



The “complex reality” (LG 8) of the Church in the light of the Incarnate Word: I. Precedent Debates and the Genesis of the Text

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Introduction

In number 8 of the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*,¹ the following description is found about the complex reality of the Church, in analogy with the mystery of the Incarnate Word:

Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation² through which He communicated truth and grace to all. But, the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with

¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 21 November 1964. All *Lumen gentium* quotations from <http://www.vatican.va>.

² Cf. LEON XIII, Encyclical *Sapientiae christianae*, 10 January 1890: ASS 22 (1889-90), p. 392; ID., Encyclical *Satis cognitum*, 29 June 1896: AAS 28 (1895-96), 710 and 724ff. PIUS XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, [note 7], 199-200.

heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element.³ For this reason, by no weak analogy, it 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 social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (cf. Eph. 4:16).⁴

The mystery of the Incarnate Word sheds light on the mystery of the Church, and a Christological theory provides the backdrop for the goal of this inquiry: from Reimarus to present a conviction has emerged among some theologians of distinguishing the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith. From this conviction a method has been adopted for studying the historical Jesus in one manner and the Christ of faith in another. This has, for example, been an obligatory point of departure for exponents of the so-called “theology of religious pluralism” such as J. Hick, R. Pannikar, and P. Knitter, as well as a premise in historical-critical exegesis for reconstructing the historical Jesus after the first disciples “constructed” Christ (the so-called “Jesus Quest”).

Two fundamental Christologies are also born from this distinction: one from below (the historical Jesus), the other from above (the Christ of faith). This split in reflection on the Incarnate Word has led to divergent contemporary Christologies not easily reconcilable, leading to a situation that obliged the CDF document *Dominus Iesus*⁵ to insist on the human-divine union of Jesus Christ (cf. nn.4-6, 16) and the importance of this union for the fulfillment of God’s saving plan through his Incarnate Son.

Lumen gentium number 8 concludes the constitution’s first chapter, entitled, “The Mystery of the Church” and compares the “complex reality” of the Church, a single reality consisting of divine and human elements, and the mystery of the Incarnate Word, in which “the assumed [human] nature [is] inseparably united.” Therefore, a distinction

³ Cf. PIUS XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 221ff; ID., Encyclical *Humani generis*, 12 August 1950: AAS 42 (1950),571.

⁴ Cf. LEONE XIII, *Satis cognitum*, 713.

⁵ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Dominus Iesus* on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, 6 August 2000.

between human and divine that goes beyond a formal distinction in reflection on the Incarnate Word would necessarily have repercussions in reflection on the Church he founded.

Diminishing a dimension of the Church or separating the visible Church from the invisible one usually leads to denying one or the other, and is unfortunately a sore point even today in ecumenical dialogue that seeks to restore a shared understanding of the nature of the Church after dividing that understanding into two camps: one of a spiritual-invisible Church “of hearts” and another of a hierarchical, social, organized Church, a *societas perfecta*. More recently the debate has split into a charismatic camp and an institutional camp. The text of *Lumen gentium* just quoted helps avoid dividing or diminishing the mystery of Christ and the Church in both visible and invisible aspects.

For Ratzinger, Christ himself is the origin and essential center of the Church. The unity of the Church’s visible and invisible reality in her corporate constitution, as well as her sacramental manner of existing.⁶ The one, unique, and indivisible Church for Ratzinger is at the same time a mystery of faith and sign of faith, mysterious life and the visible phenomenal form of this life. Therefore, ecclesiology and Christology are directly related.⁷

For the remainder of this inquiry this text from *Lumen gentium* 8 will be simply referred to as the “complex reality.” This “complex reality” will be the optic through which this inquiry wishes to shed light on the mystery of the Church in the light of the mystery of the Incarnate Word.

Visible versus Invisible

Before considering relevant Magisterium, it will be useful to present some doctrine and theology that concerns the opposition between the visible and the invisible in both the Church and the Incarnate Word.

⁶ Cf. M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology: Fundamentals of Ecclesiology*, Ignatius Press 2007, 236.

⁷ M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church...*, 236–237.

Visible Church, Invisible Community

At first Protestant authors spoke of opposing the visible Church and an invisible community or other reality. In the Middle Ages some already sought a more spiritual Church, but this trend of thought flourished in the period of the Reformation. Lutheran ecclesiology defined its identity by distancing itself on many points from ancient and medieval tradition, the two fundamental ones in the Lutheran conception of the Church being the *Catholic* intention of the Lutheran Reformation and its *confessional* character.⁸

The key to Church reform was to restore authentic preaching of the Gospel. When speaking of the Church, actually “community”/“Christian assembly” are the correct expressions, because “Church” risks falling into the error of speaking about the building and about worship.⁹ Therefore, here “Church” is seen purely externally and in terms of worship.

Regarding the historical recognition of the Church Luther spoke of the “hidden” Church:

“As an object of faith, the Church is not immediately recognizable by those who observe empirical reality, but participates in the invisibility proper to the eschatological action of God and in the hidden character of divine revelation, which finds its highest and most unsurpassed expression in the cross.” As an object of faith it is no longer measured by empirical criteria, only evaluated by Christ.¹⁰

This conceptualization shows the beginning of an understanding of Church that sets aside her visibility and her historical continuity with Christ. This could also possibly be the remote beginning that would underscore the Christ of faith and set aside the historical Jesus.

⁸ A. MAFFEIS, «Ecclesiologia luterana», in G. CALABRESE - P. GOYRET - O. F. PIAZZA (edd.), *Dizionario di ecclesiologia*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 2010, 522–528, 522.

⁹ Cf. A. MAFFEIS, «Ecclesiologia Luterana», 523.

¹⁰ A. MAFFEIS, «Ecclesiologia Luterana», 524. Translation mine: “«In quanto oggetto di fede la Chiesa non è infatti immediatamente riconoscibile per chi osservi la realtà empirica, ma partecipa dell’invisibilità propria dell’azione escatologica di Dio e del carattere nascosto della rivelazione divina, che nella croce trova la sua espressione più alta e insuperabile». Come oggetto di fede non si può misurare con criteri empirici, soltanto valutato da Cristo.”

Nevertheless, the Lutheran reformers rejected the assertion that they reduced the Church to a purely interior, spiritual, platonic reality opposed to an institutional, historical, visible reality:

...the Church which, in its very essence, is constituted by the action of the Spirit who, through the word, sanctifies those called to the faith, is hidden and, at the same time, has a visible order whose meaning is to ensure the conditions through which the proclamation of the word of God can elicit justifying faith.¹¹

Ratzinger observed¹² some Augustinian roots to the spiritualization of the Church by Luther. Augustine in polemics with the Donatists experienced a split in the Church of his native Africa that was unparalleled in the rest of the ancient Church. In every city, altar stood against altar, episcopacy against episcopacy; Donatists and Catholics were found everywhere in almost equal numbers. Conversions went back and forth from one Church to the other, often for very superficial reasons. As a result, the ecclesial community was thrown into confusion. Against this background we can understand why Augustine could not immediately see the true Church in those who came together for the eucharistic celebration—quite possibly by tomorrow they would belong to a different Church. For him, consequently, the true Church consisted of those who would ultimately be brought together by God’s final call—the number of the elect. One who was presently within the Church could be outside her when that call came, or vice versa. The immediate result of this combination of ecclesiology and speculation about predestination created a distinction between the concrete community that came together to celebrate the Eucharist and a purely spiritual concept of the Church that would one day reveal the external assembly as secondary. The true Church was composed of the elect. In contrast to this “being,”

¹¹ A. MAFFEIS, «Ecclesiologia Luterana», 524. Translation mine: “la Chiesa che, nella sua intima essenza, è costituita dall’azione dello Spirito il quale, attraverso la parola, santifica coloro che sono chiamati alla fede, è nascosta e, insieme, ha un ordinamento visibile il cui significato è di assicurare le condizioni perché possa avvenire la proclamazione della parola di Dio che suscita la fede giustificante”.

¹² Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, Ignatius, San Francisco 1987, 257-258.

the assembled community was only “appearance.” Augustine himself did not make this distinction absolutely. Appearance and being continued to be intertwined in his thought. Even if the always changing state of the assembly did not reflect the community that would exist at the end of time, the ecclesial *communio* was, nevertheless, an indispensable prelude to the community that was to come. Final membership in the Church that celebrates the Eucharist is the sign of election.

Luther, according to Ratzinger, looked to the Greek Church, which had remained a true church without being submissive to the pope, and he, too, concluded that what was important was not the concrete, structured *communio* but the community behind the institutional one. In this way a problematic position arose that could in fact not be resolved by appealing to the *communio*-structure of the early Church, since the discrediting of *communio* by the politicizing of excommunication had led, at the same time, to the dissolution of the identification of Church and *communio* and thus to the destruction of the primitive model. The concrete Church thereby became just an institution and, as such, more or less a *quantité négligeable* from a spiritual point of view.¹³

The Reformers of Calvin did not deny a certain order and visibility to the Church. Nevertheless, they conceptualized it in a reductive and simplified way. They insisted, in accord with the doctrine of predestination, that those who truly belonged to the Church (the elect, destined for salvation) were only known by God, therefore, they could not be the same as the visible Church. The similarities with the Augustinian theology shown by Ratzinger are evident, although the ulterior doctrinal development is undeniable.

The *Scots' Confession* of 1560 declared “This kirk [Church] is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen...”¹⁴ The true Church on the earth would always be smaller than the visible community. Church order was established by divine authority; therefore it is sacred and inviolable. For this reason, pastors with the task of teaching were needed.¹⁵

¹³ Cf. J. RATZINGER, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 259.

¹⁴ Article 16. Cf. W. HENN, «Ecclesiologia riformata», in G. CALABRESE - P. GOYRET - O. F. PIAZZA (edd.), *Dizionario di ecclesiologia*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 2010, 579–586, 582–583. Text downloaded from <http://www.crivoice.org/creedscots.html> [19 December 2019].

¹⁵ Cf. W. HENN, «Ecclesiologia riformata», 582.

For the Anglicans the Church is, by divine intention, a single visible body for the whole world, but, in the case of errors arising, it can legitimately be reformed, even if this implies fracturing unity, as was the case when the Church of England separated from the Church of Rome in 1533.¹⁶ In opposition to the doctrinal development of the Calvinists (the Church as an invisible community), Anglicanism, through thinkers like Richard Hooker (1554-1600), favored the Church as a visible congregation. The visible nature of the Church implied the visibility of the acts that characterized her existence as a social institution. Hooker demonstrated that the sacraments were not subordinate to the faith; they were visible articulations of the faith and vital instruments of the continuous activity and presence of the Holy Spirit, an integrating part of the Church’s visible nature.¹⁷

In the nineteenth century the Oxford Movement, a Catholic reawakening within the heart of Anglicanism, highlighted the sacramental nature of the Church. At the same time liberal Anglicanism reacted against this sacramental emphasis with a rational form of religion based on faith without the need of any exterior or corporeal action to achieve interior spiritual effects. For them interior religion was of primary importance.¹⁸

In the nineteenth century evangelical Anglicanism also insisted that the sacraments and other exterior aspects or pious practice were expressions of those gifts of God that were directly conferred to believers through the Holy Spirit, without intermediaries.¹⁹ Consequently, both liberal and evangelical Anglicans are characterized by religious practices colored by individualism, a Christian community lacking a developed social configuration.

The “Jesus Quest”

In her study on the relationship between Jesus, Christ, and the Christian faith Jacobs observed that New Testament scholars did not

¹⁶ Cf. W. FRANKLIN, «Ecclesiologia anglicana», in G. CALABRESE - P. GOYRET - O. F. PIAZZA (edd.), *Dizionario di ecclesiologia*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 2010, 472–479, 473.

¹⁷ Cf. W. FRANKLIN, «Ecclesiologia Anglicana», 473–474.

¹⁸ Cf. W. FRANKLIN, «Ecclesiologia Anglicana», 474–475.

¹⁹ Cf. W. FRANKLIN, «Ecclesiologia Anglicana», 475.

worry about the theological implications of their work, because it did not concern them and, for some, would be off limits in historical research. Nevertheless, in the case of research into the historical Jesus:

it becomes necessary to give the “story” some kind of ending, if only a provisional one. One of the things which can without any doubt be said about Jesus is that for most people who remembered him he lived on as more than an historical figure. The marginal Jew (Meier) or Mediterranean Jewish peasant (Crossan) lived on as Jesus Christ.²⁰

These scholars, according to Jacobs, cannot ignore that today Jesus is more than a historical figure. This research is research about us and about God.²¹ Research regarding the historical Jesus, distinct from the Christ of faith, is undertaken by New Testament scholars with the goal of reconstructing the historical Jesus. They’ve strived to remain on the historical level, but little by little have realized they cannot ignore, beyond the history in question, the faith that is professed about Christ. This progressive realization influenced the framing and goal of the research through diverse stages of the “Jesus Quest”:²²

1. “Old Quest.” In the nineteenth century scholars noted a discrepancy between Jesus and Christ. The first Christians and New Testament authors transformed Jesus into something he never was. To reach the “true Jesus” it was necessary to return to the historical Jesus. In this stage there was no relationship between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith: it was necessary to choose one, and the scholars in this period chose reconstructing a historical Jesus relevant to them.
2. “No Quest.” Kähler opted for the Christ of faith and rejected the historical relevance of the Gospels: basing the nature of the faith on history would be a violation. This current of thought influenced authors such as Barth and Bultmann.

²⁰ M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith in current historical Jesus scholarship», *Neotestamentica* 30/1 (1996), 18, 103.

²¹ M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 104.

²² Cf. M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 105–107.

3. “New Quest.” Inaugurated by a lecture imparted by Käsemann in 1964 (“The Problem of the Historical Jesus”) against Kähler’s thesis, he emphasized the close rapport between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith: “the significance of this Jesus for faith was so profound, that even in the very earliest days it almost entirely swallowed up his earthly history.”²³ The Gospels attribute the *kerygma* to the historical Jesus, but founding the Christian message on Paschal faith does not impede the historical life of Jesus’ relevance for the faith in the minds of the evangelists. For them the earthly and the exalted Lord are one and the same.
4. “Third Quest” or “Renewed Quest.” It’s debated whether there was a pause between the “New Quest” and the “Third Quest” or just an intensification. It represents a new methodological stage. Authors diverge so much on the goal of the research (or revert to previous goals) that a common goal is difficult to determine. In the Eighties publications on the historical Jesus multiplied. The “Jesus seminar” was held in 1985. In the context of the “Jesus seminar” Funk described research as seeking the true voice of Jesus. The seminar wanted to publicly undertake research and take it beyond academia. E.P. Sanders in his *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) wanted to discover Jesus’ intentions and his relationship with his Jewish contemporaries. An article on the historical Jesus in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* by J. Meier was later elaborated into a series of volumes on *Jesus, A Marginal Jew* which, to date, is published in five volumes with more to come.

Jacobs also presented some authors who did give an “ending” to the Jesus story:

1. M. Borg preferred a distinction between the pre-Paschal Jesus and the post-Paschal Jesus instead of between Jesus and the Christ of faith. The historical figure of Jesus underwent a process starting with the Resurrection from historical figure to

²³ Quoted by M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 106.

divine reality united with God. After the Resurrection his followers experienced him in a radically new way: as a spiritual reality instead of one of flesh and bones. This experience continues today. Borg remains at the level of historical experience of Jesus, leaving the role of supernatural revelation in doubt.²⁴

2. J.D. Crossan sees Jesus as a peasant that preached a radical egalitarianism and, therefore, a kingdom accessible to everyone. His egalitarian program was especially expressed in his healings and open commensality. Crossan is a historian, but also sees the historical study of Jesus and primitive Christianity as something theological and religious. The conclusions of his works present the religious and theological implications of his historical research. He considers himself a historical theologian and a theological historian.²⁵ In earthly life there were already people who believed in Jesus, who called him divine and wanted to worship him. For Crossan, the Christian faith is an act of faith in the historical Jesus as a manifestation of God. The Resurrection concerned not so much the origin of the Christian faith as the origin of Christian authority, which then diversified into different faiths and different Christianities (including, according to Crossan, a Christianity based on Gnosticism, the apocryphal gospel of Thomas, etc.). A vision of the Resurrection was only important for Paul's Christianity. From the beginning there was a dynamic relationship between the historical Jesus and theologically interpreted Christs.²⁶
3. L.T. Johnson reacted against the basic thesis of "Jesus Seminar" and the current of thought considered until now. He carries out the subject within the framework of church, canon, and confession. According to him, New Testament studies since the time of the Reformation and the nineteenth century disintegrated that framework. For Johnson, it is almost impossible to build a historical image of Jesus from the New Testament. He used Plato's writings on Socrates as an example of the difficulty: one cannot

²⁴ Cf. M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 109–110.

²⁵ Cf. M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 111–112.

²⁶ Cf. M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 112–113.

reach the real-historical person of Socrates, only the Socrates interpreted by Plato. The Christian faith has never been based on a historical reconstruction of Jesus, even though there have been several historical assertions about Jesus. Christianity is not based on the ministry of Jesus, but on his Resurrection. The Christian faith experiences the real Jesus within the Gospel, without recourse to the historical Jesus, especially through two aspects: the powerful and risen Lord whose transforming spirit is active in the community; and as the one who suffers in obedience and service—the suffering Messiah or Son of Man.²⁷

Jacobs notes that while Crossan emphasizes the story too much, Johnson more or less ignores it, a difficult position to sustain. Is the Christian faith a-historic, or is it the answer to a historical person who acted and spoke in a concrete way?

It is noteworthy that there are also New Testament scholars, who regard historical study of the New Testament as of crucial importance and who devote their whole lives to such study, who have reservations about historical Jesus research and its relevance for Christian faith.²⁸

The first Christian communities were founded without recourse to the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Meier notes that over many centuries people have believed in Jesus Christ without any knowledge of the historical Jesus. The object of Christian faith is not the reconstruction of scholars, but a living person who is forever in the presence of the Father. Jacobs notes that Johnson and Meier maintain a separation between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, but this does not lack problems:²⁹

on the one hand “the risen Christ” as object of faith is used by Johnson and Meier as if its content is self-evident and totally

²⁷ Cf. M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 114–115.

²⁸ M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 116.

²⁹ Cf. M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 116–117.

independent on the Jesus of history. On the other hand, Meier says that the risen Jesus is the same person who lived and died as a Jew in Palestine. If the risen Jesus is the same as the one who lived as a Jew in Palestine, how can research into his life make no real difference to the object of faith, the risen Christ?³⁰

Scholars continue either to make historical reconstructions of Jesus or to rely on the Christ of faith. Some clearly separate them, others emphasize one and then relate it to the other. Ratzinger sees the roots of the current crisis in the Church is a Christological crisis, of which one of the root causes is the construction of a “so-called historical Jesus,” alongside a reinterpretation of redemption as liberation, where Jesus appears only as a historical leading figure and not a mediator of grace.³¹ The third cause is the deism of the Enlightenment that sees God as having nothing to do with us, making a God who cares for us inconceivable for many people and the Church a man-made organization that strives to be people-friendly. Sacraments become more oriented toward building and maintaining community, and worship is focused on “we” who are celebrating more than God or Christ, as well as fellowship. Moral theology would also flatten out into an ethics without any reference to God.³²

This crisis, according to Ratzinger, is an ecclesiological encrypted crisis of God, Jesus as the Christ of the Gospels is a truth that can only be grasped through a theological act of faith. Faith is faith in God or else there is no faith. The refusal to make this act of faith precipitates a serious identity crisis of the Church in which the slogan “Yes to Jesus, No to the Church” has changed to “Religion: Yes; God: No.” To overcome this crisis of God the Church must be understood as not there for her own sake, but as the instrument God uses to gather men to him, preparing for when God shall be “everything to everyone” (1 Cor 15:28). A Church that is there for her own sake is superfluous, and people notice it straightaway:

³⁰ M. M. JACOBS, «The relation between Jesus, Christ and Christian faith...», 117.

³¹ Cf. M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church...*, 262–263.

³² Cf. M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church...*, 264–265.

...without a view of the mystery of the Church that is also *supernatural* and not only *sociological*, Christology itself loses its reference to the divine ... The Gospel becomes the *Jesus-project*, the social-liberation project or other merely historical, immanent projects that can still seem religious in appearance, but which are atheistic in substance.³³

Ratzinger also observes the shortcomings regarding dwelling on a past historical reconstruction of the Church without taking into account the Church’s historical dynamism:

a body maintains its identity by the fact that it constantly becomes new in the process of living. For Cardinal Newman, the idea of development was the real bridge to his conversion to the Catholic faith. ... Anyone who wants to cling exclusively to the wording of Scripture or to the formulas and structures of the patristic Church banishes Christ to yesterday. The result is, then, either a completely sterile faith that has nothing to say to today or else an arbitrariness that skips over two thousand years of history, tosses it onto the scrap heap of failed enterprises, and now decides to figure out what Christianity should really look like according to the Scriptures or according to Jesus. But that can only amount to an artificial product of our own making that has no inherent stability. There is real identity with the origin only when there is at the same time a living continuity that unfolds it and thereby preserves it.³⁴

The Genesis of the “complex reality” Text

Having presented the context of understanding visible and invisible in Christ and in the Church, and between the Church and the Incarnate Word, the genesis of the text regarding the “complex reality” of the Church can now be considered.

³³ Quoted by M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church...*, 266–267.

³⁴ J. RATZINGER, *Church, ecumenism, and politics: new endeavors in ecclesiology*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2008, 16–17. Cf. M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church...*, 252.

Magisterial Precedents

The text itself refers to two previous magisterial documents, and a definition of faith from the Council of Chalcedon on the mystery of the Incarnate Word is also relevant.

Council of Chalcedon, 451

The premise of considering the complex reality of the Church in the light of the mystery of the Incarnate Word authorizes the use of the following doctrine taken from the Council of Chalcedon (451). Spataro in his article on “*historia ecclesiastica* for a theology of history” observed:

Historia ecclesiastica, as set out in Christian antiquity, precisely because it is linked to Christology and placed in the wider vision of a theology of history, offers a framework of broad horizons and, ultimately, faithful to the self-understanding of the Church herself and her experience, whose dimensions “form a single complex reality resulting from a human element and a divine element,” (LG 8), are, according to the Chalcedonian model applicable, therefore, also to the Church and her historical events.³⁵

Therefore, the first Magisterium to consider is Christological: the definition of faith regarding the hypostatic union.

...one and the same Christ only begotten Son, our Lord, acknowledged in two natures, without mingling, without change, indivisibly, undividedly, the distinction of the natures nowhere removed on account of the union but rather the peculiarity of each nature being

³⁵ R. SPATARO, «Scienze patristiche e «*Historia ecclesiastica*» per una teologia della storia», *PATH. Pontificia Academia Theologica* 11 (2012), 225–233, 233. Translation mine: “L’*historia ecclesiastica*, così come impostata nell’antichità cristiana, proprio perché connessa alla cristologia e collocata nella più ampia visione di teologia della storia, offre un framework di larghi orizzonti e, in definitiva, fedele all’autocomprensione della Chiesa stessa e del suo vissuto, le cui dimensioni «formano una sola complessa realtà risultante di un elemento umano e di un elemento divino» (LG 8), secondo il modello calcedoniano applicabile, dunque, anche alla Chiesa e alle sue vicende storiche.”

kept, and uniting in one person and substance, not divided or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son only begotten God Word, Lord Jesus Christ...³⁶

Confusing human and divine nature in Christ has repercussions in a Church that is understood as his Body. Various magisterial documents start with the rapport between the human and divine natures of Christ to shed light on the rapport between the human and divine dimensions of the Church. This inquiry will highlight some Christological errors that have been transposed into ecclesiology, noted by prelates as well as theologians.

Satis cognitum

Pope Leo XII’s letter *Satis cognitum*,³⁷ on the unity of the Church, teaches that the Lord willed to continue the divine mission through his disciples, making them participate in his power and, invoking the Holy Spirit upon them, sending them throughout the world to preach to all peoples so that they could attain holiness on earth and eternal happiness in Heaven. This is why the Church is spiritual: her purpose and, along with that holiness and happiness “the proximate efficient causes of salvation.” But the Church is also visible and external in her members and the means that lead to attaining spiritual gifts:

The Apostles received a mission to teach by visible and audible signs, and they discharged their mission only by words and acts which certainly appealed to the senses. So that their voices falling upon the ears of those who heard them begot faith in souls [...] In the same way in man, nothing is more internal than heavenly grace which begets sanctity, but the ordinary and chief means of obtaining grace are external: that is to say, the sacraments which are

³⁶ COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON, “Definition of the Two Natures of Christ” in H. DENZINGER – K. RAHNER (edd.), *The sources of Catholic dogma*, B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, MO 1954, 61. DS 302.

³⁷ LEO XIII, Encyclical *Satis cognitum*, 29 June 1896.

administered by men specially chosen for that purpose, by means of certain ordinances.³⁸

The rights and obligations of Christianity could not have begun or survived without “words and acts which certainly appealed to the senses.” This is why Sacred Scripture calls the Church body and body of Christ. Body as visible, of Christ as “living and energizing, because by the infusion of His power Christ guards and sustains it, just as the vine gives nourishment and renders fruitful the branches united to it.”³⁹ Leo XIII presents the analogy between the hidden vital principle of animals and “the principle of supernatural life in the Church ... clearly shown in that which is done by it.”⁴⁰

Leo XIII rejects conceiving an almost hidden, invisible Church, as well as conceiving the Church as a human institution with no perennial communication of divine gifts and things that show her life is from God. He compares this split to a separation between body and soul as well as comparing it to Christological errors concerning the union between the human and divine nature of Christ:

The Church is not something dead: it is the body of Christ endowed with supernatural life. As Christ, the Head and Exemplar, is not wholly in His visible human nature, which Photinians and Nestorians assert, nor wholly in the invisible divine nature, as the Monophysites hold, but is one, from and in both natures, visible and invisible; so the mystical body of Christ is the true Church, only because its visible parts draw life and power from the supernatural gifts and other things whence spring their very nature and essence.⁴¹

He highlights three erroneous Christological positions (all rejected by the Council of Chalcedon):

³⁸ LEO XIII, *Satis cognitum*, 3. All quotations and enumeration taken from C. CARLEN (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals: 1878–1903*, Pierian Press, Ypsilanti, MI 1990, 387ff.

³⁹ LEO XIII, *Satis cognitum*, 3.

⁴⁰ LEO XIII, *Satis cognitum*, 3.

⁴¹ LEO XIII, *Satis cognitum*, 3.

1. The Photinians combined the errors of Theodotus and Sabellius, a Dynamist Monarchianism (also described as Adoptionist) that attributed divinity to Jesus after his normal birth through a divine adoption.⁴²
2. The Nestorians denied a hypostatic union in the Incarnate Word, separating the two natures of the Word into two persons.
3. Lastly, the Monophysites affirmed a single nature in Christ after the Incarnation, more divine than human.

In Leo XIII’s teaching the nature of the Church is elucidated based on Christological doctrine, comparing the invisible-visible dimensions of the Church with the divine-human natures of Christ. He concludes by affirming that the Church perpetually endures due to her purpose, which cannot be circumscribed by the confines of time and place.

Mystici Corporis

At the beginning of his encyclical, *Mystici Corporis*, Pius XII expresses the desire, through presenting doctrine on the Mystical Body, to refute three errors:

For while there still survives a false *rationalism*, which ridicules anything that transcends and defies the power of human genius, and which is accompanied by a cognate error, the so-called *popular naturalism*, which sees and wills to see in the Church nothing but a juridical and social union, there is on the other hand a false *mysticism* creeping in, which, in its attempt to eliminate the immovable frontier that separates creatures from their Creator, falsifies the Sacred Scriptures.⁴³

⁴² Cf. J. CHAPMAN, “Photinus.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911 downloaded from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12043a.htm> [14 Nov. 2019]. ID., “Monarchians.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911 downloaded from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10448a.htm> [14 Nov. 2019].

⁴³ PIUS XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, 29 June 1943, 9. All quotations and enumeration taken from C. CARLEN (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals: 1939–1958*, The Pierian Press, Ypsilanti, MI 1990, 39.

These are three implicit denials of the Church's nature:

1. Rationalism does not see beyond the empirical dimension of the Church, also leaving out the role of Revelation. As a method it reduces the Church to something natural-human.
2. Naturalism denies the spiritual-divine dimension and considers the Church to be like any other human society.
3. A false mysticism opposes those tendencies, but with the error of not distinguishing well between the human and divine of the Church. Pius XII observes, "They make the Divine Redeemer and the members of the Church coalesce in one physical person, and while they bestow divine attributes on man, they make Christ our Lord subject to error and to human inclination to evil."⁴⁴

There is a parallel here between the Christological error of monophysism pointed out by Leo XIII in *Satis cognitum*, under the aspect of a "confusion" between the human and divine natures that must be avoided according to the Council of Chalcedon. *Mystici Corporis* provides an implicit analogy that evidently inspired the text of *Lumen gentium* 8:

As He hung upon the Cross, Christ Jesus not only appeased the justice of the Eternal Father which had been violated, but He also won for us, His brethren, an ineffable flow of graces. It was possible for Him of Himself to impart these graces to mankind directly; but He willed to do so only through a visible Church made up of men, so that through her all might cooperate with Him in dispensing the graces of Redemption. As the Word of God willed to make use of our nature, when in excruciating agony He would redeem mankind, so in the same way throughout the centuries He makes use of the Church that the work begun might endure.⁴⁵

The analogy revolves around the assumption of human nature and the Lord's choice of using a visible Church to communicate the fruits of redemption. For Pius XII the emphasis is the visibility of this

⁴⁴ Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 86.

⁴⁵ Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 12.

Church-body because affirming an imperceptible unity (a thought taken from *Satis cognitum*) would be insufficient; it should be visible and tangible because it is a body. He condemns the teaching of an invisible, “pneumatic,” reality from which diverse Christian communities could co-exist, united by an invisible bond, but with diverse professions of faith, perhaps based on a distinction between the Spirit’s action and Christ’s. Consequently, the unity and uniqueness of the Church must be visible; the Church is one, indivisible, and visible, and those characteristics are related to her corporeality.

Pius XII also clarifies why it is a “mystical” body. A moral body is united by working together toward a common goal. A mystical body is not only united by working toward a supernatural goal, but also by another principle of the supernatural order: the Spirit of God. Therefore, the Church as Mystical Body goes beyond other human societies:

It is far superior to all other human societies; it surpasses them as grace surpasses nature, as things immortal are above all those that perish. Such human societies, and in the first place civil Society, are by no means to be despised or belittled, but the Church in its entirety is not found within this natural order, any more than the whole of man is encompassed within the organism of our mortal body. [...] that which lifts the Society of Christians far above the whole natural order is the Spirit of our Redeemer who penetrates and fills every part of the Church’s being and is active within it until the end of time as the source of every grace and every gift and every miraculous power. Just as our composite mortal body, although it is a marvelous work of the Creator, falls far short of the eminent dignity of our soul, so the social structure of the Christian community, though it proclaims the wisdom of its divine Architect, still remains something inferior when compared to the spiritual gifts which give it beauty and life, and to the divine source whence they flow.⁴⁶

This articulation of the rapport between the Spirit of Christ and the Church will be taken up again more concisely by LG 8. Like Leo XIII, Pius XII compares invisibility-visibility to the soul-body rapport. He

⁴⁶ PIUS XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 63.

condemns the error of distinguishing between the juridical Church and the church of Charity:

We deplore and condemn the pernicious error of those who dream of an imaginary Church, a kind of society that finds its origin and growth in charity, to which, somewhat contemptuously, they oppose another, which they call juridical. But this distinction which they introduce is false: for they fail to understand that the reason which led our Divine Redeemer to give to the community of man He founded the constitution of a Society, perfect of its kind and containing all the juridical and social elements—namely, that He might perpetuate on earth the saving work of Redemption—was also the reason why He willed it to be enriched with the heavenly gifts of the Paraclete.⁴⁷

Therefore, the teaching of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ paves the way for understanding the mystery of the Church in the light of the mystery of Christ.

The Church as Sacrament

As a theological precedent, the pioneers of a renewed sacramental perspective that favored the presentation of the “complex reality” found in the first chapter of *Lumen gentium* were, in the nineteenth century, Johann Adam Möhler, who explained the unity between the spiritual and visible in the Church with the concept of *incarnatio continua*: “just as the divine and the human elements can be distinguished in Christ, although the two are united, so it is also in the Church as an undivided totality.”⁴⁸ After him, Matthias Joseph Scheeben, inspired by Möhler, called the Church a “grand sacrament.”⁴⁹

Karl Rahner, from 1930 on, and Otto Semmelroth, from 1953 on, repeatedly referred to the Church as a sacrament. It became popular in German Catholic theology, but to distinguish it from the seven

⁴⁷ PIUS XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 65.

⁴⁸ Quoted by M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church...*, 56. Cf. note 76.

⁴⁹ Quoted by M. HEIM, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church...*, 56. Cf. note 77.

sacraments authors used terms such as *Ursakrament*, *Grundsakrament*, *Gesamtsakrament* e *Wurzelsakrament*, and, through their influence, it appeared in *Lumen gentium*. Nevertheless, Vatican II clarified that it was “like” a sacrament “in Christ”:

The text [LG 1] also states that the Church is a sacrament “*in Christo*”. Christ himself is the great sacrament of our redemption. The Church participates in his life and mission, just as, in spreading light, she disseminates the light that is Christ. Unlike de Lubac, the Council does not say that the Church is the sacrament of Christ, but, reserving the preposition “of” to designate the effect signified, it uses “in” to refer to Christ as exemplary cause, thus echoing the Christological mysticism of the Apostle Paul.⁵⁰

For an adequate understanding of LG 8 it’s important to see its chapter as the framework for its argumentation. Early drafts of *De Ecclesia* described the Church along the lines of Pius XII and *Mystici Corporis*, a rather juridical interpretation of the Pauline image of the Body of Christ, but the final version, Dulles observes, in describing the Church in being in Christ a kind of sacrament is indispensable for understanding *Lumen gentium* as a whole.⁵¹ The interpretative key and the framing of the entire constitution, Dulles demonstrates, is a sacramental ecclesiology.

Starting with LG 1 this sacramental framing is seen in the analogy between the Church and the sacraments: “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.” This sacramentality exists “in Christ” and cannot exist without him. Consequently, LG 8 is a logical conclusion to the sacramental framing presented from the beginning of the chapter.

Dulles notes a potential ecclesial monophysism that could flow from the Body of Christ image, but the council balanced that image with the image of People of God, which, in turn, could be prevented

⁵⁰ A. R. DULLES, «The sacramental ecclesiology of “Lumen gentium”», *Gregorianum* 86/3 (2005), 550–562, 552.

⁵¹ Cf. A. R. DULLES, «The sacramental ecclesiology of “Lumen gentium”», 551.

from falling into the political and liberation theologies that used it to promote democratization or class conflict in the Church by interpreting it in the light of the concept of sacrament: “the People of God, like the Body of Christ, is, in Christ, the universal sacrament of salvation.”⁵²

Dulles observes that institutional and organic models of Church led to the conclusion that Christians separated from Rome were outside the body of Christ, with no middle ground. Pius XII’s *Mystici Corporis* taught that to be truly a member requires baptism, full faith, and to not have withdrawn from the body or been excommunicated from it. This put non-Catholic Christians on the same level as those who had not been baptized at all: with either an implicit or explicit desire to be united to the Church, but not true members. Sacramental ecclesiology paved the way to see that the Church as sacrament consisted of visible and invisible elements, making it possible for non-Catholic Christians to be in Christ’s Church to some degree. LG 15 taught that non-Catholic churches and ecclesial community are truly joined to Christ (*Christo conjunguntur*) by elements such as baptism, other sacraments, biblical faith, etc. Sacramental ecclesiology allowed for a measure of ecclesial reality outside the visible borders of the Church. UR 3, based on this, would affirm that through Baptism a non-Catholic Christian enters into imperfect communion with the Catholic Church.⁵³

Vatican II asserted that the Church as sacrament exists fully in the Catholic Church and nowhere else. But the sacrament is imperfectly realized in other Christian communions, in different degrees and modalities. Their members are in partial or imperfect communion with the Church of Christ.⁵⁴

Due to this theological precedent sacramental theology is also a useful tool for understanding the rapport between the divine and the

⁵² A. R. DULLES, «The sacramental ecclesiology of “Lumen gentium”», 554.

⁵³ Cf. A. R. DULLES, «The sacramental ecclesiology of “Lumen gentium”», 555–556.

⁵⁴ A. R. DULLES, «The sacramental ecclesiology of “Lumen gentium”», 557. Cf. N. DERPICH, «“Haec Ecclesia... subsistit in Ecclesia catholica” (LG 8): the subsistence of the Church of Christ as a starting point toward Catholic unity», *Alpha Omega* 21/2, 181–215.

human in Christ and in the Church, as well as an interpretative key for *Lumen gentium*.

To be continued...

Summary: Since Reimarus certain Christologies have made formal and methodological distinctions between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, premises that became points of departure for the “Jesus Quest” and theologies of religious pluralism that required Magisterial interventions such as *Dominus Iesus*. Number 8 of the Vatican II dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, presents an analogy between the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the Incarnate Word, describing the Church as, like Christ, a “complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element.” Christological approaches that divide the Incarnate Word into the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith will necessarily lead to repercussions in ecclesiology. The goal of this inquiry is to see how the mystery of the Incarnate Word sheds light on the mystery of the Church, in the light of *Lumen Gentium* 8.

Key Words: Jesus, Christ, Quest, Ecclesiology, Christology, *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II, Complex Reality, Church, Unity

Sommario: Da Reimarus in poi, alcune cristologie hanno fatto delle distinzioni formali e metodologiche tra il Gesù storico e il Cristo della fede, premesse che sono diventate punti di partenza per la “*Jesus Quest*” e teologie del pluralismo religioso che hanno richiesto degli interventi magisteriali come la *Dominus Iesus*. Il numero 8 della costituzione dogmatica sulla Chiesa del Vaticano II, *Lumen gentium*, presenta un’analogia tra il mistero della Chiesa e il mistero del Verbo incarnato, descrivendo la Chiesa come, come Cristo, “una sola complessa realtà risultante di un duplice elemento, umano e divino”. Gli approcci cristologici che dividono il Verbo incarnato nel Gesù storico e nel Cristo della fede porteranno necessariamente a ripercussioni nell’ecclesiologia. L’obiettivo di questa indagine è di vedere come il mistero del Verbo Incarnato illumina il mistero della Chiesa, alla luce della *Lumen gentium* 8.

Parole chiave: Gesù, Cristo, ricerca, ecclesiologia, cristologia, *Lumen gentium*, Vaticano II, realtà complessa, Chiesa, unità.