

LOYALTY TO THE CHURCH

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The texts of this Sunday's liturgy form a chain of invocations to the Lord. We tell him that he is our support, our rock, our defence (cf Ps 17:19-20, 2-3). The collect also takes up the theme of the introit: 'You never refuse your light to those who stand fast in the firmness of your love'¹.

In the gradual we continue to have recourse to him: 'In moments of anguish I have called upon the Lord . . . Free my soul, o Lord, from lying lips, from deceiving tongues, Lord, I take refuge in you!' (Ps 19:12; 7:2). We are moved by the insistence of God our Father who is determined to remind us that we ought to appeal to his mercy, no matter what happens, always. Now as well, in these moments in which confused voices are rending the Church, many souls are going astray, because they do not find good shepherds, other Christs, who would guide them to the Lord of Love. They find, instead, 'thieves and robbers' who come 'to steal, to kill, to destroy' (Jn 10:8, 10).

Let us not be afraid. The Church, which is the body of Christ, must indefectibly be the path and the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd, the strong foundation and the way open to all men. We have just read in the holy Gospel: 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and make them come in, so that my house may be filled' (Lk 14:23).

But what is the Church? Where is the Church? Bewildered and disoriented, many Christians do not find sure answers to these questions. And they come to believe that perhaps the answers which the Magisterium has formulated for centuries—and which good catechisms have proposed with the necessary precision and simplicity—have now been 'surpassed' and must be substituted by new ones. A series of facts and difficulties seem to have come together to darken the bright countenance of the Church. Some maintain that the valid Church can be found only in their personal zeal to accommodate it to what they call *modern times*. Others cry out: the Church is nothing more than man's desire for solidarity. We ought to change it in accord with present circumstances.

They are wrong. The Church today is the same one Christ founded. It cannot be any other. 'The Apostles and their successors are vicars of God for the ruling of the Church, founded on the faith and on the sacraments of the faith. Therefore just as it is not lawful for them to establish another Church, neither can they pass on another faith nor institute other sacraments. Rather the Church has been constructed through the sacraments which flowed forth from the side of Christ as he hung on the cross'². The Church must be recognized by the four marks expressed in the profession of faith of one of the first councils, as we pray in the creed of the Mass: 'only one Church, holy, catholic and apostolic'³. These are the essential properties of the Church, which are derived from its nature as Christ intended it. And, being essential, they are also marks, signs, which distinguish it from any other human gathering, even though in the others the name of Christ may also be pronounced.

A little more than a century ago, Pope Pius IX summed up briefly this traditional teaching: 'The true Church of Christ is constituted and recognized, by divine authority, in the four marks which in the creed we affirm as to be believed; and each of these marks is so united with the others that it cannot be separated from them. For this reason, that which truly is and is called catholic, should at the same time shine forth by the prerogatives of unity, of holiness and of apostolic succession'⁴. It is, I insist, the traditional teaching of the Church, which the Second Vatican Council has repeated again, even though in recent years some may have forgotten it, led by a false ecumenism. 'This is the sole Church of Christ which in the creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter's pastoral care, commissioning him and the other Apostles to extend and rule it, and which he raised up for all ages as the pillar and mainstay of the truth'⁵.

THE CHURCH IS ONE

'That they may be one, as we are one' (Jn 17:11), Christ cries out to his Father; 'that all may be one, even as you Father, in me and I in you; that they also may be one in us' (Jn 17:21). This exhortation to unity flows in a constant stream from the lips of Jesus, for 'every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand' (Mt 12:25). It is a teaching which is converted into a vehement desire: 'Other sheep I have that are not of this fold. Them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd' (Jn 10:16).

What beautiful tones our Lord uses to express this doctrine! He multiplies words and images so that we may understand it, so that this passion for unity may remain engraved on our souls. 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-dresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he will take away; and every branch that bears fruit he will prune, that it may bear more fruit . . . Abide in me, and I in you, as the branch

cannot bear fruit of itself unless it remain on the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing' (Jn 15:1-5).

Do you not see how those who separate themselves from the Church, even though sometimes they are full of foliage, quickly dry up, and their very fruits are converted into a living bed of worms? Love the one, holy, Roman, apostolic Church. One! For, as St Cyprian writes: 'He who reaps elsewhere, outside the Church, dissipates the Church of Christ'⁶. And St John Chrysostom insists: 'Do not separate yourself from the Church. Nothing is stronger than the Church. Your hope is the Church; your salvation is the Church; your refuge is the Church. It is higher than the heavens, and broader than the earth; it never grows old, its vigor is eternal'⁷.

To defend the unity of the Church is to live very united to Jesus Christ, who is our vine. How? By growing in fidelity to the perennial Magisterium of the Church: 'For the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter in order that through his revelation they should manifest a new doctrine, but rather that, with his assistance, they should safeguard in a holy way and faithfully teach the revelation transmitted by the Apostles: the deposit of the faith'⁸. By venerating this mother of ours without stain and loving the Roman Pontiff, we will preserve unity.

Some say that few men are left in the Church. I would answer that if all of us loyally safeguarded Christ's doctrine, our number would grow considerably since God wants his house to be filled. In the Church we discover Christ, who is the Love of our lives. And we should desire for all men our vocation, this intimate joy which intoxicates the soul, the limpid sweetness of the most merciful heart of Jesus.

One hears it said that we must be ecumenical. So be it. Nevertheless I fear that behind some self-styled ecumenical activities, there is a hidden fraud: for they are activities which do not lead to our loving Christ, to the true vine. For that reason they lack fruit. I ask our Lord each day to expand my heart, that he may continue to supernaturalize the love he has put in my soul toward all men without distinction of race, nationality, cultural condition or wealth. I sincerely esteem all men, Catholics or not, those who believe in something and those who do not. I feel sorry for these unbelievers. But Christ founded only one Church; he has only one spouse.

The union of all Christians? Yes. Even more: the union of all those who believe in God. But there exists only one true Church. There is no need to rebuild it out of pieces dispersed throughout the world. And it does not need to go through any sort of purification in order to remain finally clean. 'The spouse of Christ cannot be adulterous, for it is incorruptible and pure. Only one house knows and safeguards the inviolability of only one bridal bed with chaste modesty. She preserves us for God, she destines for the kingdom the

children she has begotten. Anyone who separates himself from the Church unites himself with an adulterer, he leaves behind the promises of the Church; and he who abandons the Church of Christ will not achieve the rewards of Christ⁹.

THE CHURCH IS HOLY

Now we can understand better how the unity of the Church leads to her holiness, and how one of the principal aspects of her holiness is that unity centred on the mystery of the one and triune God. 'One body and one Spirit, even as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and throughout all, and in us all' (Eph 4:4-6).

Holiness means precisely union with God: a greater intimacy with the Lord, more sanctity. The Church has been willed and founded by Christ, who carries out in this way the will of the Father: the spouse of the Son is assisted by the Holy Spirit. The Church is the work of the blessed Trinity: it is holy and our mother, our holy mother the Church. We can admire in the Church a perfection which we could call original and another final, eschatological. St Paul refers to both of them in his letter to the Ephesians. 'Christ loved the Church, and delivered himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, cleansing her in the bath of water by means of the word: in order that he might present to himself the Church in all her glory, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph 5:25-27).

The original and constitutive holiness of the Church can be hidden—but never destroyed—since it is indefectible: 'The gates of hell will not prevail against it' (Mt 16:18). It can be veiled from human eyes, as I was saying, in certain moments of obscurity, which can become almost universal. But St Peter applies to Christians the title of 'holy nation' (1 Pet 2:9). And being members of a holy nation, all the faithful have received a call to holiness, and they must strive to correspond to grace and to be personally holy. Throughout history and now as well, there have been so many Catholics who have truly sanctified themselves: young and old, single and married, priests and lay people, men and women.

But it happens that the personal sanctity of so many faithful—then and now—is not something externally apparent. Frequently we do not recognize the ordinary people, common and holy, who work and live alongside us. From an earthly viewpoint, what stands out most is sin and unfaithfulness: they are more apparent.

A 'holy nation,' composed of creatures with infirmities. This apparent contradiction marks an aspect of the mystery of the Church. The Church, which is divine, is also human, for it is made up of men, and men have their defects: 'We are all dust and ashes' (Eccli 17:31).

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who founds the holy Church, expects the members of his people to strive continually to acquire sanctity. Not all respond loyally to his call.

And in the spouse of Christ, at one and the same time, both the marvel of the way of salvation and the miseries of those who take up that way are visible. 'It was one and the same purpose—namely, that of perpetuating on this earth the salutary work of the redemption—which caused the divine Redeemer to give the community of human beings founded by him the constitution of a society perfect in its own order, provided with all the juridical and social elements . . . If something is perceived in the Church which points to the infirmity of our human condition, this is not to be attributed to her juridical constitution, but to the lamentable tendency of individuals toward evil, a tendency which her divine Founder suffers to exist even in the higher members of his mystical body, for the testing of the virtue of both flock and pastors, and for the greater merit of christian faith in all'¹⁰.

This is the reality of the Church here and now. For this reason the holiness of the spouse of Christ is compatible with the existence in her bosom of persons with defects. 'Christ did not will sinners to be excluded from the society he had founded; if therefore some members are spiritually infirm, this is no reason for lessening our love toward the Church, but rather for increasing our compassion toward her members'¹¹.

It would be a sign of very little maturity if, in view of the defects and miseries of any who belong to the Church—no matter how high they may be placed by virtue of their function—anyone should feel his faith in the Church and in Christ lessened. The Church is not governed by Peter, nor by John, nor by Paul; it is governed by the Holy Spirit, and the Lord has promised that he will remain at her side 'all days, even to the end of the world' (Mt 28:20).

Listen to what St Thomas Aquinas says, elaborating on this point. He is speaking about receiving the sacraments, which are the cause and sign of sanctifying grace: 'He who approaches the sacraments, receives them to be sure from the minister of the Church, not in so far as he is this or that person, but rather in so far as he is a minister of the Church. Therefore as long as the Church permits him to exercise his ministry, anyone who receives the sacraments from his hands, does not participate in the sin of the unworthy minister, but rather communicates with the Church, which has him as a minister'¹². When the Lord permits human weakness to appear, our reaction ought to be the same as if we were to see our mother sick or treated with disdain: to love her all the more, to bestow on her more manifestations of affection, both external and internal.

If we love the Church, there will never arise in us that morbid interest in airing as the faults of the mother the weakness of some of her children. The Church, the spouse of Christ, does not have to intone any *mea culpa*. But we do: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. The only true *mea culpa* is a personal one, not the one which attacks the Church, pointing out and exaggerating the human defects which, in this

holy mother, result from the presence in her of men whose actions can go far astray, but which can never destroy—nor even touch—that which we call the original and constitutive holiness of the Church.

God our Lord indeed has compared the Church to the threshing floor where the straw is piled together with the wheat from which will come bread for the table and bread for the altar. He has compared the Church to a dragnet (cf Mt 13:47) that catches both good and bad fish, of which the latter are later thrown away.

The mystery of the holiness of the Church—that pristine light which can become hidden by the shadows of human lowliness—rejects even the slightest thought of suspicion, of doubt about the beauty of our mother. Nor can we tolerate, without protesting, that others insult her. We cannot seek out in the Church the vulnerable points in order to criticize them, as some do who show thereby neither their faith nor their love. I cannot conceive of anyone having true affection for his mother, while speaking disdainfully of her.

Our mother is holy, because she was born pure and will continue without blemish for all eternity. If at times we are not able to perceive her fair face, let us clean our own eyes. If we notice that her voice does not please us, let us remove from our ears any hardness which prevents us from hearing in her tone of voice the whistled beckonings of the loving Shepherd. Our mother is holy, with the holiness of Christ, to whom she is united in body—which is all of us—and in spirit, which is the Holy Spirit, dwelling also in the hearts of each one of us, if we remain in the grace of God.

Holy, holy, holy, we dare to sing to the Church, evoking a hymn in honour of the blessed Trinity. You are holy, o Church, my mother, because the Son of God, who is holy, founded you; you are holy, because the Father, source of all holiness, so ordained it; you are holy, because the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the souls of the faithful, assists you, in order to gather together the children of the Father, who will dwell in the Church of heaven, the eternal Jerusalem.

THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC

God 'wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all, bearing witness in his own time' (1 Tim 2:4-6). Jesus Christ instituted only one Church: for this reason the spouse of Christ is one and Catholic; universal, for all men.

For many centuries now the Church has been spread throughout the world; and it numbers persons of all races and walks of life. But the universality of the Church does not depend on its geographical distribution, even though this is a visible sign and a motive of credibility. The Church was catholic already at Pentecost: it was born catholic from the wounded heart of Jesus, as a fire which the Holy Spirit enkindled.

In the second century the Christians called the

Church catholic in order to distinguish it from the sects which, using the name of Christ, were betraying his doctrine in one way or another. 'We call it catholic,' writes St Cyril, 'not only because it is spread throughout the world, from one extreme to the other, but because in a universal way and without defect it teaches all the dogmas which men ought to know, of both the visible and the invisible, the celestial and the earthly. Likewise because it draws to true worship all types of men, those who govern and citizens, the learned and the ignorant. And finally, because it cures and makes healthy all kinds of sins, whether of the soul or of the body, possessing in addition—by whatever name it may be called—all the forms of virtue, in deeds and in words and in every kind of spiritual gift'¹³.

The catholicity of the Church does not depend either on whether or not non-Catholics acclaim and acknowledge it. Nor does it have anything to do with the fact that, in non-spiritual matters, the opinions of some persons in positions of authority in the Church are taken up—and at times exploited—by those who fashion public opinion, when these churchmen have views similar to theirs. It will often happen that the aspect of truth which is defended in any human ideology will find an echo of foundation in the perennial teaching of the Church. This is, in a certain sense, a sign of the divinity of the revelation which the Magisterium safeguards. But the spouse of Christ is catholic, even when it is deliberately ignored by many, and even abused and persecuted, as unfortunately happens in so many places.

The Church is not a political party, nor a social ideology, nor a worldwide organisation for harmony or material progress, even though we recognize the nobility of these and other activities. The Church has always undertaken and undertakes today an immense work on behalf of the needy, of those who suffer, of all those who suffer in any way the consequences of the only true evil, which is sin. And to all—to those who are in any way needy and to those who claim to enjoy the fullness of earthly goods—the Church comes to confirm only one, essential, definitive truth: that our destiny is eternal and supernatural, that only in Jesus Christ are we saved for all time, and that only in him will we achieve in some way already in this life true peace and happiness.

Ask God our Lord now, along with me, that we Catholics may never forget these truths, and that we may resolve to put them into practice. The Catholic Church does not need the approval of men, for it is the work of God.

We will show ourselves to be Catholics by the fruits of sanctity which we bear, for sanctity does not admit of frontiers, nor is it the patrimony of any particular group. We will show ourselves to be Catholics if we pray, if we strive to direct ourselves to God at all times, if we make an effort always and in all things to be just—in the broadest sense of the term justice, which is used frequently in these times with a materialistic and erroneous connotation—if we

love and defend the personal freedom of other men.

I remind you also of another clear sign of the universality of the Church: the faithful preservation and administration of the sacraments as they were instituted by Jesus Christ, without human deformations or evil attempts to interpret them psychologically or sociologically. For 'no one can determine what is under the power of another, but only that which is within his own power. And since the sanctification of man falls under the power of the sanctifying God, it is not within man's power to establish according to his own judgment what things are to sanctify him, but rather this must be determined by divine institution'¹⁴. The attempts to take universality away from the essence of the sacraments would perhaps be justified if it were a matter only of *signs*, of symbols, which are subject to the natural laws of comprehension and understanding. But 'the sacraments of the New Law are at once both causes and signs. For this reason it is commonly taught that they cause what they signify. Therefore they preserve perfectly the nature of sacrament in as much as they are ordered to something sacred, not only as signs, but also as causes'¹⁵.

This catholic Church is Roman. I savor that word Roman! I feel completely Roman, for Roman means universal, catholic. For it leads me to love tenderly the pope, *il dolce Cristo in terra*, as St Catherine of Siena, whom I count as a most beloved friend, liked to repeat.

'From this catholic Roman center,' Paul VI emphasized in the closing address of the Second Vatican Council, 'no one is, in theory, beyond reach; all can and should be reached. For the catholic Church no one is a stranger, no one is excluded, no one considers himself far away'¹⁶. I venerate with all my strength the Rome of Peter and Paul, bathed in the blood of the martyrs, the centre from which so many have set out to propagate throughout the world the saving word of Christ. To be Roman does not entail any manifestation of provincialism, but rather of authentic ecumenism. It presupposes the desire to enlarge the heart, to open it to all men with the redemptive zeal of Christ, who seeks all men and takes in all men, for he has loved all men first.

St Ambrose wrote a few words which comprise, as it were, a song of joy: 'Where Peter is, there is the Church; and where the Church is, not death, but eternal life reigns'¹⁷. For where Peter and the Church are, there Christ is; and he is salvation, the only way.

THE CHURCH IS APOSTOLIC

Our Lord founded his Church on the weakness—but also on the fidelity—of a few men, the Apostles, to whom he promised the constant assistance of the Holy Spirit. Let us read again the well-known text, which is ever new and up-to-date: 'All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded

you; and behold, I am with you all days, even unto the consummation of the world' (Mt 28:18-20).

The preaching of the Gospel does not arise in Palestine through the personal initiative of a few fervent individuals. What could the Apostles do? They were nothing in their time. From a human point of view, they were neither rich, nor learned, nor heroes. Jesus places on the shoulders of a handful of disciples an immense, divine task. 'You have not chosen me, but I have appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you' (Jn 15:16).

Through two thousand years of history, apostolic succession has been preserved in the Church. 'The bishops,' declares the Council of Trent, 'have succeeded in the place of the Apostles and are placed, as the Apostle himself says, by the Holy Spirit to rule the Church of God (Act 20:28)'¹⁸. 'I have prayed for you,' he adds, 'that your faith may not fail: and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brethren' (Lk 22:23).

Peter moves to Rome and establishes there the see of the primacy, of the vicar of Christ. For this reason it is in Rome where the apostolic succession is seen most clearly. And for this reason Rome is called the apostolic see by *anthonomasia*. The First Vatican Council proclaimed, with the words of a prior council, that of Florence: 'All the faithful of Christ must believe that the Holy Apostolic See and the Roman Pontiff possess primacy over the whole world, and that the same Roman Pontiff is the successor of blessed Peter, prince of the Apostles, and true vicar of Jesus Christ, and head of all the Church, and father and teacher of all Christians; and that to him was given by our Lord Jesus Christ, in the person of blessed Peter, full power to feed, rule and govern the universal Church'¹⁹.

The supreme power of the Roman Pontiff and his infallibility, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, are not human inventions. They are based on the explicit foundational will of Christ. How foolish it is, then, to bring the government of the pope face to face with that of the bishops, or to reduce the validity of the pontifical Magisterium to the consent of the faithful! Nothing is more foreign to it than an equilibrium of powers; human moulds of thought do not help us, no matter how attractive or functional they may be. No one in the Church enjoys absolute power by himself, as man. In the Church there is no other leader than Christ. And Christ constituted a vicar of his—the Roman Pontiff—for his wayfaring spouse on earth.

The Church is apostolic by constitution. 'That which truly is and is called catholic, should stand out at one and the same time by the prerogatives of unity, holiness and apostolic succession. In that way, the Church is one, with a clear and perfect unity of the whole world and all nations, with that unity of which the principle, root and indefectible origin is the supreme authority and most excellent primary of

blessed Peter, prince of the Apostles, and his successors in the Roman See. And there is no other catholic Church, but that one which, built on the one Peter, rises up on the unity of the faith and on charity in one unique body, joined together and compact'²⁰.

We help to make that apostolic continuity more evident in the eyes of all men by demonstrating with exquisite fidelity our union with the pope, which is union with Peter. Love for the Roman Pontiff must be in us a beautiful passion, for in him we see Christ. If we deal with the Lord in prayer, we will go forward with a clear gaze that will permit us to perceive the action of the Holy Spirit, even in the face of events we do not understand or which produce sighs or sorrow.

THE APOSTOLIC MISSION OF ALL CATHOLICS

The Church sanctifies us after we enter into her bosom through baptism. Newly born into natural life, we can already take refuge in sanctifying grace. 'The faith of one person, even more, the faith of the whole Church, benefits the child through the action of the Holy Spirit, which gives unity to the Church and communicates the goods of one to the other'²¹. This supernatural maternity of the Church, which the Holy Spirit confers, is truly marvellous. 'Spiritual rebirth which is brought about through baptism is in some way similar to bodily birth. Just as children in the womb of their mothers do not feed themselves, but rather are nourished from the sustenance of the mother, so also the little ones who do not have the use of reason and are like children in the womb of their mother the Church, receive salvation through the action of the Church and not by themselves'²².

The priestly power of the Church, which proceeds directly from Christ, stands out in all its greatness. 'Christ is the source of every priesthood: for the priesthood of the Old Law was as its figure; but the priesthood of the New Law acts in the person of Christ, as is written in 2 Cor 2:10: for what I forgive, if I forgive, I forgive for love of you in the person of Christ'²³.

The saving mediation between God and man is perpetuated in the Church through the sacrament of Holy Orders, which gives to men the power—through sacramental character and its consequent graces—to act as ministers of Jesus Christ on behalf of all souls. 'That one person can carry out an act that another cannot, does not stem from a difference in goodness or malice, but from an acquired power, which one possesses and the other does not. Therefore, since the layman does not receive the power to consecrate, he cannot bring about the consecration, no matter what his personal goodness may be'²⁴.

In the Church there is a diversity of ministries, but there is only one aim: the sanctification of men. And in this task all Christians participate in some way, through the character imprinted by the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. We must all feel responsible for the mission of the Church, which is the mission of Christ. He who does not have zeal for

the salvation of souls, he who does not strive with all his strength to make the name and doctrine of Christ known and loved, will not understand the apostolicity of the Church.

A passive Christian has failed to understand what Christ wants from all of us. A Christian who goes his own way, unconcerned about the salvation of others, does not love Jesus' heart. Apostolate is not a mission reserved for the hierarchy, priests and religious. The Lord calls all of us to be instruments, with our example, and word, of the stream of grace which springs up to eternal life.

Whenever we read the Acts of the Apostles, we are moved by the audacity, the confidence in their mission and the sacrificing joy of the disciples of Christ. They do not ask for multitudes. Even though the multitudes come, they address themselves to each particular soul, to each man, one by one. Philip, to the Ethiopian (cf Act 8:24-40); Peter, to the centurion Cornelius (cf Act 10:1-48); Paul, to Sergius Paulus (cf Acts 13:6-12).

They have learned from the Master. Remember the parable of the labourers who awaited work in the middle of the marketplace of the village? When the owner of the vineyard went out, already late in the day, he found that there were still labourers standing idle. 'Why do you stand here all day idle? Because no man has hired us' (Mt 20:6-7), they answered. This should not happen in the life of a Christian; there should not be found anyone around him who can assert that he has not heard of Christ because no one has bothered to tell him.

Men often think that nothing prevents them from leaving God out of their lives. They deceive themselves. Though they may not know it, they are stretched out like the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda: unable to move to the waters which save, to the doctrine which puts joy in the soul. So often the blame lies with Christians. The lame and sick of soul could repeat: 'I have no one . . .' (Jn 5:7), I do not have even one person to help me. Every Christian should be an apostle, because God, who does not need anyone, nevertheless needs us. He counts on us to dedicate ourselves to propagating his saving doctrine.

We are contemplating the mystery of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church. It is time to ask ourselves: do I share with Christ his zeal for souls? Do I pray for the Church of which I form part, in which I must carry out a specific mission which no one else can do for me? To be in the Church is already much, but it is not enough. We must *be* the Church, because our mother must never be a stranger to us, something external, foreign to our deepest thoughts.

Let us conclude our consideration of the marks of the Church. With the help of the Lord they will become engraved on our souls, and we will be confirmed by this clear, sure, divine criterion in order to love more this holy mother who has brought us to the life of grace and who nourishes us day by day with inexhaustible care.

If by chance you hear offensive words or shouts hurled against the Church, show their loveless authors, with humanity and charity, that one cannot mistreat a mother in that way. They attack her now with impunity, because her kingdom, which is that of her Master and Founder, is not of this world. 'As long as the wheat groans among the straw, as long as the spikes of wheat sigh among the cockle, as long as the vessels of mercy lament among those of ire, as long as the lily sobs among the thorns, there will always be enemies who say: when will she die and her name perish? They think: there will come a time in which the Church will disappear and there will be no more Christians . . . But, when they say this, they of necessity die. And the Church remains'²⁵.

No matter what happens, Christ will not abandon his spouse. The Church triumphant is already with him at the right hand of the Father. And our christian brothers beckon us to join them there, they who

glorify God for this reality which we still see in the clear shadow of faith: the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

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