

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE HEAVENLY- EARTHLY CHURCH

~: Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, O. P. ~:

“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, has made even us, who were dead through our sins, alive together with Christ. . .and he has raised us up with him in Christ Jesus and given us a place with him in the heavens” (Eph. 2:4–6). Christian existence means being with Christ, and thus means being where he is, sitting at the right hand of the Father. The Church has her homeland where Christ is. In terms of her head and of her goal, she is a *heavenly* Church. Since she is an earthly Church, she knows that she is a *pilgrim* Church, stretching out to reach her goal.

The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, contemplated the Church as the people of God. If one reads this great conciliar text as a whole, it is clear that the Council sees the Church as the people of God entirely on the basis of her *goal*, to be the heavenly, perfected Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 2). It is only the goal that gives meaning to the path. The Church is the pilgrim people of God, and her goal is the heavenly Jerusalem.

It is only when we contemplate the Church in her earthly-heavenly transitional existence that we have the *whole* Church in view. This is why we begin by presenting some witnesses for this way of seeing the Church; then we ask why the sensitivity to this perspective has been largely lost today, and above all why the heavenly dimension of the Church is often forgotten; finally, we should like to indicate some perspectives on how it is possible to regain this vision of the Church as heavenly-earthly reality. The seventh chapter of *Lumen Gentium* will give us special help in understanding here.

The Unity of the Pilgrim Church and the Heavenly Church

Andrea Pozzo has given a most beautiful expression, in a painting on the ceiling of Sant’ Ignazio in Rome, to the unity of the pilgrim Church and the Church of heaven. On the ceiling of the central nave, a great Baroque architecture opens out onto an infinite heaven. Saint Ignatius ascends on clouds to the Holy Trinity. Other saints of the Society of Jesus join him; on all sides, angels ascend and descend, creating the link here to the allegorical representations of the four continents, which strive toward this heavenly fellowship and make their way toward it. While the Church of heaven descends, the pilgrim Church ascends to her native land; or rather, both make their way to meet one another, “grow together to form the one Church” to which all her members belong “to various extents and in various ways,” whether

they are pilgrims on earth or “have departed from this life and are being purified” or are already glorified in the vision of God (*Lumen Gentium*, 49).

In the church of Sant’Ignazio there is also the tomb of St. Robert Bellarmine, who dedicated an entire volume of his work, *De Controversiis Christianae Fidei*, to the three levels of the Church: the Church militant, the Church of the state of purification, and the triumphant Church.¹ The ecclesiology of the Counter-Reformation has often been accused of overemphasizing the societal, institutional character of the Church militant and giving too little prominence to her fundamentally eschatological character. By replacing the expression “Church militant” with the concept of “pilgrim Church”,² the Council wanted to correct this vision and to show that the Church in her pilgrim state strives with all her might toward her fullness and perfection “in the heavenly glory” (*Lumen Gentium*, 48).

Chapter 7 of *Lumen Gentium* was edited in this perspective, even if “belatedly and hurriedly.”³ Popes John XXIII and Paul VI had personally insisted, with vigor, on the introduction of some remarks on the veneration of the saints at some place in the Constitution on the Church. The Council took the view that the question of the veneration of the saints must be situated against a wider theological horizon, namely, that of the eschatological character of the Church. Monsignor Gerard Philips makes the following comments on the outcome of this work:

This idea leads us unexpectedly to a happy enrichment of the Constitution on the Church. Not only does this broadening permit us to see the Church in her totality, including her perfection: it also proffers us the meaning of her marching forward, in concrete terms, the meaning of hope. Only now are we able to understand completely chapter 2, on the pilgrim people of God. The second and the penultimate [seventh] chapters of *Lumen*

1 When the much-discussed definition of the Church by St. Robert Bellarmine (“The Church is an association of men which is just as visible and tangible as the association of the Roman people or of the kingdom of France or of the republic of Venice,” in vol. II, *Contr.* 1a, Liber III, cap. II) is criticized today, it is all too easily forgotten that it concerns only the aspect of the Church militant and that it must be given its place within the totality of the three levels of the Church. Compare the observations by Charles Journet, *L’Église du Verbe Incarné: Essai de Théologie Speculative*, 2 vols. (Bruges, 1962), 2:61, 80.

2 The expression “militant” Church crops up again, a little surprisingly, in Leonardo Boff, *Iglesia: carisma y poder. Ensayos de ecclesiología militante* (1982). Eng. trans.: *Church, Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

3 Henri de Lubac, *Geheimnis aus dem wir leben* (Einsiedeln, 1967), 105. Eng. trans.: *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (Shannon: Ecclesia Press, 1969). See also the commentaries by Msgr. G. Philips, *L’Église et Son Mystère*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1968), 2:161–205, and O. Semmelroth in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Supplement 1, Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, ed. Michael Buchberger (Freiburg, Herder, 1957–65), 314–25. It is striking that chap. 7 has found little echo in what has been written about *Lumen Gentium*. See however, C. Pozzo, *Teología del Más Allá*, 2d. ed. (Madrid, 1980), 538–78.

Gentium correspond to one another and achieve the equilibrium. Now we no longer merely consider whence we come and what has already been realized: we consider also the direction in which we are heading and what awaits us in the future.⁴

Although this vision does a little to correct the insufficiently eschatological view of the “Church militant” in the posttridentine theology, “it remains true that the decision to take ‘people of God’ as the fundamental and initial concept, linked with today’s juxtaposition of the two Churches—the earthly, in which we live, and the heavenly Church of those who have already reached their ‘native land’—has brought about a certain restriction of the patristic horizon.”⁵

One must indeed take care not to exaggerate this antithesis and push it to extremes.⁶ Nevertheless it is useful to point out.

In the New Jerusalem Above

Cardinal Henri de Lubac emphasizes a certain difference between the patristic view and the view presented by *Lumen Gentium*. What is this difference?

“You have come,” says the letter to the Hebrews, “to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the Jerusalem above.” Our fathers believed these words and reflected on them. Thus, the Church that had given birth to them in the water of baptism—precisely this earthly, visible Church—was at the same time “the heavenly Church” for them, “the new Jerusalem above, our mother.” “Let us already now, in the Church, live in the Jerusalem above,” Augustine will say, “so that we may not perish for ever” (*On the Psalms*, 124, 4). And again: “The present Church is the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of God” (*Sermon 125*). In this synthesizing vision of the mystery, the Church is identified with Christ her Bridegroom, who is himself the kingdom: *autobasileia*, in Origen’s wonderful term. And precisely this vision corresponds to the deepest logic of Christian eschatology: if one were to abandon it, countless abuses in thought and deed would be the result.⁷

In my view, some of the directions taken by ecclesiology that have emerged since the Council justify the anxiety that Cardinal de Lubac had formulated already before the Council. I shall attempt to show that one cannot understand such

4 Philips, *L’Eglise*, 163.

5 De Lubac, *Geheimnis*, 110.

6 De Lubac, *Geheimnis*, 107.

7 De Lubac, *Geheimnis*, 111.

tendencies to be the view of the Council itself. Before we tackle these disputed questions, let us first remain with this vision of the Church as a reality that is essentially heavenly. The following testimonies—basically chance fruits of my reading—do not claim to offer a fully rounded picture, but feature here as harmonious voices (so to speak) in the immeasurable choir of the Church.

The Church is where Christ is. How then would it be possible for her not to be primarily in heaven, where Christ is? A nun who lived in secret in Hungary and died at the age of twenty-five writes in her diary:

This Easter feast was the first that permitted me to experience what I have accepted with my understanding for a very long time: this life is only a brief passage of transition that flies quickly away. The only truth is the risen Lord. It is still painful to be far away from him, and how much do I feel this on this day! But I can never again forget this unique experience, which lasted only a few minutes. It is not this life that is reality for me: the other life, beyond the grave, is a thousand times more real.⁸

It is impossible not to be reminded of Paul here. “You have been raised up with Christ: therefore strive for the things that are of heaven, where Christ sits at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1; *Lumen Gentium*, 6; 48); “Thus we are always confident, even though we know that we live in exile far from the Lord, as long as we are at home in this body; for we walk as those who believe, not as those who see. But because we are confident, we prefer to depart from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:6–8; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 6; 48; 49); “I yearn to depart and to be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23; *Lumen Gentium*, 48).

This experience, this faith, this burning desire, does not come from a pagan egotism that aims at one’s own immortality (that was the objection of an Adolph von Harnack).⁹ Their center is Christ himself and his promise: “There are many dwellings in my Father’s house. . . I go to prepare a place for you. When I have gone and have prepared a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that you too may be where I am” (John 14:2–3). The Jerusalem Bible comments on this text: “This entire expectation of the Church is based on this promise.” For here is the place of her hope.

Thanks to Christ, the faithful here below have already their “native land in heaven” (Phil. 3:20; *Lumen Gentium*, 48); they are “no longer foreigners without the rights of citizens, but fellow-citizens of the saints and members of God’s household” (Eph. 2:19; *Lumen Gentium*, 6); their names have been entered in the

8 *Monika. Ein Zeugnis in Ungarn*, with introduction by Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln, 1982), 160.

9 *Das Wesen des Christentums*, (Leipzig, 1905), 146. Eng. trans: *What is Christianity?* (New York: Harper, 1957).

list of the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem (Luke 10:20). "All the faithful who are pilgrims on this earth make for the 'city of the living God' and do not cease to go toward it (Heb. 12:22)."¹⁰ "The heavenly Jerusalem. . . is our mother" (Gal. 4:26; *Lumen Gentium*, 6). Thus, to be a Christian means that one has set up his tent in heaven (Rev. 12:12; 13:6).¹¹ Because Christ is her head, and she his body, the Church is essentially heavenly. Augustine says this again and again: "Jerusalem, which is constructed as a city: Christ is its foundation. The apostle Paul says: 'No one can lay any other foundation than that which is already laid: Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 3:11). When the foundation is laid in the earth, the walls are built above it, and the weight of the walls pulls downward, because the foundation is laid below. But if our foundation is in heaven, we will be built up toward heaven. . . for. . . we are constructed in a spiritual manner; our foundation lies above. Let us then hasten to the place where we are being built!"¹²

This mighty vision of the Church is not in the least an evasion that would permit one to avoid the toils and vicissitudes of an active involvement in this world. It is only when one sees in faith the "heavenly" nature of the Church that the meaning of her earthly condition as a pilgrim Church becomes clear as well. Since she has her origin in the life of God himself, in the holy Trinity, the Church is "first of all a reality founded by heaven in time."¹³ She is this because she is nothing other than what God intends to do with this world, according to the famous saying of Clement of Alexandria: "For as his will is a deed, and this deed is called 'world,' so is also his desire the salvation of men, and this is called 'Church.'"¹⁴ In this ultimate vision there lies the final meaning of the "communion of saints" that we profess in the creed. Nicetas of Remesiana has expressed this vividly:

10 Ceslas Spicq, "Les chrétiens vivent en citoyens du ciel," in *Théologie morale du Nouveau Testament*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1970), 1:417–32, at 418; see also, Spicq, *Vie chrétienne et pèlerinage selon le Nouveau Testament*, (Paris, 1972); Erik Peterson, "Von den Engeln," in *Theologische Traktate* (Munich, 1951), 327–29.

11 According to E.-B. Allo, *L'Apocalypse* (Paris, 1933), 208, these passages (also Rev. 7:15) concern also "the dwelling of God in the hearts of the saints, already here below through grace, and then in heaven."

12 *On the Psalms*, 121, 4, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), 37, 1621. Hereafter abbreviated *PL*. See also the numerous texts in Henri de Lubac, *Die Kirche. Eine Betrachtung* (Einsiedeln, 1968), 66–71. Eng. trans.: *The Splendor of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986).

13 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik. Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln, 1983), 114. Eng. trans.: *Theodrama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5, *The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999). See also the texts of Adrienne von Speyr quoted in Von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, 114–22: The Church is "in a very proper sense the place where eternity begins within time"; "The Church with all her sacraments and institutions lives from the air of eternity of heaven; she cannot avoid mediating something of this." See also H. U. von Balthasar, "Die himmlische Kirche und ihre Erscheinung", in *Homo creatus est*, vol. 5 of *Skizzen zur Theologie* (Einsiedeln, 1986), 148–64.

14 *The Instructor*, Bk. I, chap. 6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 216.

After you have professed your faith in the most blessed Trinity, you declare that you believe in the holy Catholic Church. What is the Church other than the gathering together of all the saints? For since the beginning of the world, the patriarchs. . .the prophets, the martyrs, and all the righteous. . .form one single Church, since they are sanctified through one and the same faith and one and the same life, and are marked with the sign of one and the same Spirit, and thus form one single body. As is stated above, Christ is termed the head of this body. But there is still more to be said. Even the angels, the heavenly dominations, and authorities are members of this one single Church. . . Believe therefore that you are to attain to the fellowship of the saints in this one Church. Know that this Catholic Church is *one*, established over the whole face of the earth; you must cling decisively to her fellowship.¹⁵

We asked whether in Andrea Pozzo's ceiling painting it is the Church of heaven that is descending or the Church of earth that is ascending. Now we can say: it is the one single Church of heaven and of earth. But since this one single Church has her true dwelling place in heaven, she is in her essence "the holy city, the new Jerusalem that comes down from God out of heaven" (Rev. 21:2). In the course of the centuries, Christian art and architecture have endeavored to express this, by making churches into images of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The Church and the Kingdom of God

"Who is the city of God, if not the holy Church?"¹⁶ Is the Church identical with the kingdom of God? Augustine affirms this: "Thus, the Church is already now the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of heaven."¹⁷ Although it is true that the kingdom of Christ here below (*nunc*) is "in a state of war (*militae*)," it will be perfected only at the end of the ages (*in fine saeculorum, tunc*).¹⁸

Thomas Aquinas does not say anything different: "The kingdom of God is spoken of by preference (as it were) in a double sense: first, as the group of those who walk in faith, and in this sense the Church militant is called the 'kingdom of

15 *Explanation of the Symbol*, 10, in *PL* 52, 871 B; see also P.-Y. Emery, "L'unité des croyants au ciel et sur la terre," *Verbum Caro* 16 (1962), 1–240.

16 Augustine, *On the Psalms*, 92, 4; see also Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk. 16, chap. 2, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 310. See also "L'Eglise et la Cité de Dieu," vol. 37 of *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1960), 774–777, n. 28.

17 *The City of God*, Bk. 20, chap. 9, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 429.

18 Compare the note on "les deux états de l'Eglise 'qualis nunc' et 'qualis tunc,'" in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, vol. 32 (Paris 1965), 723–25.

God'; but then also as the assembly of those who have already safely attained their goal, and in this sense the triumphant Church is called the 'kingdom of God.'"¹⁹

For both Augustine and Thomas, there are two successive states of the Church, *nunc et tunc*, now and then: the definitive and the provisional state of the kingdom of God. Jacques Bonsirven says the same in his book, *Le Règne de Dieu*: "Is the kingdom of God identical with the Church. . .? The answer can only be 'yes.'"²⁰ Cardinal Charles Journet is no less affirmative: "We do not believe that one can refuse to identify the Church and the kingdom. We have two concepts here, but only one single reality. The Church is the kingdom; the kingdom is the Church. The concept of 'kingdom' refers to eschatology. But it is precisely with Jesus that eschatology, which belongs above all to the qualitative order, has broken into time. From the time of Christ onward, the whole Church has entered the end time; she is eschatological."²¹

But now, precisely in the name of eschatology, this identification has been called into question for about the last one hundred years in a debate that is not at all concluded. Much is at stake here, for it is a question not only of the nature of the Church but also of very significant practical consequences.

If the Church is essentially heavenly, since she is "there where Christ is," if she is his body, and it is "not only the believers who are alive today that belong" to this body "but also those who have lived before us, and those who will come after us until the end of time,"²² then it is not possible to grasp a reason *not* to identify the Church and the kingdom of God.

The objection has been made for a hundred years that one may not identify the Church with the kingdom, since this is a strictly eschatological reality, whereas the Church is only a sign of the kingdom and a pointer to it. We must attempt to clarify this very confused question, so we shall begin by listening carefully to the teaching of the Council, and then we shall ask about the reception of this teaching.

The Eschatological Character of the Pilgrim Church

One can often read the statement that the Council taught that the Church is *the sacrament of the kingdom*: "The Council has given new vigor to the old patristic view of the Church as the sacrament of the kingdom. . . In her [the pilgrim Church], the kingdom of God is already present. She is, as Augustine says, already 'the reconciled world,' she is already the new creation; but she is not yet the kingdom

19 *Commentary on the Fourth Book of the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Dist. 49, q. 1, a. 2, quaest. 5, sol. 5.

20 (Paris, 1957), 194f.

21 *L'Église du Verbe Incarné*, 2: 997, n. 1; compare 60–91 and *Nova et Vetera* 38 (1963), 307–10.

22 Augustine, *On the Psalms*, 62, 2.

in its fullness and its definitive realization.”²³ But if the author of these lines had looked more closely, he could have seen that the council nowhere calls the Church the “sacrament of the kingdom.”

The Constitution *Lumen Gentium* is clear on this point. It states: “In order to accomplish the Father’s will, Christ founded the kingdom of heaven on earth, revealed his mystery to us and brought about our redemption through his obedience. The Church, that is, the kingdom of Christ which is already present in mystery, grows visibly in the world through the power of God” (*Lumen Gentium*, 3). Before we ask what “already present in mystery” may mean here, let us listen to two other texts of the Constitution.

Article 5, which was inserted in the schema after the discussions of the second conciliar session, is entirely concerned with the Church and the kingdom of God. The *Relatio commissionis doctrinalis* states that this article, which originally bore the title, “On the kingdom of God,” was inserted because it expressed the simultaneously visible and spiritual character of the Church’s fellowship, as well as her historical and eschatological aspect.²⁴

Although one really should quote the whole text, which is very important for our subject, we limit ourselves to recalling the following striking passages: “For the Lord Jesus initiated his Church by proclaiming the good news, namely the coming of the kingdom of God, which had been promised from of old in the Scriptures: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near’ (Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:17).” The presence of the kingdom is seen in the words and works, but above all in the person, of Christ himself. Christ’s mission is continued in the Church: “The Church receives thence. . . the mission to proclaim the kingdom of God and of Christ and to establish it among all peoples. Thus she represents the seed and the beginning of the kingdom. As she gradually grows, she reaches out in longing for the perfected kingdom; with all her might she hopes and yearns to be united with her King in glory” (*Lumen Gentium*, 5).

The Church is here called the “seed and beginning of the kingdom” on earth. May one comment on this as follows: “This is why the Church can posit a distance between the Church and Christ: she is only the sacrament of salvation. It can proclaim the distance between the Church and the kingdom: here too we have an ‘already and not yet’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 5, above all the conclusion; see also *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3, 5). Because the Church is not coterminous with the kingdom, she

23 I myself “perpetrated” these sentences in *Realizzare il Concilio. Il contributo di Comunione e Liberazione* (Milan, 1982), in a lecture on “Il significato ecclesiologico del Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II,” at 23. This text, which I hereby withdraw, was also published as “Realizzare il Concilio,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (October 2, 1982), 2.

24 Quoted from G. Alberigo and F. Magistretti, eds., *Constitutionis Dogmaticae Lumen Gentium Synopsis Historica*, (Bologna, 1975), 436.

renews and reforms herself unceasingly: *Lumen Gentium*, 8, conclusion; *Gaudium et Spes*, 21, 5; 43, 6.”²⁵

Is the purpose of the formulations, “present in mystery” (*Lumen Gentium*, 3) and “seed and beginning” (*Lumen Gentium*, 5), “to proclaim the distance between the Church and the kingdom”? A third text can complete the framework of this question. *Lumen Gentium* 9 says of the people of God: “This messianic people has Christ as its head. . . .It is destined to possess the kingdom of God, which was founded on earth by God himself and must continue to unfold until it is also perfected by him at the end of the ages.” Is this text to be read in the sense of a distance between the Church and the kingdom? In my view, the answer can be given only on the basis of *Lumen Gentium* as a whole: for if we read these three passages in the light of chapter 7, it becomes clear that one can speak of a “distance” only when one is looking at the Church in her *pilgrim existence*. Seen in this way, she is not yet the *perfected* kingdom: “In her sacraments and institutions, which still belong to this period of the world, the pilgrim Church bears the figure of this world which is passing away” (*Lumen Gentium*, 48). Does this mean that she stands at a distance from the kingdom?

The pilgrim Church is nothing other than the “kingdom of heaven” that Christ has established on earth (*Lumen Gentium*, 3). When it is said of the pilgrim Church that she is “the kingdom of Christ which is already present in mystery” (*Lumen Gentium*, 3) and that she is the “seed and beginning of this kingdom on earth” (*Lumen Gentium*, 5), then the perfected kingdom will be nothing other than the perfected Church: “It is only in heavenly glory. . . that the Church will be perfected” (*Lumen Gentium*, 48). Will this Church, when she is “perfected in glory at the end of the ages of the world,” be anything other than the totally realized kingdom? For “then will. . .all the righteous. . .be gathered together in the Father’s presence in the all-embracing Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, 2). It is certainly true that the Church strives with all her power “to attain the perfected kingdom,” but in this “she yearns to be united with her king in glory (*Lumen Gentium*, 5), and as long as she goes along the paths of her earthly pilgrimage, her life is nevertheless

25 Thus Yves Congar, “Les implications christologiques et pneumatologiques de l’Ecclésiologie de Vatican II,” in *Le Concile de Vatican II: Son Eglise, Peuple de Dieu et Corps du Christ*, (Paris, 1984), 174. With the exception of the first (*Lumen Gentium*, 5), none of the passages adduced here speaks of the kingdom of God: *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3, 5 states that the Church is on the pilgrimage of hope toward “the fullness of eternal glory in the heavenly Jerusalem”; *Lumen Gentium*, 8, 3 says that the Church is “at once holy and always in need of purification”; *Lumen Gentium*, 9 (Conclusion) adds that she is “ceaselessly renewing herself”; *Gaudium et Spes*, 21, 5 takes over *Lumen Gentium*, 8, 3; *Gaudium et Spes*, 43, 6 takes over *Lumen Gentium*, 15, where the members of the Church are summoned to purification. See Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism (November 21, 1964) and *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (December 7, 1965), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1987).

“hidden with Christ in God, until she appears in glory, united to her bridegroom (Col. 3:1–4)” (*Lumen Gentium*, 6).

Thus there lies no distance between the Church and the kingdom of God. Rather, we have different *status* both of the Church and of the kingdom: The pilgrim Church is the kingdom that “buds and grows until the time for the harvest (Mark 4:26–29)” (*Lumen Gentium*, 5), but the Church in the glory of heaven is the perfected kingdom, the final goal of the pilgrimage of the messianic people of God (*Lumen Gentium*, 9).

But what then shall we say about the fact that the Church, which “includes sinners within her own self, is at one and the same time holy and continuously in need of purification, and always takes the path of penitence and renewal” (*Lumen Gentium*, 8)? Is this “because the Church is not coterminous with the kingdom”?

As we have seen (note 25), the Council never makes such a connection. On the contrary, the Council clearly demonstrates, by appealing to the Gospel, that the kingdom that Christ initiated on earth has no other destiny than the Church: “The word of the Lord is like a seed that is sown in a field (Mark 4:14): those who hear it in faith and are counted among the little flock of Christ (Luke 12:32) have received the kingdom itself” (*Lumen Gentium*, 5).

The saints make known how the Church is already the kingdom received in faith. “In their life. . . God shows men, in a living manner, his presence and his countenance. In them, he himself speaks to us and gives us a sign of his kingdom, to which we are powerfully drawn, surrounded as we are by such a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1) and confronted with such a testimony to the truth of the Gospel” (*Lumen Gentium*, 50).

The Church *is* the kingdom, and the Council does not permit us to say that she is merely its sacrament. For the expression *sacrament* is in fact employed by the Council in another sense, which strengthens even further the identity between the Church and the kingdom: “Christ has. . . made his body, the Church, the all-embracing sacrament of salvation” (*Lumen Gentium*, 48). “For the Church is in Christ as it were the sacrament, that is, the sign and the instrument, for the most intimate uniting to God, the unity of the whole of humanity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). The sacramentality of the Church lies in her relationship to the world—not to the kingdom. Through her and in her, Christ calls all men to himself: “Sitting at the right hand of the Father, he works continuously in the world to lead men to the Church and to unite them more closely to himself through her” (*Lumen Gentium*, 48).

Paul VI summarized the teaching of the Council in his “Credo of the People of God”: “We profess that the kingdom of God begins here on earth in the Church of Christ” (no. 35).²⁶ Cardinal Journet says the same in a summarizing formula-

²⁶ See *Encyclical of Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae, on the Regulation of Birth, and Pope Paul VI's “Credo of the People of God,” Study Club Edition* (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press 1968).

tion: "The kingdom is already on earth, and the Church is already in heaven. To abandon the equal value of Church and kingdom would mean overlooking this important revelation."²⁷

"The Fata Morgana of Eschatology"²⁸

On January 28, 1979, Pope John Paul II addressed the following words to the Latin American bishops at Puebla:

In the extensive material drawn up in preparation for this conference. . .one sometimes notices a certain confusion in the exposition of the nature and mission of the Church. For example, we find the reference to the separation that some make between the Church and the kingdom of God. This deprives the kingdom of its full contents, so that it is understood in a very secularized sense: thus we are told that one does not enter the kingdom of God through faith and through belonging to the Church.²⁹

To what confusion does the Holy Father refer here? Which secularization of the concept "kingdom of God" is involved here? The problem to which he alludes is basically an old problem, but one that has taken on a new form in roughly the last hundred years. The secularization of the idea of the kingdom of God is one of the possible consequences of the radical eschatologism that has dominated the discussions about the relationship between the Church and the kingdom of God since Johannes Weiss, Alfred Loisy, and Albert Schweitzer. We cannot sketch here the history of this debate, which is not yet in the least closed. We limit ourselves to the presentation by Jean Carmignac (see note 27) and to the theses that Leonardo Boff has developed in his *Ecclesiogenesis*.³⁰

Carmignac begins by recalling that the source of many obscurities about the kingdom of God is the fact that Greek has only one expression, *basileia*, to reproduce three Hebrew expressions that are close to but not identical with it: *melukah* (kingdom), *malkuth* (lordship), and *mamlakah* (the land ruled by a king).³¹ Naturally, the interpretation of the scriptural texts acquires greater precision when one takes into account the particular aspect involved in each individual use of the

27 Jorner, *L'Eglise du Verbe Incarné*, 2:57.

28 *Le mirage de l'Eschatologie* is the title of what I consider a very important book by the French exegete Jean Carmignac (Paris, 1979). This well documented book has the subtitle "Royauté, Règne et Rouaume de Dieu. . .sans Eschatologie."

29 *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71:3 (February 1979), 194.

30 *Ecclesiogênese. As comunidades de base reinventam a Igreja* (Petrópolis, 1977), quoted here from the German edition, *Die Neuentdeckung der Kirche. Basisgemeinden in Lateinamerika* (Mainz, 1980). Eng. trans.: *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986).

31 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 13–16.

expression *basileia*.³² Then it becomes clear that, whereas one can distinguish the Church in some way from the lordship of God, one cannot distinguish her from the “sphere where the King rules.” In fact, the various traits of this kingdom of God or of Christ correspond to those of the Church.³³ Carmignac summarizes the results of his exegetical investigation as follows:

It is not permissible. . . as some writers do, to see the Church as a preparation for the kingdom, for then the kingdom would be temporally later than the Church, and that would contradict the words of Jesus and the apostles, who confirm that the kingdom already belongs to their time and is a present reality. Nor may one hold the view that the kingdom of God will be the continuation of the Church in the other world. The Church begins to exist at precisely the moment in which the kingdom of God was founded, and she will continue to exist for the whole of eternity. It is not at all possible to separate the Church and the kingdom from one another—at least, not if one holds to the New Testament as a whole, without giving some texts preference before others.

But the identification of the Church and the kingdom of God does not in the least oblige us to see these two expressions as synonymous. They refer to the same reality, but from different perspectives. If one speaks of the kingdom of God, one looks above all at the event of God’s working, which is realized among men when they gather around Christ; if one speaks of the Church, one looks above all at these men who are gathered around Christ by God.³⁴

Carmignac draws up an impressive list of authors from the Church fathers on into our own days who make statements in keeping with this identification.³⁵ Why, therefore, has this identity lost its evidential character from a certain point in time that does not lie very far in the past? Here begins what Carmignac calls “the *fata morgana* of eschatology.”

The “formation of an error” begins with Reimarus; it consists in the idea, which has been vigorously propagated since then, that the entire Jewish people at the time of Jesus awaited this kingdom of the Messiah. Eduard Reuss extends this idea by means of the assertion that Jesus’ contemporaries lived in an eschatological

32 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 19–83.

33 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 99.

34 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 101.

35 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 102–19.

“high tension.” Ernest Renan popularizes the idea that Jesus too lived in this “high tension” and that he awaited the imminent, abrupt irruption of the kingdom of God as the total overthrowing of this world. “Basically, the considerations of these authors went astray because of two fundamental errors: (a) because of rationalistic prejudices, they bracketed off (consciously or not) those texts of the New Testament that opposed their theory and did not agree with their prefabricated syntheses; (b) they imagined that the Jews at the beginning of the Christian era were obsessed by the expectation of the kingdom of God and that Jesus shared their illusions.”³⁶

The “success of an error” was ensured by Johannes Weiss and Alfred Loisy. Both men “take one further step, because they begin to combine the concepts ‘kingdom of God’ (as something lying exclusively in the future) and ‘eschatology’ (reified to become the end of the world). For them, eschatology and the kingdom of God become two correlative concepts that cannot be separated from one another.”³⁷ Two theses take on an uncritically accepted evidential character for many: “that Jesus’ contemporaries lived in the feverish expectation of the kingdom of God and that Jesus could do no other than make their illusions his own.”³⁸

The “triumph of an error” arrives with Albert Schweitzer. “Schweitzer presupposes without further ado that the kingdom of God is a purely eschatological vision of faith, and he constructs inexorably a life of Jesus that goes in circles around this illusion, which was to be proved to be a lie by the historical reality.”³⁹ The “logic of an error” reaches its zenith in Rudolph Bultmann. For him, it is clear “that Jesus’ proclamation of God’s lordship was an eschatological message” and that this was “the message of the coming end of the world.” “All this means that in earliest Christianity history was swallowed up by eschatology.”⁴⁰

W. G. Kümmel observes on this point: “The fundamentally futurist-eschatological understanding of Jesus’ proclamation, with its basis laid by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, seems to be for Bultmann so much a matter of course that he neither adduces any evidence in support of it nor mentions any dissenting opinions.”⁴¹

The most striking thing about the dossier drawn up by Carmignac is the demonstration that there exists no evidence for this view of eschatology and of the kingdom of God. The few texts that are usually plucked out of the intertestamental literature and adduced as evidence do not in the least permit one to construct

36 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 144.

37 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 147.

38 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 154.

39 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 157.

40 *Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Tübingen, 1958), 36–42. Eng. trans.: *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 1957).

41 “Die Naherwartung in der Verkündigung Jesu,” in *Zeit und Geschichte* (Festschrift for Bultmann) (Tübingen, 1964), 31–46, at 31.

the entire theory of eschatologism upon them.⁴² Thus the presumed apocalyptic horizon that Jesus allegedly shared with his contemporaries shrinks greatly, and one must ask whether eschatologism is not to a great extent an *a priori* construction. Before we return to this question, we shall look briefly at the consequences to which the “fata morgana of eschatology” can lead.

In his *Ecclesiogenesis*, Leonardo Boff takes over the theses of eschatologism and makes them his own without posing any questions—simply as a matter of course. The explosive quality of his views comes from the practical consequences that he draws from this position. Boff takes it for granted that Jesus lived in the imminent eschatological expectation of the kingdom of God:⁴³ “No one can deny that Jesus had the same temporal expectation as his entire generation.”⁴⁴

The necessary inference from the supposition that people at that period were expecting the kingdom of God, understood as the end of the world, and that it was precisely *this* kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, is that Jesus did not wish to found the Church, but rather to proclaim this kingdom. Jesus’ “imminent expectation” seems of itself to exclude the idea that he thought of an institutionally established Church.⁴⁵

For Boff, it is a fact that Jesus’ expectation was not fulfilled. The kingdom did not come—at least, it did not come in the form in which it was expected. Thanks to the death and then the resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom of God became reality in the person of Jesus. But the kingdom has not become universally realized; it has found its personal realization in Jesus, and this realization is the anticipation of the fullness of the kingdom. And it is here that the Church finds her place and her possibility of existence: “Thus the Church has clearly the character of a substitute for the kingdom of God. On the one hand, she is the kingdom of God, since the Risen One lives in her; on the other hand, she is also not the kingdom, since it is only in the end time that the kingdom of God will come. The Church is at the service of the kingdom of God and is its sacrament, sign, and instrument, so that it can start and realize itself in the world.”⁴⁶

The Church—as the link that spans the gap between Easter and the delayed parousia—is thus the “substitute” for the kingdom, which is understood as a purely eschatological reality. One is, accordingly, not surprised when it is stated that the Church owes her existence not to any intention of the “pre-Easter Jesus” but to a decision taken by Peter and the apostles, namely, the decision to begin the mission to the Gentiles:⁴⁷ “As an institution, therefore, the Church is based not (as is

42 Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 160–65; compare 212.

43 Boff, *Die Neuentdeckung der Kirche*, 80.

44 Boff, *Ecclesiogênese*, 90. One is surprised at the assuredness of this assertion.

45 Boff, *Ecclesiogênese*, 82–84.

46 Boff, *Ecclesiogênese*, 91.

47 Boff, *Ecclesiogênese*, 87.

generally asserted) on the incarnation of the Word but on the faith and the power of the apostles, who transposed eschatology into the time of the Church, thanks to the might of the Spirit, and translated the message about the kingdom of God into the teaching about the Church—the Church, which is an imperfect and temporal realization of the kingdom.”⁴⁸

Here we see to the full the serious consequences of “The fata morgana of eschatology”: a narrowed-down understanding of the kingdom (bereft of its present element as something that is “already there”) is linked to a reductionist understanding of the Church (which is bereft of her “eschatological character”). This has grave consequences, for such a Church—detached from the plan of Jesus Christ and bound one-sidedly to the working of the Spirit⁴⁹—is based on human, and thus mutable, decisions. Thus the ecclesio-genesis, the “new birth of the Church,” which the author foresees can be brought about through new decisions: “The Church can organize herself in a manner different to that hitherto prevailing, because this is theologically possible and because this lies in the intention of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰ What institutional form is the Church to have? “Jesus wanted, and still wants, the form for which the apostolic fellowship decides, out of the power of the Spirit and in confrontation with the needs of each individual situation, and which this fellowship makes its own.”⁵¹

Yves Congar observes, “This certainly does not correspond to the intention of the Council.”⁵² In my view, the fundamental defect in this view of the Church lies in its Christology. This ecclesiology is the product of a reductionist Christology.⁵³ If the Council’s vision of the Church is to be received more fully and deeply, the christological bases of *Lumen Gentium* must be considered anew.

The Need for a Christocentric Eschatology

I limit myself to some suggestions that have been insufficiently elaborated and rather point to paths for future work.

The fundamental error of eschatologism is its subordination of Jesus’ eschatology to the alleged apocalyptic horizon of his time. In a recent study, “On the Concept of Christian Eschatology,”⁵⁴ however, Hans Urs von Balthasar has shown how very christocentric the entire eschatology of the New Testament basically is, even where it makes use of the language of Jewish apocalyptic. Christ’s eschatology

48 Boff, *Eclesiogenèse*, 95.

49 Compare the criticism of this position in Congar, “Les implications,” 165.

50 Boff, *Eclesiogenèse*, 79.

51 Boff, *Eclesiogenèse*, 97.

52 Congar, “Les implications,” 166.

53 Hans Urs von Balthasar points out this christological deficit in *Test Everything: Hold Fast to What Is Good* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 43–47.

54 *Theodramatik* (Einsiedeln, 1983), 14–46.

determines the views of his disciples, more in its substance than in the literary modes of expression. Let us take the “little apocalypses” of the synoptic evangelists: “If one takes an overview of the texts without any preconceptions, he will be astonished to see how many of them. . . refer to the direct effect of the presence of Jesus in the world.”⁵⁵

This is not a scenario that would simply have been drawn from the world of apocalyptic images; it deals essentially with the consequences of the coming of Jesus Christ and of the *krisis* provoked by this coming. In the case of the “false prophets” (Matt. 24:4), for example, it seems to be a case of some who are calling into question the uniqueness of Christ, and even the words and the natural catastrophes (Matt. 24:6–8) have a “christological motivation,” since they transpose to the societal and cosmic level the separations that Jesus already provokes on the level of the family.⁵⁶ There is no “neutral” apocalyptic—apocalyptic always has Christ as its center—and there is no serious reason to exclude the possibility that this “christocentrism” of the New Testament eschatology ultimately arose from the consciousness that Christ himself had of his mission, of his “hour.”⁵⁷ Is it possible to avoid the conclusion that Jesus Christ was conscious of being himself the *eschaton*, in his mission and in his person?

Karl Barth, who was a “consistent eschatologist” in his *Römerbrief* (1922), altered his position totally,⁵⁸ in order to orient eschatology once again on the mystery of Christ: Jesus himself “is the kingdom, he was the kingdom, and will be the kingdom, and in him exist the entire establishment, all the salvation, all the perfection, all the joy of the kingdom. To speak precisely, there are no ‘last things’: no abstract, no autonomous ‘last things’ apart from and alongside him who is *the* Last.”⁵⁹

Once he has given back eschatology its own, definitive place in Jesus Christ as its center, Karl Barth can again discover what the older writers, both Catholic and Protestant, never lost from view: the Church is the kingdom. “‘The kingdom of God’ means the lordship set up in Jesus Christ in the world, God’s ruling that takes place in him. He himself is the kingdom of God. One should therefore not

55 *Theodramatik*, 28.

56 *Theodramatik*, 31.

57 On this, see the document of the International Theological Commission, “Jesu Selbst- und Sendungsbewusstsein,” in *IKZ Communio* 16 (1987), 38–49. Eng. trans.: “The Consciousness of Christ Concerning himself and his Mission.” *Communio* 14:3 (1987): 316–25.

58 Karl Barth writes in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 8: 2, 562: “It is precisely a ‘consistent’ eschatology, which must look on the intervening time between ‘now’ and ‘once in the future’ as a time of emptiness, of nothingness, of a mere deprivation, of increasing disappointment which is laboriously concealed, that is *not* the eschatology of the New Testament Christianity.” Eng. trans.: *Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

59 *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 589.

suppress the proposition that has often been attached too quickly and too heedlessly in Protestant theology: the *kingdom of God* is the community.”⁶⁰

*The Church of the Angels and Mary*⁶¹

It is impossible to understand the Church in her mystery, which can be grasped only in faith,⁶² if one fails to take into account that part of the Church, of the kingdom of God, which forms above all the Church of heaven: the holy angels. In order to quicken the sense to perceive the true nature of the Church, we must continually recall this fellowship between the pilgrim Church and the saints and angels of heaven—this is the theme of chapter 7 of *Lumen Gentium*.

When the mentions of the holy angels in the liturgy, where they had had a central place since the Apocalypse, were reduced and made almost void of significance, was not this an all too easy capitulation to a certain rationalism? “The *ekklesia* of the Eucharist would then be no mere assembly of men among themselves, but—as the Jews already believed and affirmed in their *berakoth*—the gathering of redeemed men with the angels who are the first servants of their salvation, as they also were the first to recognize the love of God and to respond to this with praise. This corresponds also to the vision of the Church offered us in the Christian Apocalypse: the earthly Eucharist that is perfected and is transposed into heaven and as it were drawn into the liturgy of the angels.”⁶³

How are we to keep alive the knowledge of the invisible dimension of the Church, when her invisible members are forgotten in our liturgical assemblies, at which they are present? The consciousness that the angels belong to the Church has “directly the wholly practical consequences that no one can be a prophet or an apostle unless he has *first been a contemplative and an intercessor* like the angels. For one cannot effectively transmit, on the level of man or on the level of an angel, anything that one has not first made most deeply one’s own. It is only when *agape* has taken control of our entire being that God, thanks to the maternal grace that he wanted to communicate to his entire creation, to his entire heavenly and earthly Church, can bestow on us, if he wishes, the gift of the simple prophetic testimony or of the apostolic mission in the name of his Son. In this sense, the bishops ought to be the ‘angels of the Church’, according to the ancient interpretation of the Apocalypse (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18, etc.)”⁶⁴

Although the identity between Church and kingdom has its basis in Christ,

60 *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV, 2, 742; compare Carmignac, *Le mirage*, 184–88.

61 Cf. L. Bouyer, *Die Kirche*, vol. 2: *Theologie der Kirche* (Einsiedeln, 1977), in the chapter on *Lumen Gentium*, 7 and 8.

62 *Fide solum intelligimus*, says the Catechism of the Council of Trent with a view to the mystery of the Church. Karl Barth mentions this with acknowledgment and agreement in *Zwischen den Zeiten*, 5 (1927), 365–78.

63 Bouyer, *Die Kirche*, 402.

64 *Die Kirche*, 403.

there is no higher concretization of this identity for the Church than the Mother of God. It would not be possible to assert this identity if its only basis were Christ, the Head of the Church, and there was no real perfect correspondence on the side of the members of the Church. One may justly say that, if Mary did not exist in the Church, then there would be a distance between the Church and the kingdom, because of the presence of sinners in the Church. But “in the most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:27)” (*Lumen Gentium*, 65).

In Mary, the most perfect member of the Church, we are able to contemplate the Church’s true nature. Thus, “by contemplating Mary’s mysterious holiness, by imitating her love and faithfully carrying out the Father’s will, the Church too herself becomes a mother through receiving the Word of God in faith” (*Lumen Gentium*, 64). If Mary did not exist in the Church, one could not speak with full correctness of the Church’s motherhood. “*The Church’s motherhood is something that already exists in reality only because the Church has found here her anticipated perfection: the highest created holiness in a unique communication with Christ’s own holiness, who communicates it to her who is not only the mother of us all, but is first of all his own mother.*”⁶⁵

In Mary, the Council wanted to display to us the sign of the Church but also the Church’s reality: both the eschatological character of the earthly, pilgrim Church and her inseparable unity with the Church of heaven. “As the Mother of Jesus, already glorified with body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church, which will be perfected in the world to come, so she also shines here on earth in the intermediary time until the day of the Lord comes (2 Pet. 3:10) as a sign of sure hope and of consolation to the people of God on its pilgrim way” (*Lumen Gentium*, 68).

65 *Die Kirche*, 406.