

Chapter 8

THE CHURCH AS THE 'MYSTICAL' BODY OF CHRIST: *Towards an Ecclesial Mysticism*

INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiology is the area of theology which appears at first sight to have very little to do with the subject of mystical experience. The Church is commonly understood as an *institution*, an organization determined by fixed laws of government (Canon Law) and loaded with notions of *potestas, divino iure* or not, in which everything moves according to *order*. Is it possible to speak of mystical experience in such a case? Do not order, institution, and so on, rule out automatically that which is commonly called 'mystical experience'?

The fact that there is indeed such an incompatibility in the minds of many people is evident from the various 'either/or's or antithetical schemes which have become current terminology among theologians. It would suffice to think, for example, of the scheme *Amt und Geist* introduced by A. Harnack and R. Sohm¹ and, implicitly or explicitly, omnipresent ever since in modern ecclesiologies: hierarchy, ministry, and so on, are incompatible with *Geist*, that is, with the Spirit of liberty that 'blows wherever it wills' (Jn 3.8).² Other artificial schemes, such as that of institution versus event,³ point in the same direction. And it is not simply a matter of theoretical construction and schematization:

¹ Cf. K.H. Neufeld, *Adolf Harnacks Konflikt mit der Kirche*, 1979, *passim* and pp. 156ff., 202ff.

² Cf. the views of A. Sabatier, *Les Religions d'autorité et la Religion de l'esprit*, 1903, and other liberal theologians of the nineteenth century. Also A. Loisy, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, 1902.

³ Cf. J. Leuba, *L'Institution et l'événement*, 1950.

the entire history of the Church seems to show that charisma and institution are quite often in conflict with each other. Monasticism in the ancient Church posed a real threat to episcopal authority,⁴ and the struggle between the two 'powers' does not seem to have been fully resolved up to now. The mystics tend to isolate themselves from the ordinary body of the Church. Mystical experience is identified with the *extraordinary* and the *unusual*,⁵ often with the *individual* as distinct from or even opposed to the common mass of Christians that make up the Church.⁶ If mystical experience is to be understood in such terms (as the extraordinary and the subjective and individualistic), then it presents real problems to ecclesiology. It either conflicts with the idea of the Church fundamentally, or has to be somehow accommodated to the institutional aspect of the Church. And this latter requires real creativity on the part of theology so as to make the extraordinary and unusual organically united with the ordinary and common in the life of the Church.

But does mystical experience have to be related only or primarily to the extraordinary and the subjective? If the term *μυστικός* is understood in the way it was originally used in the early Church then it not only becomes possible but it appears to be imperative to dissociate its meaning from the extraordinary or the unusual and relate it to the experience of the *whole* body of the Church. For the

⁴ This was particularly noticeable at the time of St Photius in the ninth century CE.

⁵ A. Deblaere, 'Mystique: Le phénomène mystique', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, X, 1980, col. 1893, defines mysticism precisely as that which 'exceeds the schemes of ordinary experience'. 'The word itself (*mysterion*, *mystikos*) signifies something "hidden", "secret", outside the expectations of knowledge and experience proper. The mystical phenomenon designates in the first place a movement...in the direction of a particular object, not simply profane, nor eternal, but situated beyond the limits of normal, empirical experience...' For fuller discussions of the subject see the classical works of W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902; E. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 1911; W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 1899, who listed 25 definitions of the word 'mysticism'.

⁶ This was the meaning given to mysticism especially in the West, which 'mostly under Augustine's impact, eventually came to understand the mystical as related to a subjective state of mind... Here we witness the formulation of the modern usage of a state of consciousness that surpasses ordinary experience through the union with a transcendental reality', L. Dupré, 'Mysticism', in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, vol. 10, p. 246. B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 1991, p. 249f., takes a different view on the later St Augustine, who, according to him, 'spoke of union in terms of the bond that knits all believers into the one Body of Christ, not the union of the individual soul with God'. This distinguishes him, according to this author, from the mysticism of Plotinus.

term *μυστικός* derives from the verb *μύω*,⁷ and this verb is at the root of *mysterion* (*μυστήριον*) with which the early Church indicated experiences common to all its members, such as Baptism and the Eucharist, without which no one could be called a member of the Church. It is precisely this sense that allows St Cyril of Jerusalem to use the term *μυστήριον* for the sacraments,⁸ and Maximus the Confessor to call his interpretation of the eucharistic liturgy *Mystagogia* (*Μυσταγωγία*). *Μύστις* or *μεμνημένος* is every member of the Church — not some members only. And mystical theology (*μυστική θεολογία*) is never used in the early Church to denote the extraordinary and the unusual but the institutional itself. Thus, the Dionysian writings use the term *μυσταγωγός* for the bishop, who is part of what the same writings call ‘hierarchy’.⁹ The early Church did not know of any opposition between *Amt* and *Geist*, or institution and mystical experience. Ecclesiology, including the institutional aspect of it, was not only compatible with mystical experience; it was even the place *par excellence* of true *mystagogia*.

All this implies that in ecclesiology the term ‘mystical’ acquires a meaning of its own. Ecclesial mysticism, as we may call it from now on, is a mysticism which has special characteristics. In this chapter we shall attempt to point out these characteristics and also to place them in the context of theology as a whole. We shall do this by taking our starting point from the idea of the Church as the *Body of Christ* (although one could start from other ideas), an idea that needs to be clarified before it is properly used for such a purpose. After that we shall try to isolate certain types or forms of mystical experience which pertain to ecclesiology. In this connection I propose to deal with some of the fundamental components of ecclesiology and try to see in what way we can speak of mystical experience in relation to them. Such components include the sacraments, particularly Baptism and the Eucharist, as well as the ‘word’ and its relation to sacrament. Another component is the ministry, both ordinary and extraordinary, which should not be ruled out *a priori* as irrelevant for the subject of mysticism. Finally, a particular place must be reserved in our consideration, at least from an Orthodox point of view, to asceticism and monasticism and the idea of the ‘holy man’ in general.

⁷ Originally the word designated ‘to remain silent’, as in the case of the ancient Greek cults. In Neoplatonism it acquired the meaning of wordless contemplation.

⁸ Cyril Jerus., *Catech.* 18.32 (PG 33, 1053f.); 23.22 (PG 33, 1125B); etc.

⁹ Cf. R. Roques, *L'univers dionysien*, 1954, esp. pp. 232f., 296f.

In all this it is evident that we shall constantly be operating with the vicious circle of assuming that we have a conception of the 'mystical' while aiming at defining its content. Mysticism is not simply presupposed here as a given; it is also expected to emerge as a conclusion. This is why in concluding this chapter we shall ask the question again of what Christian mysticism is and what it implies — seen now from the angle of ecclesiology. Thus it is hoped that some of the central issues will come into focus in the particular context of a systematic treatment of ecclesiology.

I. THE 'BODY OF CHRIST' AS A 'MYSTICAL' NOTION

1.

The application of the image of the 'body', and more specifically of the 'body of Christ', to the Church goes back to St Paul, as is well known. It is not our purpose here to enter into a detailed discussion of the meaning given by Paul to this image. The subject has become controversial among biblical scholars and has been dealt with quite extensively in modern bibliography. What I think we ought to recall here is that this image has gone through a long and revealing history in relation to the adjective 'mystical' attached to it. Let me outline the main phases in this history.

The first phase is that of the Pauline use of the term 'body of Christ'. What characterizes this phase is the simultaneous use of it for (a) Christological purposes (Christ's personal body, especially in its risen state), (b) ecclesiological purposes (the Church as the body of Christ) and (c) eucharistic purposes (the body of Christ as it is broken, shared, and communicated in the Eucharist). All these uses appear in Paul's writings in such a way as to imply no need for further explanations: Paul switches from one use to another as if it were the most natural thing to do.¹⁰

This implicit identification of all these three uses of the term 'body of Christ' continues throughout the patristic period and at least up to the twelfth or even the thirteenth century. Henri de Lubac, in his classical study, *Corpus Mysticum*,¹¹ examines in detail the history of this concept in order to conclude with an observation that bears directly on our subject. He notes (and this is confirmed by other studies such as those of Fr Yves Congar)¹² that from the thirteenth

¹⁰ Thus, in 1 Cor. 6.15-20; 10.16-17; 11.1-27; etc.

¹¹ H. de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L'Eucharistie et l'Eglise au Moyen Age*, 1944.

¹² Y. Congar, *L'Eglise de s. Augustin à l'époque moderne*, 1970, p. 168. Cf. his *L'ecclesiologie du haut Moyen-Age*, 1968, pp. 86ff.

century onwards these three uses of the term 'body of Christ' (the Christological, the ecclesiological and the eucharistic) are carefully distinguished by the scholastics so as to acquire entirely different and indeed *independent* meanings. It is in this context that the term 'mystical body of Christ' would be attached exclusively to the Church and would acquire a very specific meaning.

The consequences of this development have been quite serious in the course of history. This development was accompanied by the tendency of scholastic theology to treat the sacraments (including the Eucharist) as an autonomous subject in relation to both Christology and ecclesiology.¹³ This meant that we could now speak of the 'mystical body of Christ', the Church, without necessarily referring automatically to the Eucharist — or even to the historical and risen personal body of Christ — as was the case in Paul and in the early Church. *Corpus mysticum* was to be used for the Church alone,¹⁴ and mainly for the Church in its heavenly, ideal and invisible existence, for the 'communion of saints', which transcends and escapes our everyday experience. It is clear from this that the term 'mystical body' takes shape in close relationship with the fate which awaited the very term 'mystical' since that time, namely its identification with that which lies beyond the ordinary and the historical and surpasses all understanding.

A correction of this development, albeit only partial, took place in the twentieth century. We may call this a new phase in the history of the term 'mystical body'. This made its appearance in the 1930s with the monumental work of Emile Mersch, *Le Corps mystique du Christ*, which tried to connect again the idea of the 'mystical body' with its Christological roots, making use of all the biblical and patristic material that refers to Christ as a corporate entity. Almost at the same time, or just a few years later, biblical scholars led by H. Wheeler Robinson¹⁵ put forward the theory of 'corporate personality' as a fundamental biblical concept and thus further enhanced Mersch's stress on the collective character of Christology, which has played a central role in theology ever since.

¹³ Cf. Y. Congar, *L'Eglise de s. Augustin*, pp. 173ff.

¹⁴ This allowed the possibility of speaking of the pope as a *caput* of the mystical body, which would have been impossible if the term 'mystical body' had retained its earlier association with the Eucharist. Cf. Y. Congar, *L'Eglise de s. Augustin*, p. 168f.

¹⁵ *The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality* (1936), followed by A.R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (1942), and J. de Fraine, *Adam et son lignage* (1959).

Now, I have called this development a 'partial correction' because, although it connects again the ecclesial with the Christological use of 'body of Christ', it does very little to connect it with the third use, namely the Eucharist.¹⁶ This use was left out of ecclesiology almost entirely until an Orthodox theologian, the late Fr N. Afanassieff, brought it to the fore with his 'eucharistic ecclesiology', without of course entering into any serious systematic theological reflection on the matter. Works such as those already mentioned of de Lubac and Congar, and also of G. Dix¹⁷ and the Lutheran Werner Elert,¹⁸ though primarily historical in nature, did a great deal to relate the idea of 'body of Christ' to the Eucharist and thus implicitly or explicitly to ecclesiology. It now seems that we are at a point in the history of scholarship where we can no longer operate with the idea of 'body of Christ' in ecclesiology without simultaneously taking into account the original synthesis of the Christological, the ecclesiological and the eucharistic. We shall try to take this into consideration throughout this chapter.

But what of the adjective 'mystical' in such a synthetic approach? History has bequeathed to us only the sense in which the scholastics and, later on, Mersch have used it. If we are to apply it to the synthetic use of 'body of Christ', it is obvious that we have to give it a new meaning. It must be made to include also the historical as well as the eucharistic understanding of the 'body of Christ' simultaneously. What sense are we then to give to 'mystical'?

2.

It is obvious that in order to do this we have to go outside the strict ecclesiological field and consider some broader philosophical and theological areas, leading in the first instance to Christology. In order to make a rather difficult task somehow easier, let me propose as a basic working hypothesis a definition of the term 'mystical' along the following very general lines.

All forms of mysticism seem to have to do with man's desire, and indeed deep existential need, to bridge the gap between what he in fact is or experiences and what transcends him. In religion this means bridging the gap between being human and the divine¹⁹ —

¹⁶This seems to apply also to the papal encyclical, *Mystici corporis* (1943), which owed its inspiration to the work of Mersch.

¹⁷Mainly his *The Shape of the Liturgy* (1945).

¹⁸*Abendmahl und Kirchengemeinschaft in der alten Kirche hauptsächlich des Ostens* (1954).

¹⁹I. Marcoulesco, 'Mystical Union', in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Reli-*

whatever this may imply: a personal being or a state of existence which lies beyond the actual. Mysticism thus always has something to do with soteriology and is the aspect of a relationship which could be called 'positive', that is, a relationship stressing *unity* rather than distance and otherness.

This stress on unity rather than on distance, inherent in all mystical experience, can easily lead to *monism* in philosophy and religious thought. Biblical 'religion', if we may call it that, appears to be particularly sensitive to monistic views of existence and by implication also to mysticism.²⁰ I maintain that such monism was always present in classical Greek thought from the pre-Socratics to the Neoplatonists, and that patristic theology had to wrestle with this issue as the most crucial one — perhaps the only one — in its relation with pagan Greek philosophy. It is against this background of the struggle to maintain the dialectic between 'created' and 'uncreated' existence in the Greek thinking culture of the patristic period²¹ that we must place and try to understand the application of the 'body of Christ' idea to Christology in that period.

A careful study of the Christology of the Council of Chalcedon would reveal to us that the deeper concern of the Fathers was how to arrive at the unity between the divine and the human in Christ without falling into mystical monism. There is no doubt that Chalcedon wants to make sure that the gap between the 'created' and the 'uncreated' is fully bridged. This is a soteriological demand which can be called 'mystical' in that it is inspired by the desire to bring about a total and unbreakable unity between divine and human. This demand is met with the insistence of the Council that in Christ divine and human natures are united *ἀδιαπέτως* (indivisibly). And yet the need is felt immediately to qualify this by another adverb pointing in the opposite direction: *ἀσπγγύτως* (without confusion). Thus Christology bridges the gap between created and uncreated in a way that avoids monism and maintains the created-uncreated dialectic. In orthodox Chalcedonian Christology it is impossible to utter such mystical phrases as 'I am Thou and Thou art me'²² and the like. Following and

gion, vol. X, 1987, p. 239: 'The experience of union between the subject and its divine object is considered the supreme stage of mystical experience and of contemplative life'.

²⁰ On this ground certain Protestant theologians (E. Brunner, R. Niebuhr) hold mysticism to be essentially anti-Christian, linked more with Neoplatonism and paganism than with the Gospel.

²¹ See Chapter 7, above.

²² Such expressions are to be found mainly in Islamic Sufism (which seems also to