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**FROM THE IMAGE OF GOD TO THE
KINGDOM OF GOD
The Church as a Creative Space**

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Introduction

The Second Vatican Council made a significant effort to contextualize the Church in the modern world. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* undertakes this task by “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.”¹ The Church has to be prepared to face the realities of the world and to respond to them creatively by being more sensitive to the changing world and less prone to institutionalization. In this new self-understanding the Church rediscovers its “relational” nature which has for centuries remained overshadowed by its institutional structures. In order to be relevant and meaningful in today’s world and to realize its destiny the Church has to be a dynamic, creative community.

Challenges of the Changing World

Vatican II confronts the rapid changes that are taking place everywhere, effecting a radical social and cultural transformation in an unprecedented manner. They have serious repercussions on the religious consciousness and life of the people. While the world is making progress and attaining welfare in all aspects, there is an inner

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¹GS, # 4.

restlessness, uncertainty of direction and self-doubt tormenting human heart. The concentration of wealth, resources and power on the one hand and hunger, poverty and illiteracy on the other presents a deeply disturbing scenario. It is strange but true that along with greater understanding of freedom and human rights different forms of social and psychological slavery also make their appearance. The world is torn into fragments by warring forces, in spite of a keen awareness of the need of unity and solidarity.

Today's intellectual formation, increasingly based on the mathematical and natural sciences which helps human beings to master the world through technological skills has not been always helpful to give a synthetic vision of reality. It has given rise to many contradictions and imbalances in the world which can be ultimately traced to their source in human heart.

The Church cannot remain unaffected in the changing world. It is against the background of these revolutionary changes in all areas of life that the Council attempted to reflect on the mystery of the Church and to understand its nature and mission in the world.² On the one hand the Church is convinced of its divine origin and its eschatological finality. On the other hand, the Church is aware of its presence in the world as a society composed of men and women, sharing historically the same earthly lot of humanity in the world. In this context the Church finds her role in accompanying humanity, participating in its experiences and serving it as "a leaven and as a kind of soul" until it is "renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family."³ The Church can be relevant, effective and meaningful in today's world only by actively involving in its affairs and thereby constantly transforming it until it realizes its highest ideal.

Discovering the Church as a Living and Growing Reality

The Council's vision underscores the dynamic and organic nature of the Church. It is not merely an organization, but an organism with an inner core of life. While explaining the Ecclesiology of Vatican II, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spoke of this new emphasis quoting the words of Romano Guardini whose vision of the Church had influenced the Council:

²GS, # 40.

³GS, # 40.

The Church 'is not an institution devised and built by men... but a living reality... It lives still throughout the course of time. Like all living realities it develops, it changes... and yet in the very depths of its being it remains the same; its inmost nucleus is Christ... To the extent that we look upon the Church as organization... like an association... we have not yet arrived at a proper understanding of it. Instead, it is a living reality and our relationship with it ought to be – life.'⁴

Here we find the need go beyond the institutionalized vision of the Church which has defined the Church's nature and mission for centuries.⁵

Vatican II attempted to present the Church as a reality with flesh and blood. "The Church is not an idea, it is a body."⁶ It is the living body of Christ. Christ makes himself available to the world in the concreteness of his body and not in abstract ideals. It is a moving and growing reality, belonging not only to the past, but also to the present and the future. The presence of Christ gives the Church its specific identity and dynamic nature. It grows from within, manifesting in it Christ's glory, as it moves towards fulfillment. This concept finds expression in the very first sentence of the Second Vatican Council's fundamental text on the Church: "Christ is the Light of nations.... this Sacred Synod... eagerly desires... to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church."⁷ Christ and the Church are inseparably related to each other as light and image.

The Creative Potential of the Church

The "light-image" relationship between Christ and the Church implies that the Church can make sense in the world only when it is constantly enlightened by the light of Christ. Similarly, Christ is

⁴Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II" (Conference at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa, Italy on 15th September 2001), in *L'Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 23 January 2002, 5. Quotation of Romano Guardini is taken from *La Chiesa del Signore (The Church of the Lord)*, Brescia: Morcelliana, 1967, 160.

⁵It is the Political Society Model of Ecclesiology presented by Robert Bellarmine in his classic definition of the Church in *De Controversiis* (1588). See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York: Image Books, 2002.

⁶Joseph Ratzinger, "The Ecclesiology of Vatican II" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 23 January 2002, 5.

⁷ LG, # 1.

accessible to the world through the mediation of the Church as a visible and tangible reality. Hence the anti-institutional move, emphasizing the interiority and the mystical dimension of the Church has to be complemented by the visibility and the physical presence of the Church as a community. *Lumen Gentium* seeks to reconcile these two dimensions of the Church in its vision of the Church as the People of God.

The state of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us (Cf. Jn 13:34). Its end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the end of time, when Christ, our life (Cf. Col 3:4), shall appear, and "creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God" (Rom 8:21).⁸

This vision highlights the Church as a community of human persons who enjoy the dignity and freedom of the children of God and who are led by the indwelling Spirit of God. They are motivated by the law of love in their actions which are directed towards an ever greater manifestation and realization of the kingdom of God as the continuation and extension of God's work on earth, until it is perfected at the end of time, when Jesus Christ will finally deliver the entire creation from the slavery of corruption to the freedom of glory.

The Focal Point of Christian Creativity

The basic principles of Christian creativity are woven into this explanation of the Church. The first of these principles is the dignity and freedom of the human person. The foundation of human dignity and freedom is to be found in the very destiny of human beings whose ultimate measure of fulfilment is Jesus Christ. Vatican II has a Christo-centric anthropology of the human person which is based on a firm belief that Christ is the model, measure and destiny of human fulfilment.⁹ Jesus Christ "reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling."¹⁰ Human beings are predestined by God to be conformed to the image of the Son (Cf. Rom 8:29). In Christ can be found "the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all

⁸LG, # 9.

⁹GS, # 10.

¹⁰GS, # 22.

human history... Hence under the light of Christ, the image of the unseen God, the firstborn of every creature (Cf. Col 1:15), the Council wishes to speak to all men in order to shed light on the mystery of man and to cooperate in finding the solution to the outstanding problems of our time."¹¹

The Pauline vision of the universal fulfilment in Christ in the letter to the Colossians is reflected in this Christo-centric vision. According to Paul, Christ is the "image of God," the exemplar of the created world. He is the model, principle and end of all things. The entire creation derives its existence, relevance and purpose from him (Col 1:15-17). He is the unique reconciling point and centre of the cosmos. As the image of God, mediating effectively between the Creator and the creatures, Jesus Christ is not only the image of revelation but also the image of realization. The notion of the "image of God" in Paul's understanding implies not only a retrospection of the beginnings but also the process of an actual transformation and the prospects of a future fulfilment. "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1Cor 15:49). The foundation of the supreme human destiny is, thus, laid already in the creation of human beings, as the Sacred Scripture teaches, in the "image of God" (Gen 1:27).¹²

"The image of God" is the key expression which summarizes the biblical notion of creativity. It is a dynamic notion which has to be understood and experienced alive in the process of a transformation. It is not to be held as an object of static plasticity, imitating something or somebody. The biblical notion of the "image of God" in the context of creation implies the privileged position of Adam and Eve in relation to the rest of creation as well as their responsible relationship to the Creator.¹³ Either as the "apex" or as the "centre" of creation, as presented in the two different narrations of the Book of Genesis,¹⁴ human beings are related to the rest of creation. As physical beings they share the world with other physical beings and the material

¹¹GS # 10.

¹²Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 1700: The dignity of the human person is rooted in his or her creation in the image and likeness of God.

¹³GS, # 12.

¹⁴See Karl Hermann Schelkle, *Theology of the New Testament, vol.1: Creation*, trans. William A. Jürgens, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1968, 83.

world creates for them conditions for their intellectual and affective engagement with one another.¹⁵

The Image of God and the Notion of a Creative Space

Being in the image of God implies that human existence is essentially “relational.” Relationships define space. Mutually complementing relations give rise to a dynamic and creative space out of chaos. The biblical notion of Paradise epitomises, in this sense, the original state of interrelatedness and harmony in creation. It is the “ideal space” where the all creatures find themselves in harmonious relationship with one another and with the Creator. The web of relationships that remains uninterrupted and intact means also the fullness of bliss celebrated in the paradisiacal “space.” God who willed and filled the cosmic space with the handiworks of his creation, living in harmonious coexistence, is said to have derived pleasure at the sight of its pristine perfection and beauty. “And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Gen 3:9).

The awareness of having “space” would basically mean the awareness of relationships. It is the experience of a creative “matrix” in which one realizes oneself in relation to God and to others. But the fall of the first parents due to sin resulted in the loss of Paradise which signifies the loss of “space” and hence the rupture of all relationships. It means also the disfigurement of the “image of God,” which is essentially dialogical or relational in its ontological structure¹⁶ Since Adam and Eve lost their “space,” they had to hide themselves from the sight of God. The Lord God came in search of them and asked, “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). This question reminded of them of their estrangement from God and the rest of creation. Regaining the lost Paradise, the lost “space” demanded a “recreation” and “restoration” of the image of God.

The regaining of the lost Paradise is the divine project in the person of Jesus Christ, who through his incarnation inaugurates the reconstruction of the disrupted and disintegrated world, the “space” turned into “chaos.” He transfigures and resurrects humanity and thus the entire creation in his own body. He becomes the “space” in

¹⁵International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship*, Vatican, July 1994, #26; www.press.catholica.a/http://roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html

¹⁶*Communion and Stewardship*, # 45.

which the restored humanity and the entire creation live, move and grow to fulfilment until through him the whole universe will be judged at the appointed time (Cf. Acts 17:28-30). Jesus inaugurated his mission of restoring the "image of God" by proclaiming the Kingdom of God, teaching and healing diseases. "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Mt 4:23; Cf. Mk 1:14-15).

The Kingdom of God as the Vocation of the Church

In the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the revelation of the mystery of the Church. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* finds in it the very foundation of the Church.

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: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15; cf. Mt 4:17).¹⁷

The immediacy of the kingdom of God in the proclamation of Jesus emphasizes that it is not simply a vision, an abstract ideal or a fascinating dream. It is here and now, spatially and temporally present in the midst of the world. In the words and works of Jesus, in his presence with the authority and power of God this kingdom is open to the view of all. The various parables of the kingdom Jesus underscore the vital and dynamic nature of the kingdom as different from its worldly understanding.

It is like a seed which is sown in a field to die to itself and to grow bearing fruits (Mk 4:14). Those who hear the Word and become the part of the flock of Christ receive the kingdom itself. The miracles of Jesus are signs which confirm the arrival and the presence of the kingdom already on earth. "If I cast out devils by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk 11:20; cf. Mt 12:28). Above all, the kingdom of God is clearly visible in the very Person of Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, who came "to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). The Church in the world progresses towards its finality by doing the same mission of Christ and thus revealing him, though dimly and

¹⁷LG, # 5.

feebly in the given contexts of life, until the Lord is manifested in the fullness of his glory.

By the power of the risen Lord it is given strength that it might, in patience and in love, overcome its sorrows and its challenges, both within itself and from without, and that it might reveal to the world, faithfully though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light.¹⁸

The kingdom of God, like the image of God is essentially a vibrant reality. The concepts of both "the image" and "the kingdom" can be grasped only in the categories of action, movement, growth and relation. They have an "evolutionary" and "processional" nature which continually transcends all kinds of structural definitions or delimitations. Both signify the experience of an inner tension between what "they are" and what "they are destined to be." They entail two dispositions at once: "restlessness" at the awareness of the actual conditions and "assurance" at the vision of the future which moves them forward to ever greater realizations. The restoration of the image of God within the human person as well as the presence and growth of the kingdom of God in the world means, therefore, a "vocation" to be responded and followed. It consists in imitating "the ideal" and thereby transforming and transcending "the actual." This explains the origin and finality of creativity manifested in all meaningful human activities.

Creative Life and the Unfolding of the Image and Kingdom

The image of God and the kingdom of God are two biblical notions by which we can comprehend the polarities of existence and fulfilment which constitute the mystery of the human person and the mystery of the Church. The human-divine, the earthly-heavenly and the actual-eschatological tensions inherent in these two notions reflect the human condition of belonging to time and eternity at the same time. They explain also the supreme call and destiny of the Church as well as every human being in the world. Following the call and realizing the destiny consist in a process of transformation and transfiguration motivated by human industry and sustained by the inspiration of the creative Spirit.

The Council identifies the principle of creativity in properly human endeavours. Human labour carried out with dignity and freedom is

¹⁸LG, # 8.

“creative” in the proper sense of the term. *Gaudium et Spes* considers the meaning of human industry as collaboration in “unfolding the Creator’s work” in order to realize in history the divine plan.¹⁹ In this sense all works which are truly human are extensions of creative work of God. But if done with servile passivity, works will have a dehumanizing and alienating effect in the worker as well as in their products. Such works are not properly human either in their origin or in their finality. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, “Human activity, to be sure, takes its significance from its relationship to man. Just as it proceeds from man, it is ordered toward man. For when a man works, he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well.”²⁰

The scope of human work is, therefore, twofold: transformation of things and society and self-realization of the person who works. Development and progress attained through human work are valued for what a person has become rather than for what a person has amassed. Justice, brotherhood and values of human and social relationships can change life qualitatively rather than the productions of technical skills which do not concern human dignity and freedom and fail to effect a qualitative change within the person who employs the skills and enjoys their fruits.

The Church as an Experience of Communion

The Vatican Council, deviating from the earlier concept of the Church as a static, institutionalized organization, envisaged the Church as a living and growing reality with an inner creative core animating and guiding its progress towards fulfilment. The Council discovered various biblical images which could enlighten the mystery of the Church in terms of life and growth.²¹ There are different expressions in *Lumen Gentium* as attempts to capture this new sense of the Church succinctly. The Church is the Mystical body of Christ,²² the Sacrament of Salvation,²³ the People of God,²⁴ the bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit and the family of God. There have been further theological reflections to clarify the nature and the mission of the

¹⁹Cf. GS, # 34.

²⁰GS, # 34.

²¹Cf. LG, # 6.

²²Cf. LG # 7 & # 8.

²³Cf. LG # 9; Cf. also LG # 48; SC # 26; AG # 5; GS # 42.

²⁴Cf. LG # 9; Cf. also LG ##10-17.

Church in the spirit of the Vatican II. These efforts led to an ecclesiology of communion which made its impact in the extraordinary Synod of 1985.²⁵

The vision of the Church as communion focuses on the unity of its centre, while recognizing at the same time the diversity and “pluriformity” of its extension in the world. It is an effort to rectify the loss of the “centre,” the loss of the sense of mystery in today’s secularized world which is blinded by material progress and consumerism.²⁶ The mystery of Christ is at the centre of the Church animating and realizing the vision of communion.

All the essential elements of the Christian concept of ‘*communio*’ can be found in the famous passage from the First Letter of St. John (1:3); ... ‘That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship (*communio*) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.’ The point of departure of *communio* is clearly evident in this passage: the union with the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who comes to mankind through the proclamation of the Church. Fellowship (*communio*) among men is born here and merges into fellowship (*communio*) with the One and Triune God.²⁷

Communion with Christ and through him with the Father and the Spirit is the foundation of the wider human communion in the world, breaking all boundaries and structures. It is in this sense that the Church in Christ is “a sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind,”²⁸ the sign of reconciliation, of peace among men, nations, classes and peoples.

As St. John writes, the goal of communion is the “fullness of joy.” The Church carries in its bosom this eschatological dynamic which motivates it to pursue this goal patiently and consistently through trials and tribulations. During the short time of separation and pain the promise of the Lord always resounds in the heart of the Church: “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy... I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and nobody will take your joy

²⁵“The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod,” See www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/SYNFINAL.HTM.

²⁶See “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod,” in www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/SYNFINAL.HTM.

²⁷Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” in *L’Osservatore Romano* Weekly Edition in English, 23 January 2002, 5.

²⁸LG, # 9.

away from you... Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (Jn 16:20, 22, 24).

It is the faith in the Christ mystery and hope in the eschatological fullness of joy that makes the Church creative in its mission and proclamation of the Good News. In its creative life the inner experience of communion takes visible and tangible forms in concrete situations of life, making more and more "space" for God. The Church transforms and transfigures reality, enlightening it with its original meaning and demonstrating its relevance and thus unfolding in it God's plan for the world. It is the kingdom of God in which the entire universe is manifested in the stature and perfection of the Christ-Image.

The inner experience of communion obliges the Church to greater engagement in the world in solidarity with all the victims of unjust and inhuman conditions of life. The Church becomes creative when it fulfils a prophetic mission by critically confronting and denouncing the forces of evil which dehumanize life. It is through such critical and creative actions that the Church can become a sign of the eschatological fullness of communion and joy.

The Creative Space of Eucharistic Communion

The Church becomes a "creative space" of transformation and transfiguration, communion and joy in the celebration of the Eucharist. The publication of the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* in 2003 by Pope John Paul II has highlighted this vision of the ecclesiology of communion. The Church lives from the Eucharist. It is a truth that touches *the heart of the mystery of the Church*.²⁹ The Church can "make" the Eucharist, because the Church has been already "made" by the Eucharist. It means that the Church is the fruit of the self-gift of Jesus. At same time the Church has to go on "making" the Eucharist until the Lord comes in the fullness of his glory.

The celebration of the Eucharist is, on the one hand, rooted in the memory of the paschal events, the death and resurrection of Jesus and on the other hand, extended to heaven in hope and expectation. The Eucharist kindles in us an eschatological longing which expresses and reinforces our communion with the Church in heaven.

²⁹Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia (EE)*, Vatican:Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003, # 1.

The Eucharist is a straining towards the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ (cf. Jn 15:11); it is in some way the anticipation of heaven, the 'pledge of future glory' (Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, Second Vespers, Antiphon to the *Magnificat*). In the Eucharist, everything speaks of confident waiting 'in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ' (*Missale Romanum*, Embolism following the Lord's Prayer).³⁰

The longing for the future glory with joy and confidence kindles the creative imagination of the Church to celebrate the heavenly communion here on earth, making space for God even amidst the struggles and the most wretched conditions of life.

In arranging the large Upper Room carefully for the Passover meal (Cf. Mk 14:15; Lk 22:12) Jesus had in view an appropriate "space" for the most creative moment of his life. It was a space of remembrance, reliving the Passover events, the sacrifice of the lamb and sharing of the communitarian meal. In the sacrificial context of the Passover meal Jesus offered bread and wine as his own body and blood to his disciples and through them to the whole world. He spoke words over bread and wine by which he made concrete expressions of handing over his body and shedding his blood. It was the moment in which the elemental world in bread and wine was substantially transformed and transfigured into the sacramental image of the Son of God through the Eucharistic action. The Upper Room becomes a creative space as it is redefined in terms of new relationships. It is at this moment and in this space that the Church is born as communion. The growth of the Church, therefore, must be an expansion of this space with ever greater realization of the eschatological communion.

The lost space of Paradise is regained in the space of the Upper Room. The broken relationships in creation are mended. The world is saved from death and disintegration. The image of God disfigured due to the sin of Adam and Eve is restored in the person of Jesus Christ who reconciles the estranged humanity and the entire creation with God through an irrevocable new Covenant. The Eucharistic banquet in the Upper Room is a celebration of the fullness of joy, anticipating and, at the same time, actualizing the eschatological communion.

³⁰EE, # 18.

Conclusion

The Church without the spirit of creativity is a Church without space. For centuries the Church understood itself primarily an institutionalized organization. It identified itself with its expansion in geographical space and with stable organizational structures. The Vatican II realized the limitations of this view and tried to define the Church in terms of its life and growth potential. The Council employed various biblical images to explain the nature of the Church. All those images of the Church are expressive of a tension between an original experience and an eschatological fulfilment. Creativity is needed to comprehend the polarities of the actual and the potential, the visible and invisible and to reconcile them effectively in creative expressions signifying ever greater realizations. It essentially consists in discovering and expressing the underlying interrelatedness of experiences, things and events that constitute reality. The self-understanding of the Church as Eucharistic community offers greater possibilities of realization to the creative potential of the Church. The ultimate goal of all creative strivings is communion, celebration and joy.