

## 6.

# Understanding the Church

FREDERICK M. JELLY, O.P.:  
A ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

As is the case with all the doctrines of our Christian faith, both Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics look to the inspired Word of God in the Bible to find the foundation for our understanding of the church. Each of us does this, however, fully realizing that we read the biblical record of divine revelation as members of different ecclesial traditions which often interpret our common scriptural source in diverse ways, especially regarding our ecclesiologies or theologies of the church. At the same time, starting with the Sacred Scriptures does emphasize the basic convictions about the church of Christ that we do share as well as those that still divide us into two separate ecclesial communions. Only after we have searched the Scriptures prayerfully and carefully together are we able to enter into further dialogue about those aspects of our understanding of the church on which our communions must reach consensus before we can belong to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ the Savior of us all.

The New Testament uses many diverse images to describe the various aspects of the mystery of the church. These include the people of God, land to be cultivated, the field of God, the flock, edifice, the house of God, the family of God, the church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and so forth. We will reflect upon three of these biblical images, “the people of God,” “the body of Christ,” and “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (see *The Church's Confession of*

*Faith*, pp. 211–254). Each one has something distinctive to contribute to our theological understanding of the church as we interpret the Bible from a Roman Catholic perspective.

*The Church as the People of God*—The biblical image of the church as the people of God is central to the teaching of Vatican II on the mystery of the church (see chapter 2 of “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” in *The Documents of Vatican II*). It has been particularly helpful in reforming Roman Catholics from an understanding of the church that was highly individualistic and excessively institutional. This biblical image emphasizes the fact that salvation is not intended for the individual in isolation but for a community in which each member participates and is co-responsible for the good of all. Like any people or family, the church is given to her individual members from the beginning, and the community is not the result of a coalition of believers who come together to form a community that had not already been given to us by God in the Pentecostal Spirit of our risen Lord. The people of God embrace everyone from the Pope to the newly baptized, thus underlining the truth that the church’s hierarchical structure and its various offices exist not for their own sake but as a means to beget and nourish the community of faith. The church’s institutional aspect, therefore, while essential and important, is not that which is most significant about her mysterious nature as God’s new creation in Christ.

The people of God is not an ordinary people, linked by common ancestry and so on, but the people chosen by God from all the peoples and with whom he has struck a covenant. According to this biblical image, whether it refers to the church coming to be under the Old Covenant, or already established in the New Covenant, she is one universal people derived from all peoples, races, and classes. A person is not born into the church but reborn and incorporated into her through faith and the sacrament of baptism. The church is not a civil-political assembly convened to consult and determine common concerns, but called together by God to hear what God has decided, has spoken, and has accomplished, in order to praise him for his saving desires and deeds on behalf of his people.

God's fundamental promise to his people in the Old Testament is: "I will be your God and you will be my people." This promise connects the church of Christ with Israel. Without this connection in which the church is prepared and prefigured (see "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 9), it is not possible to understand the church. At the same time, there is a radically new reality about God's people of the New Covenant, who also include the Gentiles who were not originally the people of God. In the church of Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11–22), God's promise to Abraham that all peoples would be blessed in him has reached fulfillment (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; Gal. 3:8).

Because the church is not tied down to one particular form of culture or system, because she embraces the whole of humanity, she can be the sign and efficacious instrument of bringing about the true unity of every people ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 1). Of her very nature, she is a pilgrim people of God, on the march towards her heavenly home where she will no longer be needed as the means of salvation. Until the second coming of Christ, although she witnesses to much that is permanent and definitive, the church is not the goal but the God-given means to reach the heavenly church.

*The Church as the Body of Christ*—St. Paul was inspired to take up a popular comparison of antiquity between the human organism and the human community and apply it to the church. The church is one body with many distinct members who all need one another and who must cooperate together for the good of the whole (Rom 12:4–9). They all suffer and rejoice together (I Cor. 12:26), but the poor, the weak, and the persecuted members stand in special need of the church's solidarity ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 8). St. Paul, however, did correct this familiar image by comparing not only the body and the church, but also the body and Christ (I Cor. 12:12). The church does not arise from the cooperation of her members, but entirely from Jesus Christ, who alone can make us members of his body the church (Eph. 1:22–23; 4:15–16; Col. 1:18; 2:19).

The church, therefore, is not only compared with a body, but is even identified with Jesus Christ in his body. This, of course, does not mean that Jesus Christ and the church are identical but

that they belong inseparably together and that the church's participation in Christ is threefold: she is called to build up Christ's body (herself) by sharing in his prophetic office through the proclamation of the word of God, by sharing in his high-priestly office by celebrating the sacraments (especially baptism and Eucharist), and by sharing in his kingly office through her pastoral ministries. Vatican II compares the mystery of the church with that of the Incarnation: "the Church is compared, not without significance, to the mystery of the incarnate Word. As the assumed nature, inseparably linked to him, serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a somewhat similar way, does the social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body" ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 8). The church then is the place filled with Christ and his Pentecostal Spirit, and through her he will fill all (Eph. 1:23).

*The Church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit*—According to this biblical image, the church is not primarily a building of lifeless stones, but a "spiritual building of living stones," the cornerstone of which is Jesus Christ (I Pet. 2:4–5). "Temple" in the scriptures signifies the effective presence of God or Jesus Christ in the midst of his people (Mt. 18:20), and this presence comes about through the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:31–33; Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:26–27), and also the one Spirit creates the church as the one body in Christ (I Cor. 12:13–14; 3:16–17; cf. II Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21).

This particular biblical image of the church seems to bring together the two aspects of the mystery of the church that the Roman Catholic tradition has always considered essential: her external visible structure (temple), and her interior invisible reality (the Holy Spirit and his gifts). Therefore the Holy Spirit may be likened to the "soul" in the mystical body of Christ or the principle of the life of grace within the church ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 7). Both elements are indispensable to the pilgrim church; the church could not be a "sign" for human beings if she were not externally visible in the world, nor an "instrument" of effecting true unity in Christ if she were she not animated by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit preserves the church

in the truth (John 14:26; 16:13–14; “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” 7–9, in *The Documents of Vatican II*), inspires her to carry out missions (“Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” 4, in *The Documents of Vatican II*), and makes her holy in her members (“Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” 39–40). The Holy Spirit is especially the principle of church unity amidst her rich diversity of spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:4–31a; Eph. 4:3; “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” 12; “Decree on Ecumenism,” 2, in *The Documents of Vatican II*). So she must pray to the Holy Spirit over and over that he will bestow upon her these gifts. It is especially important that such gifts are seen to be communicated both through charisms and offices in the church so that there might be avoided the undue conflicts between the established official structures of the church and the charismatic claims of groups and individuals such as erupted in Corinth (see I Cor. 12). When such conflicts do arise, however, are there any marks manifesting the true character of the church of Christ?

*Unity, Holiness, Catholicity, and Apostolicity of the Church*—The Nicene Creed confesses faith in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. These have been traditionally called the marks of the church of Christ. We will examine each one briefly in order to understand more clearly and in greater depth the developments that have taken place in the tradition of the Roman Catholic understanding of the church.

In Christ’s priestly prayer for unity (John 17:21–23) and in the Letter to the Ephesians (4:2–6), we find the New Testament foundation for our faith that the unity of the church is already a gift in Christ as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. In accord with the will of the triune God, there is one single church (uniqueness) and she is one in herself (unity). Vatican II teaches that there is a three-fold bond of unity: 1) of the confession of faith; 2) of the sacraments; and, 3) of church leadership and community (“Dogmatic Constitution on the the Church,” 14). This threefold unity does not mean uniformity; instead, it embraces a rich diversity of formulations of the single faith, of liturgical celebrations, and of ecclesiastical polities; the one church exists where the essential truths of revelation, the necessary means of salvation, and the

indispensable ministries are preserved. While this unity of the church is truly a grace, a gift of the Holy Spirit, it is also a task, especially for those of us who are participants in the ecumenical movement prayerfully seeking through dialogue to come together into the one church willed by Christ.

The holiness of the church, according to the Sacred Scriptures, consists first of the objective holiness of being singled out from the secular order and belonging in a special consecrated way to God (John 17:11, 14–15; Matt. 16:18; Matt. 28:20). From this a subjective holiness, an ethical perfection, must follow (Rom. 6:6–14, 8:2–17). All Christians, lay as well as clerical and religious, are called to this holiness. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and not the product or achievement of our merely human efforts. At the same time, it does demand our free acceptance of the divine gifts and our continual cooperation with grace, especially in our fulfillment of the great commandment to love God above all and to love our neighbor as ourself (Mark 12:30–31; John 13:34; 15:12; I Cor. 13). Unlike her head, Jesus Christ, however, the church upon earth is not a sinless body. She is called to follow constantly the path of penance, reform, and renewal; she is always in need of further purification among her members, but is also always endowed by her head with the means of sanctification.

The word “catholic” does not appear in the New Testament; St. Ignatius used it for the first time in reference to the church about 110 A.D. (*Letter to the Smyrnians*, 8, 2). Applied to the church, catholicity means that the whole, worldwide, universal church will announce the faith in its integrity truly and authentically. Every truth of revelation and every means of salvation may be found in her. Concretely the church embodies her catholicity in three ways: 1) by preaching the gospel to all creatures (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:15–20; “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” 13); 2) by being a local church in a particular historical place as well as a worldwide, universal church; and, 3) by providing in every local church as well as in the universal church the fullness of the means of salvation. By her mark of catholicity the church is shown to be not a static monolith but a dynamic organism of rich diversity with a profound unity of faith, worship, and ministry. As is the case with unity and holiness, this quality

is a task as well as a gift, especially the ecumenical task of giving the one church of Christ a fully realized catholicity as well as the missionary task of evangelization.

The fourth and final mark of the church, apostolicity, touches upon thorny problems in the ecumenical dialogue, particularly between Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics. The Roman Catholic belief is that the church must preserve her identity with the foundation laid by Jesus Christ on the apostles, precisely on the witness of the twelve and of St. Paul. But how can their testimony be present in the church until the second coming of Christ? The New Testament clearly records that even in their lifetime the apostles commissioned men to complete and carry on their mission after their deaths (see Acts 2:18–32 for St. Paul's farewell address in Miletus before the presbyters of the congregation of Ephesus). The Pastoral Letters (I and II Timothy and Titus) describe this handing on of the apostolic mission. Timothy and Titus were to lay hands upon men and so place them in the apostolic ministry (I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6, 2:2; Titus 1:5). The transition from the apostolic to the post-apostolic period of the church is already apparent, therefore, in the New Testament record itself.

With Clement of Rome (about 95 A.D.) and Ignatius of Antioch (about 110 A.D.), the understanding of an apostolic succession is already alive in the tradition to be further developed by Irenaeus of Lyons (about 180 A.D.) and Tertullian (about 200 A.D.). Vatican II summarizes the teaching of Scripture and tradition: "the bishops have by divine institution taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church" ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 20). Of course, this does not mean that the bishops of the church are new apostles in the same sense as Paul and the twelve. The office and witness of the apostles themselves are unique in salvation history; but some particular apostolic functions must continue in the church, and the bishops are primarily responsible for preserving in the tradition the apostolic faith that has entered into Sacred Scripture.

*Ministries and Offices of the Church*—All of the baptized share in the one priesthood of Jesus Christ. This common or universal priesthood of all the faithful bestows upon each Chris-

tian not only a participation in the priestly office and mission of Christ, but also in his prophetic and kingly offices so that all are called to contribute to the church's growth in holiness ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 30–38; "Decree of the Apostolate on the Laity," 1–8, in *The Documents of Vatican II*). Vatican II particularly stressed the importance of the role of the laity or non-ordained in the church of Christ during our time, especially through their Christian witness in the world or secular sphere ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 31; "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," 43) as well as their co-responsibility within the church's hierarchical structure such as serving on parish councils, and so on.

Traditionally there has been a threefold ordained ministry in the church—that of bishops, of priests or presbyters, and of deacons ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 28). As we have discussed regarding the church's mark of apostolicity, it is the ministry of bishops to succeed the apostles as pastors of the church ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 20). Priests or presbyters share in the episcopal ministry and office by preaching the word and administering the sacraments, especially in celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy and other forms of pastoral ministry ("Document on the Ministry and Life of Priests," 4–6, in *The Documents of Vatican II*). The deacons serve by preaching, assisting at the liturgy, and charitable activity ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 29). Although there is a distinction in kind and not only in degree between the common priesthood of all the faithful and the ordained or ministerial priesthood ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 10), priesthood is designed to relate the laity and clergy more harmoniously in their respective roles in the one mission of the whole church.

In the church there is a collegiality of office so that every priest has his office within the presbyterate of a diocese under the leadership of a bishop ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 28); and each individual bishop has his office within the college of bishops in communion with and under the Roman Pontiff, the successor of St. Peter ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," 22–23). Institutionally this common responsibility and fraternal collaboration is exercised in the priests' senate of a diocese, in

