

CHURCH, CONTINUITY & UNITY



Part One

The Church in the light of Scripture: a living organism, the sacramental outward of an inner and spiritual reality



CHAPTER I. GOD & 'INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION'

I

EVEN among earnest Christians, very few are willing to give much thought to problems of Church and ministry, so many regard them as unessential, of 'merely ecclesiastical' importance. Let us be candid, we fight shy of the ecclesiastical. The word is often used in mild reproach; we apply it mostly to things clerical, and especially to faults or foibles that we dislike, such as the parsonic voice. Of course there is no other adjective for 'church', except perhaps 'churchy'; we should indignantly deny that we are churchy, and we certainly do not think of ourselves as 'ecclesiastical persons'. Nine out of ten lay folk will say, not that so-and-so has become a minister, or has received Holy Orders, but that he 'has gone into the Church', thus revealing unconsciously that, at the back of our minds, we do not think of ourselves as having come into the Church, although we were baptized into it.

II

Since the great fact and privilege of membership in the universal Church is thought of so lightly, it is natural that problems of Church and ministry are widely deprecated as the concern of 'institutional religion', despised as mechanical and unspiritual. There is a half-truth behind this, one-half of a great truth, the other half of which is often not understood. Religion is spiritual, not material—inward,

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not outward. *It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing.* To many people who fully believe in the spiritual reality of the Church, any kind of organism, so far as it involves human action, seems to be alien to that spiritual reality. They think, for example, of the laying on of hands as only a mechanical action in the material sphere, and they cannot conceive of it as in any way indispensable to accompany the bestowal of heavenly grace for the work of ministry. A modern theologian has written that 'One bane of the whole question of the Sacraments is the obtrusion of the material elements'.¹

From time to time in Christian history, some have mistaken this half-truth for the whole truth. The Friends, with all their high-minded spirituality, have abandoned all sacraments. It led to the heresy of Docetism, at so early a date that there are allusions to it in the New Testament;² to the Docetists, even the catholic doctrine that the Word was made flesh seemed to be materialistic, and they ended by denying the truth of the Incarnation as a fact in the visible world.

The other half of this truth is found in the sacramental principle. Sacrament³ is a meeting-place of divine Spirit with humble matter, and the sacramental principle extends far beyond the solemn rites of the Church. This indeed might seem to follow from the mere fact of our dual nature, the fact that we, who live in material bodies in the concrete world, are at the same time spiritual beings. *Know ye not that your body is a temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have from God?*⁴ We ourselves are sacramental beings: but the great and all-comprehending sacrament was the holy Incarnation of the Son of God, the Word made flesh. From that greatest of all sacraments depends the truth and reality of all others. Our Lord has once for all ennobled humble matter into a new union with Spirit. This duality, this, to us, mysterious relation of spirit and matter, pervades the whole life of the Church and its members. When, for example, the presbyters pray over the sick, *anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord*,⁵ their use of a humble material accessory is not formal or 'mechanical' any more than is the use of water in Holy Baptism. It is the appointed accompaniment of a spiritual grace, an 'outward and visible sign' of a sacramental

¹ Forsyth, p. 133.

³ Note A. *Sacrament* (p. 5).

⁵ James v. 14.

² I John iv. 2; II John 7.

⁴ I Cor. vi. 19.

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character. It is right and necessary to guard against materialism and formalism, to keep the emphasis on the inward and spiritual rather than on the outward form; but it is necessary also for the spiritually minded to guard against a well-known tendency to exaggerate the antipathy of spirit and matter. The whole Church throughout the world is sacramental. Whatever we may believe to be the marks distinguishing it as visible in the world, so far as it is so, it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality.

III

Even if we have understood the sacramental principle, and have come to perceive that the visible Church and ministry are closely linked with that principle and with the sacraments themselves, we may still have failed to grasp the whole of another truth, of which we have seen only half.

We often recognize beauty of life and character in men and women who, though they seem to remain apart from the life and fellowship of the visible Church, are nevertheless much richer than ourselves or most churchgoers in what we must acknowledge to be true Christian grace. *By their fruits ye shall know them.* Surely then, the Church and all things ecclesiastical must be 'unessentials'? If the visible Church is, as St Paul says it is,¹ the household of God in the world, how is it, we ask ourselves, that there are very many of God's elect outside that visible household? If the sacraments are means of grace of His particular appointment, how is it that grace is often and abundantly vouchsafed to Friends and other devout Christians who do not resort to them? If God has appointed a visible stewardship for His household, how is it that notable prophets and evangelists are raised up outside its ranks?

Such questions often face us, and the answer is clear and manifest, that God is not tied to His Church, or its sacraments and ministry, as channels of His grace. That is neither new and original, nor in the least degree unorthodox; it has been the teaching of the Church from the earliest times. Those who suffered martyrdom for the Faith were believed to have received Baptism in their own blood. Crusaders were taught that, when wounded and dying in the field, if they but plucked and ate three blades of grass with faith and prayer, it was

¹ Eph. ii. 19.

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as if they had actually received the consecrated Host. The Church continues to teach the reality of spiritual communion, when actual sacramental reception is impossible; it is plainly taught in the Anglican book of Common Prayer.^{*1} In the old Latin book this spiritual act was expressed in the phrase 'only believe and thou hast eaten'. It was held at one time that confessors, i.e. those who had survived chains and torture, should rank as presbyters without actual ordination by the laying on of hands.^{*2} Those too who hold most firmly that there is no safety, no security, for us outside the household of God, *nulla salus extra Ecclesiam*, are also the first to acknowledge with thankfulness that many who have lived aloof from that household will hereafter be found among the elect.^{*3}

The great truth proclaimed in all these ways is, and always has been, the doctrine of the Church; it has for long been expressed in the theological maxim, *Deus non alligatur sacramentis*, God is not tied to His sacraments.^{*4} This can never be too distinctly stated, because there are many good people who imagine that insistence on the necessity of Church, sacraments, and ministry involves a terrible and indeed shocking doctrine that God's hands are tied to these means of grace, and that His omnipotence is somehow limited. They see that such a doctrine must be false, that it is almost blasphemous; they rightly recoil from it; but they are mistaken in supposing that it is held by churchmen of any school of thought.

Half a truth has again been mistaken for the whole. God is not bound to His appointed channels of grace. That is one half. *But we are*. That is the other half, which completes the truth. We are not to forsake the household of God, or its sacraments, although the grace of God can and does overflow the special channels to which His promises are attached. If we refuse to drink of a fountain provided for us, because He is able to bring water for us out of the rock in the wilderness, we greatly err. It is written, *Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*.⁵ What are 'unessentials' for God are not therefore unessentials for us. Are we then to judge those who have not known, or have not recognized, the household, or the fountains of grace made ready for those within it? God forbid. But for those who have seen and understood, it would be a grave presumption to remain

¹ Note B. *Spiritual Communion* (p. 5).

² Note C. *Confessors as presbyters without ordination* (p. 6).

³ Note D. '*Nulla salus extra Ecclesiam*' (p. 6).

⁴ Note E. '*Deus non alligatur sacramentis*' (p. 7).

⁵ Matt. iv. 7; Deut. vi. 16; Exod. xvii. 2, 7.

aloof. To despise and reject appointed channels of grace, counting upon God's power to bestow it in other ways, is to 'tempt' Him.

IV

Divergent views of the nature of the Church and the due credentials of its ministry are a chief obstacle in the way of Christian unity, but those who look upon these problems as 'merely ecclesiastical', unessential, will not give time to studying them.¹ Are they to wait for Christendom to come round to their way of thinking? It will be suggested in a later chapter how the sacramental principle helps to explain the nature of the Church in the world; no study of the Church as the household of God can have any meaning without some appreciation of that principle. Also it is first necessary to see that we may be bound to follow appointed ways although God cannot be bound. That does not, of course, establish the truth of the old belief that a continuing stewardship has been divinely appointed for the household, but it is necessary before there can be any serious examination of that belief.

¹ 'In recent generations Reformed churchmen have been little interested in questions of catholicity and indeed, in many cases, have not believed in the Church in any recognizable Biblical or traditional sense.' (D. T. Jenkins, *The Nature of Catholicity*, pp. 14, 15.)

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

A. SACRAMENT

The Latin *sacramentum* and *mysterium* are used in the Vulgate, apparently indifferently (e.g. Col. i. 26, 27), for 'mystery', to translate μυστήριον from the original Greek of the New Testament; but 'sacrament' is not used in the English translations. The word has come into Christian use in the same way in which the wording of the Creed has been evolved, in order to express conceptions and truths that are implicit in the Bible. For the stages in the meaning of the word, see Archbishop R. C. Trench, *On the Study of Words*, pp. 137 f., and W. Bright, *Sermons of St Leo the Great*, p. 136.

B. SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

In the office for the Communion of the Sick, instruction is given that 'if a man, either by reason of extremity of sickness, . . . or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. . . if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe. . . he

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doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth'. This teaching was given in the first vernacular Prayer Book of Edward VI in 1549, and has ever since been retained. Dr W. J. Sparrow Simpson deals with this subject in *The Ministry and the Eucharist* at pp. 72 and 99 f.

C. CONFESSORS AS PRESBYTERS WITHOUT ORDINATION

Some writings on Church order and worship dating from about the third century assign 'the honour of the presbyterate' to confessors without actual ordination. See Gore and Turner, p. 134, and Bishop W. H. Frere in *Essays on Early Hist.* pp. 289 f. It was expressly stated that they could not be made bishops without laying on of hands, possibly because a bishop is himself the minister of ordination.

D. 'NULLA SALUS EXTRA ECCLESIAM'

'Nearly all the great Fathers of the Church used to say: "Nulla salus extra ecclesiam." That phrase does not necessarily mean that no one can be ultimately saved who is not on earth in visible communion with the Church, but it does mean that God's grace is ordinarily given to us, not as mere individuals but as members of a body... If we are to attach a true and useful meaning to the phrase, we must remember that the Church is a society infinitely wider than people commonly suppose. It is certainly not to be identified with the Church of England, or the Church of Rome, or the orthodox Churches of the East, or even with these taken together as being one visible body, though now, unhappily, divided.

'The Church must include, at least, all those who have been baptized with water in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; and we certainly need not deny that the grace of God can and does overflow the special channels to which the promises are attached. We may distinguish, as Dr Pusey was accustomed to distinguish, between the soul and the body of the Church. I know of no wider and more beautiful conception of the Church than that contained in one of his University sermons (on the "Responsibility of the Intellect in matters of Faith", preached in 1872, pp. 37-44, *University Sermons*, vol. III):

The soul of the Church includes, we cannot doubt, a great multitude which no man can number of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues, who did not on earth belong to its body; as contrariwise believers, who led to the end bad lives and died impenitent, belonged, it may be, visibly to its body, but not to its soul.

For the Lover and Father of mankind, Who willeth not that any should perish, has not one way only of bringing home His lost sheep. All who shall be saved, shall be saved for the sake of that Precious Blood, which has redeemed our earth and arrayed it with Divine glory and beauty. Varied and beautiful, each with its own special loveliness, will be the choirs of His elect. In those ever open portals

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there enter, day and night, that countless multitude of every people, nation, and language; they who, in the Church, were by His grace faithful to Him, and they who knew not the Church of God, whom the Church below knew not how to win, or, alas! neglected to win them, but whom Jesus looked upon and the Father drew to Himself, whom His inner light enlightened, and who out of the misery of our fallen state, drawn by His unknown grace, looked up yearningly to Him their "unknown God", yet still their God, for He made them for Himself.

There, out of every religion or irreligion, out of every clime, in whatever ignorance steeped, in whatever hatred, or contempt, or blasphemy of Christ nurtured, God has His own elect, who ignorantly worship Him, and whose ignorant fear or longing He Who inspired it will accept.

'It is remarkable that these eloquent and tolerant words were written, not by a so-called *broad* Churchman, but by the man who did more than any one else in the last century to bring back the English Church and the English people to full belief in the importance and reality of sacramental grace, which is assured only to those who are in full communion with the Church.' (M. Cyril Bickersteth, *Letters to a Godson*, Second Series, chapter xvii.)

E. 'DEUS NON ALLIGATUR SACRAMENTIS'

This is sometimes expressed more generally, *non alligatur mediis*. It is found in substance in the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas (1227–74) that, under certain circumstances, a man is sanctified by the interior act of God *cuius potentia sacramentis visibilibus non alligatur*. (*Summa* III, Quæstio lxxviii, Art. ii.)

CHAPTER II. WORDS & NAMES

SOME words that must be used in any discussion of Church and ministry are commonly understood nowadays in meanings quite different from their meaning in the New Testament. This is true especially of the word 'Church' itself. It will be found too that some names or descriptions, such as apostles, and overseers or bishops, did not originally have the same significance that they have since acquired.*¹ It will be generally agreed that our surest guidance to a true interpretation must be looked for in the thought and language of apostolic and sub-apostolic times, particularly in that of the New Testament itself. There are other necessary words that are ambiguous and are used, often unwittingly, in different meanings by writers on these subjects, who therefore are sometimes found to be at cross purposes.

'CHURCH'

Not long ago a newspaper in a large provincial town contained notices of the religious services of over forty different denominations, nineteen of which used the word 'Church' in describing themselves. The word has come to be used very loosely. Even of Communism it has been said, by Berdyaev, that it 'wishes to be not only an organized Society, a State, but a Church as well'. It is useless to quarrel with such extended use of the word, or to try to confine it to the historic Church; Sir Thomas More, saint and scholar, wrote of 'the church of the Paynims'.²

Even within the limits of orthodox Christianity, the idea of nationality has developed in a way unknown to the primitive Church. In the New Testament we do not read of the Church *of* Ephesus, the Church *of* Rome, and so on, but of the saints *at* Colossae, or *at* Philippi, the Church *in* Ephesus, or the Church that is in the house of Nymphas, or of Aquila and Priscilla. It is one and the same Church, visible and organic, that is found welling up everywhere throughout the old world. It is like the sea; we may go to the sea on various coasts of our own or other lands. We shall find it at Berwick or Blackpool, Biarritz or Bermuda, but it is all the same

Note A. *Changed meanings of words* (p. 13).
 Sir Thomas More, *Heresies*, II. Works, 178/2.

sea. We do not speak of the sea of Berwick, or of Bermuda. It is true that we may observe variations in its appearance. The sea at Berwick has a different colour and temperature from those of the sea at Bermuda, but it is all the same sea. If you sail from one place to another you will find exactly the same salt water; if you found some harbour where the water was very different, you would know that it had become contaminated and was not pure sea water. Similarly, in apostolic times, there was no distinct Church of Jerusalem, or of Rome, or of Philippi. They were all visibly and organically one body, whose membership only was localized.*¹

The great subject of Christian reunion is closely concerned with a question that may be asked in regard to each Christian communion: Is it organically and recognizably *one* with 'the Church in Ephesus' or 'in the house of Nymphas'? On the one hand, all Christian communions that can claim to be truly and organically one with 'the church and the apostles and presbyters' at Jerusalem must also, it is plain, be truly and organically one with each other. In other words, the Apostolic Church of the first century is continuously one with the Apostolic Church of to-day; so this question vitally concerns every Christian communion. On the other hand, every Christian communion that cannot truly make that claim, however faithful and devout its members may be, must be lacking in something that is essential for organic unity with the Church of the apostles and essential, therefore, for Christian unity to-day.

It is clear that the mere adoption of the word 'Church' by a religious body settles nothing. Nor can it be admitted that a religious society or communion possesses organic unity with the Apostolic Church merely because it has been founded and carried on by sincere Christian believers. The members of a society, whether it is large or small, may all have been baptized into the universal Church, and yet their society, as a society, may not truly form part of the Church. Consider the following examples: the Society of Friends (Quakers); the Society of Jesus (Jesuits); the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel; the Salvation Army; the Church Army; the Congregational Union; the Wesleyan Connexion. That is a very varied list. The members of some of these societies have remained faithful to the life and worship of the historic Church, which others have deserted. The members of some of these societies have never even been baptized into the Church. All these societies have, in various ways,

Note B. *The Church localized* (p. 14).

manifestly been used as instruments of divine grace. None of them is a 'Church' in the New Testament sense, or in any sense that would have been recognizable to the early Christians.

The point which it is sought to bring out here is that we must rid our minds of some present-day conceptions in order to grasp clearly what the Church means in the New Testament. Thus, for example, there is mentioned at Ephesus and Pergamum a sect of Nicolaitans which, in the language of to-day, would be classed as a 'denomination' and would probably be called 'the Nicolaitan Church'; it might even find favour with the State and become 'established', when it would be called the Church of Ephesus. But to the early Church, such a description would have been impossible and unthinkable.

The true nature and meaning of the Church in the New Testament must be considered more fully in the next chapter.

'CATHOLIC'

The expression 'the Catholic Church' first occurs in the letter of St Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans, written about A.D. 110, where it means the one Church 'throughout-all', as opposed to local groups of its members, its local 'Churches'. Later, when heretical Christian sects were formed, the word acquired the additional meaning of the one and faithful Church, and that is its settled historical meaning.*¹ The famous *Commonitorium* of Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century, after speaking of the sufficiency of Scripture and the occurrence, nevertheless, of various errors, says that in the Catholic Church 'we hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all'. The word 'Catholic' will here be used in this acceptance, *ubique, semper, ab omnibus*, which, incidentally, is thought to afford the shortest and simplest disproof of claims subsequently asserted for the bishop of Rome. These were unheard of in the first few centuries, and they have never been admitted everywhere or by all. Rome, which maintains that the great Roman Church is the whole Church, is now quite consistent in claiming a monopoly of the word 'Catholic', but that claim cannot be admitted by other Christians, among whom, strangely enough, it is most often those most bitterly opposed to the Roman claim who verbally concede it by speaking and writing of 'Catholic' as if it meant 'Roman Catholic'.

¹ Note C. *The Catholic Church* (p. 14).