

## **31\_ IS THE CHURCH THE BODY OF CHRIST?**

Fr Luigi Gioia  
*Theologian In Residence*

**Sharp Faith:** talks on the Church

Is the Church the People of God? (May 12)

**Is the Church the Body of Christ (June 2)**

Is the Church the Temple of the Holy Spirit (June 16)

Is the Church the same thing as the Kingdom of God? (June 30)

### **THE CHURCH BODY OF CHRIST**

#### **The unity of Christians and the Eucharistic body of Christ**

1Co 10:14-22 [14](#)Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. [15](#)I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. [16](#)The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? **The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?** [17](#)Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

1. Traditionally, Christian unity was linked to that of broken bread: the dinner in memory of Jesus was called the "breaking of bread". The idea of unity was naturally linked to this formula: the broken bread ideally remains one – Christian unity is based on the gesture of Christ who distributes the pieces of a single loaf to all.

Acts 2:42 They persevered in the apostles' teaching and in communion, in the breaking of bread and in prayers.

Luke 24:35 And they told what had happened along the way and how they had recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

2. On the basis of the identity between the bread and the body, Paul progressively develops the notion of unity by connecting it not only to the bread, but to the body. It is important to note here that the expression "one body" (1Co 10, 17) designates the individual and real body of Christ.

#### **The Greco-Roman allegory of the body**

3. The allegory of the body was famously employed in a fable by Aesop (+ 564 BC): the different organs of the human body band together out of jealousy against the stomach and decide to no longer provide it with any food, with the result that together with the stomach they also die, because together they are one body.
4. This fable was applied to the social order by Menenius Agrippa (+ 493 BC):

<p>Olim humani artus, cum ventrem otiosum cernerent, ab eo discordarunt, conspiraruntque ne manus ad os cibum ferrent, nec os acciperet datum, nec dentes conficerent.</p> <p>At dum ventrem domare volunt, ipsi quoque defecerunt, totumque corpus ad extremam tabem venit: inde apparuit ventris haud segne ministerium esse, eumque acceptos cibos per omnia membra disseminare, et cum eo in gratiam redierunt.</p> <p>Sic senatus et populus <b>quasi unum corpus</b> discordia pereunt concordia valent.</p>	<p>«Once, the limbs of a person, noting that the stomach was idle [waiting for food], broke the agreements with him and conspired among themselves, deciding that the hands should not bring food to the mouth, nor that, having brought it, the mouth would accept it, nor let the teeth chew it.</p> <p>But while they intended to tame the stomach, they themselves also weakened, and the entire body reached extreme deterioration. From here it appeared that the office of the stomach is not that of a lazy person, but that, once received, it distributes the foods to all the limbs. And so they returned to friendship with him.</p> <p>Thus the senate and the people, <b>as one body</b>, perish through discord, remain healthy through concord.</p>
--	---

- 4.1. an army, a society are united or should be united as a human body is
- 4.2. for the common good, everyone's contribution is necessary (moral unity), complementarity and self-forgetfulness on the part of each member are needed. Even when the role of a member is humble and hidden, it remains as indispensable to the life of the whole body as that of any other member.
- 5. This motif can be found in the following passage by Paul in Romans:
 

Rom 12:3-8 3By the grace given to me, I say to each of you: do not think of yourselves more than is appropriate, but think of yourselves wisely and justly, each according to the measure of faith that God has given him. 4**For just as we have many members in one body, and these members do not all have the same function,** 5 **so we too, though many, are one body in Christ and, each in his own part, we are members of one another.** 6We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us: whoever has the gift of prophecy exercises it according to what faith dictates; 7whoever has a ministry should attend to the ministry; whoever teaches should dedicate himself to teaching; 8he who exhorts must devote himself to exhortation. Whoever gives should do so with simplicity; whoever presides must preside with diligence; whoever does works of mercy should do them with joy.
- 6. However, a theological deepening is in the making, because the unifying factor is not a social or simply moral order. If Christians are "one body" it is because they are "in Christ".
- 7. We should distinguish
  - 7.1. the **physical** union, a single being (a human body);
  - 7.2. the **moral** union, that is, the same will in view of a common good (the army, the state) and

- 7.3. the **real** union: sharing an essential reality in common with Christ, that is, his Spirit, his life. There are no examples of real unity in creation.
8. Compared to the "people of God", the reference to Christ's life or Spirit as that which unites Christians in one single entity is not meant to underline continuity with the people of the Old Testament, but novelty: it expresses the specificity of the Christian community-churches compared to the Greek 'church-assemblies' and the Jewish 'churches-holy assemblies'.

Gal 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Eph 2:14 For he [Christ] is our peace, he who made two things one, breaking down the wall of separation that divided them, that is, enmity, through his flesh.

### From allegory to the Christian sense

9. Having to face the community problems created by anarchy in the exercise of charisms in the Church of Corinth, Paul resorts to the allegory of the body, but gives a clearly theological meaning to it:

**1Co 12:4-27** 4There are different charisms, but only one is the Spirit;

5there are different ministries, but only one is the Lord;

6there are different activities, but there is only one God, who works everything in everyone.

7To each one is given a particular manifestation of the Spirit for the common good:

- 8for one is given the language of wisdom through the Spirit;
- to another instead, from the same Spirit, the language of knowledge;
- 9a one, in the same Spirit, faith;
- to another, in the one Spirit, the gift of healing;
- 10a one the power of miracles;
- to another the gift of prophecy;
- to another the gift of discerning spirits;
- to another the variety of languages;
- to another the interpretation of languages.

11But all these things are done by one and the same Spirit, distributing them to each as he wishes.

12For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13For we were all baptized into one body by one Spirit, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free; and we were all quenched by one Spirit.

4For the body is not made up of just one member, but of many members. 15If the foot said: «Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, it would not therefore not be part of the body. 16And if the ear were to say: "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body, it would not therefore not be part of the body. 17If the whole body were an eye, where would hearing be? If everything were heard, where would the sense of smell be? 18But now God<sub>3</sub>

has arranged the members of the body distinctly, as he willed. 19If everything were a single member, where would the body be? 20But the members are many, but the body is one. 21The eye cannot say to the hand: «I have no need of you; or head to toe: «I don't need you. 22Indeed, the very members of the body that seem weakest are the most necessary; 23and the parts of the body that we deem less honorable we surround with greater respect, and the unseemly ones are treated with greater decency, 24while the decent ones do not need it. But God arranged the body, giving greater honor to what he does not have, 25 so that there is no division in the body, but rather the various members take care of each other. 26So if one member suffers, all the members suffer together; and if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with him. 27**Now you are the body of Christ and, each according to your part, members of him.**

- 9.1. Not “the *mystical* body of Christ”, but “one with the personal body of Christ”
- 9.2. Not "you are members incorporated into this body which is the Church", but "you are members incorporated into the personal body of Christ".
- 9.3. Body does not mean society.
- 9.4. The argument is the following: just as the human body makes the plurality of members a unity, so the [personal body] of Christ, that is, his very person, plays the role of unifying principle of the community.

## 10. The background: baptism and the Eucharist

1 Co 12:13 For we were all baptized into one body by one Spirit, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free; and we were all quenched by one Spirit.

cf. 1Co 10:17 Since there is one bread, we are, although many, one body: in fact we all partake of the one bread.

1Co 10:4 they all drank the same spiritual drink: in fact they drank from a spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

## 11. Meaning of 1Co 12:13: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body (eis en sôma), Jews or Greeks, slaves or free; and we were all quenched by one Spirit.”

- 11.1. “eis en sôma” “into one body” does not mean “in order to form one [unity similar to a] body” but “to be in relationship with/united with the personal body of Christ”

- 11.2. Many parallels in other letters:

Rom 6:3 do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

Gal 3:27 For all of you are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ

1 Cor 1:13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

## 12. Therefore the church is a body only with reference to the principle of unity which is the body of Christ and "one body" ("en sôma") designates the unique personal physical body of Christ. This is confirmed by the conclusion of this passage: “Now you are the body of Christ, and you are members of him” (1 Co 12:27).

- 12.1. Cf. the nuance introduced by the lack of article in “Now you are ~~the~~ body of Christ

and you are members of him" (*"umeis de este soma Christou kai mele ek merous"*)

- 12.2. the comparison with the human body has just been concluded and therefore it cannot simply mean: ""You are comparable to a human body"
- 12.3. nor can there be a simple identification with the physical or Eucharistic body of Christ when it is said "You are the body of Christ".
- 12.4. It is therefore necessary to translate "you are a body, a body which is that of Christ, in which the life of Christ circulates".
- 12.5. The body with which the community is identified is the real and personal body of Christ who lived, died, is glorified and offered in the Eucharist. This real body is the center and origin of the unity of the Christian world: it is because we are identified with this body that we can be one among us.

Cf. Acts 11:24 [Barnaba] was a virtuous man full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And a considerable crowd was added to the Lord. (to enter the community of Christians is *to unite with the Lord*).

#### 4. The body of Christ in the epistles of the captivity

- 13. Although there is an evolution in the understanding of the Church in the so-called "letters of captivity" (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon), the theme of the 'body of Christ' retains the same meaning as in the great letters
  - 13.1. it never designates a moral body, but there is always an implicit reference to the real body of Christ, even there is a shift of emphasis on the body of the resurrected Christ, the source of all sanctification.
  - 13.2. in this sense, the theme evolves into the head/body comparison
  - 13.3. saying "the Church is the body of Christ" is a metonymic expression which actually means: "The Church is an irradiation of the life of the risen Christ".
- 14. The author(s) of these letters underlines the distinction between the mortal body of Christ and his resurrected body

Phil 3:21 The Lord Jesus Christ will transfigure our lowly body to conform it to his glorious body, by virtue of the power he has to subject all things to himself.

Col 1:21f And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

Eph 2:14-16 [14](#)For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [15](#)by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, [16](#)and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

- 14.1. Christians are united with the body of Christ in its two successive states. We are stripped of the fleshly body by our union with the cross, our baptism buries us with Christ and resurrects us with him:

Col 2, 9-15 [9](#)For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, [10](#)and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. [11](#)In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by [5](#)

putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, [12](#)having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. [13](#)And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14](#)by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [15](#)He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

- 14.2.** Christian sanctification is now related to the influence of the personal body of the risen one in which the fullness of divinity dwells.

## **15. Head and body**

- 15.1.** The designation of Christ as 'head' of the Church is absent in the letters to Romans and Corinthians (in 1 Cor one finds 'body/members' but not 'body/head').

- 15.2.** In the letters of captivity, it is stated that Christ is the head of the Church, as if he were the head of a human body

Eph 5:23 For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the Church, he who is the savior of the body.

- 15.3.** And with reference to the presumed physiological role of the head, it is stated that life spreads from it throughout the entire body

Col 2:19 From this head [Christ] the whole body receives sustenance and cohesion through joints and ligaments and grows according to the will of God.

Eph 4:16 From him the whole body, well composed and connected, with the collaboration of every joint, according to the energy of each member, grows in such a way as to build itself up in charity.

## **16. The Church is the body of the risen Christ**

Col 1:24 Now I rejoice in the sufferings that I endure for you and I fulfill what is missing from Christ's sufferings in my flesh, for the sake of his body which is the Church.

Eph 1:16-23 [16](#)I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, [17](#)that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, [18](#)having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, [19](#)and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might [20](#)that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, [21](#)far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. [22](#)And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, [23](#)which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

- 16.1.** The Church is an expansion of Christ, of his fullness; it arises from the sanctifying influence of Christ as the body develops under the influence of the vital principle (which is located in the head)



cf. Eph 2:6 He also raised us up with him and made us sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

- 16.2. There is an identification between the resurrected body of Christ and the Church. When we talk about the Church, the body of Christ, there is always an implicit (metonymic) reference to the real body of the risen one.

### **Saint Augustine's Sermon 272 (406 CE)**

17. "What you see on God's altar [...] is simply bread and a cup - this is the information your eyes report.

17.1. But your faith demands far subtler insight: the bread is Christ's body, the cup is Christ's blood.

17.2. Faith can grasp the fundamentals quickly, succinctly, yet it hungers for a fuller account of the matter. As the prophet says, "Unless you believe, you will not understand." [Is. 7.9; Septuagint]

17.3. So you can say to me, "You urged us to believe; now explain, so we can understand." Inside each of you, thoughts like these are rising:

"Our Lord Jesus Christ, we know the source of his flesh; he took it from the virgin Mary. Like any infant, he was nursed and nourished; he grew; became a youngster; suffered persecution from his own people. To the wood he was nailed; on the wood he died; from the wood, his body was taken down and buried. On the third day (as he willed) he rose; he ascended bodily into heaven whence he will come to judge the living and the dead. There he dwells even now, seated at God's right.

So how can bread be his body? And what about the cup? How can it (or what it contains) be his blood?"

17.4. My friends, these realities are called **sacraments** because in them one thing is seen, while another is grasped.

- i. What is seen is a mere physical likeness;
- ii. what is grasped bears spiritual fruit.

18. So now, if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle Paul speaking to the faithful:

"You are the body of Christ, member for member." [1 Cor. 12.27]

18.1. If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, **it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table!**

18.2. It is your own mystery that you are receiving!

18.3. You are saying "Amen" **to what you are:** your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith.

18.4. When you hear "The body of Christ", you reply "Amen."

18.5. Be a member of Christ's body, then, so that your "Amen" may ring true!

19. But what role does the bread play? We have no theory of our own to propose here; listen, instead, to what Paul says about this sacrament:

"The bread is one, and we, though many, are one body." [1 Cor. 10.17]

19.1. Understand and rejoice: unity, truth, faithfulness, love.

## SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

- 19.2. "One bread," he says. What is this one bread? Is it not the "one body," formed from many?
- 19.3. Remember: bread doesn't come from a single grain, but from many.
  - i. When you received exorcism, you were "ground."
  - ii. When you were baptized, you were "leavened."
  - iii. When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, you were "baked."
- 19.4. **Be what you see; receive what you are.**
- 19.5. This is what Paul is saying about the bread.
- 20. So too, what we are to understand about the cup is similar and requires little explanation.
  - 20.1. In the visible object of bread, many grains are gathered into one just as the faithful (so Scripture says) form "a single heart and mind in God" [Acts 4.32].
  - 20.2. And thus it is with the wine. Remember, friends, how wine is made.
  - 20.3. Individual grapes hang together in a bunch, but the juice from them all is mingled to become a single brew.
- 21. **This is the image chosen by Christ our Lord to show how, at his own table, the mystery of our unity and peace is solemnly consecrated.**
- 22. All who fail to keep the bond of peace after entering this mystery receive not a sacrament that benefits them, but an indictment that condemns them.
- 23. So let us give God our sincere and deepest gratitude, and, as far as human weakness will permit, let us turn to the Lord with pure hearts. With all our strength, let us seek God's singular mercy, for then the Divine Goodness will surely hear our prayers. God's power will drive the Evil One from our acts and thoughts; it will deepen our faith, govern our minds, grant us holy thoughts, and lead us, finally, to share the divine happiness through God's own son Jesus Christ. Amen!".