

SUPERNATURAL AIM OF THE CHURCH

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Let me begin by reminding you of something St. Cyprian tells us: "The universal Church is a people which derives its unity from the unity of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"(1). It is not out of place therefore, to preach about the Church on this feast of the most blessed Trinity. The Church is rooted in this fundamental mystery of our catholic faith, the mystery of God who is one in essence and three in persons.

The Fathers all see the Church as centered in the Trinity. Look how clearly St. Augustine puts it: "God then dwells in his temple. Not only the Holy Spirit but also the Father and the Son... Therefore, the holy Church is the temple of God, the temple of the holy Trinity"(2).

Next Sunday when we gather again, we will consider another marvelous aspect of the Church. We will fix our attention on the notes of the Church that we will recite in a few moments in the creed after singing our belief in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit: *Et in Spiritum Sanctum*, we say: and *in unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam* (3). We confess that there is only one Church, which is holy, catholic and apostolic.

All those who truly love the Church have known how to relate these four notes to the doctrine of the blessed Trinity, which is the most ineffable mystery of our faith. "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of God, in which we receive the faith. In her we know the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"(4).

Difficult moments

WE NEED to meditate frequently on the fact that the Church is a deep, great mystery, so that we never forget it. We cannot fully understand the Church on this earth. If men, using only their reason, were to analyze it, they would see only a group of people who abide by certain precepts and think in a similar way, but that would not be the Church.

In the holy Church, we Catholics find our faith, our norms of conduct, our prayer, our sense of fraternity. Through it we are united with all our brothers who have already left this life and are being cleansed in purgatory—the Church suffering—and with those who already enjoy the beatific vision

and love for ever the thrice holy God—the Church triumphant. The Church is in our midst and at the same time transcends history. It was born under the mantle of holy Mary and continues to praise her as its mother on earth and in heaven.

Let us strengthen our faith in the supernatural character of the Church. Let us confess it with shouts, if necessary, for there are many physically within the Church and even in high places who have forgotten these capital truths. They try to propose an image of the Church which is not holy nor one. Neither would it be apostolic since it is not founded on the rock of Peter. Their substitute is not catholic, because it is riddled with unwarranted factions that are mere human caprices.

This is nothing new. Since Jesus Christ our Lord founded the holy Church, this mother of ours has suffered constant persecution. In times past the attacks were delivered openly. Now in many cases, persecution is disguised. But today, as yesterday, the Church continues to be buffeted from many sides.

Let me say once again that I am not a pessimist by habit or by temperament. How can we be pessimistic if our Lord has promised that he will be with us until the end of the world (cf Mt 28:20)? The effusion of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples gathered together in the Cenacle provided the first public manifestation of the Church (6).

Our Father God is a loving father. To help us understand this, Scripture graphically tells us that he takes care of us like "the apple of his eye"(Dt 32:10). He never ceases to sanctify through the Holy Spirit the Church founded by his beloved Son. But the Church is going through a difficult moment. These are very upsetting years for souls. Confused shouting is heard on all sides, and all the errors that have appeared in the course of the centuries are reappearing with great fanfare.

Faith. We need faith. If we look with eyes of faith, we will see that "the Church carries within herself and spreads her own *apologia* round about her. Anyone who contemplates her, who looks at her with eyes filled with love for the truth, must recognize that independently of the men who make her up and of the concrete ways in which she bears herself, she carries within herself a unique and universal message of light, which is liberating, necessary and divine"(6).

We cannot help but feel sadness invade our soul when we hear about us heretical

voices. And that is what they are, for I have never liked euphemisms. We see that the sanctity of marriage and the priesthood is attacked without fear of rebuke. We see people deny the immaculate conception and the perpetual virginity of our mother holy Mary, along with all the other privileges and gifts with which God adorned her. We see the perpetual miracle of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the holy Eucharist, the primacy of Peter and even the resurrection of our Lord put in doubt. How can anyone not feel tempted to sadness? But have confidence, for the holy Church is incorruptible. "The Church will shake if her foundation shifts, but can Christ be moved? As long as Christ remains her unmovable base, the Church will remain strong until the end of time"(7).

Human and divine elements

JUST AS IN Christ there are two natures, both a human and a divine, so by analogy we can refer to the presence in the Church of human and divine elements. None can fail to see the human part. The Church, in this world, is for men, who are its raw material. And when we speak of men we speak of freedom, which permits the co-existence of grandeur and meanness, of heroism and failures.

If we were to focus only on the human side of the Church, we would never understand her. We would still be distant from the threshold of her central mystery. Holy Scripture uses many terms derived from everyday life to describe God's kingdom and its presence among us in the Church. It compares her to a sheepfold, to a flock, to a house, to a seed, to a vine, to a field in which God plants or builds. But one expression stands out and sums up all the rest: the Church is Christ's body.

"Some Christ has appointed to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, or pastors, or teachers. They are to order the lives of the faithful, minister to their needs, build up the frame of Christ's body"(Eph 4:11-12). St. Paul also writes that "all of us, though many in number, form one body in Christ and each acts as the counterpart of the other"(Rom 12:5). How luminous is our faith! We are all in Christ, for "he is the head of his body, which is the Church"(Col 1:18).

This is the faith that Christians have always professed. Listen with me to what St.

Augustine tells us: "The whole Christ is made up of head and body, a truth which I am sure you know well. The head is our Savior himself, who suffered under Pontius Pilate and now, after his resurrection from among the dead, is seated at the right hand of the Father. And his body is the Church. Not this or that church, but the Church that is spread throughout the world. Not only the one that exists among men now living, for those who went before us and those who are to come until the end of the world also belong to it. The entire Church, formed by the assembly of all the faithful since all of them are members of Christ, has Christ as its head. He governs his body from heaven. And although the head is not visible to the body, it is united to it by love" (8).

You should understand now why the visible Church cannot be severed from the invisible. The Church is, at one and the same time, a mystical body and a juridical body. Pope Leo XIII tells us: "By the very fact that it is a body, the Church is visible to the eyes" (9). In the visible body of the Church, in the behavior of the men who make it up here on earth, we find weaknesses, vacillations and acts of treason. But that is not the whole Church, nor is it to be confused with this unworthy behavior. On the other hand, here and now, there is no shortage of generosity, of heroism, of holy lives that make no noise, that are spent with joy in the service of their brothers in the faith and of all souls.

I would also like you to consider that even if human failings were to outnumber acts of valor, the clear, undeniable mystical reality of the Church, though unperceived by the senses, would still remain. The Church would still be the body of Christ, our Lord himself, the action of the Holy Spirit and the loving presence of the Father.

The Church is, therefore, inseparably human and divine. "It is a divine society in its origin, and supernatural in its aim and in the means that are directly ordered to this end. But in so far as it is made up of men, it is a human community" (10). It lives and acts in the world, but its goal and strength are not here but in heaven.

It would be a serious mistake to attempt to separate the *charismatic* Church, supposedly the sole follower of Christ's spirit, from the juridical or *institutional* Church, the handiwork of men, subject to historical vicissitudes. There is only one Church. Christ founded one Church which is visible and invisible. It has a hierarchical and organized body and a fundamental structure given it by Christ himself, with an intimate supernatural life that animates, sustains and vivifies it.

We cannot fail to recall that when Christ instituted his Church, "he did not conceive it or form it in such a way that it would contain a number of generically similar but distinct communities without the bonds that make the Church indivisible and singular... And thus when Jesus Christ spoke of this mystical edifice, he mentions only one Church which we call his own: 'I will build my Church' (Mt 16:18). Any other one you can imagine outside of this, cannot be his true Church since it was not founded by him" (11).

Faith, I repeat. Let us believe more, asking the holy Trinity, whose feast we celebrate today, for greater faith. Anything

can happen, but the thrice holy God cannot abandon his spouse.

The Church's aim

IN THE FIRST chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul affirms that the mystery of God, announced by Christ, is carried out in the Church. God the Father "has put everything under his dominion, and made him the head to which the whole Church is joined, so that the Church is his body, the completion of him who completes all things in all things" (Eph 1:22). The mystery of God is "to give history its fulfillment by resuming everything in him, all that is in heaven, all that is on earth, summed up in him" (Eph 1:10).

It is an inscrutable mystery, of pure gratuitous love. "He chose us before the creation of the world, to be holy and without stain in his presence in charity" (Eph 1:4). God's love is limitless. St. Paul also tells us that our Savior "wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4-6).

This, and no other, is the aim of the Church: the salvation of souls, one by one. For this reason the Father sent his Son, and "I also send you" (Jn 20:21). This is the origin of the command to teach his doctrine and to baptize, so the most holy Trinity may live in men's souls in grace. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; you, therefore, must go out, making disciples of all nations, and baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all those commandments which I have given you. And behold I am with you all through the days that are coming, until the consummation of the world" (Mt 28:18-20).

In those simple and sublime words that conclude St. Matthew's gospel we find the obligation to preach the truths of faith, the need for sacramental life, the promise of Christ's continual assistance to his Church. You cannot be faithful to our Lord if you neglect these supernatural demands: the instruction in christian faith and morality and to make the sacraments our supernatural sustenance. It is with this mandate that Christ founded his Church. Everything else is secondary.

Salvation in the Church

WE CANNOT forget that the Church is not merely a way of salvation; it is the only way. This is not a human opinion, but the express will of Christ. "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16). That is why we affirm that the Church is a necessary means of salvation. No later than the second century, Origen wrote: "If anyone wants to be saved, let him come to this house so he can obtain salvation... Let no one deceive himself: outside of this house, that is outside of the Church, no one will be saved" (12). Of the deluge, St. Cyprian says: "If someone had escaped outside of Noah's ark, then we would admit that someone who abandoned the Church might escape condemnation" (13).

Extra Ecclesiam, nulla salus. That is the continual warning of the Fathers. "Outside the catholic Church you can find everything except salvation," St. Augustine admits.

"You can have honor and sacraments; you can sing 'alleluia' and respond 'amen'. You can uphold the gospel, have faith in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit, and preach that faith. But never, except in the catholic Church, can you find salvation" (14).

Nonetheless, as Pius XII lamented little more than twenty years ago, "some reduce to an empty formula the need to pertain to the true Church in order to obtain eternal salvation" (15). This dogma of faith is at the root of the Church's co-redemptive activity. It spells out the Christian's grave apostolic responsibility. Among Christ's express commandments is the categorical one to incorporate ourselves to his mystical body by baptism. "And our Savior not only commanded that everyone enter the Church, but also established that the Church be the means of salvation, without which no one can reach the kingdom of celestial glory" (16).

It is a matter of faith that anyone who does not belong to the Church will not be saved, and that anyone who is not baptized does not enter the Church. Justification "cannot take place after the promulgation of the gospel, without baptism or its desire," the Council of Trent established (17). This is an ongoing demand of the Church which on the one hand stimulates us to greater apostolic zeal and on the other manifests clearly the infinite mercy of God with his creatures.

This is how St. Thomas explains it: "The sacrament of baptism may be wanting to someone in two ways. First, in reality and in desire; as is the case with those who are neither baptized nor wish to be baptized: which clearly indicates contempt of the sacrament for those who have the use of reason. Consequently those to whom baptism is wanting thus, cannot obtain salvation: since neither sacramentally nor spiritually are they incorporated in Christ, through whom alone can salvation be obtained.

"Secondly, the sacrament of baptism may be wanting to anyone in reality but not in desire: for instance, when a man wishes to be baptized, but by some misfortune he is forestalled by death before receiving baptism. Such a man can obtain salvation without being actually baptized, on account of his desire for baptism, which desire is the outcome of 'faith that works by charity', whereby God, whose power is not tied to visible sacraments, sanctifies man inwardly" (18).

God our Lord denies no one supernatural eternal happiness, although it is a completely free gift to which no one has a right, especially after sin. His generosity is infinite. "It is a matter of common knowledge that those who suffer invincible ignorance of our most holy religion but carefully observe the precepts of the natural law which are engraved by God in the hearts of all men and want to obey God and lead an upright life can obtain eternal life through the efficacious action of divine light and grace" (19). God alone knows what goes on in the heart of each man, and he does not deal with souls *en masse*, but one by one. No one on this earth can judge about the eternal salvation or condemnation of any individual.

Let us not forget that conscience can be culpably deformed and harden itself in sin,

resisting the saving action of God. That is why it is necessary to spread Christ's doctrine, the truths of faith and the norms of christian morality. That is also why we need the sacraments, all of which were instituted by Jesus Christ as instrumental causes of grace (20) and remedies for the weaknesses that ensue our fallen nature (21). Finally, that is why we need to receive frequently the sacraments of penance and communion.

The awesome responsibility of all the Church's members and especially of its shepherds is made clear in St Paul's advice: "I adjure you in the sight of God, and of Jesus Christ, who is to be the judge of living and dead, in the name of his coming, and of his kingdom, preach the word, dwelling upon it continually, welcome or unwelcome; bring home wrong-doing, comfort the waverer, rebuke the sinner, with all the patience of a teacher. The time will surely come, when men will grow tired of sound doctrine, always itching to hear something fresh; and so they will provide themselves with a continuous succession of new teachers, as the whim takes them, turning a deaf ear to the truth, bestowing their attention on fables instead" (2 Tim 4:1-4).

A time of trial

I CANNOT say how often the prophetic words of the Apostle have been fulfilled, but you would have to be blind not to see how they are being carried out almost to the letter in our own time. People reject the doctrine contained in the law of God and of the Church. They twist the content of the beatitudes, translating them into a socio-political doctrine. They attack those who try to be humble, meek and pure of heart as ignorant or outdated partisans of things long consigned to the past. They refuse to bear the yoke of chastity and invent a thousand excuses to evade Christ's divine precepts.

There is one symptom that sums up this whole situation: the attempt to change the supernatural aims of the Church. When they speak of *justice*, some people no longer understand a life of sanctity, but a particular political struggle, more or less influenced by Marxism, which is incompatible with christian faith. For them *liberation* does not imply a personal battle to flee from sin, but merely a human task, which may be noble and just in itself, but which is meaningless for a Christian, if it implies losing sight of the one thing necessary (cf Lk 1:42)—the eternal salvation of souls, one by one.

With a blindness that comes from separating themselves from God—"This people honors me with its lips, but its heart is far from me" (Mt 15:8)—some *fabricate* an image of the Church that has nothing to do with what Christ founded. Even the holy sacrament of the altar, the renovation of the sacrifice of Calvary, is profaned or reduced to a mere symbol of what they call the communion of men with each other. What would have become of souls if our Lord had not sacrificed himself for us, to the last drop of his precious blood? How can they despise this perpetual miracle of the real presence of Christ in the tabernacle? He has stayed with us so that we can talk to him and adore him. He has stayed with us as a foretaste of our future glory, so that we decide once and for all to follow in his footsteps.

These times are times of trial, and we have to ask the Lord with an unceasing clamor (cf Is 58:1) to shorten them, to look mercifully on his Church and to grant once again his supernatural light to the souls of her shepherds and of all the faithful. The Church has no reason to try to pander to men, since the children of Eve, individually or in community, cannot save themselves. The only one who saves is God.

Loving the Church

WE NEED to shout loudly today—time and again—those bold words of St. Peter to a group of important people in Jerusalem: "This Jesus is that stone, rejected by you, the builders, that has become the chief stone at the corner. Salvation is not to be found elsewhere; this alone of all the names under heaven has been appointed to men as the one by which we must needs be saved" (Acts 4:11-12).

Thus spoke the first pope, the rock on which Christ built his Church. He was moved to do so by his filial devotion for the Lord and by his solicitude for the little flock confided to him. From him and from the rest of the apostles, the first Christians learned to love the Church tenderly.

Have you seen, in contrast, how often people talk heartlessly about our holy mother the Church nowadays? What a great consolation it is to read the ancient Fathers' ardent and loving phrases about the Church! "Let us love the Lord our God; let us love his Church," St. Augustine writes. "Let us love him as our Father, and her as our mother. Let no one say, 'It is true that I still go to the idols and consult the possessed and the sorcerers, but I have not abandoned the Church. I am a Catholic.' You may still be united to your mother, but you offend your Father. Someone else might say: 'God forbid. I do not consult sorcerers or the possessed. I do not practice sacrilegious auguries nor go to adore demons nor serve gods of stone. But I belong to the Donatist party.' What use will it be to him not to offend his Father if his Father will avenge his mother whom he offends" (22)? And St. Cyprian put it more briefly: "No one can have God as his Father who does not have the Church as his mother" (23).

In our days many refuse to listen to the true doctrine about our mother the Church. Some want to redesign the institution, trying foolishly to introduce in the mystical body of Christ a democracy modeled on that of some civil societies. Or worse yet, they clamor for an ecclesiastical body whose members would be equal in every respect. They refuse to believe that by divine institution the Church is made up of the pope, with the bishops, priests, deacons and laymen. That is how Christ wanted it to be.

The Church is by divine will a hierarchical institution. The Second Vatican Council describes it as a "hierarchically organized society" (24) in which "the ministers have a sacred power" (25). The hierarchy is not only compatible with freedom, it is at the service of the freedom of the children of God (cf Rom 8:21).

The term democracy is meaningless in the Church which, let me insist, is hierarchical by divine will. But hierarchy means holy government and sacred order. In no way does it imply a merely human arbitrary order

or a subhuman despotism. Our Lord established in the Church a hierarchical order which should not degenerate into tyranny, because authority is as much a call to serve as is obedience.

In the Church there is equality, because once baptized we are all equal, all children of the same God, our Father. There is no difference as Christians between the pope and someone who has just joined the Church. But this radical equality does not mean that we can change the constitution of the Church in those things that were established by Christ. By expressed divine will there are different functions which imply different capacities, an indelible *character* conferred on the sacred ministers by the sacrament of orders. At the summit of this order is Peter's successor and, with him and under him, all the bishops with the triple mission of sanctifying, governing and teaching.

Forgive me for being so insistent, but I must remind you again that the truths of faith are not determined by majority vote.

They make up the *depositum fidei*: the body of truths left by Christ to all the faithful and entrusted to the Magisterium of the Church to be authentically taught and set forth.

It would be an error to think that since men seem to have become more aware of the bonds of mutual solidarity that unite them, we ought to change the constitution of the Church as if it needed updating. The times do not belong to men, whether ecclesiastics or not. The times are God's, who is the Lord of history. And the Church can bring salvation to souls only if she remains faithful to Christ in her constitution and teaching, both dogmatic and moral.

Let us reject, therefore, the suggestion that the Church, ignoring the sermon on the Mount, seek a purely human happiness on earth, since we know that her only task is to bring men to eternal glory in heaven. Let us reject any purely naturalistic view that fails to value the supernal role of divine grace. Let us reject materialistic opinions that exclude spiritual values from human life. Let us equally reject any secularizing theory which attempts to equate the aims of the Church with those of earthly states, distorting its essence, institutions and activities into something similar to those of temporal society.

Depths of God's wisdom

REMEMBER what St. Paul told us in the epistle we read today: "How deep is the mine of God's wisdom, of his knowledge; how inscrutable are his judgments, how undiscoverable his ways! Who has ever understood the Lord's thoughts, or been his counsellor? Who ever was the first to give, and so earned his favors? All things find in him their origin, their impulse, the center of their being; to him be glory throughout all ages. Amen" (Rom 11:33-36). In the light of God's words, how petty human designs seem when they are used to undermine what our Lord has established!

But I do not want you to ignore the fact that on all sides we find evidence of man's warped behavior. Not being able to get around God, he turns and takes revenge on other men. Contemporaries of ours become terrible instruments of evil when they serve

as occasion and inducement to sin, sowing confusion which leads people to commit intrinsically evil actions and flaunt them as good.

There has always been ignorance. But nowadays the most abysmal ignorance in matters of faith and morals is disguised at times with high-sounding terms which appear theological. That is why Christ's commandment to his apostles which we have just heard, "God and teach all nations" (Mt 28:19) takes on, if possible, an even more pressing urgency. We cannot be indifferent. We cannot fold our arms and shut ourselves up in ourselves. Let us step forward to fight, for God, a great battle of peace, serenity and doctrine.

We must be understanding, covering over everything with the kind mantle of charity. But charity must strengthen us in the faith, increase our hope and make us strong to say loud and clear that the Church is not what some people pretend. The Church belongs to God and has only one aim, the salvation of souls. Let us draw near to our Lord and

speak to him face to face in our prayer. Let us ask his forgiveness for our personal weaknesses and let us make reparation for our sins and those of other men who may not realize in this climate of confusion how gravely they are offending God.

This Sunday in the holy Mass, in the unbloody renovation of the sacrifice of Calvary, Jesus Christ, priest and victim, will offer himself for the sins of men. Let us not leave him alone. Let there well up in our heart an ardent desire to be with him, next to the cross. May our clamor rise to the Father, the merciful God, asking him to give back peace to the world, peace to the Church, peace to consciences.

If we do this, we will find next to the cross most holy Mary, the Mother of God and our mother. And guided by her blessed hand, we will come to Jesus, and through him to the Father in the Holy Spirit.

1. *De oratione dominica*, 23 (PL 4, 553).

2. *Enchiridion*, 56, 15 (PL 40, 259).

3. Creed of the Mass.

4. St. John Damascene, *Adversus Iconum*, 12 (PG 96, 1358, D).

5. Cf. Leo XIII, Encyclical *Divinum illud munus*, ASS 29, p. 648: "Ecclesia, quae iam concepta, ex latere ipso secundi Adami valut in cruce dormientis orta erat, sese in lucem hominum insigni modo primitus dedit die celeberrima Pentecostes. Ipsaque die beneficia sua Spiritus Sanctus in mystico Christi Corpore prodere coepit."

6. Paul VI, *Allocution*, June 23, 1966.

7. St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 103, 2, 5 (PL 37, 1353).

8. *Op. cit.*, 56, 1 (PL 36, 662).

9. Leo XIII, Encyclical *Satis cognitum*, ASS 28, p. 710.

10. Leo XIII, *op. cit.*, p. 724.

11. Leo XIII, *op. cit.*, pp. 712-713.

12. *In Iesu nave homilia*, 5, 3 (PG 12, 841).

13. *De catholicae Ecclesiae unitate*, 6, (PL 4, 503).

14. *Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem*, 6 (PL 4, 503).

15. Encyclical *Humani Generis*, AAS 42, p. 570.

16. Pius XII, *Letter from the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston*, Denz. 3868.

17. Council of Trent, *De iustificatione*, ch. 4, Denz. 1524.

18. *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 68, a. 2.

19. Pius IX, Encyclical *Quanto conficiamur moerore*, Denz. 1677 (2866).

20. Cf. St. Thomas, *S. Th.*, III, q. 62, a. 1.

21. Cf. St. Thomas, *S. Th.*, III, q. 61, a. 2.

22. *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 88, 2, 14 (PL 37, 1140).

23. *De catholicae Ecclesiae unitate*, 6 (PL 4, 502).

24. Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8.

25. *Idem*, n. 18.