

## THE CHURCH AS GIFT

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The concept of a gift is pleasing to the mind and heart of all, and there is little that warms the heart of man more than the certainty that someone loves and values him enough to bestow on him a gift. A gift means we have been thought of in love. A gift is an act of love. Unfortunately, one result of sin is that we often are unable to recognize what in fact is a true gift. Sometimes the outer package fools us, and what we see as good, is in fact not. The opposite is also true. Often the greatest gifts are distorted by Satan, the Father of Lies, and they appear as things to be rejected.

Another tendency of modern fallen man has been a shift in the way we view the world. Modern man has become an empirical man that sees the world and its realities as human constructs. This unfortunate trend causes us to see everything with a "bottom-up" mentality. This mentality creates from below - the human level. Therefore, if every truth, concept and reality is a product of the human mind, the laws of nature dictate that nothing we create can be greater than ourselves. This world view cannot be reconciled with a Divine Being. Many have gone as far to claim that religion, and even God, are things that man has created himself. The reasons for doing so vary, but in the end, whatever we have created cannot be greater than the human person.

As can be expected, this world view caused many people, even faithful Catholics, to have a negative view of the Catholic Church. For empirical, modern man sees the Church as a merely human construct. If this is the case, few can blame them for their scorn, for the Church would then be nothing greater than man himself - a far cry from the divinity she proclaims for herself. Why would man place himself in submission to at best an entity equal to himself? All this makes it evident that a radical change is necessary in order to renew the view of God and His Church in the hearts and minds of men. We must begin see the Church as she really is - a gift from a loving Father.

The Catholic Church claims that she is the One, true Church and that the fullness of truth subsists in her; there is no other church that even dares to make this claim. Many people find this claim to be triumphalistic and even arrogant. However, the exact opposite is true. As St. Paul clearly states, the Church is the Body of Christ, which means that the Church is the fullness of God Himself. Jesus was not sent by the Father to take on human form merely to establish rules to follow and to set up an organizational system that constitutes the Church today. Instead, He gave us His Body. He took on human form in order that humanity could be forever united with divinity. The Church is the living Body of Christ. This is precisely why there cannot be any more than one Church. If there exists two true Churches, for example, then one must have something that the other lacks. Necessarily, one must then be inferior to the other, and therefore it could not be the fullness of God Himself. Saying that the Catholic Church is the one true Church is not an arrogant egocentrism, but awe at a God who desires to give us His whole Being, who holds nothing back in His love for man. To desire more than one Church would be to desire something less than God Himself. With the Church, we possess "the fullness of him who fills all in all."<sup>1</sup> We have been loved to the extreme and given all. The Church is not merely a gift, but she is the gift of the whole Person of Jesus Christ.

When we realize that God loved to the extreme of making us part of His own Body, we see that the Eucharist becomes so fitting it is almost necessary. Furthermore, the Eucharist is inexorably linked to the second mark and gift of the Church - its catholicity. However, before we can understand the Church as Catholic and its relationship to the Eucharist, it is necessary to understand unity and its relation to human nature.

Catholic implies unity; the Church is for all. Because of the autonomy and individualism that run rampant in the hearts and minds of modern men, the concept of catholic often meets great opposition among the human race. We are grafted into a Body not our own, and it puts each one of us necessarily in relation and communion with one another. We are pulled from all nations, all backgrounds, and we are inserted into one, single Whole. This Whole excludes no one, for Jesus did not unite Himself to a single person, nationality or race, but to human nature. Therefore, each person is called to communion in one Body, and we can recognize that this is a gift because it something that man could never bring about on his own.



The laws of physical science, specifically those of thermodynamics, demonstrate to us that nature progresses to an "un-unified" state. Left on their own, with no outside help or energy, all substances break down into a lower energy, more disorderly, and less unified condition. Paul expresses this truth in his letter to the Romans when he states, "for creation was made subject to futility...in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God."<sup>2</sup> Creation follows the path of man, who, on his own, tends toward a state of disunity, disorder, and downhill decline. This is the nature and consequence of sin. Sin divides, wounds and tears apart. Jesus came to save us from this; he came so "that they may all be one."<sup>3</sup> In our depths we long for this unity; we long for fulfilling social communion. However, our sinful nature prevents this from happening as the Tower of Babel so aptly demonstrates. Jesus came to right this wrong, and He does it through the Church, and most specifically the Eucharist. By receiving the Body and Blood of Christ into our own person, we become one with Him and His Body, the Church. We are grafted into a unity that is not our own. Our sinful nature rebels at this insertion at first because as we come closer, we begin to rub against one another and feel each other's thorns. However, despite the initial pain of unity, it is our fountain of life and our path to sanctity. Without union to a Body that is greater than any individual, we are subject to the laws of a nature that is subject to futility - and this leads to death. Union with God and one another through the Eucharist is our greatest gift - life itself. Again, we have come back to the same truth from another road: this gift is not a gift of an institutional, nonliving Church - it is a gift of a Person, and this Person is the Giver of Life.

We come next to the third mark of the Church - Apostolic. The claims concerning this characteristic are initially no less scandalous than the ones made in the previous two. Most of the modern world balks at the idea the certain men have special commissions, special powers, are in some ways free from error, and are accountable to no worldly powers. The authority that the Pope and his college of bishops claim for themselves again seems to have the mark of arrogant, power-hungry, triumphalistic, sinful man. To examine this claim more carefully, we will look more carefully at Peter and his commission as "rock."

The commission of Peter as head of the Church flows from his response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter is the first to call Jesus the Christ, and Jesus as a result confirms that "flesh and blood" did not reveal this to him, but his "Father who is in heaven."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore he changes his name from Simon to Peter (Kephas, meaning "rock") and designates him as the "rock" on which He will build His Church.<sup>5</sup> This seems to be a moment of great triumph for Peter; he got it right and was rewarded with alleged power. However, the very next recorded scene shows a different truth. Jesus continues with a prophecy of His future suffering, death and resurrection, to which Peter relies, "By no means shall this ever be."<sup>6</sup> To this Jesus offers a harsh rebuke, "Be gone, behind me Satan; you are a stumbling block (skandalon); you are not of the side of God, but of men."<sup>7</sup> Left to 'flesh and blood,' left to his own resources and logic, Peter, the rock (kephas) on whom the Church will stand and never fall, becomes a stumbling block (skandalon) on which one falls. Nowhere do we see so glaringly the tension between the man's own capacity and the gift of God that can only be 'revealed by the Father.' The contrast between 'flesh and blood' and that 'revealed and given by the Father' is a summary of two thousand years of papal history. We see a Church that has managed to survive despite the often glaring deficiencies of her leaders. As Cardinal Ratzinger states, "...the very empowerment of man to be the rock makes evident how little is it they who sustain the Church but God alone who does so, who does so more in spite of men than through them."<sup>8</sup>

Why this gift? Why sustain and use such broken instruments? One, it allows us to give glory to God who can do so much with so little. It is a lesson for us all - 'flesh and blood' will never be more than a skandalon without that which comes from the Father. Second, the gift of the papacy and apostolic succession is not a gift for the successors, but for all the members of the Church. God loves each member of the whole Church so much that He desires each one to always know and have access to the Truth that brings life. Through the apostolicity of the Church, He promises that by His power these men will always teach the necessary truths needed for salvation. The gift of a rock is not for the sake of the rock, but for those who will rest upon it.

Finally, we arrive next at the last mark of the Church - Holy. Again, the Church makes another scandalous claim - she is "indefectibly holy."<sup>9</sup> But, again, this claim too deserves further examination. To be holy means to be set apart for something greater, for service or worship of God. Therefore, by its very nature, holiness must be a gift. Let us look at the Sacraments as an example. In the Sacraments, God takes ordinary, profane matter and makes it accomplish something that it cannot do on its own. Water cleanses of sin. Hands impart the Holy Spirit. Just like the Incarnation, God enters into nature to elevate it. Humanity is elevated to divinity. In the Incarnation and the Sacraments, God makes some thing more than it is by nature; He makes it

holy, set apart for Him. He gives matter a power not their own. To be set apart, to attain a state greater than what your nature can produce on its own necessarily implies a greater Being to "raise it up." Only someone pulling from above has the power to make us higher. Therefore, to say the Church is holy necessarily implies that this holiness is not through our own doing, but is instead a call by the heavenly Father to receive gift that cannot be grasped by our own powers. He calls us to Himself, and we get there only by humbly receiving the gift of a Person who is intrinsically holy - Jesus Christ.

To conclude, we have seen that each seemingly scandalous claim of the Church leads to the same conclusion - the Church is a gift, and this gift is the Person of Jesus Christ. It is only fitting then that we end by looking to the Giver. A giver of a gift necessarily implies one who has something that another does not have - the gift. This "having" sometimes provokes jealousy and skepticism in the one who lacks. However, to give a gift of something great to a creature weaker than yourself necessitates that you lose so they may gain. In other words, a gift requires the sacrifice of the giver. Parents aptly display this truth. To give food, shelter, time, and education, they must give from what they have so that the child can gain, grow and mature. The giver must sacrifice and suffer so that the one gifted may grow and gain, and the nature of giver and gift is such that the giver always suffers more than the one receiving. Furthermore, the greater the gift, the more it costs the giver. God gives us His whole Person in order that we can gain Him. If we allow our hearts to dwell on this truth, they will be changed, for this means that the gift of Infinite Love is also infinite in cost - the death of the Only Begotten Son.

Fortunately, we have a Father who is Infinite Gift, and therefore, when we give, we are always replenished by an unending and infinitely generous Source. Seeing Church as Gift leads us to our own vocation. We too, as Church are called to give. The Church is simultaneously Gift from God and the Body of Christ. Therefore, as each member is living in the Body, he is called to be as Christ - a gift to God and fellow man, and in fact, "man...cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."<sup>10</sup> This can be asked of us because there is more to the story. The Trinity reveals the fullness of the truth by showing us that gift does end with one-way loss and reception. Instead it is returned, and both gift and reception are in full, infinite, circular, and perpetual motion, forever giving and receiving, forever filling and being filled, infinite in splendor and glory, consumed in the fire of burning Love.

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 1:23

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:20-21

<sup>3</sup> John 17:21

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:15-17

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:18

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:22

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, v.23

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Called to Communion, 73. 1996, Ignatius Press.

<sup>9</sup> Lumen gentium, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Gaudium et spes, 24.

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