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THE USE OF THE TERMS BODY AND SOUL WITH REFERENCE TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

In the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* our Holy Father Pope Pius XII has acted energetically to end what had become a source of serious confusion in teaching about the Catholic Church.

We deplore and condemn the pernicious error of those who conjure up from their fancies an imaginary Church, a kind of Society that finds its origin and growth in charity, to which they somewhat contemptuously oppose another, which they call juridical. But this distinction, which they introduce, is baseless.¹

The *funestus error* reproved by the Sovereign Pontiff exists in Catholic theological literature under the guise of teaching on the body and soul of the Church. Some authors have described the *soul* of the Catholic Church as an invisible, spiritual society, and then designated the existing and visible Church as the *body*, the counterpart of that soul. The invisible or spiritual Church is presented as a society of good men and women in the state of grace, bound together by ties of faith and charity. According to those who have used the distinction rejected in the *Mystici Corporis* this soul of the Church is a society which exists even outside the membership of the visible Church. It is distinct from the Church of which the Roman Pontiff is the visible head, and yet it is in some way connected with it. The expression "members of the soul of the Church" which has unfortunately crept into the revised Baltimore Catechism² seems to involve some such teaching.

The distinction condemned by the Holy Father is used ordinarily to explain the connection between non-Catholics who are saved and the Catholic Church. Such a connection must exist, since the Church is necessary for the attainment of the beatific vision. To obviate what seemed to them a difficulty, some writers postulated the existence of a social organism of men and women who possess charity. This invisible Church or soul of the Church was depicted as wider in extent than the visible society, distinct from it, yet in some manner belonging with it. The body and the soul were presented as parts of that universal Church to which a person had to belong in order to be saved.

¹ AAS, XXXV (1943), 224; The NCWC translation # 64, p. 40.

² *The Number Two Catechism*, Lesson 12, #168.

Once and for all, the *Mystici Corporis* has stigmatized such an hypothesis as erroneous. There is no Church of God in this world in any way distinct from the one visible society which Jesus Christ instituted during the days of His earthly sojourn, and which He placed under the supreme and visible direction of St. Peter and his successors. Furthermore there is no society in this world composed only and entirely of persons in the state of grace. The just on earth are not organized into any society, made up exclusively of their own number.

The men who have applied the terms body and soul of the Church to the distinction condemned by the Holy Father have twisted metaphors found in Scripture and in the *De Ecclesia Militante* of St. Robert Bellarmine into meanings which they were never meant to convey. St. Paul called the Church the body of Christ, and the *Mystici Corporis* warns us against perverting his terminology.

“For some there are who neglect the fact that the Apostle Paul has used metaphorical language in speaking of this doctrine, and failing to distinguish the physical from the social body of Christ as they should, out of their fancy drawn some deformed kind of unity.³”

There is a tendency, however, to attribute every use of the terms body and soul of the Church in modern theological writing to St. Robert Bellarmine. Thus he is sometimes falsely represented as the source for the type of teaching condemned by Pope Plus XII. The truth of the matter is that paradoxically enough, the very terms which have been twisted to designate a distinction between a visible and an invisible Church appear in St. Robert's *De Ecclesia Militante* integrated into proofs that no such dichotomy exists.

The saintly Controversialist employed the terms body and soul with reference to the Catholic Church much more extensively than the other classical ecclesiologists. The terms are metaphors, and St. Robert used them effectively and scientifically as metaphors. He used the analogy of body and soul to explain various portions of his teaching on the nature of the Church. We find each term used in three distinct meanings in the *De Ecclesia Militante*. 1) The *body* is used to designate the Catholic Church itself. "The Church is a living body."⁴ St. Robert speaks of God the Holy Ghost

³ AAS, p. 234; NCWC translation, #84, p. 52.

⁴ *De Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus Huius Temporis Haereticos*; Tom. T, Ingolstadt, 1586, *Quartae Controversiae Generalis*, Liber III, *De Ecclesia Militante*, cap. 2, col. 1264.

as the *soul*, the correlative of this body. "The Church is governed by Christ, as by its Head and its Spouse, and by the Holy Ghost as by its Soul."⁵

2) The external profession of faith and the communication of the sacraments are called the *body* within the Church, or of the Church. The internal gifts of the Holy Ghost, faith, hope, charity and the rest constitute the corresponding soul.⁶

3) Good Catholics constitute the interior part, and as it were the *soul* of the Church, while the wicked persons within the Church are its exterior part, and as it were the *body*⁷. While the other great ecclesiologists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries never used the terms body and soul as extensively as did St. Robert, they were perfectly familiar with the distinctions which he sought to illustrate by the use of this analogy. We would be doing St. Robert a grave injustice were we to imagine that he brought some new concept of the soul and body of the Church into Catholic theology. What he actually did was to employ the analogy of body and soul to illustrate distinctions for which other theologians had used other terms. It was only when later and lesser theologians in the eighteenth century mistook the metaphors of St. Robert for factors which had to be explained in their own right that the process towards confusion was begun. In the *De Ecclesia Militante* there are no two entities indicated exclusively as *the* body and *the* soul of the Catholic Church.

St. Robert employed these terms as instruments for effective teaching. There is a definite and easily understandable relationship between a body and a soul, and the great Controversialist used this analogy to designate factors between which a somewhat similar relationship exists. The Catholic Church has an essential reference to the Holy Ghost. The external profession of the Christian faith, and the communication of the sacraments under legitimate ecclesiastical authority are related to the three theological virtues. The wicked Catholics have a definite reference to their virtuous coreligionists. In each case the relationship could be explained to some extent by means of a comparison with the relationship existing between a body and a soul.

The *Mystici Corporis* uses the analogy of body and soul in only one

⁵Op. cit., cap. 14, col. 1315.

⁶Op. cit., cap. 2, col. 1264.

⁷Op. cit., cap. 9, col. 1294.

way. The body is a name of the Church, while the Holy Ghost is called the Soul of the Church.

“If we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ, . . . which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church, . . . we shall find no expression more noble, more sublime or more divine than the phrase which calls it ‘the mystical Body of Jesus Christ.’ ”

The *Mystici Corporis* cites Leo XIII in calling the Holy Ghost the Soul of the Church. “Let it suffice to say that, as Christ is the Head of the Church, so is the Holy Ghost her Soul.”⁹

There is good reason why the analogy of body and soul can help us to appreciate the relation of the Catholic Church to the Holy Ghost. The function of the Blessed Trinity, appropriated to the Holy Ghost as the Soul of the Church is quite distinct from that of our Lord, who, as man, is the Head of this society. There is one, and only one invisible and temporal mission of the divine Persons. This takes place in and with the gift of sanctifying grace. God, Who is in all things by His presence, power and substance, has chosen to dwell in some intellectual creatures in yet another way, as an Object to be known, loved and enjoyed as He is in Himself. Thus this mission, appropriated to God the Holy Ghost, renders a man competent to know and love God as He is in Himself, and not merely as He can be recognized as the first Cause of creatures.

In the fatherland of heaven, this knowledge is the beatific vision itself. In this world the supernatural awareness of God is to be found in faith, the preparation for the vision. The knowledge and the love of God resultant from the indwelling of the Holy Ghost and expressed in the acts of the theological virtues are social rather than merely individual. They tend to unite men within the Catholic Church, and together the acts of the supernatural virtues constitute the basic operation of that Church. Thus, since the Holy Ghost, dwelling within the Church, acts as the ultimate Principle of its corporate unity and life, His function within this society bears some resemblance to that of a soul within a living physical body. So it is that the metaphor soul is useful and effective in explaining His work in the Church of Jesus Christ.

It is of course impossible to conciliate this use of the term soul with the expression “members of the soul of the Church.” There are members

⁸ AAS, p. 199; NCWC translation, # 13, p. 11.

⁹ AAS, p. 220; NCWC translation, # 56, p. 35.

of a body or of a society. There can be no members of the Holy Ghost. Furthermore the men and women in whom the Holy Ghost dwells through sanctifying grace do not constitute any social organization by themselves in this world.

Historically, the false use of the terms body and soul has come from a failure to understand St. Robert's second application of this analogy. This time the terminology is St. Robert's own. While the other classical ecclesiologists commonly used the terms body and soul to designate the Church and the Holy Ghost, they did not employ these metaphors to designate the external profession of the faith and the communication of the sacraments on the one hand, and the three theological virtues on the other. In order to understand St. Robert's use of this analogy, we must see these terms in their proper context.

St. Robert used this analogy in the second chapter of his *De Ecclesia Militante*, the chapter in which he presents his famous definition of the Church. This chapter opens with the citation and the criticism of five formulae which the heretics had used to describe the true Church of Jesus Christ. Then follows the definition which has become classical in Catholic theology.

“But it is our teaching that there is one Church, and not two, and that this one and true Church is the assembly of men gathered together in the profession of the same Christian faith and in the communion of the same sacraments under the rule of legitimate pastors, and particularly of the Roman Pontiff, the one Vicar of Christ on earth.”¹⁰

The great Controversialist employs the terms body and soul in indicating the difference between his definition and the various formulae which had been offered by heretics.

“Our teaching differs from all the others in this, that all the others require internal virtues to constitute someone as within the Church, and therefore they make the true Church invisible. But although we believe that all the virtues, faith, hope, charity and the rest are found in the Church, still, in order that someone be said to be absolutely a part of the true Church spoken of in the Scriptures, we do not think that any internal virtue whatsoever is required, but only the external *profession of faith* and the sensibly perceived communion of the sacraments. For the Church is as visible and palpable a society as the assembly of the Roman people or the kingdom of France or the Republic of the Venetians.

“But we should remember from Augustine, *in the Breviculus Collationis*,

¹⁰ Op. cit., cap. 2, col. 1263.

in the third conference, that the Church is a living body, in which there is a soul and a body. The internal gifts of the Holy Ghost, faith, hope, charity and the rest are the soul. The external profession of the faith and the communication of the sacraments are the body.

“Hence it is that some are of the soul and of the body of the Church *de anima et de corpore Ecclesiae* and thus both inwardly and outwardly united with Christ the Head. These are most perfectly of the Church, for they are like living members in a body, although even among these some partake more of life and others less. And some even have only the beginning of life, and as it were sensation but not movement, as those who have faith alone without charity.

“Again, some are of the soul and not of the body, as catechumens or excommunicated persons, if they possess faith and charity as they very well may.

“Finally others are of the body but not of the soul, as those who have no internal virtue, but who still profess the faith and communicate in the sacraments under the rule of the pastors by reason of some temporal hope or fear. Such persons are like hairs or fingernails or diseased fluids in the human body. Therefore our definition takes cognizance of only this last way of being in the Church, since this is required as a minimum in order that a person may be said to be a part of the visible Church.”¹¹

Such is the teaching of St. Robert Bellarmine. Taken in their proper context, the terms body and soul of the Church prove to be instruments employed by St. Robert in establishing his contention "that there is one Church and not two," and that this one Church of Jesus Christ is as visible an organization as any civil society. It was not St. Robert, but rather the followers of Luther and of Calvin who distinguished between a visible and an invisible Church. This was the very error which the great Doctor of the Church set out to overthrow.

St. Robert speaks of the three theological virtues as the soul in or of the Church. Manifestly there can be no such thing as a "member of the soul of the Church" in this sense. Faith, hope and charity constitute neither a body nor a society.

The people whom St. Robert designated as "of the soul of the Church" are, in the light of his own teaching, those who possess the virtues which are found within the Catholic Church and which the heretics had claimed as requisite for membership in the Church. Those who are "of the soul and not of the body" are precisely the individuals who have these virtues without being actually members of

¹¹ Op. cit., cap. 2, col. 1264.

Church. Neither the soul nor the persons who are said to be "of" that soul could be considered as forming a society in any way distinct from the one visible Church of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the counterpart of this soul is not the Church itself. The external profession of faith and the communication of the sacraments constitute this correlative body. The theological virtues and the other factors which St. Robert designated as the corresponding body are forms or forces which tend to unite a man to Christ, the Head of the Church. Those who are "of" both the soul and the body of the Church are said to be "inwardly and outwardly united to Christ the Head."

A man is inwardly united to Christ in so far as he elicits some supernatural activity stemming from the *gratia capitalis* of our Lord Himself. No man can have the supernatural life, or even the beginning of that life as found in faith without charity, unless it be communicated to him by Christ. Thus there is a necessary contact between our Lord and every man who falls within the category of those who are "of the soul of the Church." But this union is invisible and inward, brought about in and through the communication of divine grace.

The outward union with Christ is the factor by which a man places himself in the ranks of the Church militant. The Church, as a society, is the body of Christ, and thus the man who is a part of this society is actually joined to our Lord. The persons who are "of the body of the Church" according to the terminology of St. Robert, are precisely those who fulfill the minimum and essential requisites for being parts of this society, and who thus are outwardly and visibly in contact with Christ.

St. Robert offers catechumens and excommunicated persons as examples of those who are not of the body of the Church, but who may be of the soul. He teaches explicitly that such people are not members of the Catholic Church.¹² Yet, far from postulating the existence of some spiritual and invisible society or Church, in any manner distinct from the Catholic Church, to which such persons would belong and through which they could achieve their eternal salvation, St. Robert teaches distinctly that they can be saved by being of the Church by desire.¹³

Thus there is one, and only one necessary social vehicle of salvation.

¹² Op. cit., chapters 3 and 6; columns 1265–1266; 1274–1277.

¹³ Op. cit., cap. 3, col. 1266; cap. 6, col. 1276.

There is no society in any way distinct from the visible Catholic Church through which men may attain to the beatific vision. The men who are saved must be either actually members of this Church or desire to enter this society as members. Such a desire must be sincere, even where, by reason of faulty instruction it is implicit rather than explicit. St. Robert's use of the metaphors body and soul aptly explains the relationship between the external profession of faith and the three theological virtues. The factors which constitute a man as a member of the Catholic Church are the external profession of the faith and the communication of the sacraments. The man who makes a profession of the Catholic faith should really believe. The person who receives the sacraments should receive them with the proper dispositions, and thus possess the life of charity. Without the factors which St. Robert indicated as the soul, the external profession of the faith and the communication of the sacraments would suffice to establish a man as a member of the Catholic Church.

However they would not make him a living member. Apart from the elements which St. Robert named as the soul, the corresponding external acts would be meaningless and insincere. Since the three theological virtues, together with the other internal gifts of the Holy Ghost, act to vivify and inform the elements which St. Robert designated as the body, the analogy of body and soul is useful as a means for teaching about their relations with the factors which contribute to make a man a member of the Church.

In the ninth chapter of the *De Ecclesia Militante*, St. Robert drew the terms of his analogy of body and soul from the same source, but attached different meanings to the terms. Once again he mentions St. Augustine's use of the analogy in the *Breviculus*, albeit St. Robert does not record the fact that the actual terms *corpus et anima* do not occur in the passage to which he refers. But, where before the soul of the Church was used to designate "the internal gifts of the Holy Ghost, faith, hope, charity and the like," now the good Catholics are represented as constituting, the interior part, and as it were the soul of the Church. Where, in the second chapter, the external profession of the faith and the communication of the sacraments constituted the body of the Church, here in the ninth chapter the *quasi corpus* is made up of wicked Catholics.

In the ninth chapter St. Robert deals with the thesis that a great and manifest sinner can be a part of the Catholic Church. Among the objections he considers is one based upon assertions of St. Augustine,

to the effect that Christ cannot have members who have been damned. The terms *quasi corpus*, and *quasi anima Ecclesiae* occur in the response to this objection.

I answer that, because of these statements, not only Brentius and Calvin, but also certain Catholics fancy that there are two Churches. However this is truly imagination, since neither the Scriptures nor Augustine ever speak of two Churches, but only of one Church. Certainly, in the *Breviculus Collationum*, in the third conference, when the Donatists falsely charged the Catholics with holding two Churches, one of which would contain only the good while the other would hold both good and wicked persons, the Catholics answered that they never dreamed that there were two Churches, but that they had only distinguished parts or stages of the Church.

There were parts since the good belong to the Church in one way and the wicked in another. For the good are the inner part, and as it were the soul of the Church *quasi anima Ecclesiae*. The wicked are the outer part and as it were the body *quasi corpus*. And they gave the example of the inner and the outer man *de homine interiore et exteriori*, who are not two men but two parts of the same man.¹⁴

Not by any means all of the men who are said to be "of the soul of the Church" in the second chapter, appear in the ninth chapter of the *De Ecclesia Militante* within the *quasi anima Ecclesiae*. Only good Catholics, members of the true Church who are in the state of grace are said to constitute the *quasi anima*. Not only these persons, but all those who have the true faith, whether they are in the state of grace or not, and whether they are members of the Church or not, are classed, as "of the soul of the Church" according to the terminology of the second chapter.

Obviously there is nothing in this last use of the terms body and soul favoring the existence of an invisible Church. The terms *quasi corpus* and *quasi anima* actually appear within a passage devoted to the proof that no such organization exists. There is no such thing as a member of this "soul of the Church," since the Catholics in the state of grace have no special social organization distinct from that of the Church itself. Only a body or a society can have a member. Yet, at the same time, the fact remains that good Catholics and wicked Catholics do not belong to the Church in the same way. Those who are in the state of grace possess that supernatural activity which is the basic community life of the Catholic Church. The wicked within the Church do not contribute towards this activity. They are

¹⁴ Op. cit., cap. 9, col. 1294.

as it were carried along in an organization which lives a life of supernatural perfection. Thus they stand in somewhat the same relation to good Catholics as the body does to the soul within the human composite.

St. Robert himself is authority for the statement that even in his time certain Catholics had postulated the existence of a twofold church. However it was not until the eighteenth century that men began to abuse his terminology to propound a thesis which was wholly distasteful to him. Charles du Plessis d'Argentre, Honoratus Tournely and Louis Legrand who contributed towards the use of the terms body and soul to designate a twofold Church no longer considered these words as metaphors, but thought of them as names for some realities which demanded an explanation in their own, right. Now that the Holy Father has reproved the doctrine of the twofold Church, we may look forward to a decided improvement in popular ecclesiology.

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