

II. THE LAY FAITHFUL

897 "The term 'laity' is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church. That is, the faithful, who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ and integrated into the People of God, are made sharers in their particular way in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, and have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the World."⁴³⁰

The vocation of lay people

898 "By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. . . . It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are closely associated that these may always be effected and grow according to Christ and maybe to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer."⁴³¹

899 The initiative of lay Christians is necessary especially when the matter involves discovering or inventing the means for permeating social, political, and economic realities with the demands of Christian doctrine and life. This initiative is a normal element of the life of the Church:

Lay believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the common Head, and of the bishops in communion with him. They are the Church.⁴³²

900 Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth. This duty is the more pressing when it is only through them that men can hear the Gospel and know Christ. Their activity in ecclesial communities is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it.⁴³³

The participation of lay people in Christ's priestly office

901 "Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and prepared so that even richer fruits of the Spirit maybe produced in them. For all their works, prayers, and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit - indeed even the hardships of life if patiently born - all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives."⁴³⁴

902 In a very special way, parents share in the office of sanctifying "by leading a conjugal life in the Christian spirit and by seeing to the Christian education of their children."⁴³⁵

903 Lay people who possess the required qualities can be admitted permanently to the ministries of lector and acolyte.⁴³⁶ When the necessity of the Church warrants it and when ministers are lacking, lay persons, even if they are not lectors or acolytes, can also supply for certain of their offices, namely, to exercise the ministry of the word, to preside over liturgical prayers, to confer Baptism, and to distribute Holy Communion in accord with the prescriptions of law."⁴³⁷

Participation in Christ's prophetic office

904 "Christ . . . fulfills this prophetic office, not only by the hierarchy . . . but also by the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with the sense of the faith [*sensus fidei*] and the grace of the word"⁴³⁸

To teach in order to lead others to faith is the task of every preacher and of each believer.⁴³⁹

905 Lay people also fulfill their prophetic mission by evangelization, "that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of life." For lay people, "this evangelization . . . acquires a specific property and peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world."⁴⁴⁰

This witness of life, however, is not the sole element in the apostolate; the true apostle is on the lookout for occasions of announcing Christ by word, either to unbelievers . . . or to the faithful.⁴⁴¹

906 Lay people who are capable and trained may also collaborate in catechetical formation, in teaching the sacred sciences, and in use of the communications media.⁴⁴²

907 "In accord with the knowledge, competence, and preeminence which they possess, [lay people] have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and they have a right to make their opinion known to the other Christian faithful, with due regard to the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward their pastors, and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons."⁴⁴³

Participation in Christ's kingly office

908 By his obedience unto death,⁴⁴⁴ Christ communicated to his disciples the gift of royal freedom, so that they might "by the self-abnegation of a holy life, overcome the reign of sin in themselves".⁴⁴⁵

That man is rightly called a king who makes his own body an obedient subject and, by governing himself with suitable rigor, refuses to let his passions breed rebellion in his soul, for he exercises a kind of royal power over himself. And because he knows how to rule his own person as king, so too does he sit as its judge. He will not let himself be imprisoned by sin, or thrown headlong into wickedness.⁴⁴⁶

909 "Moreover, by uniting their forces let the laity so remedy the institutions and conditions of the world when the latter are an inducement to sin, that these may be conformed to the norms of justice, favoring rather than hindering the practice of virtue. By so doing they will impregnate culture and human works with a moral value."⁴⁴⁷

910 "The laity can also feel called, or be in fact called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community, for the sake of its growth and life. This can be done through the exercise of different kinds of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord has been pleased to bestow on them."⁴⁴⁸

911 In the Church, "lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this power [of governance] in accord with the norm of law."⁴⁴⁹ And so the Church provides for their presence at particular councils, diocesan synods, pastoral councils; the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish, collaboration in finance committees, and participation in ecclesiastical tribunals, etc.⁴⁵⁰

912 The faithful should "distinguish carefully between the rights and the duties which they have as belonging to the Church and those which fall to them as members of the human society. They will strive to unite the two harmoniously, remembering that in every temporal affair they are to be guided by a Christian conscience, since no human activity, even of the temporal order, can be withdrawn from God's dominion."⁴⁵¹

913 "Thus, every person, through these gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself 'according to the measure of Christ's bestowal.'"⁴⁵²

The Catholic Laity: Priests, Prophets and Kings

Address to Catholic students and laity at Furman College, Greenville, South Carolina

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Professing that Christ is the Light of the nations, the Second Vatican Council on November 21, 1964 promulgated the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Its primary purpose was to address the mystery of the Church which, as His sacrament of salvation, is the principal prism through which Christ's salvific light dispels the darkness of our sinful world and enlightens the hearts and minds of men and women throughout all ages.

Being Catholic: Our Benefit and the Benefit of Others

All of us, who are Catholic Christians, are members of the Church because we are convinced, in faith, that only as such are we fully united to Christ, and so share fully in His salvific light. Within the Church we, who are sinners, obtain, in Christ, the forgiveness of our sins and the new life of the Holy Spirit. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we assume the likeness of Jesus the Son and so become the Father's adopted sons and daughters living in communion with Him. Thus, we reside within the Church for our own benefit, that is, so that we may obtain the eternal salvation made possible only in Christ Jesus our Lord.

However, the Church does not exist solely for our own benefit nor do we belong to it solely for our own benefit. Yes, we are members because we want to bask in the light of Christ's truth. Yes, we rejoice in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist. Yet, we, who are aglow with the light of Christ as members of His Church, are called to participate in the Church's ministry of light. This ministry is twofold.

Serving the Church and World

First, the Church must continually nurture the life of its own members, guiding them to further repentance and to further growth in truth and holiness. Second, the Church must continually manifest the light of Christ's Gospel to the unbelieving world surrounding it. As members of the Church we are all commissioned by our Baptism and Confirmation to participate in this twofold ecclesial ministry. While we may become members of the Church for the sake of our own salvation, yet, in so doing, we, by necessity, assume the ministries of the Church as living and active members of the Body of Christ. Thus, we are empowered, in the Spirit, to nurture the spiritual life of our brothers and sisters in Christ and to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, in word and deed, to those around us who have yet to acknowledge, in faith, Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Following closely the teaching of Saint Paul, *Lumen Gentium* states: "[I]n the building up of Christ's body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions. There is only one Spirit who, according to His own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives different gifts for the welfare of the Church" (7). The Council specifically states that "the laity -- no matter who they are -- have, as living members, the vocation of applying to the building up of the Church and to its continual sanctification all the powers which they have received from the goodness of the Creator and from the grace of the Redeemer" (33). The Council also declares that "Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate of the Lord Himself... Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself 'according to the measure of Christ's bestowal' (Ephesians 4:7)" (33).

Priests, Prophets and Kings

According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Church, in its twofold ministry toward its own members and toward those outside, shares in Jesus' threefold office of Priest, Prophet and King, that is, it participates in Jesus' ministry to sanctify, to teach and to govern (see 10-13). While bishops, priests and deacons exercise, within the Church, the ministries of sanctifying, teaching and governing through the power and authority bestowed upon them at their sacramental ordination, all Catholic lay men and women also share in this threefold ministry of Christ. Catholic lay men

and women, by their baptismal and confirmational character, are empowered, in Christ through the Holy Spirit, to be priests, prophets and kings and so come to share in the Church's ministry of sanctification, teaching and governing. *Lumen Gentium* states that, in collaboration with their bishops and clergy, "the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world". (31)

Before proceeding to the various ways that lay men and women may exercise their priestly, prophetic and governing ministries, I want to highlight the honor and the dignity to which Jesus, through His indwelling Spirit, has elevated Catholic lay men and women. By sharing in Christ's threefold office of priest, prophet and king, no lay person should ever consider themselves as mere passive members of the Church.

All of us, even those who are handicapped, sick, elderly, or even physically dead, are all living members of Christ's Body, the Church, and so we all have the privilege and even the duty to exercise the ministries that Christ has shared with us and is actually depending upon us to carry out. Moreover, while many more lay men and women are active in the Church today than were prior to the Second Vatican Council, I do not believe that they often fully realize the sacramental foundation of the ecclesial activity, nor do they fully appreciate the sacramental authority and power that they possess by sharing in Jesus' and the Church's ministry of sanctification, teaching and governance. All that Catholic lay men and women say and do as members of Christ's Body, the Church, they do so as sharers in Christ's threefold ministry, and therefore they are speaking and acting under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

But how do lay men and women exercise, in Christ, their ministries of priest, prophet and king? In what ways do they practically share in Jesus' and the Church's ministries of sanctifying, teaching and governing? While I am unable to delineate all of the possible ways and manners in which Catholic lay people sanctify, teach and govern as members of Christ's Church, I would like to provide some examples. My hope would be that these examples would prod your own imagination so that you may find other creative ways in which you are and can be priests, prophets and kings.

Sharing in Jesus' Priestly Ministry

Christ, as the Great High Priest, offered Himself in love as an all-holy sacrifice to the Father. In so doing He conquered sin and in rising He vanquished death and sanctifies all those believe with the resurrected life of the Holy Spirit. All of us who now participate in the priesthood of Christ are empowered to share, each in accordance with our own sacramental ability, in His ministry of sanctification.

Lay men and women bring Christ's and the Church's sanctifying ministry to areas that are uniquely suitable and proper to them. *Lumen Gentium* states that, because lay men and women share in Christ's "priestly office", they, "dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and prepared so that even richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers, apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit -- indeed even the

hardships of life if patiently borne -- all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". (34)

The council Fathers realized that there are specific areas of life that only lay men and women can truly sanctify because it is precisely their proper vocation to do so. It is their vocation to do so because they are primarily responsible for these lived situations, such as family and married life, or the secular work place. It is in areas such as these where only lay people are the ones who are actually on the scene. Bishops and priests are normally not personally involved in these situations and so they do not possess the primary authority or the immediate responsibility to sanctify these lived experiences. Let us look at some examples.

Many of you here are Catholic lay college students. As such, by virtue of your Baptism and Confirmation and by virtue of your present state of life as college students, you possess the priestly authority and responsibility to help sanctify your fellow students, teachers and others with whom you associate. This sanctification is accomplished through your holy actions -- the loving and good deeds you perform on their behalf.

Through your own holy example, even in situations of sports and fun, you bring holiness into your relationships and so sanctify this campus. Moreover, through your prayer for and with your fellow students, teachers and others, Christian and non-Christian, you contribute to their holiness for you are exercising your priestly authority to intercede for others after the manner of Jesus the Great High Priest. Likewise, when you perceive that some evil exists on this campus, intentionally or unintentionally, you possess the priestly authority and power to banish it from your midst through prayer in the name of Jesus. (Fasting would probably help at times as well.) Do not, as students, underestimate your priestly responsibility nor your priestly power and the authority that accompanies it.

Spouses and parents, by the very nature of the sacrament of marriage, also possess a priestly authority and power. Husbands and wives help sanctify one another, again, through their care and love for one another, even in their forgiveness of and patience with one another. Saint Paul specifically states that husbands must love their wives as Christ loved His church who laid down His life and so sanctified it, so that it might be without blemish (See Eph. 5:25-28). A husband is called -- it is his vocation -- to sacrifice his life that his wife and his children might become holy, so that they may be without blemish.

Moreover, parents together are obviously the ones who are primarily responsible for the sanctification of their children. Their priestly authority empowers them to teach their child to pray and to pray with them and for them. Their priestly authority and power authorizes them, for example, to pray for healing when their children are ill, even accompanied by the laying on of their parental hands. Parents have the priestly authority and power to bless their children in a manner similar to the way the priest blesses people. They can sign their children with holy water and even with blessed oil. Their priestly authority and power authorizes them to bless their homes with holy water and to cast out all evil from their midst.

Obviously, single adults and the elderly also exercise priestly ministry; this is especially true of grandparents, but time does not permit me to address these various groups. I must move on to the prophetic ministry that lay men and women are called to exercise in Christ, the true prophet.

Sharing in Jesus' Prophetic Ministry

Closely aligned to the office of the priest is the office of the prophet. It is, for example, within the Eucharistic celebration that bishops and priests are anointed to proclaim the prophetic word of God. Similarly, lay men and women often sanctify others through their prophetic words and example. As [*Lumen Gentium*](#) states:

Christ is the great prophet who proclaimed the kingdom of the Father both by testimony of His life and by the power of His word. Until the full manifestation of His glory, He fulfills this prophetic office, not only by the hierarchy who teach in His name and by His power, but also by the laity. He accordingly both establishes them as witnesses and provides them with the appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) and the grace of the word so that the power of the Gospel may shine out in daily family and social life.... Let them not hide this their hope then, in the depths of their hearts, but rather express it through the structure of their secular lives in continual conversion and in the wrestling "against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of iniquity (Ephesians 6:12)". (35)

While lay men and women, by sharing in Jesus' prophetic office, are called to speak anointed words to their brothers and sisters in Christ and so nurture the holiness of His body, I want to focus on a few situations where the office of prophet is especially significant and important today.

First, because bishops and priests exercise their prophetic office primarily within a liturgical setting, their audience is primarily composed of those who are already members of the Church. Likewise, it is often the case that bishops and priests do not have many opportunities to evangelize those who are not Christian. This is not the case with lay men and women.

By the very nature of their lives lay men and women are often in continual contact with those who do not believe in Jesus or whose faith is uninformed or devoid of a mature commitment. Again, [*Lumen Gentium*](#) states: "This evangelization, that is, the proclamation of Christ by word and the testimony of life, acquires a specific property and peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world". (35)

Pope John Paul II and now Benedict XVI have called for a new evangelization. Such a summons can only be fully realized if lay men and women in large numbers are involved. Confidence in the truth of the Gospel is essential, as well as recognizing that, when one testifies to the faith of the Church as the Church teaches that faith, one is proclaiming what is infallibly true. Thus, fear of what others may think must be cast aside. Worry that one does not want to impose one's own belief upon another must be seen for what it often is -- simply a cop-out.

Rather, the grace of Baptism, and specifically the anointing of Confirmation, are to be enkindled so that the Gospel, so sorely needed in our world today, can be heard throughout our land and throughout the whole world at large. This can only be done if lay men and women so love their

non-Christian brothers and sisters that they are willing to risk rejection in the hope of offering them the greatest gift of all -- the love of God the Father, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and the salvation of Jesus Christ.

Second, the college students here present, and not simply the college chaplain, are on the front line of evangelism within the college or university. You are the ones who share your lives most closely with your fellow students, who are non-believing or half-hearted. Moreover, as Catholics, you are the ones who can testify to the fullness of truth that resides within the Catholic Church through the teaching of the pope and bishops who are the authentic successors of Peter and the Apostles. You possess the prophetic power to testify to the beauty of the Eucharist as the one sacrifice of Christ in which we come into full communion with His resurrected presence.

The third point I want to emphasize with regard to sharing in Jesus' prophetic office pertains to marriage and family life. *Lumen Gentium* teaches us that "The state of life that is sanctified by a special sacrament, namely, married and family life, has a special importance in this prophetic office.... In it the married partners have their own proper vocation: they must be witnesses of faith and love of Christ to one another and to their children". (35)

As the Church has constantly taught and has been emphasized again within Vatican II and in subsequent Church documents, parents have the primary responsibility to educate their children in the faith. Parents should not underestimate their prophetic anointing in this regard. The catechetical education that parents provide their children whether it is at bedtime or at dinner or while riding in the car bears the imprint of the Holy Spirit and will bear the Spirit's fruit.

Lastly, Christ's prophetic ministry must be exercised within the workplace. Present in this setting are only Christian lay men and women. For many people in today's world, it is only in that setting that they may have the opportunity to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and, if they do not hear it from lay people like yourselves from whom will they hear it? While many people may shy away from the Catholic Church, there is no better way to make contact with it than through kind, knowledgeable, vibrant lay men and women.

Sharing in the Jesus' Governance

The pope and the bishops in union with him have the primary responsibility for governing the Church and in so doing participate in Jesus' kingship. Yet, all lay Catholic men and women, through their various priestly and prophetic ministries within the Church, also share in the Church's governance. Those who are involved in various campus and parish ministries or other church-related organizations aid in the governance of the Church so that all that it does promotes the good of all its members and society at large. Here, in this last section I want to highlight two aspects in which the laity shares in Jesus' kingship.

The first again concerns family life. Fathers and mothers, by participating in Jesus' priestly and prophetic ministry within their families, often exercise those charisms through their parental authority. It is in the right ordering of their family that they are better able to sanctify it through teaching their children the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This right ordering of family life, by its very nature, involves the living out of Christian principles and the making of rules that embody those principles. This is not an easy task, for Christian parental authority implies then reciprocal obedience on the part of children, and here is the rub. Governance of one's family in a Christian manner will involve, especially in the non-Christian environment of our day, a great deal of wisdom, patience, courage and fortitude. In short, it involves a great deal of hassle, to say the least. But again, I want to emphasize that parents participate in the Jesus' own ministry of governance and so they share in His Spirit-filled authority and power, an authority and power that is exercised in love and proper discipline.

This, I believe, is especially important for fathers of families. Too often today fathers abdicate their paternal authority to their wives and this is to the detriment of both their sons and daughters. It is the primary responsibility of fathers to teach their sons to be Christian men of integrity and honesty, and who respect not only their mothers but all women. In order to do this he must exercise fatherly governance over them. Moreover, fathers must care for their daughters such that they are assured of his fatherly love and so are secure under his fatherly protection. To raise up Christian men and women is the noblest task of Christian fathers and mothers, but in order to do so they, like Jesus, must exercise their ministry of family governance with the authority conferred upon them by the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes that Catholic lay men and women, as part of sharing in Jesus' kingship, must engage "in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will". (31) Catholic laity has a responsibility for the right governance and the right ordering of society according to Gospel principles and the Church's social teaching. Today we, as Christians and Catholics, are engaged in a cultural war. A culture of death is waging a relentless war against a culture of life. That a culture of life can achieve victory frequently does not look promising. How each Catholic lay man and lay woman engages in this battle and in which battles one engages will depend on one's talents and graces. However, no Catholic lay person can absent him- or herself from the conflict. You were commissioned by Christ to fight this battle when you were confirmed and it was there that you were given the strength and courage of the Holy Spirit. Too much is at stake to stand by idly as the forces of evil vigorously corrupt our culture and the world.

Some issues are very complex, such as the issues of war and peace, and we all have to seek wisdom in addressing these concerns. Other issues are very clear. As Catholic lay men and women we must strive to make our country and the world safe for the unborn, the sick, the elderly and the dying. We must insure that science and technology are governed by principles that honor and respect our human dignity, as men and women created in the image and likeness of God. We must strive to protect the family from those who wish to transform it into something that is not in accord with human nature itself as God intended in creating men and women. We must ensure that those on the margins of our society are protected and helped, especially the poor, the needy, and those millions of people throughout the world and even in our own country who have been displaced from their own homeland because of war, famine, or economic depression.

The issues are endless, but Catholic lay men and women must address them as part of their sharing in Jesus' kingly ministry. This is especially true of you who are the young college

students of today. The future for you is yet to be lived and yet to be won, and it is your task to so live as to win the future for the Lord Jesus. Whatever your vocation, whatever career you may choose you are to strive for the right ordering and just governance of our world for the good and benefit of all. As [Lumen Gentium](#) states: “Thus, through the members of the Church, will Christ increasingly illuminate the whole of human society with His saving light”. (36)

The Laity’s Commission

In concluding, I want simply to make two points. The first is that I hope that I have demonstrated in this brief talk what great honor Jesus has bestowed upon lay men and women within our Catholic Church. As members of His Church you share in His priestly, prophetic and kingly ministry and so share in the authority and power that these ministries entail. This is the Gospel foundation and the theological basis of all that you do for the sake of Jesus Christ, for His Church and for all of humankind. Treasure this high calling and take up its challenges with resolve, with courage, with wisdom, with joy and, above all, with love.

Lastly, it is within prayer, especially within the Eucharist, that we find the source of this resolve, courage, wisdom, joy and love, for it is here that Jesus our Priest, Prophet and King nourishes with His own resolve, courage, wisdom, joy and love by uniting us to Himself in Holy Communion. Moreover, it is here that we offer to Him all of our priestly, prophetic and kingly activity so that He might sanctify it in the Holy Spirit, endow it with His truth and order it according to the will of His Father. [Lumen Gentium](#) states that within the celebration of the Eucharist the laity bring all of their life’s work and activity, and so “worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God”. (34)

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Christ Figures [Edit](#)

Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn: Priest, Prophet, King [Edit](#)

In fact, [Frodo Baggins](#), [Gandalf the Grey](#), and [Aragorn](#) each in a remote way embody one of the three aspects of Christ’s ministry as priest, prophet, and king. Each also undergoes a kind of sacrificial "death" and rebirth.

The priestly role belongs to Frodo, and he is the sacrificial lamb of Middle-earth who bears a burden of terrible evil on behalf of the whole world, like Christ carrying his cross. Frodo’s [Via Dolorosa](#) or way of sorrows is at the very heart of Tolkien’s story, just as the crucifixion

narratives are at the heart of the gospels accounts. As Christ descended into the grave, Frodo journeys into Mordor, the Land of Death, and there suffers a death-like state in the lair of the giant [spider Shelob](#) before awakening to complete his task. And, as Christ ascended into heaven, Frodo's life in Middle-earth comes to an end when he departs over the [sea](#) into the mythical West with the Elves, which is as much to say, into paradise. Frodo walks his Via Dolorosa or "way of sorrows" to [Mount Doom](#) like Jesus making his way to Calvary. As Jesus bore the sins of mankind, Frodo bears a great burden of evil on behalf of the world, and as he approaches the Cracks of Doom the Ring becomes as much a crushing weight as the wood of the cross.

Frodo, the Ring Bearer, is Christ the Sin Bearer. He carries the burden of the Ring as Christ carried the burden of sin. He too is a living sacrifice. Frodo's wound on [Weathertop](#) is a figurative of Christ's spear wound on the Cross. Note that the wound on Weathertop is inflicted by the [Witch-king](#), another Satan figure. Frodo's voyage to the west, like Gandalf's, is also symbolic of the Ascension. It doesn't take a biblical scholar to feel some similarity between Frodo's struggle to carry the Ring up Mount Doom and Christ's struggle to carry his cross to Calvary. By the time Frodo reaches Mount Doom, he is so weighed down by the power of the Ring and despair over its destruction that Sam carries him and the Ring up the path to the [Crack of Doom](#) — shades of Simon of Cyrene bearing Jesus' cross to Golgotha. Any parallel, intentional or not, between Frodo and Christ ends when [Gollum](#) attacks Frodo on the path in their second-to-last encounter. Gollum's effort to wrest the Ring from him re-ignites Frodo's will, showing how stern and powerful he has become under the Ring's influence. In prophetic and commanding words, Frodo fends off Gollum, warning that if he ever touches him again, he will be cast into the Fire of Doom. Unlike Christ, who at the height of his trial on the cross submits his will to God's and commends his spirit into His hands, Frodo, at the climax of his ordeal with the Ring, exerts his own will first by choosing not to complete the quest, saying, "I will not do this deed." With this declaration of will, Frodo claims the One Ring as his own and puts it on to openly reveal himself to the [Eye of Sauron](#). One can only surmise that at that point Frodo is prepared to directly challenge the [Dark Lord](#) for the [title](#) of Lord of the Ring.

The idea that Frodo could best Sauron in a contest of evil, even wearing the Ring, is hard to believe. More likely than not, the Ring is simply using Frodo to get back to its master by revealing its whereabouts. The great irony of this situation is that the moment Frodo feels as though he's finally mastered the Ring by claiming it and deciding against its destruction is precisely when the Ring takes completely mastery of him and turns his will into its will. Frodo's failure at [Mount Doom](#) is the polar opposite of Christ's victory on the cross, wherein Christ masters his suffering and death by submitting his will to this fate. When Jesus died, an earthquake occurred and did destroy things, same as Frodo, when he destroyed the ring; all the lands in Mordor did shake then finally destroyed including Mount Doom and the Eye of Sauron.

[Samwise Gamgee](#) is Christ the servant. He is the "friend that sticks closer than a brother". He makes himself a living sacrifice as he aids Frodo. He is the meek one who inherits the earth (in this case, the Shire).

Gandalf is the prophet, revealing hidden knowledge, working wonders, teaching others the way. Evoking the saving death and resurrection of [Christ](#), Gandalf does [battle](#) with the powers of hell to save his friends, sacrificing himself and descending into the nether regions before being

triumphantly reborn in greater power and glory as Gandalf the White. As with Frodo, Gandalf's sojourn in Middle-earth ends with his final voyage over the sea into the West.

The [One Ring](#) is a symbol of sin. It is the Forbidden Fruit that everyone wants; the "Precious" thing that no one who has it wants to give up, yet it enslaves and destroys anyone who has it. It is no coincidence that the Ring was made by [Sauron](#), the main Satan figure. The Bible tells us that sin began in Satan. The Hebrew word usually translated "found" in Ezekiel 28:15, "Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee", can mean "began" or "was made". Though Sauron made the Ring, he himself lost control of it, and in the end, it indirectly destroys him, just as sin will indirectly destroy [Satan](#).

Finally, there is Aragorn, the crownless destined to be [king](#). Besides being a messianic king of prophecy, Aragorn also dimly reflects the saving work of Christ by walking the [Paths of the Dead](#) and offering peace to the spirits there imprisoned, anticipating in a way the Harrowing of Hell. (The oath-breaking spirits Aragorn encounters on the Paths of the Dead, who cannot rest in peace until they expiate their treason, suggest a kind of purgatorial state.)

By Steven D. Greydanus

J. R. R. Tolkien once described his epic masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* as "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work." Yet nowhere in its pages is there any mention of religion, let alone of the Catholic Church, Christ, or even God. Tolkien's hobbits have no religious practices or cult; of prayer, sacrifice, or corporate worship there is no sign.

To make matters more difficult, Tolkien was equally emphatic that *The Lord of the Rings* were not to be understood allegorically. In fact, Tolkien was famously hostile to allegory in general, disliking even the allegorical children's stories of his friend and fellow Christian C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. How then can *The Lord of the Rings* be in any sense described as a fundamentally Catholic work, or even a religious one?

Creation and corruption in Middle-earth

Part of the answer is found in Tolkien's other great chronicle of Middle-earth, *The Silmarillion*, which recounts the larger mythic context of Middle-earth, beginning (notwithstanding his antipathy for allegory) with a magnificent allegorical retelling of the Creation and the Fall according to Genesis 1-3.

Here Tolkien does name the creator-God of Middle-earth, Eru ("the One," also called Ilúvatar, "All-Father"), as well as the mighty spirit Melkor, who rebelled against Eru and went into darkness. We also learn that Sauron, maker of the One Ring, is himself an agent of this Melkor. Tolkien thus establishes a direct relationship between the theistic, even Judeo-Christian cosmology of *The Silmarillion* and the war for the One Ring recounted in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the latter work itself there is no mention of Eru, nor is there any explicitly religious component to the characters' behavior. Even so, Tolkien's Catholic Christian worldview not only stands behind the saga of the Ring in its prehistory, but surrounds and suffuses it in its overarching themes and imaginative structures.

His faith is not the only aspect of Tolkien's inner life or personal experiences that bears upon the story. Other influences include Tolkien's love of languages, his early youth in a Shire-like pre-industrial Warwickshire, his love of trees and nature generally and corresponding dislike of engines and machines, and his experiences in World War I, where he encountered plain rural Englishmen performing everyday acts of great heroism.

But it was Tolkien's deeply held Catholic faith that most profoundly shaped his work. Though he rightly insisted *The Lord of the Rings* is not an allegorical work, the fact is that Tolkien thought, imagined, and wrote as a Catholic, and his work bears the clear signs of his faith, as he fully intended it should.

"The Shadow mocks, it cannot make"

The Judeo-Christian conception of creation and the fall, and of the preeminence of good over evil, is an important theme not only in *The Silmarillion* but also in *The Lord of the Rings*, where we find evil in Middle-earth depicted as a corruption and distortion of prior and fundamental goodness. In particular, just as Melkor and Sauron are fallen Ainur or angelic beings, the evil creatures and races of Middle-earth are always corrupted or distorted versions of the good ones.

For example, there are the trolls, "bred in mockery" of the tree-like Ents; the orcs, corrupted or misbred descendants of the Elves; and the fearsome Nazgûl or Black Riders, wraiths of human kings. Likewise, the evil wizard Saruman is a fallen Istari, and even Gollum is a withered hobbit.

The underlying principle is illuminated in a key exchange between Samwise Gamgee and Frodo Baggins, as they travel through the dark land of Mordor "where Shadows lie," on a mission to destroy the evil Ring. When Sam wonders if the evil orcs eat and drink food and water like ordinary creatures, or if perhaps they live on poison and foul air, Frodo replies:

"No, they eat and drink, Sam. The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them; and if they are to live at all, they have to live like other living creatures. Foul waters and foul meats they'll take, if they can get no better, but not poison."

There is no possibility here, as perhaps there is with [the two sides of the Force](#) in George Lucas's *Star Wars* films, of a dualistic interpretation of good and evil as equal and opposite forces, yin and yang, twin sides of one coin. In Tolkien's vision, goodness is primordial, evil derivative; and, whatever tragedies and horrors may be visited upon this world, they shall not have the final word.

This sense of eschatological hope becomes exceptionally clear in one memorable passage during the journey through Mordor, in which Sam has a kind of epiphany:

The land seemed full of creaking and cracking and sly noises, but there was no sound of voice or of foot. Far above the Ephel Duath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was a light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep.

Mere "defiance" of evil is a natural or pagan virtue (the evil giants will win in the end, said the Norse warriors, but we go to die with the gods). But hope, in Christian thought, is a theological virtue, and it is this eschatological hope that fills Sam's heart.

"Something else at work"

This sense of hope in Middle-earth is also rooted in an undefined but definite awareness of Providence. The name of Eru may not be spoken in *The Lord of the Rings*, but his will is evident from the outset, when Gandalf explains to Frodo the significance of the evil Ring being discovered by his uncle Bilbo, a humble hobbit. In that seemingly chance occurrence, Gandalf says,

"...there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought."

Gandalf can "put it no plainer," of course, because in this story Tolkien wishes to avoid explicit entanglement with religious doctrine. Nevertheless, the underlying idea is clear.

The hand of Providence is seen at various points throughout the drama of the story, but nowhere more clearly than in the climactic scene at Mount Doom, where two central characters struggling with evil both succumb, yet in the conflict of their evil wills not evil but good is served.

In the hands of another writer, such an ending might be seen as coincidental, ironic, absurdist, or even *deus ex machina*. As written by Tolkien, however, it is the inevitable result of the collision between the inexorable designs of Providence and the limitations of his fallen cast of characters. It is here that Tolkien most emphatically rejects an allegorizing interpretation: Frodo may be a Christ-like figure in many ways, but he is not, like Lewis's lion Aslan, an allegorical representation of Christ himself. Where Christ triumphed, Frodo fails, yet the designs of Providence are still served.

Echoes of sorrow

Frodo's ultimate failure at Mount Doom is also important for another reason: It strikes, even on the brink of victory, a note of sorrow and loss that pervades these books.

For all its signs of Providence and eschatological hope, *The Lord of the Rings* is not the story of ultimate victory of good over evil, but only of one important battle far in a mythical past.

Far from a Revelation-22-like epiphany of eternal glory in which every tear is wiped away, Tolkien's story resonates with elegiac sorrow and acute awareness of things lost never to be regained. Again and again we are made aware of all that once was and shall never be again (or never again till the world is renewed). The Ents never find their Ent-wives; Frodo never returns to Lothlórien; the Elves depart forever into the West.

All of this is shaped by the author's consciousness of the fallenness of the world and the inevitable sorrows of this life. "I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic," Tolkien once wrote to a friend, "so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' — though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory."

This is precisely the sensibility that Tolkien's own "legend" embodies. "Samples or glimpses of final victory" there certainly are, but also sorrow and tragedy and loss. Even in the very end, victory is tempered by signs of sorrow and loss: Frodo's failure at Mount Doom; the scouring of the Shire; the departure of the Elves.

"Glimpses of final victory"

Despite these climactic sorrowful elements, Tolkien's conclusion avoids the device of a climactic tragedy or heroic death, like the death of Thorin Oakenshield at the climax of *The Hobbit*, the prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*. In that story, Thorin redeemed himself from his obstinacy toward Bilbo by dying valiantly in the Battle of Five Armies.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, by contrast, no one is required to die in order to destroy the dark lord and his evil ring, or even to perish in the final struggle against him. Frodo and Sam, Aragorn and Faramir, Gandalf and Gimli and Legolas, Merry and Pippin — all survive the final conflict (one supporting character, aged Théoden, does die in battle with the Nazgûl). Of course an important character does perish with the ring and its master, but in doing so he isn't sacrificing himself, but reaping judgment, being consumed by the evil of his own choosing. In the end, the only true horror is a soul that goes into the fire, and even that serves the designs of Providence.

That Tolkien avoided a climactic sacrificial death in *The Lord of the Rings* is not due to some failure on his part to appreciate the dramatic merits of such a device, but because in this ending he was doing something different. Some victories come only at the cost of some final sacrifice or loss, but this, Tolkien believed, is not the deepest truth about the conflict of good and evil, and the "final victory" over evil of which legends can offer only "samples or glimpses" turns on no such loss.

The elements of sorrow and fallenness in Tolkien's ending forbid an allegorical-eschatological interpretation, yet in the absence of a climactic tragedy and the survival of all the companions it's possible to see "samples or glimpses of final victory."

Indeed, the element of hope is so strong that Samwise can even wonder aloud, "Is everything sad going to come untrue?" To which the answer is: Yes, but not here, alas, not now. Here in Middle-earth there is still hard work to be done, future shadows to be fought, and, somewhere in the unspecified future, redemption still to be accomplished by the one whose saving work is only remotely echoed in the great deeds of Frodo and Gandalf and Aragorn.

Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn: Priest, prophet, king

In fact, Frodo Baggins, Gandalf the Grey, and Aragorn each in a remote way embody one of the three aspects of Christ's ministry as priest, prophet, and king. Each also undergoes a kind of sacrificial "death" and rebirth.

The priestly role belongs to Frodo, who bears a burden of terrible evil on behalf of the whole world, like Christ carrying his cross. Frodo's *via dolorosa* or way of sorrows is at the very heart of Tolkien's story, just as the crucifixion narratives are at the heart of the gospels accounts. As Christ descended into the grave, Frodo journeys into Mordor, the Land of Death, and there suffers a deathlike state in the lair of the giant spider Shelob before awakening to complete his task. And, as Christ ascended into heaven, Frodo's life in Middle-earth comes to an end when he departs over the sea into the mythical West with the Elves, which is as much to say, into paradise.

Gandalf is the prophet, revealing hidden knowledge, working wonders, teaching others the way. Evoking the saving death and resurrection of Christ, Gandalf does battle with the powers of hell to save his friends, sacrificing himself and descending into the nether regions before being triumphantly reborn in greater power and glory as Gandalf the White. As with Frodo, Gandalf's sojourn in Middle-earth ends with his final voyage over the sea into the West.

Finally, there is Aragorn, the crownless destined to be king. Besides being a messianic king of prophecy, Aragorn also dimly reflects the saving work of Christ by walking the Paths of the Dead and offering peace to the spirits there imprisoned, anticipating in a way the Harrowing of Hell. (The oath-breaking spirits Aragorn encounters on the Paths of the Dead, who cannot rest in peace until they expiate their treason, suggest a kind of purgatorial state.)

"Snow-white! Snow-white! O Lady clear!"

As the passion of Christ is dimly echoed in the struggles of Tolkien's three heroes, so the place of Mary in Catholic faith and piety is reflected in another key figure of Middle-earth: Galadriel, the elven Queen of Lothlórien. Tolkien himself explicitly acknowledged this connection, observing in a letter to a friend, "I think it is true that I owe much of this character to Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary." In another letter he remarked that it is upon our Lady that "all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded."

Once again, this isn't to say that Galadriel is an allegorical representation of the Blessed Virgin, any more than Frodo or Gandalf or Aragorn are direct representations of Christ. The actual relationship is more subtle: In imagining a glorious and immortal Queen of a paradisaical realm,

and in depicting the devotion of others to her, Tolkien could hardly help drawing on the actual devotion in his religious tradition to a glorified Queen of a divine realm.

Indeed, in being drawn to create such a character in the first place, Tolkien's imagination was informed and fired by his faith and piety. Had he been, for instance, a Southern Baptist, or a Dutch Calvinist, doubtless Galadriel either would never have existed at all, or would at any rate have been an entirely different figure.

It's in the devotion she inspires, most especially in the dwarf Gimli, that Galadriel's Marian resonances are most apparent. Gimli's heart belongs to his immortal Queen as unreservedly as the heart of St. Louis de Montford or St. Maximilian Kolbe to the Queen of Heaven, and through Gimli the reader, even the non-Catholic or non-Christian reader, has a kind of window into the world of such devotion.

Galadriel is not the only elven Queen with Marian associations. The elvish hymns sung in praise of Elbereth resonate with Marian hymnody; a number of writers have observed similarities between the following lines of Tolkien's poetry and a well-known Marian hymn Tolkien would have known from childhood.

Snow-white! Snow-white! O Lady clear!
O Queen beyond the Western seas!
O light to us that wander here
Amid the world of woven trees!...
O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!
We still remember, we who dwell
In this far land beneath the trees,
Thy starlight on the Western seas.

Note the themes common to these lines and those that follow (the singer as wanderer in a remote land; the far-off Queen as a source of light and guidance; the repeated association of the Queen with starlight and the sea):

Hail, Queen of Heaven, the ocean star,
Guide of the wand'rer here below:
Thrown on life's surge, we claim thy care -
Save us from peril and from woe.
Mother of Christ, star of the sea,
Pray for the wanderer, pray for me.

These ethereal queens aren't the books' only elvish element with specifically Catholic resonance. The "waybread" or *lembas* of the Elves, given to the members of the Fellowship in Lothlórien, has clear eucharistic overtones. "Wafers" (Tolkien's word) of this extraordinary food, we read,

had a virtue without which [Frodo and Sam] would long ago have lain down to die. It did not satisfy desire, and at times Sam's mind was filled with the memories of food, and the longing for simple bread

and meats. And yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travellers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind.

Corruption and conversion; weakness and strength

Although Tolkien never explains just how the wearer of the One Ring, at least if he is a titan like Sauron or Gandalf, takes advantage of its power to dominate others, another aspect of the Ring's power is vividly realized throughout the books: its seductive power over the one who carries it. Gollum was consumed by it, Bilbo begins to suffer its deleterious effects, Gandalf and Galadriel refuse even to touch it, Boromir succumbs to its attraction, and even Frodo battles its allure all the way to Mount Doom before finally falling under its spell. Frodo may be a type of Christ, but only a type, and all types ultimately fall short of the reality.

Side by side with this depiction of the allure of evil is an acknowledgment of the possibility of conversion and redemption. Even Gollum, after years of enslavement and degeneration, seems to respond to Frodo's mercy by rising almost to the brink of redemption, struggling between good and evil before falling back into darkness.

Boromir, on the other hand, genuinely repents of his moment of weakness, and is redeemed, not only by an act of reparation that costs him his life, but also by making confession of his wrongdoing to another. As for Frodo, he is finally saved not by last-minute repentance, but by a preemptive providence, a strange grace that uses Gollum's concupiscence to give Frodo another chance. Thus, Frodo's own mercy to Gollum becomes a factor in his deliverance from the consequences of his ultimate failure.

Why does Frodo eventually succumb to the power of the Ring? A more revealing question might be why he endures against it as long as he does. To put it a third way, why do the great powers of Middle-earth, wizards and rulers of Elves, elect to entrust this most dangerous of artifacts to the keeping of a defenseless hobbit, a creature of comfort and humble domesticity? Why not trust to the strength and cunning of Aragorn, the power of Elrond, the art of Gandalf?

In part, the answer lies in the element of surprise. The Council at Rivendell gambles on sending the Ring straight into Mordor in the keeping of an insignificant creature partly because this is the one move the Enemy would not anticipate.

But there's more to it. There's a reason Gandalf finds it encouraging that the mysterious ways of fate brought the Ring into the possession of a hobbit rather than a warrior or wizard or elf, and why, of the mixed fellowship that departs Rivendell for Mordor, Frodo and no other is the Ring-bearer. Frodo's very lack of power, either physical or mystical, is itself seen as a sign of hope. The powerless can be less likely to trust to themselves, less likely to fall prey to hubris and presumption, more available as instruments of grace or divine action. Tolkien's unlikely heroes reflect the paradoxes of St. Paul: "When I am weak, then am I strong" and "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise."

Bride of Christ

PART ONE THE PROFESSION OF FAITH

SECTION TWO THE PROFESSION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

CHAPTER THREE I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

ARTICLE 9 "I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH"

Paragraph 2. The Church - People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit

I. THE CHURCH - PEOPLE OF GOD

781 "At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him. He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness. He therefore chose the Israelite race to be his own people and established a covenant with it. He gradually instructed this people. . . . All these things, however, happened as a preparation for and figure of that new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ . . . the New Covenant in his blood; he called together a race made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit."²⁰¹

Characteristics of the People of God

782 The People of God is marked by characteristics that clearly distinguish it from all other religious, ethnic, political, or cultural groups found in history:

- It is the People *of God*: God is not the property of any one people. But he acquired a people for himself from those who previously were not a people: "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation."²⁰²
- One becomes a *member* of this people not by a physical birth, but by being "born anew," a birth "of water and the Spirit,"²⁰³ that is, by faith in Christ, and Baptism.
- This People has for its Head Jesus the Christ (the anointed, the Messiah). Because the same anointing, the Holy Spirit, flows from the head into the body, this is "the messianic people."

- "The *status* of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in a temple."

- "Its *law* is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us."²⁰⁴ This is the "new" law of the Holy Spirit.²⁰⁵

- Its *mission* is to be salt of the earth and light of the world.²⁰⁶ This people is "a most sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race."

- Its *destiny*, finally, "is the Kingdom of God which has been begun by God himself on earth and which must be further extended until it has been brought to perfection by him at the end of time."²⁰⁷

A priestly, prophetic, and royal people

783 Jesus Christ is the one whom the Father anointed with the Holy Spirit and established as priest, prophet, and king. The whole People of God participates in these three offices of Christ and bears the responsibilities for mission and service that flow from them.²⁰⁸

784 On entering the People of God through faith and Baptism, one receives a share in this people's unique, *priestly* vocation: "Christ the Lord, high priest taken from among men, has made this new people 'a kingdom of priests to God, his Father.' The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are *consecrated* to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood."²⁰⁹

785 "The holy People of God shares also in Christ's *prophetic* office," above all in the supernatural sense of faith that belongs to the whole People, lay and clergy, when it "unfailingly adheres to this faith . . . once for all delivered to the saints,"²¹⁰ and when it deepens its understanding and becomes Christ's witness in the midst of this world.

786 Finally, the People of God shares in the *royal* office of Christ. He exercises his kingship by drawing all men to himself through his death and Resurrection.²¹¹ Christ, King and Lord of the universe, made himself the servant of all, for he came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."²¹² For the Christian, "to reign is to serve him," particularly when serving "the poor and the suffering, in whom the Church recognizes the image of her poor and suffering founder."²¹³ The People of God fulfills its royal dignity by a life in keeping with its vocation to serve with Christ.

The sign of the cross makes kings of all those reborn in Christ and the anointing of the Holy Spirit consecrates them as priests, so that, apart from the particular service of our ministry, all spiritual and rational Christians are recognized as members of this royal race and sharers in Christ's priestly office. What, indeed, is as royal for a soul as to govern the body in obedience to God? And what is as priestly as to dedicate a pure conscience to the Lord and to offer the spotless offerings of devotion on the altar of the heart?²¹⁴

II. THE CHURCH - BODY OF CHRIST

The Church is communion with Jesus

787 From the beginning, Jesus associated his disciples with his own life, revealed the mystery of the Kingdom to them, and gave them a share in his mission, joy, and sufferings.²¹⁵ Jesus spoke of a still more intimate communion between him and those who would follow him: "Abide in me, and I in you. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches."²¹⁶ And he proclaimed a mysterious and real communion between his own body and ours: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."²¹⁷

788 When his visible presence was taken from them, Jesus did not leave his disciples orphans. He promised to remain with them until the end of time; he sent them his Spirit.²¹⁸ As a result communion with Jesus has become, in a way, more intense: "By communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers of his who are called together from every nation."²¹⁹

789 The comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and his Church. Not only is she gathered *around him*; she is united *in him*, in his body. Three aspects of the Church as the Body of Christ are to be more specifically noted: the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ; Christ as head of the Body; and the Church as bride of Christ.

"One Body"

790 Believers who respond to God's word and become members of Christ's Body, become intimately united with him: "In that body the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe, and who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ in his Passion and glorification."²²⁰ This is especially true of Baptism, which unites us to Christ's death and Resurrection, and the Eucharist, by which "really sharing in the body of the Lord, . . . we are taken up into communion with him and with one another."²²¹

791 The body's unity does not do away with the diversity of its members: "In the building up of Christ's Body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions. There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives his different gifts for the welfare of the Church."²²² The unity of the Mystical Body produces and stimulates charity among the faithful: "From this it follows that if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with him, and if one member is honored, all the members together rejoice."²²³ Finally, the unity of the Mystical Body triumphs over all human divisions: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."²²⁴

"Christ is the Head of this Body"

792 Christ "is the head of the body, the Church."²²⁵ He is the principle of creation and redemption. Raised to the Father's glory, "in everything he [is] preeminent,"²²⁶ especially in the Church, through whom he extends his reign over all things.

793 *Christ unites us with his Passover:* all his members must strive to resemble him, "until Christ be formed" in them.²²⁷ "For this reason we . . . are taken up into the mysteries of his life, . . . associated with his sufferings as the body with its head, suffering with him, that with him we may be glorified."²²⁸

794 *Christ provides for our growth:* to make us grow toward him, our head,²²⁹ he provides in his Body, the Church, the gifts and assistance by which we help one another along the way of salvation.

795 Christ and his Church thus together make up the "whole Christ" (*Christus totus*). The Church is one with Christ. The saints are acutely aware of this unity:

Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God's grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members; he and we together are the whole man. . . . The fullness of Christ then is the head and the members. But what does "head and members" mean? Christ and the Church.²³⁰

Our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy Church whom he has taken to himself.²³¹

Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person.²³²

A reply of St. Joan of Arc to her judges sums up the faith of the holy doctors and the good sense of the believer: "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter."²³³

The Church is the Bride of Christ

796 The unity of Christ and the Church, head and members of one Body, also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of bridegroom and bride. The theme of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church was prepared for by the prophets and announced by John the Baptist.²³⁴ The Lord referred to himself as the "bridegroom."²³⁵ The Apostle speaks of the whole Church and of each of the faithful, members of his Body, as a bride "betrothed" to Christ the Lord so as to become but one spirit with him.²³⁶ The Church is the spotless bride of the spotless Lamb.²³⁷ "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her."²³⁸ He has joined her with himself in an everlasting covenant and never stops caring for her as for his own body.²³⁹

This is the whole Christ, head and body, one formed from many . . . whether the head or members speak, it is Christ who speaks. He speaks in his role as the head (*ex persona capitis*) and in his role as body (*ex persona corporis*). What does this mean? "The two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the Church."²⁴⁰ And the Lord himself says in the Gospel: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh."²⁴¹ They are, in fact, two different persons, yet they are one in the conjugal union, . . . as head, he calls himself the bridegroom, as body, he calls himself "bride."²⁴²

III. THE CHURCH IS THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

797 "What the soul is to the human body, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of Christ, which is the Church."²⁴³ "To this Spirit of Christ, as an invisible principle, is to be ascribed the fact that all the parts of the body are joined one with the other and with their exalted head; for the whole Spirit of Christ is in the head, the whole Spirit is in the body, and the whole Spirit is in each of the members."²⁴⁴ The Holy Spirit makes the Church "the temple of the living God".²⁴⁵

Indeed, it is to the Church herself that the "Gift of God" has been entrusted. . . . In it is in her that communion with Christ has been deposited, that is to say: the Holy Spirit, the pledge of incorruptibility, the strengthening of our faith and the ladder of our ascent to God. . . . For where the Church is, there also is God's Spirit; where God's Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace.²⁴⁶

798 The Holy Spirit is "the principle of every vital and truly saving action in each part of the Body."²⁴⁷ He works in many ways to build up the whole Body in charity.²⁴⁸ by God's Word "which is able to build you up";²⁴⁹ by Baptism, through which he forms Christ's Body;²⁵⁰ by the sacraments, which give growth and healing to Christ's members; by "the grace of the apostles, which holds first place among his gifts";²⁵¹ by the virtues, which make us act according to what is good; finally, by the many special graces (called "charisms"), by which he makes the faithful "fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church."²⁵²

Charisms

799 Whether extraordinary or simple and humble, charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world.

800 Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms.²⁵³

801 It is in this sense that discernment of charisms is always necessary. No charism is exempt from being referred and submitted to the Church's shepherds. "Their office [is] not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good,"²⁵⁴ so that all the diverse and complementary charisms work together "for the common good."²⁵⁵

IN BRIEF

802 Christ Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own" (*Titus* 2:14).

803 "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 *Pet* 2:9).

804 One enters into the People of God by faith and Baptism. "All men are called to belong to the new People of God" (*LG* 13), so that, in Christ, "men may form one family and one People of God" (*AG* 1).

805 The Church is the Body of Christ. Through the Spirit and his action in the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, Christ, who once was dead and is now risen, establishes the community of believers as his own Body.

806 In the unity of this Body, there is a diversity of members and functions. All members are linked to one another, especially to those who are suffering, to the poor and persecuted.

807 The Church is this Body of which Christ is the head: she lives from him, in him, and for him; he lives with her and in her.

808 The Church is the Bride of Christ: he loved her and handed himself over for her. He has purified her by his blood and made her the fruitful mother of all God's children.

809 The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the soul, as it were, of the Mystical Body, the source of its life, of its unity in diversity, and of the riches of its gifts and charisms.

810 "Hence the universal Church is seen to be 'a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit'" (*LG* 4 citing St. Cyprian, *De Dom. orat* 23: PL 4, 553).

201 *LG* 9; cf. *Acts* 10:35; *I Cor* 11:25.

202 *I Pet* 2:9.

203 *Jn* 3:3-5.

204 Cf. *Jn* 13:34

205 *Rom* 8:2; *Gal* 5:25.

206 Cf. *Mt* 5:13-16.

207 *LG* 9 § 2.

208 Cf. John Paul II, *RH* 18-21.

209 *LG* 10; cf. *Heb* 5:1-5; *Rev* 1:6.

210 *LG* 12; cf. *Jude* 3.

211 Cf. *Jn* 12:32.

212 *Mt* 20:28.

213 *LG* 8; cf. 36.

214 St. Leo the Great, *Sermo* 4,1:PL 54,149.

215 Cf. *Mk* 1:16-20; 3:13-19; *Mt* 13:10-17; *Lk* 10:17-20; 22:28-30.

216 *Jn* 15:4-5.

217 *Jn* 6:56.

218 Cf. *Jn* 14:18; 20:22; *Mt* 28:20; *Acts* 2:33.

219 *LG* 7.

220 *LG* 7.

221 LG 7; cf. *Rom* 6:4-5; *1 Cor* 12:13.
222 LG 7 § 3.
223 LG 7 § 3; cf. *1 Cor* 12:26.
224 *Gal* 3:27-28.
225 *Col* 1:18.
226 *Col* 1:18.
227 *Gal* 4:19.
228 LG 7 § 4; cf. *Phil* 3:21; *Rom* 8:17.
229 Cf. *Col* 2:19; *Eph* 4:11-16.
230 St. Augustine, *In Jo. ev.* 21,8:PL 35,1568.
231 Pope St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job, præf.*,14:PL 75,525A.
232 St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* III,48,2.
233 Acts of the Trial of Joan of Arc.
234 *Jn* 3:29.
235 *Mk* 2:19.
236 Cf. *Mt* 22:1-14; 25:1-13; *1 Cor* 6:15-17; *2 Cor* 11:2.
237 Cf. *Rev* 22:17; *Eph* 1:4; 5:27.
238 *Eph* 5:25-26.
239 Cf. *Eph* 5:29.
240 *Eph* 5:31-32.
241 *Mt* 19:6.
242 St. Augustine, *En. in Ps.* 74:4:PL 36,948-949.
243 St. Augustine, *Sermo* 267,4:PL 38,1231D.
244 Pius XII, encyclical, *Mystici Corporis*:DS 3808.
245 *2 Cor* 6:16; cf. *1 Cor* 3:16-17; *Eph* 2:21.
246 St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3,24,1:PG 7/1,966.
247 Pius XII, encyclical, *Mystici Corporis*:DS 3808.
248 Cf. *Eph* 4:16.
249 *Acts* 20:32.
250 Cf. *1 Cor* 12:13.
251 LG 7 § 2.
252 LG 12 § 2; cf. *AA* 3.
253 Cf. *1 Cor* 13.
254 LG 12; cf. 30; *1 Thess* 5:12,19-21; John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*,24.
255 *1 Cor* 12:7.

Sons of God

Romans 8:12-17 and the story of the two sons and the prodigal father

Romans 8: ¹² Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. ¹⁶ And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” ¹⁷ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁸ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Luke 15: The Parable of the Lost Son

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with

my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”