

# The Church 40 Years On

## No. 1

### Who holds us together? The Church as Mystery

#### Chapter One

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church  
Second Vatican Council, 1965

#### Reflection for Small Groups

*Inside:*

1. *How to use this reflection.*
2. *Part One – The Church as Mystery:  
Christ is the foundation of the Church.*
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The Church is the body of Christ.*

#### How to use these reflections

**Contents:**

The guide provides texts for reflection and brief commentaries on the texts. At the end, there are questions suggested for reflection and sharing.

**Method:**

There is no fixed method. Groups that meet regularly may use their established ways of presenting the materials, reflection and sharing. For others, it is suggested that a facilitator leads the reflection and sharing.

One suggestion takes the following format: opening prayer, hymn (optional), introduce the theme (facilitator), read the texts, take a pause for reflection, read the commentaries, share experiences and understanding, summary of the sharing, and closing prayer.

**Note:**

The texts are not easy to read. Have the reader(s) prepare. After each text, pause, and give time for the others to read the texts quietly on their own. The reflection questions provided are only suggestions – do not be limited by them].

**Comment:**

It is good to have available the document itself (Lumen Gentium), and a Bible.

**Caution:** This is only the first of a series of eight reflections on the Church. Try to stay focused on the aspects of Church discussed in each chapter.

## Who holds us together?

### **Church as Mystery\* Lumen gentium\* Chapter I**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This year, 2005 is the fortieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. (1962-1965). To celebrate this anniversary with a view to renewing our sense of Church, all the parishes of the Archdiocese of Singapore will review one chapter per month of this key document of the Council – The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church also known as Lumen Gentium or Light of the Nations.

As we shall see from reflecting on this document, it has significantly influenced the Church's own understanding of itself. This reflection guide is provided to assist us in better understanding what our Church is all about today. It is the first in a series of eight reflections.

#### **PART ONE**

##### **A. Christ is the foundation of the Church**

Someone please read the following paragraph

The Church is founded on Jesus Christ, who is the "the Light of the Nations – Lumen Gentium". The Church is a Sacrament of Christ, through which God bestows blessings and grace. The Church is to bring and unite all people in God.

As part of the divine plan, God the Father created all people in His image in order to finally share eternal life with Him; Christ, the Son, became man so as to leave us a model of God's image; and the Spirit was sent on Pentecost to guide the church's activities to achieve the goal of eternal life with God.

In other words, the Church is "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (LG n.4)

##### **B. Paragraph 5 of Lumen gentium**

Someone please read the text

5. The mystery of the holy church is already brought to light in the manner of its foundation. For the Lord Jesus inaugurated his church by preaching the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God, promised over the ages in the scriptures: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15; see Mt 4:17). This kingdom shines out before humanity in the words, the works and the presence of Christ. The word of the Lord is compared to a seed which is sown in a field (see Mk 4:14); those who hear the word with faith and form part of the little flock of Christ (see Lk 12:32) have received the kingdom itself. Then, by its own power the seed sprouts and grows until the harvest (see Mk 4:26-29). The miracles of Jesus also demonstrate that the kingdom has already come on earth: "If I cast out devils by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk 11:20; see Mt 12:28). But principally the kingdom is revealed in the person of Christ himself, Son of God and Son of Man, who came "to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

When Jesus, having died on the cross for humanity, rose again from the dead, he appeared as Lord, Christ, and priest established for ever (see Acts 2:36; Heb 5:6; 7:17-21), and he poured out on his disciples the Spirit promised by the Father (see Acts 2:23). Henceforward the church, equipped with the gifts of its founder and faithfully observing his precepts of charity, humility and self-denial, receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and is, on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom. While it slowly grows to maturity, the church longs for the completed kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its king.

##### **C. Summary explanation**

Jesus gathered to himself a group of disciples who followed him and lived with him during his ministry to the people. He

empowered them and sent them out to do for the people the same things he himself did.<sup>1</sup> When he was killed, the sadness of the disciples turned to joy when God raised him from the dead and he appeared to them.<sup>2</sup> Before He was taken up to the Father, He poured out his spirit on them, instructed his disciples to carry on his work and promised to be with them forever.<sup>3</sup> The Acts of the Apostles describes how the disciples, filled with the Spirit, carried out his instructions, and the Church grew. For the last 2000 years, Jesus has been with the Church and his message and the reality of the kingdom of God are open to all who are ready to accept them.

Jesus Christ, is referred to in John's gospel as the Word of God.<sup>4</sup> The Word is sown within us. Like the seed in the parable it grows mysteriously.<sup>5</sup> Through our baptism we received the Spirit of Christ; and this spirit will grow in our hearts and mind pushing us to unity with God. With the help of the Spirit the Church matures and bears fruits of charity, humility and self-sacrifice that are necessary for the continuing spread of God's gifts of the kingdom to all people. The Church is therefore not only for personal gain, but is called to work towards a unity of all people in God.

#### **D. Questions for reflection**

1. Underline or highlight all the times you find the word 'Kingdom' in the text. What do you think it refers to?
2. What do you understand from the above text about the word mystery or mysterious? (Read the glossary explanation if you need)

#### **NB**

If you have no time to complete Part Two, move directly to the Final Summary on page 4.

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<sup>1</sup> Mk 6:7; Matt 10:1; Lk 9:1

<sup>2</sup> Matt 28:8; Luke 28:31-35, 41; Jn 20:19-20;

<sup>3</sup> Matt 28:20

<sup>4</sup> Jn 1:1-5, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Mk 4:26-27

## **PART TWO**

### **A. The Church is the Body of Christ**

Someone please read the following paragraph

The first chapter goes on to use different images to describe the Church. The images are taken from the Bible: A flock of sheep needs the shepherd, God, for survival; a vineyard is cultivated to produce fruits for life; the family is concerned with relationships: engaged to be married, marriages and children, and meals that are shared. In all of these, the role of Jesus Christ is clear: he is the good shepherd;<sup>6</sup> he is the main vine from which the branches grow;<sup>7</sup> he is the bridegroom and the church his bride;<sup>8</sup> he is the paschal lamb, the meal that was eaten and shared, and marked the beginning of liberation of the people of God from bondage.<sup>9</sup>

### **B. Paragraph 7 of Lumen Gentium**

Someone please read the text

**The Head of this Body is Christ.** He is the image of the invisible God and in Him all things came into being. He is before all creatures and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the Body which is the Church. He is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in all things He might have the first place. By the greatness of His power He rules the things in heaven and the things on earth, and with His all-surprising perfection and way of acting He fills the whole body with the riches of His glory.

All the members ought to be molded in the likeness of Him, until Christ be formed in them. For this reason we, who have been made to conform with Him, who have died with Him and risen with Him, are taken up into the mysteries of His life, until we will reign together with Him. On earth, still as pilgrims in a strange

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<sup>6</sup> Jn 10:11

<sup>7</sup> Jn 15:5

<sup>8</sup> Mk 2:19-20; Matt 9:15; Lk 5:34-35; Jn 3:29. The parable of the ten virgins in Matt 25:1-13.

<sup>9</sup> Ex 12:21-28

land, tracing in trial and in oppression the paths he trod, we are made one with His sufferings, like the body is one with the Head, suffering with Him that with Him we may be glorified. From Him "the whole body, supplied and built up by joints and ligaments, attains a growth that is of God". He continually distributes in His body, that is in the Church, gifts of ministries in which, by His own power, we serve each other unto salvation so that, carrying out the truth in love, we might through all things grow unto Him who is our Head. (LG n.7)

### **C. Summary explanation**

The key image of the Church is that of the Body of Christ. In this image, the church is not seen as a building or institution but a gathering of people and relationships. The "Head of this Body is Christ" (n. 7) and we make up the limbs and joints and other parts. The mystery is that in "a hidden way and real way" every baptized person is united to Christ. As the Head, he endows and shares his glory with the whole body. As members of the body, each part is coordinated to others, and we discover our part in the functions we perform. For example, the eye sees, the ear hears, the nose smells, the mouth communicates and eats, and our feet take us to where we would go, each part with a specific function but part of a whole body. (1 Cor 12:12,14-17; Eph 1:22-23; Eph 4:11-16).

Christ is the Head of his Body, the Church;<sup>10</sup> and the Church is the body of people who lives according to the attitudes, values and examples taught by and exemplified in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ is the first in all things. We are united to Christ in the breaking and sharing of the Eucharistic bread which also joins us in a communion with each other, so that we rejoice together and endure sufferings as one body in Christ. (Matt 18:19-20)

The Church on earth is a visible community of faith, hope and charity. Yet it has another dimension; it is not separated from the invisible heavenly things. Just as Christ is both divine and

human, the Body of Christ, the Church "forms one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element" (n. 8).

### **D. Questions for reflection**

1. So, who holds us together as Church? Why can I say that Christ is the head of the Church?
2. What do I mean by the phrase, "We are the body of Christ"?

### **FINAL SUMMARY**

As the points below are read, keep asking yourself, what does it mean to me as a disciple of Christ and member of the Catholic Church? Read the points slowly giving time for personal reflection.

- The Church is founded on Jesus the Christ.
- The Church is a people that work toward a unity with God. Every baptized person is church
- Christ, the Word of God is like the seed that grows mysteriously. Through baptism it is sown in us.
- Christ is the head of the Church. With the Holy Spirit, He has been with the Church, as promised, from its inception.
- Christ continually shares his power with us in order to carry out his mission.
- We, the church, are united to Christ as part of his body and in the Eucharist.
- Christ commissioned us to continue his work.
- In us, the Church, Christ is revealed to the world.
- The Church works for the unity of all people in God.
- Like Christ, the Church is both human and divine.

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<sup>10</sup> Col 1:17-18

## Glossary

### **MYSTERY**

Usually when we speak about a mystery, we mean 'something hidden' and beyond human understanding and we can only understand it if the thing is revealed and explained. In the Bible & teaching on the Sacraments "mystery" refers also to the plan God has for humanity and the world. God's plan is to unite everyone and everything in Jesus Christ so the mystery is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). In the Eastern churches, the word they use for Sacraments is 'Mystery'. 'There is only one Mystery, namely God, who communicates Godself to us as Word and Spirit, in Jesus, in grace, in history and finally when we see him face to face.'

*Peter Phan.*

### ***Lumen gentium***

Meaning 'Light of the Nations' in Latin. All Church documents coming from the Pope and the Councils get their Latin titles from the first few words of chapter one paragraph one.

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