

The Church as Sacrament Revisited: Sign and Source of Encounter with Christ

Brian Gleeson CP¹

Abstract: People today make contact with the risen, glorified Christ, in and through the community of the Church, as it exists now in time and space as the Spirit-filled Body of Christ. Christ instituted (and continues to institute) the Church by sharing with the community of his followers, his own life-giving vision of the coming of the kingdom of God, and his own life-giving Spirit. As *Lumen Gentium* testifies, Christ (in the Spirit) works through the visible community of the Church in a similar, though not in the same way, as the Word (Logos) acted through the human nature of Christ on earth. It is, nevertheless, a community of human beings, made up of saints and sinners, and therefore both holy and sinful, and so always in need of reform and renewal. The reality of the Church as pilgrim People of God serves to balance the other models.

Key Words: ecclesial models; church as sacrament; body of Christ; Christ's institution; pilgrim people of God; church and Trinity; *Lumen Gentium*

Towards the end of World War II, a squad of American soldiers came into a little town which had been bitterly fought over. In the village square they found a statue of Christ lying battered and broken. Some Catholic men of the group put it together as best they could and set it back on the pedestal. But they could not find the hands. Finally, one of them made a crudely lettered sign: 'I have no hands but yours.'²

Q.1. Briefly, what does it mean to call Jesus Christ the 'primordial' or 'original' sacrament of God?

Jesus Christ is called the sacrament (sign and source) of encounter with God; He is termed the *primordial* or *original* sacrament of the encounter with God. This is to say that in God's communication with human beings, what comes first is Christ himself. He is the incarnate Son of God, the human face of God, the humanity of God, God's own body-language, God's liberating and healing love made visible.³

In his bodily way of existing today as risen, glorified Lord, as sign of God and the Spirit of God, Jesus Christ continues to be the sacrament of human encounter with God. The mutual encounter of human beings and God, as it did from the beginning of the incarnation, takes place through the bodiliness (humanity) of Christ.

¹ A Doctor of Theology, Brian Gleeson is a Passionist priest, who lectures on Church and Sacraments at the Yarra Theological Union, Box Hill, Victoria. This presentation complements his 'Jesus Christ as Sacrament: A Living, Continuing and Abiding Truth,' *Australasian Catholic Record* 70.4 (1993): 455-464.

² B.E. Meyer, *Lend Me Your Hands* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1955), 1.

³ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 237, remarks: 'The incarnate Word is the absolute symbol of God in the world, filled as nothing else can be with what is symbolized.'

Q.2. Where do people today make contact with the risen, glorified Christ, and, through Christ, with God?

But where do people make contact with this risen, glorified Christ and through him with God and God's saving grace? They do so in and through the community of the Church, as it exists now in time and space. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Liturgy of Vatican II, stresses that "Christ is always present in his Church" (a.7). Just as the Word of God came to concrete existence in the person and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, so the Risen Lord exists in history today in the Spirit-filled members of his Body and in their actions. Here on earth the community of his followers, the Church, is his bodily way of existing as risen, glorified Lord. Accordingly, the Letter to the Ephesians in 1:23 calls 'the Church which is his Body' Christ's 'fullness' (*pleroma*).

This is to say that, Christians exist in community as 'the sacrament' of the risen Christ. As communities, they signify the presence of the risen Christ and of his Spirit of saving love. This means too that actions of Christian communities are sacramental, although it is only liturgies of the Church which are explicitly called *sacraments*.

Q.3. Name some difficulties in communicating an understanding of the Church as a sacrament.

In his *Models of the Church*, however, Avery Dulles remarks that the understanding of the Church as sacrament is technical and sophisticated and cannot easily be popularised.⁴ In his later work, *A Church to Believe In*, he identifies other difficulties in communicating an understanding of the Church as a sacrament:

The term 'sacrament' suggests either an impersonal reality, such as baptismal water, or a ritual action, such as anointing. It is hard to think of a social body as a sacrament. Further, the image suggests a conspicuousness which the Church as a whole does not possess, since most Catholics and Christians do not go about in uniform. And finally, there is some ambiguity about what the Church as sacrament or sign represents. Is the Church, as we commonly experience it, a convincing sign of the unity, love, and peace, for which we hope in the final kingdom? The Church in its pilgrim state is still far from adequately representing the heavenly Jerusalem, even in a provisional manner.⁵

Such difficulties of communication and credibility, however, do not cancel out the value of understanding the Church as a sacrament. They are rather a challenge to state as clearly and as convincingly as possible different dimensions of the concept. In attempting to do so here, it will be useful to begin with a presentation of some of the biblical background to this way of approaching the nature and purpose of the Church.

A. BIBLICAL BACKGROUND TO THE CHURCH AS SACRAMENT

Q.4. Strictly speaking, when and how did the Church begin?

The presence of Christ to his Church raises the question of its institution. Exactly how did the Church begin? For a long time the official teaching of the Catholic Church maintained that Jesus of Nazareth clearly foresaw a structured group which would carry on his work after his death. It also maintained that while he was still on earth he set up the structures

⁴ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976), 69-70.

⁵ Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 5; cf. Charles Hill, *Mystery of Life: A Theology of Church* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990), introduction: 'For many contemporary Christians, even though the Church may be a preoccupation, it is not a subject they relish. Catholics at any rate, while ready enough to expose a history of vexations and disillusionment in their dealings with churchmen and churchwomen, do not come readily to courses and study sessions on the Church – it is not an attractive subject to them. They are evidently not enjoying the beauty of the vision of Church that the Scriptures and Christian tradition can offer them. Their experience is otherwise.'

of the Church which would succeed him. And so he both gave authority to his twelve apostles and commissioned them to pass on their authority to a chain of successors, the bishops. Furthermore, he gave '*the power of the keys*,' not just to Peter, but to all those who would succeed him as '*popes*' of the Catholic Church.

Recent scholarly historical studies have indicated that this general picture of how it all began is too simplistic. It is true that church structures are rooted in the actions of Jesus up to a point. Yet these are not so much in what he did before he died, as in his passage through death to resurrection and in his handing over his own Spirit to his followers (the paschal mystery). While Jesus certainly laid the foundations of the Church in his pre-Easter life by choosing the Twelve as the nucleus for the renewal of Israel, the Church does not actually exist before Christ is raised from the dead and communicates his Spirit to the eleven remaining from the Twelve, who gathered in the Upper Room.⁶ It is his Spirit which guides them and their followers concerning what to say and what to do, including how to organize the Church as the community of the followers of Jesus Christ⁷ for its life and mission.

The earliest Christian communities were rather small groups, held together by their shared faith in Christ and in his Spirit. They were communities animated by the Spirit, communities which enjoyed the outpouring of the Spirit in a continuing Pentecost. Because they embodied the presence of the Risen Lord and his Spirit, these communities were sacraments (living signs) of the presence of Christ and his Spirit. What Jesus of Nazareth did, therefore, to bring about this situation, i.e. to '*institute the Church*,' was not to formally and deliberately establish any particular community structures, but to become the Risen Lord and to share with his followers his own life-giving Spirit.

Thus Jesus Christ instituted, (and continues to institute) the Church, by sharing with the community of his followers his own life-giving vision of the coming of the kingdom of God and his own life-giving Spirit. The same Spirit of God which animates and empowers the followers of Jesus, the Church, the community of faith, hope and love, animated Jesus, of whom the New Testament says: '*...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power ...he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him*' (Acts 10:38).⁸

It is the presence of his Spirit to his followers which is implied when the Jesus of John 15:1-11 uses the imagery of the vine and its branches to describe his relationship with his followers. He himself is the vine, the branches are his followers, and the life-sap (by implication) is his Spirit. Just as the branches are alive only if they are attached to the vine, so the disciples of Jesus must '*abide*' (the term is used eleven times in the passage) in him if they are to remain spiritually faithful and fruitful. If they remain faithful to him, there will be only one life-force (= the Spirit) which will flow through them all. Only in union with the vine can they bear fruit, i.e. in today's language, be the sign and source [the sacrament] of Christ's loving, liberating, helping and healing presence, to the world.

⁶ Cf. Vatican II, Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, a.5: '*... it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wonderful sacrament of the whole Church.*'

⁷ This is the description of the Church favoured by Pope John Paul II in his first encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (March 4, 1979), no.21. In the first chapter of his *A Church to Believe In*, Avery Dulles enthusiastically endorses this description as a particularly unifying image.

⁸ Leonardo Boff, *Church Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 147, says of him: 'the carnal Jesus was the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world ...' He adds: '*... the Holy Spirit in the Church is the presence of the pneumatic (risen) Christ in the world*' (ibid.).

B. A COMMENTARY ON THE CHURCH AS MYSTERY (SACRAMENT) IN *LUMEN GENTIUM*⁹

1. The Title 'Mystery of the Church'

Q.5. What was emphasized when the Church was thought of mainly as a 'perfect society'?

In early centuries the Church was experienced and believed in, but its nature was not analysed. The first treatise on the subject did not appear till the end of the Middle Ages, and then it was from the perspective of Canon Law. With the Reformation came the felt need to oppose the Protestant concept of the invisible Church and to prove that the Roman Catholic Church was the one and only true Church. To do this, the idea of the Church as a 'perfect society' and a fully visible society was developed. The leading Counter-Reformation theologian, St Robert Bellarmine, asserted that it was '*as visible as the kingdom of France.*'

The sort of ecclesiology to which this gave rise concentrated mainly on the governmental side of the Church, and explained that government in terms of a monarchy. It seemed to be mainly concerned with structures of power in the Church, and especially that of the pope. This is not to say that it was altogether mistaken, only that it was one-sided, and therefore misleading.

Q.6a. What is the external shape of the Church?

Q.6b. Briefly describe its internal aspects.

Q.6c. What does it mean to call the Church a 'mystery'?

Against that historical background, the title of the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is significant. On the one hand, it is clear that the Church is both a community of human beings and a society with particular structures and laws. This is its external shape, and is obvious to believers and unbelievers alike. On the other hand, there is a dimension which can be seen only with the eyes of faith, and is best described by such biblical images as are given in a.6 – the sheepfold, flock, cultivated field, building, temple, and family of God; the bride of Christ, and especially, the body of Christ. Such biblical imagery suggests that the Church is the gift of God, the presence of God to people, the presence of God's loving activity for the sake of their salvation.

It is because God saves people in and through the Church that it is called a '*mystery*' ('*mystery*' being the term which describes the disclosure and unfolding of God's plan of salvation, and, as such, basically equivalent to '*sacrament*').

This is to say that in and behind the visible community of the followers of Jesus, human beings may encounter the God of active love, the God of their salvation. This is to say that among men and women who make up the Church, people may encounter and experience the God of mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

2. The Mystery of the Church as the Action of Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Chapter One of *Lumen Gentium* presents the Church as mystery by relating it to the action of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is presented in terms of

- a) the action of the three divine Persons in history, and
- b) their continuing action in our own time.

a. The Action of the Triune God in History

Q.7a. Could the millions of people who lived before the coming of Jesus Christ be saved?

⁹ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, ch.1.

From the time human beings first emerged on earth, God, the Lord of history, has been working for their salvation. One may sometimes wonder what happened to the millions of people who lived before the coming of Christ and outside the People of Israel. Were they loved by God? Or were they, in fact, excluded from God's love and mercy? While we do not know God's plan for the salvation of all human beings in detail, a sentence in this chapter together with the opening sentence of Chapter Two, give us hints on the matter:

The eternal Father... chose to raise up men and women to share in his own divine life; and when they had fallen in Adam, he did not abandon them, but at all times offered them the means of salvation, bestowed in consideration of Christ, the Redeemer... (a.2).
At all times and in every nation, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him (see Acts 10:35) (a.9).

Q.7b. What about the millions of non-Christians today?

One may hold, in fact, that God communicates his grace to people who have never heard of Christ or who have not understood and appreciated his person and message. For God wants all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Besides, God does not limit his grace to the preaching and the ritual actions (sacraments) of his Church.

Q.7c. What is God's 'extraordinary plan of salvation'?

Nevertheless, this chapter insists on what some theologians, e.g. Frank De Graeve (late of Catholic University of Louvain) have called '*God's extraordinary plan of salvation.*' This is to say that from the time that human beings were first created, it was God's plan '*to call together in the holy Church those who believe in Christ*' (a.2). '*This Church,*' in fact, '*was prepared in marvellous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and in the ancient alliance*' (a.2). The history of this chosen people is the history of God gradually revealing his mercy and fidelity, until it reaches a kind of climax in the emergence of the Church as the community of the disciples of Jesus. So much is the Church a high point in God's saving activity that LG can say that '*the Church, in Christ, is a sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race*' (a.1).

The dealings of God with human beings in history, just outlined, is the starting place to think about both the nature and purpose of the Church. The Church is the sacrament of union with God and of unity among human beings. It is a visible sign and embodiment of both. Thus, we have in the life of the Church a pre-view of the destiny of the human race - to be one both with one's fellow-human beings and one with God.

The phrase '*in Christ*' is particularly significant. It suggests the complete dependence of the Church on Christ, on Christ as the original sacrament, in its own role as sacrament. It suggests its complete dependence on Christ as the *lumen gentium*, 'the light of the nations' (to cite the opening words of the whole document). To borrow an image from the early Fathers, just as the only light the moon has is from the sun, so the only light the Church sheds on the world is that which comes from Christ. The phrase suggests that the Church points beyond itself to Christ, that it is only in and through Christ and his Spirit that the Church can function as both a sign and an instrument of unity and love in the world. To speak this way is to stress Christ's lordship over his Church.

b. The Continuing Action of the Triune God

Lumen Gentium emphasizes that all that God (Father, Son, and Spirit) has done in history, continues in the life of the Church today (see esp. a.3 & a.4). It stresses that it is through the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that Christians are united to God the Father now. In the Eucharist especially, God's work of redemption continues. It states: '*As often as the sacrifice of the cross by which "Christ our Pasch is sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7) is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out*' (a.3). The Council suggests that the role

of the Church is to make present the mediation of Christ and the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, so that Christians might live perfectly as sons and daughters of the Father, in the one family of God.

Q.8a. How are Christians bonded together in the Church?

As baptised and believing Christians, we share in the same blessings which God bestows. Thus, e.g., 'in the sacrament of the eucharistic bread, the unity of believers, who form one body in Christ (see 1 Cor 10:17) is both expressed and brought about' (a.3). By sharing the same gifts of redemption, we, many though we are, become a communion or fellowship. We are bonded together as one people because each of us individually is in communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The gifts of faith, hope, and love, the gifts of the word of God and the sacraments, as well as the many charisms for building up the Church as the Spirit-filled community of Christ, all unite us in a fellowship where no person is alone.

Q.8b. What results from the activity of God in the life of the Church today?

Thus the Church is that community where men and women, girls and boys, become, through the grace of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. In this way the Church is the mystery of fellowship with Father, Son, and Spirit. In this way the Church is the active presence of God's love among us. In this way the Church 'is seen to be "a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"' (a.4).¹⁰

Q.8c. How are liturgy and Church connected?

It is in the liturgy especially that we experience or ought to experience our fellowship with God and with one another in the Church. In the liturgy, the Church's public worship, we continue to encounter Christ as our Redeemer, and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is in the liturgy especially that we are empowered to surrender ourselves and our lives to God. It is in the liturgy especially that we are manifested and seen as the Church, the community of his disciples.

3. The Mystery of the Church as Local Church

Q.9a. Name the different but related meanings of the term 'Church.'

In the New Testament the very term for 'Church' (*ekklesia*) refers to the actual assembly of Christians meeting for worship. But from this use it is extended to mean the community of believers in any given place (Cf. Acts 5:11; 8:1-3; 13:1; 15:22; Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 4:17; Col 4:16; 1 Th 1:1). Edward Hill observes: 'One could thus define a Church as a community of Christians established in a particular locality and accustomed to meet regularly for worship.'¹¹ Less often the word refers to the community of believers as a whole, scattered around the known world.

Q.9b. In Roman Catholic thinking today, how is the universal Church understood?

In Roman Catholic thinking today, the Church as a whole, the universal Church, is seen as 'the union of churches bound together by a common faith and love.'¹² It is 'in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists.'¹³ The Church as a whole is, in fact, 'a communion of local churches, presided over by the Church of Rome, itself a local church.'¹⁴

¹⁰ Citing St. Cyprian.

¹¹ Edward Hill, 'Church,' *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. J. Komonchak et al. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987), 186.

¹² James Crichton, 'A Theology of Worship,' in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. C. Jones et al. (London: SPCK, 1978), 25.

¹³ LG, a.23.

¹⁴ Herve-Marie Legrand, 'The Revaluation of Local Churches: Some Theological Implications,' *Concilium* 1.8 (1972): 54.

Q.9c. Name some important ways in which people of a parish live the 'mystery' of the Church. Both a diocese and a parish may be regarded as a local church. But what may be said of the local Church as mystery applies especially to the parish. For it is there in the parish that the great majority of Christians live as followers of Jesus. It is there that they hear the good news of God's love reaching out to liberate and transform them; it is there that they are initiated into the Church by faith and the sacraments of Christian initiation; it is there that they are forgiven and reconciled with God; it is there that they are healed and strengthened; it is there that they give thanks for God's great deeds; it is there that they are nourished with Christ in his body and blood; it is there that they are sent forth to be witnesses and missionaries of his love.

And so the faithful gathered in their parish church to celebrate the liturgy are the Church of God. They are not simply a section of the Church, a little part of it, a cog in a big wheel. No, the entire mystery of the Church is present in the local congregation at worship. In essentials, it is the local realization and manifestation of all that the one Church is. Thus, we can point to the congregation at worship and say: *'There is the Church of God. There is the body of Christ, the indivisible body of Christ.'*

4. The Mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ

Lumen Gentium follows the approach of St Paul in its teaching on the Church as the Body of Christ (see a.7).

Q.10a. Name some important aspects of the teaching of St Paul that the Church is the Body of Christ.

Paul understood clearly that the disciples of Jesus share in the saving work of Christ. They do this both by faith and by participation in baptism and the Eucharist. When we are baptised, and when we receive the body and blood of Christ, we are joined to the crucified and risen body of Christ. And so we die with him and we rise with him. This union with Christ involves Christ's individual bodily person. We become members, parts - we might say limbs and cells - of his body. This union with Christ involves also the whole human person, not just the soul. This union is so deep and real that Paul can say to the Christians at Corinth: *'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?'* (1 Cor 6:15).

Paul's teaching on the Church as the *'body of Christ'* emphasizes both the personal communion with Christ that each individual Christian has with him through faith and the sacraments. But he also emphasizes the relationships of mutual dependence, assistance and love among the fellow-members of the body, which personal union with Christ sets up:

For just as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ (1 Cor 12:12).

As it is, God has put all the separate parts into the body as he chose. If they were all the same part, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," and nor can the head say to the feet, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:18-21).

Now Christ's body is yourselves, each of you with a part to play in the whole (1 Cor 12:27).

The blessing-cup which we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ; and the loaf of bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? And as there is one loaf, so we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf (1 Cor 10:16-17).

Q.10b. In the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, how does Paul's thought about relationships in the one Body of Christ develop?

A final development in Paul's thought can be found in texts of Colossians and Ephesians. These insist on the absolute authority of Christ over whatever exists, visible and invisible. The emphasis on the authority of Christ over the Church his 'body' is expressed as one of 'headship,' as in the following examples:

He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent (Col 1:18).

[Christ is] the head from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God (Col 2:19).

[God] has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph 1:22-23).

Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its Saviour (Eph 5:23).

In such texts we see how the emphasis has changed. It is no longer upon the individual body of Christ but upon the 'whole Christ' of head and members, stressed by later theology.

The understanding of 'Church' as the body of Christ which emerges in both St Paul and the first chapter of LG is that of a mutual fellowship with Christ. The Church is, then, the living presence of Christ in the midst of his disciples.

Q.10c. In the light of such NT teaching, how can the Church function as the sacrament of the Risen Christ in the world?

It is precisely because Christians become members of the body of Christ, that they can be the sacrament of the Risen Christ in the world. They can signify the active presence of Christ and of his Spirit in a range of activities. Just as Christ embodied the presence of his Father in his human words and actions, so Christians are called to embody the presence of Christ and of God in what they say and do. One implication of this is noted by Walter Kasper: 'So precisely because it is a sacrament of salvation, the Church must continually go beyond itself, in dialogue, in communication, and in co-operation with all people of good will.'¹⁵

5. The Mystery of the Church and the Roman Catholic Church

Q.11a. In the encyclical of Pope Pius XII on the Mystical Body of Christ, who and who only are 'really' members of the Church?

Pope Pius XII wrote of the Church as the 'body of Christ' in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943). But whereas St Paul and *Lumen Gentium* have emphasized the Church as a communion of life among Christ and his disciples, Pius XII emphasized the Church as a social body, with structures of authority, etc. This led him to totally identify the Church of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church, and to make the claim:

Only those are to be accounted really members of the Church who have been regenerated in the waters of Baptism and profess the true faith, and have not cut themselves off from the structure of the Body by their own unhappy act or been severed therefrom, for very grave crimes, by the legitimate authority ... those who are divided from one another in faith and government cannot be living in the one Body ... (n.21).

Q.11b. In Lumen Gentium, are the Church of Jesus Christ and the Roman Catholic Church exactly the same?

LG, on the other hand, does not simply identify the body of Christ, the Church of Christ, with the Roman Catholic Church, does not say that the Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are exactly one and the same. It says rather:

¹⁵ Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 117.

This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity (a.8).

This is to say that the body of Christ is present in the Roman Catholic Church, that it truly exists there, with all the means of salvation which Christ gave to his body. But the body of Christ is not co-extensive with this church, does not simply coincide with it. Ecclesial elements of holiness, truth, and love etc., can be found and are found, in fact, in other groups of Christians. In fact, the Church of Christ transcends any particular expression of it. So the Roman Catholic Church is not all the Church there is. One may therefore speak broadly of '*the Christian Church*' as a whole as the Body of Christ.

The transcendence of the body of Christ over the historical limits of the Roman Catholic Church allows LG to say in Chapter Two that other Christians are incorporated into the Church of Christ, and to offer justification on theological grounds for saying that other Christian churches, despite defects in their structures, give expression and realization to the one Church of Christ. In other words, there is an ecclesial character to non-Catholic Christian communities.

C. THE CENTRAL AND DOMINANT IDEA

1. *The Church is the Basic Sacrament of Encounter with Christ*

What the Church is and what the Church does is Christ's continuing presence in the world.¹⁶ This means that Christ (in the Spirit) works through the visible structures of the Church in a similar, though not in the same way, as the Word (the *Logos*) acted through the human nature of Christ.¹⁷ This means that the Church represents Christ, i.e. in keeping with the original meaning of the term '*represents*,' the Church makes Christ present.¹⁸ The Church makes Christ present as Redeemer. In doing so the Church functions as the sign of Christ's continuing mission in the world: - proclaiming the rule of God, calling people to be converted and follow Christ, and breaking all kinds of enslavement and oppression. Patricia Smith remarks: '*Like Christ, his Church is the sign of God's work in the world, already begun and yet to be brought to perfection.*'¹⁹ Thus the Church points to a Jesus who is present, to a Jesus who is historically past, and to a Jesus who is Lord of the future.

The Church is the sacrament of Christ, insofar as it is a community of people. A sacrament is a visible sign of some invisible reality (St Augustine). The invisible reality is Christ; the visible sign of Christ is the community which makes up his body.²⁰

¹⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 13, calls the Church 'the perpetual presence of the task and function of Christ in the economy of redemption.' In his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 240, he calls it 'the persisting presence of the incarnate Word in time and space.'

¹⁷ Aloys Grillmeier rightly remarks, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol.I, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York & London, 1967), 149: 'The Spirit does not work through an individual human nature, like the *Logos* in Christ, but through the social structure (socialis compago) of the Church, that is, through a number of persons, whose readiness to co-operate varies and in many cases is defective.'

¹⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1950), 29, states: 'If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in a sense far more real than that in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder's continuation.'

¹⁹ Patricia Smith, *Teaching Sacraments* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987), 112.

²⁰ Richard McBrien, *Church: the Continuing Quest* (New York, Paulist Press, 1970), 37.

In a.8, *Lumen Gentium* describes the composition of the Church as sacrament in these words:

The one mediator, Christ, established and constantly sustains here on earth his holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as a visible structure through which he communicates truth and grace to everyone. But, the society equipped with hierarchical structures and the mystical body of Christ, the visible society and the spiritual community, the earthly Church and the Church endowed with heavenly riches, are not to be thought of as two realities. On the contrary, they form one complex reality comprising a human and a divine element. For this reason the Church is compared, in no mean analogy, to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature, inseparably united to him, serves the divine Word as a living instrument of salvation, so, in somewhat similar fashion, does the social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (see Eph 4:16).²¹

As sacrament, the Church has both an external and an internal aspect. The external reality and structures are essential, for without these the Church would not be a visible community.²² On the other hand, the structures and rituals of the Church have meaning and relevance only if they express a relationship with God of genuine faith, hope, and love. If they fail to do so, the Church is more a dead than a living body, and therefore a sign of something that is not there, a false sign, and even a counter-sign.

As a community animated by the Spirit of Christ, a community of committed disciples, the Church is, in fact, more an event than a static and inert organization (institution). Consequently, the more his disciples respond to the influence of Christ on the community and participate in its life, the more the Church becomes the Church. The more its members can demonstrate that they are becoming Spirit-filled, Christ-like people, i.e. people of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22), the more does the Church shine out as an event of grace. Avery Dulles observes: '*As believers succeed in finding appropriate external forms by which to express their commitment to God in Christ, they become living symbols of divine love and beacons of hope in the world.*'²³

Q.12a. Briefly, how is the Church the basic sacrament of Christ?

The Church, in fact, is a sacrament of a sacrament, the basic sacrament of an original sacrament. '*Basic,*' because what the Church is and does is based on its relationship with Christ. To put things this way is to maintain the primacy of Christ and the secondary position of the Church.

Q.12b. From articles 1, 9, and 48 of Lumen Gentium, answer the following:

- OF WHAT is the Church a sacrament?
- FOR WHOM is the Church a sacrament?

In *Lumen Gentium*, the theme of the Church as the basic sacrament of encounter with Christ, and in him and through him of encounter with God, occurs in three key passages:

²¹ Adrian Hastings, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, Vol.I (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968), 38, comments: 'In a.8 for the first time we meet the word "society." The Church is indeed a visible society. We live in a visible world. Christ was a visible man, and the divine communion he came to bring, which has been described till now, must take a visible and social form. It involves a gathering of men (sic) in a human society which requires leadership, etc., like other human societies. Therefore the divine fellowship, the body of Christ existing in the visible world, must take the form of a visible society, the earthly (hierarchical) Church.'

²² Hastings, *A Concise Guide*, 92, suggests: 'It is this sacramental conception of the Church which alone can overcome the old problem of the relationship between "a visible Church" and an "invisible Church."'

²³ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67.

The Church, in Christ, is a sacrament - a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race (a.1).

Its destiny is the kingdom of God which has been begun by God himself on earth and which must be further extended until it is brought to perfection by him at the end of time when Christ our life (see Col 3:4) will appear and "creation itself also will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons and daughters of God" (Rom 8:21). Consequently, this messianic people, although it does not, in fact, include everybody, and at times may seem to be a little flock, is, however, a most certain seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, love and truth, it is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all; as the light of the world and the salt of the earth (see Mt 5:13-16) it is sent forth into the whole world (a.9).

Christ, when he was lifted up from the earth, drew all humanity to himself (see Jn 12:32 Greek text). Rising from the dead (see Rom 6:9) he sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through him set up his body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. Sitting at the right hand of the Father he is continually active in the world in order to lead people to the Church and through it to join them more closely to himself; by nourishing them with his own body and blood, he make them sharers in his glorious life (a.48).

These passages from *Lumen Gentium* answer the question: *OF WHAT is the Church a sacrament?* They answer that it is a sacrament of the salvation of the whole human race.

These passages also answer the question: *FOR WHOM is the Church a sacrament?* The answer, as the words themselves '*Lumen gentium*' (= Light of the nations) imply, is the whole human race. The Church is that city set on a hill which cannot be hidden (Mt 5:14). Patricia Smith remarks that '*the Church of Christ is a sacrament, an explicit sign of what God hopes and intends for all people.*'²⁴

Q.12c. How has the idea of 'salvation' developed since Vatican II?

The meaning of '*salvation*' in this context has undergone theological development since the Council. Its meaning today, in official church sources, has been summarised by Francis Sullivan as follows:

What has happened since Vatican II is a broadening of the concept of salvation, so that, besides the "vertical dimension" of reconciliation with God, it also includes the "horizontal dimension" of reconciliation of people with one another through the overcoming of systems of oppression and the establishment of a just social order in the world, recognising this also as an indispensable foundation for the achieving of durable peace.²⁵

The adoption within the Church of this outlook leads Sullivan to call the Church the '*sacrament of integral salvation.*'²⁶

2. Is the Notion of the Church as Sacrament New?

Q.13a. Is this a new idea, that the Church is a sacrament?

Q.13b. How has there been a change of understanding regarding what happens in the celebration of the Church's ritual sacraments?

The idea that the Church is a sacrament is not new. The Letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians both call the Church a *mysterion* (*sacramentum*). Church Fathers such as Pope St Leo the Great (c.400-461) included both Christ and the Church in their lists of sacraments. But in the Middle Ages theologians were pre-occupied with individual

²⁴ Smith, *Teaching Sacraments*, 113.

²⁵ Francis Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), 150.

²⁶ Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 132ff.

sacraments of the Church rather than with the larger picture. And what they said about particular sacraments was interpreted in terms of what those church rituals did to individuals rather than in terms of the involvement of the whole worshipping community. Sacraments were described in terms of the flow of grace from God to an individual 'recipient' through the one who 'administered' them, rather than as a loving and shared encounter with Christ living and acting in his community.

In the years leading up to Vatican II, however, stress on a one-to-one relationship with God came to be modified by an increasing emphasis on the need for community in the experience of grace and salvation. It began to be appreciated that for their faith to flourish, Christians need to belong to communities of faith, and also that faith itself is following Christ in the company of fellow-disciples. The truth was also re-discovered that all present celebrate the sacraments, and that the action of Christ takes place through the entire group of assembled worshippers, and not simply through the one designated as 'the celebrant.'

Of course, all this is fairly new to contemporary Christians. We've only just begun to think of ourselves as Christian communities doing sacraments rather than simply having sacraments done to us, receiving sacraments. And in the ways we actually celebrate sacraments, we've only just begun to consciously celebrate them as the Spirit-filled Body of the risen Christ, joined together in praise and petition to God the Father - all celebrating, all giving, and all receiving. In worship as in the whole of the Christian life we have a long way to go to realize the vision that the Church is the sacrament of Christ and that Christ is the sacrament of the Father.

D. CONCLUSION

Q.14a. Sum up succinctly how the Church is the sacrament of Christ in the world?

In summary, to state that the Church is a sacrament is to make two claims: - First, that it is a visible communion of men, women and children with the triune God and with one another. Second, that this communion is active in the world as the visible presence of the invisible Christ, and through him and with him, the visible presence of the invisible God, who is always gracious and loving.

The Church is the sacrament of Christ, i.e. the living symbol that he is still actively present in the world through his 'alter ego,' the Holy Spirit, as a kind of second self. Christ is embodied in the Spirit-filled community of his disciples,²⁷ for 'the presence of the risen Lord in the Church is the presence of the Holy Spirit.'²⁸

Q.14b. Name some implications of this truth for the life and mission of the Church today.

The Church, then, as sacrament, is an experience of a Christian community alive, at work, and involved, an experience of a community working for the full coming of the kingdom of God, a mission which will only be complete at Christ's Second Coming. In the meantime, 'the Church is continually called to become a better sign of Christ than it has been,'²⁹ is called to on-going conversion to the vision, teachings and example of Jesus Christ, its Lord.

It follows that the members of the Church are called to live in Christ-like ways, both in the Church and in the world. *Lumen Gentium* stresses that 'it is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them

²⁷ Dulles, *A Church to Believe In*, 46.

²⁸ Boff, *Church, Charism and Power*, 149. He observes: 'The risen Lord lives in the form of the Spirit' (148).

²⁹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 68.

according to God's will' and 'that they are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven ...by fulfilling their own particular duties' (a.31).

Q.14c. Why is it that the Church, as sacrament of Christ, is not immune from being a sinful Church?

Living consistently in Christ-like ways remains the ideal and the goal. One must reckon with the fact, however, that in practice, Christians, in general, are unlikely to attain a 100% success rate. Leonardo Boff says why: '*The Church is not hypostatically united to the Logos as was the humanity of Jesus. The Church is at one and the same time saint and sinner, always in need of conversion and reform.*'³⁰ Accordingly, Francis Sullivan stresses:

We cannot blame the Holy Spirit for the many mistakes and failures that have marred the Church's history. On the other hand, everything the Church has accomplished for the salvation of men and women and for the promotion of Christ's reign on earth, it has been able to do only through the power of the Holy Spirit working through it as his instrument.³¹

The ideal and the real are both captured in the Council's adoption of the designation of the Church as '*the pilgrim people of God,*' a topic to which Chapters Two and Seven of *Lumen Gentium* is entirely devoted. These chapters balance and complement what the Council has stressed in Chapter One on the Church as the Body of Christ.

Q.15. Which part of the presentation has meant the most to you and why?

Author: Brian Gleeson is a Passionist priest, who lectures on Church and Sacraments at the Yarra Theological Union, Box Hill.

³⁰ Boff, *Church Charism and Power*, 144.

³¹ Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 19.