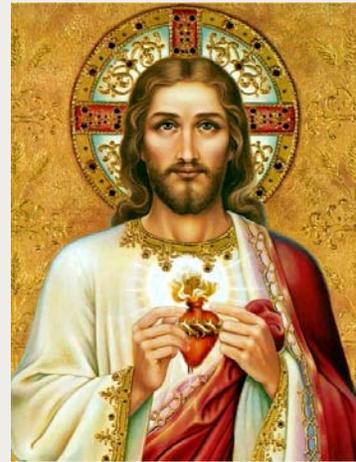


THE GRACE OF CHRIST AS HEAD OF THE CHURCH

Sr. Rachel Gosda, SCTJM

June 28, 2014

A shining gem amidst the theology of St. Paul which explains the reality of Christ as Head of His Mystical Body, the Church, is the ecclesiology he sets forth in the twelfth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians. In it, he compares the union of Christ with His Church to the union that exists in the human body among all of its varied parts. Though each part is distinct and has its own specific function within the body, each is truly united to the head, as well as to all of the other members in the greater union of the body. That is, the head of the body unites the eye with the lungs and the lungs, in turn, with the feet—parts which independently, would have no relation, but because of the same head to which they belong, they become one body. So it is with Christ: the Church unites each human person with Christ, his Head, as well as to all of the other members of the Mystical Body. Aside from the truths of Revelation by which this is known, several theological reasons expounded by St. Thomas Aquinas help to explain the grace of Christ as Head of the Church. This paper shall first examine that Christ is Head of the Church by order, perfection, and power, as is the head in relationship to the body, in order to delve more deeply into how this grace of Headship manifests itself in the “great mystery” that it is (Eph 5:32, NAB).



St. Thomas explains¹ that Christ is Head of the Church firstly by order, as the highest and first part of the Body. Two reasons can be seen why this is so. Firstly, as the first-born of all creation, Christ is higher than the angels and higher than all men by means of His union with the Word. This union is what allows Him to be supreme over all creation and Head of the Church. Secondly, as St. Thomas explains, Christ’s grace is highest and first amongst men because of His nearness to God due to His union with the Word. This is what it means that Christ is Head by means of order—in the order of grace, He is highest and first in all creation. However, that Christ is Head of the Church by order is based upon the following foundational truth: it was the Father’s mysterious plan of salvation, borne in His heart before all ages, to unite all things in Him through Christ by means of the Church. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, “God created the world for the sake of communion with his divine life, a communion brought about by the “convocation” of men in Christ, and this “convocation” is the Church.”² Although God can and does communicate His grace outside of the womb of Mother Church, it was in the order of His providential plan to communicate the fullness the life of His Son within Her.

Secondly, Christ is Head of the Church by perfection. St. Thomas explains that just as the head contains all interior and exterior senses within it (whereas the other members only contain the sensitive power of touch), Christ is Head by perfection because of the fullness of grace that He possesses within Himself. Finally, He is Head of the Church because He has the power to bestow grace on all the members of the Church, just as the head of the human body gives power and movement to the rest of its members. As St. Paul says, it is only by “holding closely to the head [that] the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and bonds, achieves the growth that comes from God” (Col 2:19). All that the members of the Church have in grace or glory does not belong to them, but rather, to Christ, the source from which it comes. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council surveys at length the various images used in Sacred Scripture to describe the Church in relation to Christ. All of them emphasize the superior place held by Christ in that relationship, and the power He bestows on them in order that they may be what they are. Among them, one can see how the Church is called the sheepfold, of which Christ is the “Chief Shepherd” (1 Pet 5:4)—it is only because of the shepherd and his power to guide and lead the sheep that the sheep can be gathered together and called a fold. The Church is also referred to as a cultivated field or a choice vineyard (1 Cor 3:9; Mt 21:33-43), which God Himself tends. Yet the true vine, which has the power to give life to all other growth on that vine, is

Christ (Jn 15:1-5).³

Pope Pius XII, enunciating the teaching of the Fathers, explains more deeply these three reasons set forth by St. Thomas. He writes, "Although He had been constituted the Head of the whole human family in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, it is by the power of the Cross that our Savior exercises fully the office itself of Head of His Church."⁴ Here one can see that from the moment of His Incarnation, by virtue of His Divine nature, Christ was always head of the whole human family. However, "it was on the tree of the Cross, finally, that He entered into possession of His Church, that is, of all the members of His Mystical Body."⁵ Thus, not only was the Church born through the sacrifice of the Cross; through the Cross, Christ was able to claim full power and authority over the Church that was to be His from the moment that He first took human flesh. The Cross was also the moment in which Christ came to be Head regarding both power and perfection. Pope Pius XII teaches,

It was through His triumph on the Cross [. . .] 'that He won power and dominion over the gentiles'; by that same victory He increased the immense treasure of graces, which, as He reigns in glory in heaven, He lavishes continually on His mortal members; it was by His blood shed on the Cross that God's anger was averted and that all the heavenly gifts, especially the spiritual graces of the New and Eternal Testament, could then flow from the fountains of our Savior for the salvation of men, of the faithful above all.⁶

Pope Pius XII notes here that Christ won power and dominion over the gentiles, thus becoming Head of the Church. He also describes how Christ became Head as regarding perfection of the fullness of grace. Through the Cross, Christ not only increased the immense treasury of graces for mankind (since this treasury already existed through all He did and suffered on our behalf from the moment of His Incarnation), but He also "unlocked," so to speak, the floodgates of heavenly gifts and grace that He could then pour out upon His Body for their salvation. Hence, it was not only through His identity as the Son of God that Christ was Head of the Church in the threefold manner of order, power, and perfection, but in a particular way, this was accomplished through His Cross.

Having thus seen that Christ is the Head of the Church, let us begin to look more deeply at how this is so. We have seen that the union between Christ and His Church has been truly effected and accomplished by order, power, and perfection. However, one important point to note about the Church is that it is a reality, both spiritual and temporal, which is not yet fully realized. Because the Body of Christ is always "becoming" in the sense that, throughout the course of human history, she grows with her members who grow in grace, and weakens with those members who wound the Body by sin, so too can one see the "already-but-not yet" aspects of the Church. The Book of Revelation reveals the "not yet" aspect of the Church—the fully transfigured and beautified reality that she will be at the end of time, when the she, the Bride of the Lamb descends out of heaven from God, Christ comes again, and the "old order [passes] away" (Rev 21:4). For now, she still struggles and strives along the path of union with her Lord through her earthly pilgrimage. In this way, one can see how the Church is "already"—truly united to her Lord by means of His grace, but at the same time, not perfectly united to Him, for that will only take place in heaven. Furthermore, on earth, one is united to Christ only to the extent that he or she is open to receive God's grace and be transformed by it. Each individual member of the Body grows unto the "full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:13) only to the extent that he or she desires to. Returning to St. Paul's comparison of the Mystical Body to the human body, one can see why this is so. For example, if a toe is infected, the head cannot force it to receive the antibodies it needs to heal. The head has the power to regulate the body's growth, but if there is blockage, sickness, or disorder in the body, growth cannot take place. Thus, members of Christ's Body on earth are united to Him only insofar as they are open to receive, and grow in, His grace—in a life of faith, hope, and charity.

For this reason, St. Thomas explains the distinction of how Christ is united to all men, and how it can be that there are sinners in His Church, and that outside of His Church, as is testified to in Sacred Scripture, there are many who will be called to His side at the end of time, though they knew not in their earthly lives that when they clothed others, fed others, welcomed others, that they were doing so to Him (Mt 25:37-40).

Because the Body of Christ encompasses all of human history, all of time and space, the individual members united to it must be considered not only in act—for example, their current state at this moment in history—but also in potentiality—what they will become by responding to God’s grace. Thus, St. Thomas describes that all men are united to Christ diversely, whether by glory; charity; faith; by potentiality which will one day be reduced to act (as is the case of those whose names are in the Book of Life, but currently not united formally to Christ through His Church); or finally, by potentiality that will never be reduced to act (as is the case of those who will not respond to the “helps necessary for salvation”⁷ given to them by God and thus, sadly, will never be united to Christ, whether in this life, or eternity).⁸ This helps to explain the phenomenon, noted by Pope Paul VI, of the “non-practicing baptized” person,⁹ of those who are truly united to Christ’s Body, but are oftentimes lifeless members of it. As the Second Vatican Council taught, such a person “remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but, as it were, only in a ‘bodily’ manner and not ‘in his heart.’”¹⁰ Such people—as well as those who do not know Christ—are the great impetus for evangelization, so that all who are potentially united to Him might come to know His love and enter into union with Him through faith and charity.

St. Paul describes the union of Christ with His Church as a great mystery, and it truly is one, for in it, Christ has formed a “single new existence [. . .] at once both spiritual and physical”¹¹ with the individual. In Christ, each man has become a new creation—whether actually, or potentially, by virtue of His union with men through grace, and specifically, that grace communicated through His Body, the Church. May such a great mystery be for all men their hope of glory, and the great reason to fight the good fight, run the race, and keep the faith (2 Tim 4:7).

1 Every time that St. Thomas is referenced in this paragraph, the source is the following: See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 1, a. 2, Second and Revised Edition, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

2 CCC, 760.

3 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964), §6.

4 Pope Pius XII, Encyclical Letter on the Mystical Body of Christ *Mystici Corporis Christi* (29 June 1943), §30.

5 *Mystici Corporis Christi*, §30.

6 *Mystici Corporis Christi*, §30, emphasis added.

7 *Lumen Gentium*, §16.

8 ST, III, q. 8, a. 3, trans. English Dominican Province.

9 Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), §55.

10 *Lumen Gentium*, §14.

11 Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 38.

Works Cited

Cardinal Ratzinger. *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000.

Pope Paul VI. Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975).

Pope Pius XII. Encyclical Letter *Mystici Corporis Christi* (29 June 1943).

Second Vatican Council. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964).

Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae: Second and Revised Edition*. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 1920. At New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

[Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...](#)



Return to main page
www.piercedhearts.org