



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

Reference from Catechism of the Catholic Church

**INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION
SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY**

II. THE CHURCH AS THE “NEW PEOPLE OF GOD”

II.1. The Multiplicity of Designations of the Church

The Church, radiant with the glory of Christ (cf. *LG* 1), manifests to all men “the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of the wisdom and goodness” of the eternal Father, who elects to save all men by the Son and in the Spirit (cf *LG* 2). In order to underline at one and the same time the presence in the Church of this transcendent divine reality and the historically expressive character of its manifestation, the Council designated the Church by the word “mystery”.

Because the proper name that would express the whole reality of the Church is known only to God, human language experiences its own radical insufficiency to express fully the “mystery” of the Church. It has to have recourse to a multiplicity of images, representations, and analogies, which, moreover, will never be able to designate more than partial aspects of the reality. The use of these formulations should suggest the transcendence of the “mystery” over against every reductionism, whether conceptual or symbolic. Furthermore, the use of a multiplicity of such formulations here will permit one to avoid these excesses that concentration on one single formula would inevitably cause. This is already suggested by *Lumen gentium* in its sixth paragraph: “In the Old Testament the revelation of the Kingdom is often made under the forms of symbols. In similar fashion the inner nature of the Church is now made known to us in various images.” Within the New Testament corpus, up to eighty comparisons for the Church have been counted. The plurality of images to which the Council draws our attention is intentional. It is meant to bring out the inexhaustible character of the “mystery” of the Church. For she shows herself to those who contemplate her as “a reality impregnated with Gods presence and, thus, so constituted that she admits of ever new and more profound explorations of herself” (Paul VI, speech opening the second session of the Council, 29 September 1963 [AAS 55 (1963): 848]). And so the New Testament presents us with images “taken either from the life of the shepherd or from cultivation of the land, from the art of building or from family life and marriage.

These images have their preparation in the books of the prophets” (LG 6).

It is true that these images do not all possess the same evocative power. Some, such as that of “the body”, have an importance of the first order. One will readily agree that without use of the “Body of Christ” comparison, applied to the community of Jesus’ disciples, the reality of the Church would scarcely be accessible to us at all. The Pauline Letters develop this comparison in various directions, as *Lumen gentium* mentions in its seventh paragraph. And yet, though the Council gives the image of the Church as Body of Christ its proper place, it gives pride of place to another image, that of the “people of God”—if only because this latter image gives the second chapter of the Constitution its very title. One can say, indeed, that the expression “people of God” has come to stand for the ecclesiology of the Council. It is not too much to say that this image was deliberately preferred by the Council to “Body of Christ” or “temple of the Holy Spirit”, even though these last are certainly not ignored by it. This choice was made for reasons at once theological and pastoral. In the minds of the Council fathers, these two types of consideration reinforced each other. The expression “people of God” had an advantage over other designations in that it could render better that sacramental reality that all the baptized share in common, both as a dignity in the Church and as a responsibility in the world. At the same time, it could undermine the communitarian nature and historical dimension of the Church—as many of the fathers wanted.

II.2. “People of God” But in itself, the expression “people of God” has a significance that does not appear on a cursory examination. As with every theological expression, it requires reflection, deepening, and clarification if falsifying interpretations are to be avoided. Even on the linguistic level, the Latin term *populus* does not seem to provide a direct translation of the Greek *laos* of the Septuagint. *Laos*, as used in the Septuagint, is a term with a characteristic and quite specific meaning. It is not just religious but is quite definitely soteriological and, as such, destined to find its own fulfillment in the New Testament. *Lumen gentium* presupposes the biblical meaning of the term “people”. The Constitution takes up that term with all the connotations that Old and New Testaments have bestowed upon it. In the expression “people of God” it is, moreover, the genitive “of God” that provides the phrase with its own specific, determinate significance, by situating it in that biblical context where it appeared and developed. Consequently, any interpretation of the term “people” of an exclusively biological, racial, cultural, political, or ideological kind must be radically excluded. The “people of God” derives “from above”, from the divine plan, that is, from election, Covenant, and mission. This is supremely true if we turn our attention to the fact that *Lumen gentium* does not confine itself to the Old Testament concept of the “people of God” but goes beyond it by speaking of the “new people of God” (LG 9). This new people of God is made up of those who believe in Jesus Christ and are “reborn” through baptism in water and the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:3-6). It is, then, the Holy Spirit who “by the power of the Gospel permits the Church to

keep the freshness of her youth [and] constantly renews her” (LG 4). And so the expression “people of God” receives its proper meaning from a constitutive reference to the trinitarian mystery revealed by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit (LG 4; UR 2).

The new people of God presents herself as a “community of faith, hope, and charity” (LG 8), whose source is the Eucharist (LG 3, 7); the intimate union of each believer with his Savior, something inseparable from the unity of the faithful with each other, is the fruit of active belonging to the Church and transforms the total existence of Christians into a “spiritual worship”. The communitarian dimension is essential to the Church, if faith, hope, and charity are to be exercised and communicated within her. That dimension is also necessary insofar as such communion, once it takes root in the “heart” of every believer, must also be deployed and realized on a communal, objective, and institutional level. On this societal level too the Church is summoned to live in the remembrance and expectation of Jesus Christ and to announce his Good News to all men.