invisible reality); he 'is' the reality and he cannot be reduced to the level of a sign. LG, 1 calls the Church a 'sacrament'.²³ In reality, no document of

¹⁵Johann A. Möhler, *Symbolism...*, 260.

¹⁶Johann A. Möhler, *Symbolism...*, 259.

¹⁷Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, London: Herder, 1946, 377-378. see also pages, 391-394.

¹⁸Odo Casel, *Il mistero del culto cristiano*, Roma: Edizioni Borla, 1966.

¹⁹Karl Rahner, "Zur Theologie der Buße bei Tertullian," in Marcel Reding, ed., *Abhandlungen über Theologie und Kirche: Festschrift für Karl Adam. In Verbindung mit Heinrich Elfers und Fritz Hofmann*, Freiburg: Herder, 1951, 129-167. see also *Kirche und Sakrament*, Freiburg-Basel-Vienna: Herder, 1960.

²⁰Henri de Lubac, *Méditation sur l'Eglise*, Paris: Aubier, 1953.

²¹Karl Rahner, *Kirche und Sakrament*, Freiburg-Basel-Vienna: Herder, 1960.

²²Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens*, Freiburg: Herder, 1976, 396; "What is a Sacrament?," TI vol. 14, 142.

²³LG 8 says, "by no weak analogy, it [the Church] is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word." The word "mystery," could be translated as "sacrament" (by no weak analogy, it [the Church] is compared to the *sacrament* of the incarnate Word), and such a

the Church calls Christ a “sacrament,” though the Church is called a sacrament. We are speaking of two different levels of the reality.

In 1953 in his book *Die Kirche als Ursakrament*, Otto Semmelroth, calls the Church the “*Ursakrament*”. This way of looking at the Church was heavily criticized (since he is using a term reserved for Christ by many authors to refer to the Church) though he remained faithful to this expression till he died. Criticisms in this regard came from Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Werbick, Kenan Osborne, etc.

While describing the way God chooses to reach man in order to reach out to man and to touch him (in order to enter into communion with man), Semmelroth uses the analogy of the arm and the hand and fingers. He compares the hand of God to the Church, and the fingers to the sacraments.²⁴ The Church is the fountain from which the seven sacraments flow out. Although many authors would prefer to call Christ the fountain (and thus the *Ursakrament*) from whom all the sacraments flow out, Semmelroth preferred to call the ‘Church’ the *Ursakrament*. In the application of this term to the Church, he did not wish to attribute to her a value of origin of the seven sacraments, he meant it in reference to the seven particular sacraments.²⁵ This affirmation rules out the possibility of calling Christ a sacrament, without at the same time taking away from Christ the role of having instituted the sacraments.

In calling the Church a sacrament, the Church’s bivalent reality is highlighted: that is, the Church being a sacrament is the visible sign of an invisible reality; thus in the Church as a reality there is the visible part (human or natural part) united to the invisible part (divine or supernatural part). This however must not be confused with the hypostatic union in Christ by which his divine nature is united to the human nature. Both in Christ and in the Church there is a divine element united to the human, but their union is of two different kinds and at two different levels. In Christ we are dealing

translation could also be used to say that even the Church Magisterium speaks of Christ and His Incarnation as the sacrament. Many authors who vouch for the sacramental concept of the Church, have as their starting point, the sacramentality of Christ. They see in Christ, the same sacramental structure of the visible and invisible, which can be observed in the seven individual sacraments. However, there is no document of the *Magisterium* that says explicitly that Christ is or can be compared to a sacrament.

²⁴Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament*, Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1953, 47-50.

²⁵Semmelroth, *Die Kirche als Ursakrament*, 48. See also, *Gott und Mensch Begegnung*, 247-248.

with the unity of a “divine person” with the human nature in his incarnation. In the Church we are first of all dealing with an institution which ultimately derives from a divine and not a human source.²⁶ According to *Lumen Gentium*, “The earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things... form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element... This is the one Church of Christ which in the creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (LG, 8). John Paul II also insists on the bivalent reality of the Church: “We are the Church in her visible dimension, which expresses her faith in her own reality as Church, a reality which is divine and human. These two dimensions are so inseparable that, if one is missing, the entire reality of the Church, as willed and founded by Christ, is cancelled.”²⁷ Thus speaking of the human weakness and the divine element in the Church he says:

in the Church and by means of the Church this sinfulness becomes an object of the divine power of redemption, under the action of that love which makes possible and accomplishes the individual’s conversion, the sinner’s justification, a change of life and progress in doing good, sometimes even to the point of heroism and holiness. Can we deny that the Church’s history is full of converted and repentant sinners who, having returned to Christ, followed him faithfully to the end? [...] one cannot fail to observe that if the Church—in spite of all the human weaknesses and sins of her members—in her entirety remains faithful to Christ and brings to Christ her many children who have failed in their baptismal commitments, this occurs because of the “power from on high” (cf. Lk 24:49), the Holy Spirit, who gives her life and guides her on her perilous journey through history.²⁸

The Church is not purely human, nor purely divine, but a unity of both, as also in Christ there is the human nature united to the divine nature. However, we cannot look at Christ or the Church or the sacraments in a static manner, because we would reduce them to something flat; there is dynamism in Christ, the Church and the sacraments. Nevertheless, other than the fact that the Church as a sacrament is a bivalent reality, as a sacrament she is also an instrument. St Thomas calls also Christ an instrument of God. In the following paragraph we shall see the difference.

²⁶“The Church is holy. It must be clarified, immediately, that the Church is such in virtue of her origin and divine institution” (John Paul II, “General Audience – July 10, 1991,” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 10 July 1991, 4).

²⁷John Paul II, “General Audience - July 24, 1991,” in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 24th July 1991, 5.

²⁸John Paul II, “General Audience - July 24, 1991.”

3.2. The Thomistic View of the Sacramentality of Christ and the Church

In his *Summa*, when he describes the Church, St Thomas uses two expressions very often:

- i. The Church is a union of all the faithful (S.Th, III, 117, 2; III, 82, 7; III, 39, 1 & 3)
- ii. The Church is the Body of Christ and Christ is the head (S.Th. III, 8, 1–8).

In this section what interests us, is the expression “Church as an Instrument” in the sense of a sacramental instrument and “Christ as an Instrument” in the writings of St Thomas. St Thomas uses Aristotelian categories to describe sacraments in general, thus he will highlight three important aspects of the sacrament according to Aristotelian Categories.

a) A Sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible reality; in connection with this St Thomas describes the signs used in every sacrament and the invisible reality they signify.²⁹

b) The Minister of the Sacraments and the sacramental efficacy (by now the concept of *ex opera operato* had been well established).³⁰

c) The Causes in Sacraments - St Thomas would describe the *primary cause*, *instrumental cause* and *final cause*, for every sacrament.

For St Thomas the criteria to establish a liturgical action as a sacrament was its institution by Christ who is the Primary Cause of every sacrament. At the same time he also discusses the final cause of every sacrament which is the effect the sacraments produce efficaciously. It is the discussion on the instrumental cause that is of interest in this section. According to St Thomas the instrumental cause for individual sacraments is the minister of every sacrament (S. Th, III, 66, 5 & 10). As regards sacraments in general, he considers the sacrament itself as an instrumental cause through which God communicates his grace to man (S. Th, III, 62, 3-4).

²⁹We must remember that St. Thomas deals with Sacraments in a static manner, since the Passover dynamics was covered up even before he started writing. Although the Passover dynamism was never lost, it had somehow lost its prominence in the understanding of sacraments.

³⁰The Pascal dynamism element did somehow survive in his discussions on the sacramental efficacy but this dynamism was limited to explaining that grace was certainly communicated through the sacraments efficaciously.

Although we say that the sacraments cause grace, it is an instrumental cause, i.e. it is as an instrument that the sacraments cause grace, since the primary cause is Christ. In the 62nd question of the 3rd Book, St Thomas will describe with more clarity the instrumental cause in sacraments. According to St Thomas a sacrament in causing grace works in the manner of an instrument. However he distinguishes two types of instruments:

- A. Separate (e.g. the hammer in the hand of a carpenter, driving a nail into the wood)
- B. United (as a hand united to the rest of the body).

He thus elucidates the difference between the two kinds of instruments: "A separated instrument is moved by the united instrument as a stick by the hand. Now the principal efficient cause of grace is God himself, in comparison, Christ's humanity is a united instrument whereas the sacrament is a separated instrument" (S. Th. III, 62, 5).

From this it is clear that even if we use a Thomistic language we cannot prove that Christ can be called a sacrament. Even though both the realities are placed in the same category of 'instruments', the humanity of Christ is used by God as a united instrument while a sacrament (that is altogether different from Christ in his humanity) is a separate instrument. We had said earlier from the point of view of definition of the sacrament (visible sign of an invisible reality) that Christ is not a visible sign of an invisible reality but he is "the reality," hence he cannot be considered a sacrament. Now, we can also say from the point of view of St Thomas that Christ's humanity being a united instrument of God cannot be a sacrament.

3.3. Present Day Understanding of the Church

3.3.1. Church as *Societas perfectas* and as *Mystery*

In the last few decades since the Council, there has been much development in the Church's self understanding. We cannot attribute these developments only to the Second Vatican Council, since many of these developments began towards the end of the XIX century and beginning of the XX century. The preferred expression to describe the Church was the term "*Societas Perfectas*" which highlighted her characteristics as a perfect human society in all its dimensions. In this understanding she is compared to all human institutions, such as the state, in order to accentuate its perfection. In understanding the

Church as *societas perfectas* attention is drawn to her structure consisting of the *hierarchy* and the *faithful* (referred to as laity). In such an understanding, however, a big distance was inevitably emphasised between the hierarchy and laity wherein the latter was considered as belonging to a class lower than that of the former. Nevertheless, it tended to present the Church as a self-imposing organisation, with much emphasis on the human and natural characteristics of the Church. In the first place, it was the *Mystici Corporis* of Pius XII and secondly the Scientific research in many theological fields – guided by the return to the sources, in which many scholars were involved who spent much time in rediscovering the richness and theological wealth of Scriptures, liturgy and patristic literature – that led to the possibility of a better understanding of the Church, her nature, her role, her structure and her mission. We can say that developments in ecclesiology started to emerge soon after the Second World War, thanks to scientific research in theology. These discoveries also prepared for the Second Vatican Council.

While the self understanding of the Church as “*Societas Perfectas*” was placing emphasis on the human characteristics of the Church, the post war developments in ecclesiology was increasingly tending to look at the Church as having also divine attributes. However, more than identifying in the Church human and divine attributes, developments in ecclesiology surprisingly moved in the direction of recognising in the Church a mystery. This does not mean that the Church has discovered her mystery aspect at the Second Vatican Council, that is, after nearly 2000 years of her existence. The Church’s self-understanding as a mystery was always there in her consciousness, but now it is being emphasised and is also backed by the results of scientific research in the field of biblical exegesis, patristics and liturgy. This can be verified in the Second Vatican Council’s desire “to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world her own inner nature and universal mission... [by] following faithfully the teaching of previous councils” (LG, 1). The mystery of the Church is first of all elucidated with the expression “the hidden plan of God” (LG, 2), so “already from the beginning of the world the foreshadowing of the Church took place. It was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant. In the present era of time the Church was constituted and, by the outpouring of the Spirit, was made manifest” (LG, 2). The nature of the Church is

described as that of a sacrament: sign and instrument “of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG, 1). The mystery of the Church is further emphasised by drawing out its link with the Kingdom of God: “The mystery of the holy Church is manifest in its very foundation. The Lord Jesus set it on its course by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Kingdom of God, which, for centuries, had been promised in the Scriptures” (LG, 5). As a result, in its effort to describe the nature of the Church *Lumen Gentium* concludes the chapter on the Mystery of the Church by drawing attention to the *Church’s mission* to “reveal to the world, faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light” (LG, 8). At the same time, in describing the nature of the Church, it does not overlook the hierarchical structure of the Church,³¹ which was already an important element of the concept of the Church as *societas perfecta*.

The Second Vatican Council, right at the outset, describes the Church as a sacrament:

Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission (LG, 1).

From this, it is clear that more than imposing herself as *Societas Perfectas* the Council wanted to describe her nature and her mission. Until now this mission was linked to the activity of conserving those who belonged to her, through pastoral care and sacraments – also called pastoral of sacramentalization – although in the previous four hundred years a lot of mission work had been undertaken (since somehow the Church was always conscious about her mission). LG highlights the Church’s “universal mission” (which opens up the discussion on the pastoral of evangelization).

Without denying the hierarchical structure of the Church, LG turns its attention to the mystery of the Church comparing it to the mystery of Christ:

By no weak analogy (the Church) is compared to the mystery of the Incarnate Word. As the assumed nature inseparably united to Him serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation so in a similar way does the visible structure of the Church serve the spirit of Christ

³¹In fact the Chapter III of LG is completely dedicated to the hierarchical structure of the Church.

in the building up of the body [...] The Church's mission is to faithfully reveal to the world the mystery of her Lord until it will be manifested in full light (LG, 8).

From this we can conclude that the Council was including the whole Church in her mission: Hierarchy and faithful. In maintaining that the Church is hierarchical, LG also gives to the hierarchical structure an even deeper meaning, or if it can be said, it identifies the programme in the hierarchical ordering of the Church:

For the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in His Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. For those ministers, who are endowed with sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation (LG, 18).

Reference to the "common goal" not only seems to be an allusion to communion between hierarchy and the Christian community, it clearly draws attention to the divine initiative as the starting point of this horizontal communion and at the same time it particularly assumes the presence of charismatic gifts in the Church and the necessary communion between them and the hierarchy:

Guiding the Church in the way of all truth (cf. Jn. 16:13) and unifying her in communion and in the works of ministry, he [the Spirit] bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her; and he adorns her with his fruits (cf. Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Cor. 12:4; Gal. 5:22). By the power of the Gospel he permits the Church to keep the freshness of youth.³²

3.3.2. Church as Communion, Body of Christ, People of God and Marxist Ideologies

While the First Vatican Council emphasized the infallibility of the Pope in his teaching office (an expression that caused much controversy) the Second Vatican Council speaks of the infallibility of the "Universal Church" (LG, 35) without underestimating the affirmation of First Vatican Council – infallibility of the Pope. This emphasis on the infallibility of the Church was soon interpreted as the council's desire for "decentralization". This was a clear sign of a progressive flattening of the idea of the Church, as the word decentralization does not appear in any of the Second Vatican Council documents. Somehow, there were many who would have

³² LG 4

liked to deal with the Church in the same way as they would do with a political or a social organisation – with a Marxist mentality.

Although, a little before the Council, different lobbies appeared, each of which wanted to diffuse their ideas into Second Vatican Council documents, the Council surprised everyone. As Ratzinger says, the Council turned out to be an experience of communion:

[T]he Second Vatican Council clearly wanted to speak of the Church within the discourse on God, to subordinate the discourse on the Church to the discourse on God and to offer an ecclesiology that would be theo-logical in a true sense. Until now, however, the way the Council was received has ignored this qualifying characteristic in favour of individual ecclesiological affirmations; it has highlighted single phrases that are easy to repeat, and has thus fallen away from the broad horizons of the Council Fathers. Something similar can be said about the first text on which the Second Vatican Council focused—the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. The fact that it was placed at the beginning was basically due to pragmatic motives. But retrospectively, it must be said that it has a deeper meaning within the structure of the Council: adoration comes first. Therefore God comes first [...] As the second text of the Council, the Constitution on the Church should be considered as inwardly connected with the text on the liturgy. The Church is guided by prayer, by the mission of glorifying God. By its nature, ecclesiology is connected with the liturgy.³³

Other than the problem of decentralization, other aspects were highlighted such as: Second Vatican Council spoke of the ecclesiology of the people of God, ecclesiology of Communion, Body of Christ, etc. All these expressions tend to flatten ecclesiology.

After the initial enthusiasm that greeted the discovery of the idea of the Body of Christ, scholars analyzed and gradually began to refine the concept and make corrections in two directions [...] Henri de Lubac [...] made concrete the idea of the Body of Christ by working out a Eucharistic ecclesiology and opened it in this way to concrete questions about the juridical ordering of the Church and the reciprocal relations between local Churches and the universal Church. The other form of correction began in Germany in the 1930's, where some theologians were critical of the fact that with the idea of the Mystical Body certain relationships were not clear between the visible and the invisible, law and grace, order and life. They therefore proposed the concept of 'People of God', found above all in the Old

³³Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of the Constitution on the Church, Vatican II, '*Lumen Gentium*,'" in *L'Ossevatore Romano*, 19th Sept. 2001, 5.

Testament, as a broader description of the Church to which one could more easily apply sociological and juridical categories. While the Mystical Body of Christ would certainly remain an important 'image', by itself it could not meet the request of theology to express things using concepts.³⁴

The same is true about the concept of the Church understood as people of God.

In her first phase of reception of the Council, the concept of the people of God dominated together with the theme of collegiality. Very soon this expression began to be understood with the politico-linguistic use in general of the word 'people' in the context of the theology of liberation, and was understood with Marxist use of the term 'people' as contra poised to the dominating classes in the sense of the sovereignty of the people, that can be finally applied. This was the occasion for many debates on the structure in which depending on the situation it was interpreted as democratization or popular democracies.³⁵

Soon after the Council, thus at the first stage, the expression "people of God" became popular and after the Synod of 1985 the expression "Church as a communion" became popular. Although there are expressions that express the truth about the Church, somehow in the post-conciliar popularity, these expressions were marked by a rather horizontal understanding that overlooked the deeper meaning of the expression. For example, in the expression "Church is communion" or in the ecclesiology of communion, much emphasis was laid on the horizontal communion as compared to the vertical communion. The main objective of the Second Vatican Council was the renewal in the Church; the source of this renewal is communion with God (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 2, preface of *Optatam Totius*, 21). The tendency to limit ecclesiology to something horizontal as a starting point was provoked by the Church's worry concerning her horizontal relationships with the separated brethren and the non-Christian religions. Unfortunately this worry infected by Marxist ideologies, started to produce an ecclesiology that considered the Church lesser and lesser in terms of mystery; the Church more than a mystery that involves revelation was seen as a social organization

³⁴Joseph Ratzinger, "Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy) – 15 Sept. 2001," in *L' Osservatore Romano*, 23 January 2002, 5.

³⁵Joseph Ratzinger, "Discourse at the International Convention on the Actualization of the Second Vatican Council," 27th Feb. 2000, in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Italian ed.), 4th March 2000, 6.

that needed reform. Also the idea of reform of the Church was conditioned by political ideologies.

Conclusion

One of the most important themes of the Second Vatican, though not the only one, was that of the Church. As we have seen above the Council documents have produced not a few discussions among theologians all over the world. Various lines of thought have drawn attention to singular elements of the Council's self understanding of the Church. However, some of these lines of thought tend to emphasize on a particular element exclusively without taking into consideration other images and models: for example, "they have not sufficiently integrated the concept of communion with the concepts of the People of God and the Body of Christ, and have not given due importance to the relationship between the Church as communion and the Church as sacrament."³⁶ So as we said earlier in the introduction, the problem of actualising the vision of the Second Vatican Council is a problem of the "correct interpretation" of the Council or its "proper hermeneutics."³⁷

In the study made by Avery Dulles on the models of the Church, Dulles himself explores the different models of the Church used by the Council in its attempts at the self understanding of the Church, but at the same time warns against the use of any single model in a manner isolated from the other models, making it an absolute, since only when all the models are taken together, does it give us some picture about the Church.³⁸ Hence we can see the serious need for the integration of the concepts of communion with the concepts of People of God, with the concept of the Church as Sacrament and as Body of Christ.

³⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Communio in Notio*, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion, 28th May 1992, AAS 85 (1993) 838.

³⁷"On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call 'a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture'; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the 'hermeneutic of reform', of renewal in the continuity of the one subject – Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God" (Pope Benedict, "Address to the Roman Curia – 22 December 2005," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4th January 2006, 3).

³⁸Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of The Church*, New York: Doubleday, 1987, 32. Cf. also Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Philadelphia, 1960. Paul Minear advocates the same hypothesis of Dulles. He traces this concept to St Athanasius.