

ST. PAUL'S METAPHOR OF 'THE BODY OF CHRIST'

IN four Epistles St. Paul calls the Church the **BODY OF CHRIST** :

- I Cor. x, 17. For we being many are one bread, one body :
all that partake of one body.
xii, 27. You are the body of Christ, and members of
member.
- Rom. xii, 5. We being many are one body in Christ and
every one members one of another.
- Eph. i, 22. And he hath subjected all things under his feet
and hath made him head over the Church.
23. Which is his body.
ii, 16. And might reconcile both to God in one body
by the cross
iv, 4. One body, one Spirit
v, 15. We may in all things grow up in him who is
the head ; 16, from whom the whole body, etc.
v, 23. the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is
the head of the Church. He is the Saviour
of his body.
v, 30. We are members of his body
- Col. i, 18. He is the head of the body, the Church.
i, 24. . . . His body which is the Church.
ii, 17. Which are a shadow (*σκιά*) of things to come ;
but the body is of Christ.
ii, 19. And not holding the head from which the whole
body groweth.
iii, 15. And let the peace of Christ rejoice in your
hearts, wherein also you are called in one
body.*

* It is not without significance that the Epistle to the Philip-
pians, which contains the highest Christological doctrine in this
group, does not contain the metaphor of the Body. This differ-
ence from the Ephesian and Colossian is one amongst the many
convergent proofs that the Epistle to the Philippians is the
latest of the three.

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(2). The metaphor of the Church, the Body of Christ, is not found in the Gospels—nor in any other of the inspired writers—nor elsewhere, even in the epistles of St. Paul. It appears only at one period of Paul's apostolic life. Then it disappears. St. Paul is alone in using it. No other writer in the New Testament follows his lead.

(3). BODY was an obvious and commonly used metaphor for any kind of society or *multitudo ordinata*. It would naturally suggest itself to St. Paul when wishing to express the newly-formed Church. Perhaps a special reason why St. Paul used it may be found in the circumstances of his conversion. When the blinded and stricken Saul asked, 'Who art thou, Lord?' Jesus answered, 'I am Jesus whom thou persecutest' (Acts ix, 5). This identification of Jesus with His Church, which Saul was persecuting, would suggest the obvious metaphor of Body.

(4). Yet the limited and temporary use which St. Paul made of this metaphor of the Body seems to show that he found the metaphor not always manageable.

Though the word Body (*σῶμα*) implies as its correlative Soul (*ψυχή*) or Spirit (*πνεῦμα*) rather than Head (*κεφαλή*) we are inclined to think that St. Paul was thinking of a Body-Head correlative.

(5). Yet it is significant that in three out of the four Epistles containing the metaphor of the Body, St. Paul seems to draw attention to its limitations.

(a) Thus in I. Cor. immediately after x, 16, 17 (his first mention of Body), he writes (xi, 3): 'I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ—and the head of the woman is the man—and the head of Christ is God.' It is quite clear that if Christ is Head of the Church as the man (husband) is the head of the woman (wife), we have not the metaphor of Head, Body, Members in any very definite sense. The same

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doctrine is repeated, with some added clearness, in Eph. v, 23, 'The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church. He is the Saviour of his Body'; 24, 'Therefore, as the Church is subject to Christ, also let wives be subject to their husbands.'

(b) Indeed, this metaphor of members and body leads to the complications of I. Cor. vi, 15, 'Know you not that your bodies are the members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them the members of a harlot? God forbid!'; 16, 'Or know you not that he who is joined to a harlot is one body? . . .'; 17, 'But he who is joined to the Lord is one Spirit (*πνεῦμα*).'

St. Paul is almost warning his Corinthian readers against taking 'one Body' too literally. Indeed, he is saying clearly that the unity between Christ and the Christian is on the spiritual plane, where they become one Soul.

(c) The second Epistle to suggest limitations to the metaphor 'Body of Christ' is Ephesians, i, 22, 'And He' (*i.e.*, God) 'hath subjected all things under his feet and hath made him head over all the church.'

Here again the metaphor of Head, Members, Body is proving a little intractable. It is not usual to speak of the Head having feet. Moreover, the members of a Body are not under the feet of that Body.

Once more St. Paul warns his readers not to think of the union between Christ and Christians as on the merely physical plane. He renews the phraseology of his letter to the Corinthians, Eph. iv, 4, one Body, one Spirit (*πνεῦμα* : Soul).

(d) The third Epistle to contain St. Paul's limitations of his own metaphor of the Body is Col. ii, 16, 'Let no man judge you in meat or drink or in respect of a festival day or of the new moon or of the sabbath.' 17, 'Which are a shadow' (*σκιά*) 'of things to come; but the body is of Christ.' Here the observances of the

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New Law brought in by Jesus are called the body (or substance) in contrast with the observances of the Old Law which are called the fore-shadow (σκιά).

From all this we can see some reason why the metaphor which St. Paul created and used only in four of his fourteen epistles was so quickly set aside. He himself had quickly found the limitations of a metaphor that suggested the correlation between a Head and a Body—a Head and Members and a Body—a Soul and a Body—a Husband and a Wife—a man and a harlot—a shadow and its reality.

(6). Yet St. Paul's temporary use of the metaphor he had created is a sign that the metaphor was of some use in the early days of his apostolic preaching. The value of the metaphor 'Body of Christ' lay in two doctrines which it expressed:—

(a) A hidden internal life-giving *influence* passes from Jesus into His Church; life-giving as blood, which comes from the heart to the head, passes from the head to the body.

(b) A visible external guidance is given by Jesus to His Church; as guidance in all human actions comes to the feet, hands, limbs, body from the head.

These two functions of Jesus in the Church are still expressed in modern theology by the phrase: 'The Mystical Body of Christ.' But the adjective 'mystical' is many centuries' fruit of wisdom.

(7). Now, St. Thomas in dealing with the question of Christ's headship of the Church had laid down a principle guiding metaphorical expressions: 'In metaphorical speech we must not expect a likeness in everything; for thus there would not be likeness, but identity. Now a natural head has not another head, because one human body is not part of another. But a metaphorical body—*i.e.*, an ordered multitude—is part of another multitude, as the domestic multitude is part of the civil multitude. And hence the father who is the

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head of the domestic multitude has a head above him—*i.e.*, the civil governor. And hence there is no reason why God should not be the Head of Christ, although Christ Himself is Head of the Church' (*Summa Theologica*, Eng. tr., Part III, Qu. 8, Art. 1, reply to first obj.).

As metaphors are not, and indeed cannot be, complete statements of the reality it would seem to be a rule that Jesus never utters a supernatural principle or fact by one metaphor alone; but at least by two. Thus He likens the Kingdom of Heaven to *seed* cast into the earth; and again to *leaven* put into three measures of wheat.

(8). The metaphor of the Body, like all metaphors, had its advantages counteracted by certain disadvantages.

(a) The physical Body of Jesus, though separated by death from the soul, was not parted or severed in itself. St. John's Gospel, the latest of the New Testament writings, is at pains to quote the prophecy of Zachary (xii, 10), 'You shall not break a bone of Him.' Alone amongst the evangelists St. John notes that although the side of Jesus was cloven with the centurion's spear, no limb of His body was broken; still less severed from His body.

This intactness of the physical body of Jesus might easily seem to justify the not unknown belief that once a soul was incorporated with Christ it was for ever incorporated. This subtle antinomianism would be tempted to justify itself by an appeal to the fact that Christ's physical body remained intact. It is significant that Catholic commentators on the New Testament have found traces of this Antinomianism in Rom. iii, 8-13; vi, 1; Eph. v, 6; II. Pet. ii, 18-19.

(b) The physical Body (*σῶμα*) of Jesus had a very literal acceptance in Holy Scripture. This Sacramental-sacrifice contained as part of its formal consecration

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the phrase *τούτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου* ('This is My Body'). The ambiguity occasioned by the Pauline metaphor of the Body led later on to the accepted distinction between the physical or natural Body of Christ and the Mystical Body of Christ.

(9). St. Paul's disuse of a metaphor which he had initiated is explained by St. John's use of two metaphors which had been initiated by Jesus himself. The fourth Gospel, which is so lacking in metaphor, has given us two—and these two—complementary metaphors used by Jesus himself to signify His relation to His Church. These two metaphors of our Blessed Lord's making contrived to keep the advantages without at the same time keeping the disadvantages of the metaphor 'Body.'

Thus the metaphor of the Good Shepherd conveyed the doctrine of the external movement and guidance given by Jesus to His Church. On the other hand, the metaphor of the Vine completed this doctrine by showing that Jesus was related to His Church not only by external guidance, but also by internal influence and life.

(10). Whilst the two complementary metaphors of the Shepherd and the Vine used by Jesus conveyed fully what St. Paul expressed in the metaphor of the Body, they had the divinely-designed feature of avoiding the disadvantages of St. Paul's metaphor.

Both metaphors allowed their hearer to realise the possibility of severance from the Church. Whilst no limb could be separated from the Body of Jesus, sheep and lambs could stray or be lost—branches could wither and be cut off. St. John, who recalled these two metaphors, was living in an age of already organised heresies or schisms, the members of which claimed to be true sheep and true branches.

Moreover, neither the metaphor of the Shepherd or the Vine created, as Body created, a certain confu-

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sion between the collective body and the Eucharistic Body.

(11). A confirmation of what we have said seems to spring out of St. John's use of the word $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$ (Body). He uses it only *thrice*, i, 21; xix, 31; xx, 12; and always of the 'dead body,' or, as we should say, the corpse of Jesus.

But in contrast with this dead body ($\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$) St. John has the living flesh ($\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\acute{\xi}$). He even seems to suggest that the Greek word ($\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$) used to translate the Aramaic original of the consecration formula might lead to misunderstanding. Hence, in his sixth chapter he shows that our Blessed Lord never spoke of eating His dead body ($\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$) but always His living body ($\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\acute{\xi}$).

In these days the likelihood of the faithful misreading St. Paul's metaphor of the Body is negligible. Yet it still remains true that the fullest, safest metaphors expressing the relation of the Church to Jesus are those Jesus Himself gave to the Church, when He called Himself the Good Shepherd and the True Vine.

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