



The Universal Mission of the Church according to Pope John Paul II

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Recently, Pope Benedict XVI announced the establishment of a Pontifical Council for New Evangelisation. This Council has been given

the specific task of promoting a renewed evangelization in countries where the first proclamation of the faith already resounded, and where Churches are present of ancient foundation, but which are going through a progressive secularization of society and a sort of “eclipse of the sense of God,” which constitutes a challenge to find the appropriate means to propose again the perennial truth of the Gospel of Christ.¹

This ‘charter’, together with the fact that the new Council does not replace the Congregation for the Evangelisation of the Peoples, shows that its purpose is to spur new efforts at spreading the Gospel in European countries like the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, where secularism has a strong anti-Christian bias – but not excluding countries like the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where Christianity has also been weakened by strong secularising trends. Besides this, the establishment of this Council once more raises questions about the nature of ‘new evangelisation’, its relation to evangelisation *per se*, to the mission *ad gentes*, and the place of ‘new evangelisation’ within the universal mission of the Church, as well as the question of whether or not Benedict XVI’s understanding of these activities might differ from John Paul II’s. As a contribution to answering these questions, especially that of the place of ‘new evangelisation’ within the universal mission of the Church, I propose in this essay to analyse John Paul II’s understanding of the universality of the Church’s mission.

Why Mission?

According to John Paul II, the basis of mission has a double aspect. First, the nature of Christ, and therefore the Christian, is to love,

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Pope’s Homily at Vespers for Sts. Peter and Paul”, Zenit.org, ZE100662806 – 2010-06-28, <http://www.zenit.org/article-29734?l=english>.

to reveal the love and mercy of the Father, to give themselves and everything they are to another.² In this sense the Church is compelled to live and proclaim the Gospel as a gift of self to others³, for love desires to give itself.⁴ The alternative is to be false to one's true nature as a Christian. 'This is why the Church's mission derives not only from the Lord's mandate but also from the profound demands of God's life within us.'⁵

The second aspect of the love that leads to mission is that of a merciful response to what John Paul II saw as the most fundamental need in every human person, the need for Christ. His answer to the question, 'why mission?' is that true liberation can only be found in Christ. Only in him can people be set free from alienation, doubt, and slavery to the power of sin and death.⁶ We are impelled by the love of Christ to share the peace that only Christ can give, the peace that has brought meaning and joy to our lives as Christians. Our engagement in mission is a kind of barometer of our faith in Christ and his love for us. The danger facing Christians today is to give in to the temptation to secularise salvation, to work for a merely natural human good, to feed the hungry, cloth the naked and work for freedom from political or economic oppression, but forget about the spiritual dimension of the human person and the ultimate destiny of the human race, divine filiation.⁷

According to John Paul II, mission is a grace that has been given to Christians. All are called and destined to receive the new life of Christ. All are searching for this new life, even if they sometimes search in confused ways. They have the right to know it and respond to it. The Church and every Christian believer does wrong if they hide this grace of Christ. Thus John Paul II said that

[t]his is why the Church's mission derives not only from the Lord's mandate but also from the profound demands of God's life within us. Those who are incorporated in the Catholic Church ought to sense their privilege and for that very reason their greater obligation of *bearing witness to the faith and to the Christian life* as a service to their brothers and sisters and as a fitting response to God. They should be ever mindful that 'they owe their distinguished status not to their own merits but to Christ's special grace; and if they fail to respond to this grace in thought, word and deed, not only will they not be saved, they will be judged more severely' (LG 14).⁸

² Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 9. (Hereafter RH) & *Dives in Misericordia*, nos. 7–8. (Hereafter DM).

³ Pope John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, no. 2. (Hereafter DV)

⁴ DM no. 7.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 11. (Hereafter RM).

⁶ RM no. 11.

⁷ RM no. 11.

⁸ RM no. 11.

The Universality of the Church's Mission

John Paul II stated that '[t]he Church's consciousness must go with universal openness, in order that all may be able to find in her 'the unsearchable riches of Christ'.⁹ In doing so he touched upon a major bone of contention within contemporary missiology – the reconciliation of the possibility of salvation for all with the necessity of the Church for salvation. How did John Paul II set about this reconciliation? To begin with, he did not reject either proposition.

The Council makes frequent reference to the Church's role in the salvation of mankind. While acknowledging that God loves all people and grants them the possibility of being saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:4), (cf. LG 14–17, AG 3) the Church believes that God has established Christ as the one mediator and that she herself has been established as the universal sacrament of salvation. (LG 48, GS 43, AG 7, 21) "To this catholic unity of the people of God, therefore, . . . all are called, and they belong to it or are ordered to it in various ways, whether they be Catholic faithful or others who believe in Christ or finally all people everywhere who by the grace of God are called to salvation." (LG 13). It is necessary to keep these two truths together, namely, the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind and the necessity of the Church for salvation. Both these truths help us to understand the *one mystery of salvation*, so that we can come to know God's mercy and our own responsibility.¹⁰

This passage exposes four crucial convictions held by John Paul II. First, that the universal mediation of the Church is intrinsically connected with the universal mediation of Christ. Second, that there is no such thing as salvation *per se*. There is only salvation *in Christ*. Third, that underlying the two truths of salvation in Christ and the necessity of the Church there is only one plan, one mystery of salvation. And finally, since the Church is the universal sacrament of salvation, that is, the sign and instrument of salvation for all, its mission is to all and all are called to become members.

These were John Paul II's convictions. How did he attempt to reconcile, within the one mystery of salvation, the two truths of the real possibility of salvation in Christ for every human being and the necessity of the Church for salvation? In *Redemptoris Missio* he stated that since salvation is for all and offered to all 'it must be concretely made available to all'.¹¹ But since many, for social, cultural, or religious reasons do not have the opportunity to know or accept the Gospel or enter the Church, for such people 'salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious

⁹ RH no. 4.

¹⁰ RM no. 9.

¹¹ RM no. 10.

relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation.¹² Christ is the source of this grace, his sacrifice is the cause of this grace, and the Holy Spirit is the one who communicates this grace. Through it each person is able to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation.¹³

For this reason the Council, after affirming the centrality of the Paschal Mystery, went on to declare that “this applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God.” (GS 22)¹⁴

What did John Paul II mean by saying that those who do not know Christ or cannot formally enter the Church can be saved by a grace of Christ that has a mysterious relationship with the Church? How does this reconcile the ‘two truths’ of salvation in Christ and the necessity of the Church for that salvation? What is the nature of this mysterious relationship? My conviction is that an answer to these questions must begin with an analysis of what John Paul II meant by ‘salvation in Christ’, and, ‘the one mystery of salvation’.

The Universality of Redemption in Christ

For John Paul II there is no such thing as salvation in isolation from Christ, there is only salvation *in* Christ. This is because of who Christ is and what salvation is. Salvation is coming into union with Christ in his self-communication with the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. The mystery of salvation, the mystery of God’s plan, is ‘to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth’.¹⁵ He expressed it thus:

Salvation in Christ, as witnessed to and proclaimed by the Church, is God’s self-communication: “It is love which not only creates the good, but also grants participation in the very life of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For he who loves desires to give himself” (DM 7).¹⁶

Salvation means sharing in the life of the Trinity through union with Christ. We could say that union with Christ, being in Christ, is salvation. He *is* the Life.

¹² RM no. 10.

¹³ RM no. 10.

¹⁴ RM no. 10.

¹⁵ Ephesians 1: 10, quoted in RM no. 6.

¹⁶ RM no. 7.

According to John Paul II, one cannot be saved except by coming into union with Christ. He is the only mediator. Only through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit, can one enter into communion with God. 'Christ's one, universal mediation, far from being an obstacle on the journey towards God, is the way established by God himself, a fact of which Christ is fully aware.'¹⁷ God's 'establishment' of Christ as the only way to him is not an arbitrary choice, nor a deterministic compulsion. It is accomplished through the unique freedom of God acting in accordance with his own divine nature in the single, eternal, creative/redemptive act.¹⁸ Therefore, participation in the Paschal Mystery is the only way to salvation. It could not be otherwise. God can only be himself.

Let us return to our 'first truth', the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind. God wants everyone to be saved in Christ. In order to be saved, one must come into union with Christ through participation in the Paschal Mystery. Therefore, we are *obliged* to hold that, in some way, God offers to everyone the possibility of participating in this Mystery.¹⁹ John Paul II certainly held to the necessity of coming into union with Christ in order to be saved. However, with Vatican II, he took this notion a step further. For him, every human person is, in some way, *already* in union with Christ. Every human person is *already* redeemed in Christ. Of crucial importance to him was the passage from *Gaudium et Spes* no. 22 where the Council taught that 'by his Incarnation, he, the Son of God, in a certain way *united himself with each man*.'²⁰ He expanded on this when he said that '[t]he Redemption event brings salvation to all, "for each one is included in the mystery of the Redemption and with each one Christ has united himself for ever through this mystery." (GS 22)'²¹ This idea of an already existing union between Christ and every single human being is central to John Paul II's whole understanding of the universality of the Church's mission, and how people can be saved without explicitly becoming a member of the Church. How did he understand this union? The Council said it exists 'in a certain way'. There was no precise definition of the nature of this union. From the context, the Council Fathers seemed to have in mind a union of experience and perhaps a familial union – the Word has become one of us, a member of the human family.

He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of

¹⁷ RM no. 5.

¹⁸ DV no. 49, RH no. 1 & Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi del mercoledì* (Casale Monferrato, 1988) 3, p. 28, 5 March, 1986.

¹⁹ RM no. 10.

²⁰ Quoted in RH no. 13.

²¹ RM no. 4.

the Virgin Mary, he has been truly made one of us, like to us in all things except sin.²²

Commentators have sought to explain the nature of this union. Joseph Ratzinger states,

[In *Gaudium et Spes* no. 22, the] idea of the ‘*assumptio hominis*’ is touched upon in its full ontological depth. The human nature of all men is one; Christ’s taking to himself the one human nature of man is an event which affects every human being; consequently human nature in every human being is henceforth Christologically characterised. This idea is then extended to the real plane of actual concrete human existence. Human action, thought, willing and loving have become the instrument of the Logos; what is first present on the plane of being also gives new significance to the plane of action, to the actual accomplishment of human personal life.²³

Likewise, Luis Ladaria states,

The Council tells us that through his Incarnation, Christ has joined himself to all humanity. Once more here we have a statement inspired by the Church’s great tradition: in some way, all humankind has been assumed by the Son. (Ref. to Clement of Alexandria, *Ped.* II, 20,1.(GCS 12, 168); St. Gregory Nazianzus, *In Cant.* h. II (PG 44, 802).) But the Council, in contrast to the Fathers of the Church, did not remain on the ontological level, but entered into the existential and practical levels of human life.²⁴

John Paul II followed the same line of thought, although he did not always express himself in the same way. He preferred to use what might be called the language of ‘presence’ and ‘relation’. He expressed the ontological union in being between Christ and each human person in terms of the *presence* of Christ in each human person, a presence which is never that of Christ in isolation, separated from the other divine Persons, but the presence of God.

For John Paul II, God creates by being ontologically present, that is, present in the being of everything he creates.

[God] *in himself* is wholly transcendent with regard to the world, especially the visible world. For he is absolute Spirit, ‘God is spirit’; (Jn 4:24) and also, in such a marvellous way, he is not only *close to this world* but *present* in it, and in a sense *immanent*, penetrating it and giving it life from within. This is especially true in relation to man: God

²² *Gaudium et Spes* no. 22.

²³ Joseph Ratzinger, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Part 1, Chapter 1,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, Vol 5.*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. W. J. O’Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), p. 160.

²⁴ Luis Ladaria, “Humanity in the Light of Christ in the Second Vatican Council,” in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspective’s, Vol. 2.*, ed. Rene Latourelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 391.

is present in the intimacy of man's being, in his mind, conscience and heart: an ontological and psychological reality, in considering which Saint Augustine said of God that he was "*closer than my inmost being*". (cf. St. Augustine, *Confess.* III, 6, 11: CCL 27, 33.) These words help us to understand better the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman: "God is spirit". Only the Spirit can be "*closer than my inmost being*", both in my existence and in my spiritual experience.²⁵

As both Ratzinger and Ladaria have pointed out, with regard to the *assumptio hominis*, the Council did not remain on the ontological level but entered into the existential and practical levels of human life by emphasising the existential humanity of Christ. John Paul II pointed out that God's presence in the being of man is a presence in man as a whole – in his mind, conscience and heart – psychological as well as ontological. The *cosmos* is created, redeemed and consummated by God through the humanity of Christ, risen and glorified.²⁶ It is this Christ who, in this eternal act, unites himself with every human person and 'in some way with the entire reality of man'.

Because John Paul II held this union to be psychological as well as ontological, he spoke of it in terms of relationship as well as presence. Thus the mission of the Church

involves above all proclaiming *the core* of this Gospel. It is the proclamation of the living God who is close to us, who calls us to profound communion with himself and awakens in us the certain hope of eternal life. It is the affirmation of the inseparable connection between the person, his life and his bodiliness. It is the presentation of human life as a life of relationship, a gift of God, the fruit and sign of his love. It is the proclamation that Jesus has a unique relationship with every person, which enables us to see in every human face the face of Christ.²⁷

For John Paul II, the risen and glorified Christ is present in every human person and present in the entire reality of their being. This presence is in their mind, conscience, heart, body and actions because of 'the inseparable connection between the person, his life and his bodiliness'.²⁸ This presence is, at the same time, the presence of God. It is the mission of Jesus to '[make] the Father present as love and mercy',²⁹ and, '[o]nly the Spirit can be "*closer than my inmost being*"', both in my existence and in my spiritual experience.³⁰

²⁵ DV no. 54. Cf. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10, 27: "For behold, You were within me, and I outside; and I sought You outside and in my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that You have made. You were with me and I was not with You."

²⁶ DV nos. 50–52.

²⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 81.

²⁸ *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 81.

²⁹ DM no. 3.

³⁰ DV no. 54.

Because 'God is love', he desires to be present in a human person in a personal way, that is, in a personal relationship. This raises the question of how Jesus can have 'a unique relationship with every person' without every person being aware of this relationship, a question that John Paul II did not explicitly attempt to answer.³¹

John Paul II's position builds upon the tradition of the *assumptio hominis*, but it does not end in a comprehensive definition. Even though it goes, I believe, beyond that of the Council it still falls short of eliminating the recurring phrases 'in a certain sense', 'in some way' and 'in a manner known to God'. According to John Paul II, the reality and power of redemption is already present in every human person. In this sense, everyone is already redeemed. Yet, there needs to be some kind of 'appropriation', an active participation in this redemption for salvation in Christ to be brought to completion. How this takes place in those who do not know Christ and are not formally a part of the Church still remains in the realm of mystery. It is still 'in a manner known to God' but not to us. John Paul II's development of the *assumptio hominis* raises two immediate questions – is this a valid development of the faith of the Church, and if so, can this development be taken any further, or must it remain in the realm of indefinable mystery?

It remains for me to bring this analysis back to our original question about the relationship between Christ and the Church. How does one reconcile the 'two truths'? What is the grace of Christ that has a mysterious relationship with the Church? Although he did not explicitly give an answer to this question, from what we have seen, it seems that John Paul II thought along the following lines – if Christ and the Church are inseparable, wherever Christ is, there is the Church.³² If Christ is present in and has a unique relationship with every human

³¹ Cf. Matthew 25: 31–46. There are possibilities raised by the presentation of the last judgment in Matthew. With St Paul, we already know that anything done to a disciple of Christ is done to Christ (Acts 9:4–5). We know that anyone who gives even a cup of cold water to someone because they are a disciple of Christ will not lack their reward (Matthew 10:42). But Matthew's last judgment seems to introduce another perspective. Just who are the 'brethren' of Christ? Granted, every Christian is. But since John Paul II held that Christ is present in every human person in the entire reality of their being, can we hold, as Mother Teresa did, that someone who picks up a dying Hindu baby in the streets of Calcutta is picking up Christ? And just who are 'the nations'? Is everyone included in this group, Christian and non-Christian, or are they 'the gentiles', those who do not belong to the New Israel? Could someone who is not a Christian, who has not encountered Christ in faith and baptism, 'encounter' Christ in what Mother Teresa described as 'Jesus in his distressing disguise'? Would that account for the surprise in their voices, 'Lord, when did we see you...'? There may not be an 'anonymous Christianity', but there may be innumerable 'anonymous Christs' whom non-Christians have 'encountered' without knowing it, and in so doing, have unknowingly established a relationship of self-giving love with him – a real encounter, but with Christ in disguise.

³² Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans*, 8. "Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."

person, so does the Church. This is the grace of Christ which has a mysterious relationship with the Church, and through which those who do not know Christ and cannot explicitly enter the Church can be saved 'in a manner known to God'.

The Relationship between Christ and the Kingdom of God

The relationship between Christ and the Church is vital to John Paul II's ideas about the mission of the Church. However, there is another reality which must be taken into account if we are to fully understand his position, namely the Kingdom of God. We must attempt to grasp John Paul II's understanding of the relationship between Christ, the Kingdom of God and the Church.

John Paul II gave a succinct summary of his understanding of this relationship at the beginning of Chapter Two in *Redemptoris Missio*.

It is "God, who is rich in mercy" whom Jesus Christ has revealed to us as Father: it is his very Son who, in himself, has manifested him and made him known to us.' I wrote this at the beginning of my Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, to show that Christ is the revelation and incarnation of the Father's mercy. Salvation consists in believing and accepting the mystery of the Father and of his love, made manifest and freely given in Jesus through the Spirit. In this way the Kingdom of God comes to be fulfilled: the Kingdom prepared for in the Old Testament, brought about by Christ and in Christ, and proclaimed to all peoples by the Church, which works and prays for its perfect and definitive realisation.³³

It is important to keep in mind that, for John Paul II, the Kingdom of God is always the Kingdom of Christ.³⁴ Salvation in Christ, that is, 'believing and accepting the mystery of the Father and his love, made manifest and freely given in Jesus through the Spirit', is the goal or fulfillment of this Kingdom. This Kingdom is 'brought about by Christ and in Christ', and it is 'proclaimed to all peoples by the Church, which works and prays for its definitive realisation'.

The Kingdom is brought about by Christ. 'The proclamation and establishment of God's Kingdom are the purpose of his mission.'³⁵ Yet, according to John Paul II, Jesus does not just establish the Kingdom. There is a kind of identity between Jesus and the Kingdom. Just as John Paul II saw Jesus as the 'Good News', there being 'an identity between the message and the messenger, between saying, doing and being',³⁶ so too he saw an identity between Jesus and

³³ RM no. 12.

³⁴ RM nos. 18 & 20.

³⁵ RM no. 13.

³⁶ RM no. 13.

the Kingdom. Thus, 'Jesus gradually reveals the characteristics and demands of the Kingdom through his words, his actions and his own person.'³⁷

John Paul II followed Vatican II in holding that the person of Jesus reveals the Kingdom.³⁸ However, he expressed this in a way which seems to go beyond what the Council said.³⁹ For him,

[t]he Kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, or a program subject to free interpretation, but is before all else *a person* with the face and the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God.⁴⁰

How are we to understand this identity of the Kingdom of God with the person of Jesus? Like the relationship between Christ and the Church, John Paul II regarded the Kingdom as being inseparable from Jesus. 'If the Kingdom is separated from Jesus, it is no longer the Kingdom of God which he revealed.'⁴¹ In order to grasp his point of view, we must once more return to his understanding of who the person named Jesus of Nazareth is. Jesus the Christ is never an individual in isolation. The term 'Christ' expresses his relationship with both God and man – with the Father, the Holy Spirit and ourselves. John Paul II held that Jesus *is* the Kingdom of God in that he himself *is* salvation. In and through the person of Christ, human nature has been assumed into the life of the Trinity. In this sense it can be said that Jesus is the Kingdom of God and that, in him, this Kingdom has become present and been fulfilled.⁴² In the person of Jesus, God and man are united in the divine life, and this reality is the Kingdom of God.

How can the relationship between God and the Kingdom of God be further defined? God and his Kingdom are not absolutely identical. Perhaps we can conclude that, in the Kingdom of God, the whole *cosmos* is assumed into the divine life, each creature in a way

³⁷ RM no. 14.

³⁸ RM no. 18. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* no. 5.

³⁹ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 338. "The theme of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God is . . . treated in a rather new fashion [than in *Lumen Gentium*] by . . . *Redemptoris Missio* . . . The encyclical shows that in Jesus Christ the Kingdom is made present: 'The proclamation and establishment of God's Kingdom are the purpose of his mission . . . But that is not all. Jesus himself is the 'Good News' . . . The secret of the effectiveness of his actions lies in his total identification with the message he announces: he proclaims the 'Good News' not just by what he says or does, but by what he is' (RM 13). Thus the ministry of Jesus contains something new which is of primordial importance in relation to the Reign of God: 'The eschatological reality is not relegated to a remote 'end of the world,' but is already close and at work in our midst. The Kingdom of God is at hand' (RM 13)."

⁴⁰ RM no. 18. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

⁴¹ RM no. 18.

⁴² RM no. 18.

which accords with the potentialities of its own nature and that this assumption takes place in and through Christ.

The Relationship between the Church and the Kingdom

When we look at John Paul II's understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Church we see that for him they have an inseparable communion.⁴³ If Christ and the Church are inseparable, as are Christ and the Kingdom, it must follow that the Church and the Kingdom are also inseparable. And this is what we find in *Redemptoris Missio*.

Likewise, one may not separate the Kingdom from the Church. It is true that the Church is not an end unto herself, since she is ordered towards the Kingdom of God of which she is the seed, sign and instrument. Yet, while remaining distinct from Christ and the Kingdom, the Church is indissolubly united to both. Christ endowed the Church, his Body, with the fullness of the benefits and means of salvation. The Holy Spirit dwells within her, enlivens her with his gifts and charisms, sanctifies, guides and constantly renews her. (LG 4) The result is a unique and special relationship which, while not excluding the action of Christ and the Spirit outside the Church's visible boundaries, confers upon her a specific and necessary role; hence the Church's special connection with the Kingdom of God and of Christ, which she has 'the mission of announcing and inaugurating among all peoples.' (LG 5)⁴⁴

This passage states John Paul II's conviction that the Church is distinct from the Kingdom but inseparable from it, and that the Church is not an end in itself, but rather the seed, sign and instrument of the Kingdom. However, defining the exact nature of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom remains difficult. One could be tempted to think that since all that could be said of one seems equally applicable to the other, that one of them is superfluous. However, the data of revelation do not seem to identify them as exactly the same reality, so we must attempt to define their relationship.

It would seem that they are not absolutely identical since the Kingdom is the fulfillment of the Church. The Kingdom is the end or goal of the Church. In keeping with the idea that the Church is the 'seed' of the Kingdom, John Paul II stated that 'the Kingdom of Christ is present in the Church and straining towards eschatological fullness.'⁴⁵

Neither the Kingdom nor the Church are easy realities to define, a fact which renders an exact definition of their relationship difficult as well. Since both realities are mysterious the exact nature of their

⁴³ RH no. 7 & DV no. 52.

⁴⁴ RM no. 18.

⁴⁵ RM no. 20. Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 34.

relationship must also remain a mystery not completely penetrable. What John Paul II insisted upon is that one cannot speak of one without speaking of the other, that both realities have not yet reached their fulfillment, and that the Church finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Kingdom. We can say that the Church is the sign and instrument of communion between God and man, and that communion, fully realised, is the Kingdom. The Kingdom is fully realised in Christ, and is in the process of coming to fulfillment as the Church continues with her mission.

The Mission of the Church is to serve the Kingdom

According to John Paul II, the mission of Christ is to proclaim,⁴⁶ establish,⁴⁷ reveal,⁴⁸ make present⁴⁹ and fulfill⁵⁰ the Kingdom. This mission of Christ at the service of the Kingdom ultimately flows from who Christ is. He is the Kingdom since the Kingdom 'is already present in the person of Jesus'.⁵¹

Since John Paul II also held that the mission of the Church is the mission of Christ, he held that the mission of the Church is to carry out the same activities mentioned above. Furthermore, as with the mission of Christ, all of these activities of the Church are mutually interconnected. Thus, the mission of the Church is to proclaim the Kingdom of God. However, this proclamation contains a necessary development of Christ's proclamation of the Kingdom. Through the Church, Christ proclaims his own fulfillment of the Kingdom, a fulfillment brought about by God the Father through the passion, death and resurrection of his Son.⁵² The Church proclaims 'the Kingdom of Christ and of God', and 'the Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' because in Christ the Kingdom is definitively revealed, made present and fulfilled.⁵³

By proclaiming the Kingdom and establishing communities, the Church makes 'present and active within mankind the living image of the Kingdom.'⁵⁴ We could say that the Church has a 'sacramental' role in relation to the Kingdom, making it manifest in the world. In the 'visible' Church, the Kingdom is made visible.

⁴⁶ RM no. 13.

⁴⁷ RM nos. 13 & 16.

⁴⁸ RM no. 14.

⁴⁹ RM no. 18.

⁵⁰ RM no. 18.

⁵¹ RM no. 16.

⁵² RM no. 16.

⁵³ RM no. 16.

⁵⁴ RM no. 19.

The Church is the Sacrament of the Kingdom

Here, we seem to have a way of reconciling the Church with the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the ultimate goal of humanity. This goal is union with God and the unity of all mankind. 'The Kingdom's nature . . . is one of communion among all human beings – with one another and with God.'⁵⁵ The Church is a kind of sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of this goal. It reveals this goal and brings it about. Because of this John Paul II could say that the Church is ordered towards the Kingdom. Although distinct from the Kingdom and not absolutely identified with it, it is also indissolubly united with it.⁵⁶

In order to understand what kind of sign and instrument of the Kingdom the Church is meant to be, we need to return to the signs of the Kingdom made manifest in the mission of Jesus. According to John Paul II, the 'signs' of Jesus have a twofold significance. To begin with, Jesus' 'option for the poor' is a sign of God's special love for the most needy in society, but John Paul II also saw it as a sign that *all* are called to the Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is meant for all mankind, and all people are called to become members of it. To emphasise this fact, Jesus drew near to those on the margins of society, and showed them special favour in announcing the Good News. At the beginning of his ministry he proclaimed that he was 'anointed . . . to preach the good news to the poor' (Lk 4:18). To all who are victims of rejection and contempt Jesus declares: 'Blessed are you poor' (Lk 6:20). What is more, he enables such individuals to experience liberation even now, by being close to them, going and eating in their homes (cf. Lk 5:30; 15:2), treating them as equals and friends (cf. Lk 7:34), and making them feel loved by God, thus revealing his tender care for the needy and for sinners (cf. Lk 15:1–32).⁵⁷

Furthermore, the response of Jesus to human distress, be it physical or of the soul, not only demonstrates the love of God for us in our immediate condition, but points to ultimate salvation and encourages people to have faith in it. In this way, John Paul II reconciled the concepts of 'liberation' and 'salvation'. Liberation from temporal evils is a manifestation of ultimate salvation and points to it.

The liberation and salvation brought by the Kingdom of God come to the human person both in his physical and spiritual dimensions. Two gestures are characteristic of Jesus' mission: healing and forgiving. Jesus' many healings clearly show his great compassion in the face

⁵⁵ RM no. 15.

⁵⁶ Cf. RM no. 18.

⁵⁷ RM no. 14.

of human distress, but they also signify that in the Kingdom there will no longer be sickness or suffering, and that his mission, from the very beginning, is meant to free people from these evils. In Jesus' eyes, healings are also a sign of spiritual salvation, namely liberation from sin. By performing acts of healing, he invites people to faith, conversion and the desire for forgiveness (cf. Lk 5:24). Once there is faith, healing is an encouragement to go further: it leads to salvation (cf. Lk 18:42–43). The acts of liberation from demonic possession – that supreme evil and symbol of sin and rebellion against God – are signs that indeed 'the Kingdom of God has come upon you' (Mt 12:28).⁵⁸

In the light of the 'signs' of healing and forgiving in Jesus' mission, we can examine the mission of the Church for some kind of equivalent. As well as preaching, the establishment of particular Churches and intercession,⁵⁹ John Paul II paid considerable attention to what he called 'Gospel values'. Although priority is given to preaching as the fundamental way in which the Church serves the Kingdom, the spreading of these 'values' is also a service that the Church renders to the Kingdom. Although John Paul II did not draw an explicit parallel between the 'signs' and the 'values', the values he mentions bear a resemblance to some of the signs. Thus, 'such activities as dialogue, human promotion, commitment to justice and peace, education and the care of the sick, and aid to the poor and to children'⁶⁰ are similar to Jesus' concern for the poor, suffering and rejected. Like the signs of Jesus, these Gospel values 'are an expression of the Kingdom and . . . help people to accept God's plan.'⁶¹ They have the same twofold significance as the signs. They are good in themselves but also point beyond themselves to the full intention of God's plan. That is why these Gospel values as the 'temporal dimension of the Kingdom [remain] incomplete unless . . . related to the Kingdom of Christ present in the Church and straining towards eschatological fullness. (Cf. EN 34, 28)'.⁶²

Can there be 'signs' and even 'instruments' of the Kingdom in the world outside the visible boundaries of the Church? Activities such as 'dialogue, human promotion, commitment to justice and peace, education and the care of the sick, and aid to the poor and to children'⁶³ are not the exclusive preserve of Christians. If there can be such 'signs', in what way is the Church a distinctive 'sacrament' of the Kingdom? I suggest that the answer lies, at least in part, in the

⁵⁸ RM no. 14.

⁵⁹ RM no. 20.

⁶⁰ RM no. 20.

⁶¹ RM no. 20.

⁶² RM no. 20.

⁶³ RM no. 20.

Church being a ‘consecrated’, ‘anointed’ reality, a people set apart, a people which has a mission and is conscious of that mission, a people in personal relationship with the triune God. The Christian’s newness of life is not a hidden grace, but a grace both operative and made manifest.

Difficulties in the Relationship between the Church and the Kingdom

One may be tempted to think, having come to the conclusion that the Church is a kind of sacrament of the Kingdom, that all questions about the nature of their relationship have been resolved. However, since both realities are divine mysteries as well as human phenomena, this is not the case. John Paul II accepted the notion of “the action of Christ and the Spirit outside the Church’s visible boundaries.”⁶⁴ This action is from a single source, the Word made flesh.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Church is not limited by her visible boundaries nor separate from this action of Christ and the Spirit. Therefore, to call the Church the *sacrament* of salvation and the *sacrament* of the Kingdom does not exhaust the reality of her mystery. Or perhaps it is not so easy to define the nature of the Church as a *kind* of sacrament.

This difficulty seems to be at the root of certain ambiguities in John Paul II’s discussion of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom. To begin with, we are told:

The Church serves the Kingdom by spreading throughout the world the ‘Gospel values’ which are an expression of the Kingdom and which help people to accept God’s plan.⁶⁶

But what exactly are these ‘Gospel values’? Prior to this passage, John Paul II said that

the Kingdom demands the promotion of human values, as well as those which can properly be called ‘evangelical’, since they are intimately bound up with the ‘Good News’. But this sort of promotion, which is at the heart of the Church, must not be detached from or opposed to other fundamental tasks, such as proclaiming Christ and his Gospel, and establishing and building up communities which make present and active within mankind the living image of the Kingdom.⁶⁷

Just what are these ‘human’ and ‘evangelical’ values? From the context, the evangelical values appear to be those which explicitly

⁶⁴ RM no. 18.

⁶⁵ John Saward, *Christ is the Answer: The Christ-Centered Teaching of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Alba House, 1995), p. 61.

⁶⁶ RM no. 20.

⁶⁷ RM no. 19.

manifest the 'Good News', those values which are directly promoted by proclaiming Christ and the Gospel, such as faith, repentance and conversion. It would appear that the 'human values' are the 'Gospel values' which, from their context, seem to be those of dialogue, human promotion, *etc.*⁶⁸ Yet, these conclusions are not absolutely certain. Calling these values 'Gospel values' is a potential source of confusion.

Furthermore, in some instances, there is a certain ambiguity in the way in which John Paul II spoke of the Church. This seems to be the case when he said:

It is true that the inchoate reality of the Kingdom can also be found beyond the confines of the Church among peoples everywhere, to the extent that they live 'Gospel values' and are open to the working of the Spirit who breathes when and where he wills (cf. Jn 3:8). But it must immediately be added that this temporal dimension of the Kingdom remains incomplete unless it is related to the Kingdom of Christ present in the Church and straining towards eschatological fullness. (Cf. Paul VI, EN 34, 28)⁶⁹

This is a tantalising passage, one that raises a number of questions about the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom. What did John Paul II mean by 'inchoate reality' and 'temporal dimension'? What are the 'Gospel values' and what does it mean for non-Christians to be open to the working of the Spirit? What is the relationship between the 'temporal dimension of the Kingdom' and 'the Kingdom of Christ present in the Church and straining towards eschatological fullness'?

The Temporal and Eschatological Aspects of the Kingdom

The essential problem to be solved is what distinction John Paul II saw between 'temporal' and 'eschatological' in relation to the Kingdom. He saw the temporal dimension as the inchoate, that is, undeveloped reality of the Kingdom found outside the *visible* boundaries of the Church whenever a person lives according to values such as dialogue, human promotion, commitment to justice and peace, *etc.*, and is open to the working of the Holy Spirit. This inchoate Kingdom is growing gradually in the world whenever human relationships are being transformed, whenever people are learning to love, forgive and serve each other.⁷⁰ This dimension of the Kingdom, however, remains incomplete unless it is related to the presence of the Kingdom in the

⁶⁸ RM no. 20.

⁶⁹ RM no. 20.

⁷⁰ RM no. 15.

Church. This presence of the Kingdom in the Church is ‘straining towards eschatological fullness’.

What, exactly, did John Paul II mean by ‘eschatological fullness’? It would appear that love is the fullness of eschatological salvation, living the new commandment of love to the fullest. The nature and ultimate goal of the Kingdom is communion ‘among all human beings – with one another and with God’.⁷¹ However, the fullness of this communion must include the fullness of divine life.

Eschatological salvation begins even now in newness of life in Christ: “To all who believe in him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn 1:12)⁷²

New life in Christ means the penetration of the power of the Holy Spirit into every aspect of the human person, including consciousness, so that they are able to relate to God as Father, as Jesus does, and relate to each other as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the Father. This new life is to live in the Spirit. To strain towards eschatological fullness means to strain towards the fullness of this life which is also a straining towards a manifest, concrete reality which we call communion with God and each other.

Conclusion

In light of Pope Benedict XVI’s recent announcement of the establishment of a Pontifical Council for New Evangelisation, this essay has sought to lay some ground work for a better understanding of this Council’s role by examining Pope John Paul II’s understanding of the universal nature of the Church’s mission. It has looked at his understanding of the fundamental reasons for mission, the universality of its nature, and how it is based on the universality of redemption in Christ. It has attempted to explain how his ideas about the relationship between Christ and the Kingdom of God, and the Church and the Kingdom of God, are vital for his belief that the mission of the Church is universal. It has examined his convictions that the mission of the Church is to serve the Kingdom, and that the Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom. It has concluded by analysing some difficulties in John Paul II’s understanding of the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom. It is my conviction that the essential problem to be solved with regard to these difficulties in John Paul II’s understanding of universal mission of the Church is that of

⁷¹ RM no. 15.

⁷² RM no. 20.

clarifying the distinction between the 'temporal' and 'eschatological' dimensions of the Kingdom of God, and the relationship between them.

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