

“Mater Ecclesia,”

from *The Splendor of the Church* by Henri de Lubac (p. 236-239)

The story is told of a priest who, shortly after apostatizing, said to a visitor who was about to congratulate him: “From now onward I am no more than a philosopher—in other words, a man alone.” It must have been a bitter reflection, but it was true. He had left the home outside which there will never be anything save exile and solitude. Many people are not aware of this truth because they live in the passing moment, alienated from themselves, rooted in this world like seaweed on the rocks.” The preoccupations of daily life absorb them; “the golden mist of appearances” forms a veil of illusion around them. Sometimes they look in a hundred and one different places for some substitute for the Church, as if to deceive their own longings. Yet the man who hears in the depths of his being the call that has stimulated his thirst for communion—indeed, the man who does no more than sense it—grasps that neither friendship nor love, let alone any of the social groupings that underlie his own life, can satisfy it. No more can the arts or philosophizing or independent spiritual exploration; for these are only symbols, the promise of something other than themselves, and, in the bargain, deceptive symbols whose promise is not fulfilled. Such bonds as these are either too abstract or too particularized, too superficial or too ephemeral; they are all the more powerless in proportion as they had great pull. There is nothing created by man and nothing on man’s level that can wrench him free from his solitude; it grows deeper the more he discovers concerning himself; for it is nothing other than the reverse side of the communion to which he is called and has both the breadth and depth of that communion.

God did not make us “to remain within the limits of nature” or for the fulfilling of a solitary destiny; on the contrary, he made us to be brought together into the heart of the life of the Trinity. Christ offered himself in sacrifice so that we might be one in that unity of the divine Persons. That is to be the “recapitulation,” “regeneration,” and “consummation” of all things, and anything outside that which exerts a pull over us is a thing of deception. But there is a place where this gather together of all things in the Trinity begins in this world; “a family of God,” a mysterious extension of the Trinity in time, which not only prepares us for this life of union and gives us a sure guarantee of it, but also makes us participate in it already. The Church is the only completely “open” society, the only one that measures up to our deepest longings and in which we can finally find our whole shape. “The people united by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”: that is the Church. She is “full of the Trinity.” The Father is in her “as the principle to which one is united, the Son as the medium in which one is united, the Holy Spirit as the knot by which all things are united; and all is one.” It is not only that we know this; we already have an anticipatory experience of it in the obscurity of faith. For us, according to the mode that suits our earthly condition, the Church is the very realization of that communion which is so much sought for. She guarantees not only our community of destiny but also our community of vocation; the bonds with which she seems to bind us have no other aim than freeing us, uniting us, and giving us room to breathe. She is the matrix that forms that “unity of the Spirit” which is no more than a mirage if there is not “unity of the body” as well. She is the “perfect dove,” like the Holy Spirit himself; in her unity we all become one, as the Father and the Son are one. Hence the fullness conveyed by the joyful words in which we bind ourselves to the gift we receive from heaven—“Amen to God.”

When we have entered the holy dwelling, whose dimensions are vaster than those of the universe, and have become members of the Mystical Body—

we have at our disposal for loving, understanding, and serving God not only our own powers, but everything from the Blessed Virgin in the summit of heaven down to the poor African leper, who,

bell in hand, whispers the responses of the Mass through a mouth half eaten away. The whole of creation, visible and invisible, all history, all the past, the present, and the future, all the treasure of the saints, multiplied by grace—all that is at our disposal as an extension of ourselves, a mighty instrument. All the saints and the angels belong to us. We can use the intelligence of St. Thomas, the right arms of St. Michael, the hearts of Joan of Arc and Catherine of Siena, and all the hidden resources that have only to be touched to be set in action. Everything of the good, the great, and the beautiful from one end of the earth to the other—everything that *begets* sanctity (as a doctor says of a patient that he has *got* a fever)—it is as if all that were our work. The heroism of the missionary, the inspiration of the Doctors of the Church, the generosity of the martyrs, the genius of the artists, the burning prayer of the Poor Clares and Carmelites—it is as if all that were ourselves; it is ourselves. All that is one with us, from the North to the South, from the Alpha to the Omega, from the Orient to the Occident; we clothe ourselves in it, we set it in motion. ... The Church transposes, and paints outside us on a vast scale, all that is in us almost without our knowing it. Our brief and blind impulses are wedded, taken up again, interpreted, developed, by vast stellar movements. Outside ourselves we can decipher at astronomic distances the text written on a microscopic scale in the farthest depths of the heart. (*Paul Claudel interroge le Cantique des cantiques.*)