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Our mother church: Mary and ecclesiology

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ABSTRACT

This essay, based upon the inaugural Bishop Geoffrey Rowell Memorial Lecture, delivered at Chichester Cathedral in November 2022 in association with the *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, examines the Scriptural background in Isaiah and Genesis for the way in which early Christians spoke about the Church as Mother or even the Virgin Mother, and how that in turn influenced the ways in which they spoke about Mary. The Church was, for them, the Virgin Mother in whose womb human beings are born into life by sharing in Christ's Pascha, already anticipated in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and the local community in which this life is realised. Further consideration is then given to what came to be the oversight of a bishop over an increasing geographical area and whether this should be spoken of as 'Church'.

KEYWORDS

Church; ecclesiology; Virgin Mother; Mary; baptism; Eucharist; episcopacy

It is a great honour to be asked to give this inaugural lecture in memory of Bishop Geoffrey Rowell. I never met Bishop Geoffrey, though from what I have read, the subject of this essay lay close to his heart.

When we speak of 'the church' what comes to mind? The word 'church' has proved to be fairly elastic over the centuries. We might, for instance, think of a building, such as this beautiful cathedral in Chichester; although in Greek it would have been called by a different term, a ναός, a temple or shrine. The Greek term for 'church', ἐκκλησία, was used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew word *qahal*, which meant a 'convoked group'; ἐκκλησία likewise refers to those who are called out, forming a distinct body. But in this case, it is not yet another body or grouping within the world, for, from the beginning, Christians, gathered together in one place, ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό (e.g. 1 Cor 11:20), spoke of themselves as being, collectively, the body of Christ and, individually, members of this body (1 Cor. 12:27–8), the body of whom the Christ, the 'first-born of all creation', is 'the head', as the 'beginning, the first-born of the dead' (Col. 1:15–20): as such Christians formed a new body, transcending all the previous social, ethnic, and sexual distinctions which divided society. In the past century, the way in which the church constitutes this distinctive body increasingly focused upon the celebration of the Eucharist as that which constitutes this gathering as the body of Christ, what is called 'eucharistic ecclesiology': the idea that the church is made present, realised, or concretised in the celebration of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the Kingdom. While the celebration of the Eucharist, as the act constitutive of the church, is necessarily always in a local community, there was, nevertheless, a debate about whether the locus of this celebration is in fact the parish or the diocese, and, by extension, how the local church

relates to the universal church. Fr Nicholas Afanasiev argued strongly that the parish, as the place where the Eucharist is in fact celebrated, is indeed the complete and 'catholic' church; Metropolitan John (Zizioulas), on the other hand, argued that the gathering is only truly catholic when it includes not only all the members of the church in one place, but also all the ministers, that is, the college of presbyters with the bishop at its head, so that the locus for the church is the diocese.[1] This territorial debate, as it were, is bound up with another way of using the word 'church', following the words often attributed to Ignatius of Antioch, 'where the bishop is there is the church': today the word 'church' is often used to denote the bishop (and perhaps his clergy), and only by extension includes the laity, as part of the 'larger' or 'broader' church. But what Ignatius in fact said is 'where the bishop is let the people be present, just as where Jesus Christ is there is the catholic church' (*Smryn*. 8) – it is a mistake to leave out Christ and the people! Eucharistic ecclesiology seems to have morphed into episcopal ecclesiology, and as such it has tended to devolve ever more into questions of territory and hierarchy.

Strikingly absent from all this, is the second part of the title of this essay, the language of mother, or even the Virgin Mother. When today we speak of the Virgin Mother, we almost invariable (and rightly!) think of the Ever-Virgin Mary. Yet we rarely reflect further on how it is that we speak of Mary and how this might relate to how we speak of the church. By considering this, I suggest, we can gain further insights into the mystery of the church, how Christians are indeed called to be the body of Christ, how this calling is effected through baptism and Eucharist, and so the nature of priesthood, and also the universal scope of the church and broader ecumenical horizons in which we might think about ecclesiology.

The church as Virgin Mother

In the year 177AD, Christians in the area of Vienne and Lyons were gathered together and led into the amphitheatre, as we learn from a letter from the Christians of Vienne and Lyons in Gaul to those in Asia and Phrygia, preserved in Eusebius but probably written by Irenaeus of Lyons.[2] Among these Christians was a certain young slave girl called Blandina, very much the heroine of the whole account. The letter describes how she was brutalised at length by the gladiators: yet according to the letter, it was the gladiators who were beaten by Blandina, for they were unable to break the young girl; they were defeated while she remained steadfast in her confession of being a Christian (*EH* 5.1.18–19). As a young female slave, she is the weakest of the weak in ancient terms, and thus the body in which the strength of God is made most perfect (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9). Eventually Blandina was hung upon a stake (ἐπὶ ξύλου), as food for the wild beasts in the amphitheatre. The account then continues:

> She, by being seen hanging in the form of a cross, by her vigorous prayer, caused great zeal in the contestants, as, in their struggle, they beheld with their outward eyes, through the sister, him who was crucified for them, that he might persuade those who believe in him that everyone who suffers for the glory of Christ has for ever communion with the living God. . . . the small and weak and despised woman had put on the great and invincible athlete, Christ,

[1] Cf. Zizoulas, *Being as Communion*, 23–5.
[2] The 'Letter of the Christians of Vienne and Lyons to those in Asia and Phrygia' can be found in Eusebius, *EH*, 5.1.

> routing the adversary in many bouts, and, through the struggle, being crowned with the crown of incorruptibility . . . . (*EH* 5.1.41–2)

She is now not only the vessel for the strength of God, but, in her conformity to the death of Christ she is the very embodiment or incarnation of Christ: looking upon her, her fellow Christians see Christ. The account continues a little later, after having introduced another figure, Attulus:

> Through their [Blandina' and Attulus'] continued life the dead were made alive, and the martyrs showed favour to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat. (*EH* 5.1.45–6)

Those who had previously failed to hold on to their confession, and so were considered to be still-born – dead – were encouraged by the witness, the *martyria*, of Blandina and Attulus to return to their confession to be born into life. And in this the Virgin Mother rejoices. But who this Virgin Mother is, is not specified; it must have been such a commonplace designation that it is presumed that we already know. If we turn to Irenaeus, the most likely author of this account, it is clear, however, that the Virgin Mother is the church. As he puts it elsewhere: 'in every place, the church, because of the love which she cherishes towards God, sends forth throughout all time a multitude of martyrs to the Father' (*AH* 4.33.9). He continues a few paragraphs later, with reference to words from Jeremiah and Isaiah (Jer 17:9; Isa 7:14, 8:3, 9:6), which speak of how the Word becomes flesh and the Son of God the Son of Man: this refers, he says, to 'the Pure One opening purely that pure womb which regenerates humans unto God and which he himself made pure' (*AH* 4.33.1). Christ, the pure one, makes the womb pure, opening it so that we also can be born of God through the same womb.

The imagery of the church as Mother or the Virgin Mother is pervasive in the early years of Christianity. One of the most extensive reflections on the church is found in the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Early on in the work, Hermas has a vision in which an old woman, 'clothed in shining garments and holding a book in her hand', appears to him (*Vision* 1.2.1). After a second vision, Hermas has another:

> And a revelation was made to me, brethren, while I slept, by a very beautiful young man, who said to me, 'Who do you think that the ancient lady was from whom you received the little book?' I said, 'The Sibyl'. 'You are wrong', he said, 'she is not'. 'Who is she, then?' I said. 'The church', he said. I said to him, 'Why then is she old?' 'Because', he said, 'she was created the first of all things. For this reason she is old; and for her sake the world was established'. (*Vision* 2.4.1)

In a later vision, the old woman shows Hermas a tower being built out of stones specifically prepared for the task. The stones that were cracked, rotten or the wrong shape were rejected, while the stones that were used fitted together so well that the tower seemed to be built out of one stone. When he asked for an explanation, Hermas was told by the woman: 'The tower which you see being built is myself, the church, who have appeared to you both now and formerly' (*Vision* 3.3.3).

By the time of the fourth vision, the woman changes appearance: having begun as a old woman, older than all creation, she now appears as a young, virginal, maiden: '"adorned

as if coming forth from the bridal chamber" [Ps 19.5; Rev. 21.2], all in white and with white sandals, veiled to her forehead, and a turban for a head-dress, and her hair was white' (*Vision* 4.2.1). The church is at once older than the rest of creation – she is created first of all things, and all things are established for her – but, as the revelation continues, she becomes a pure virgin, for it is as a spotless virgin that Paul says that he *will* present his communities to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2): this is something to be achieved, something that lies in the future.

The idea that the church pre-exists the world is also found in the *Second Epistle of Clement*:

> So, then, brethren, if we do the will of God our Father, we shall belong to the first church, the spiritual one, which was created before the sun and moon. . . . I do not think that you are ignorant of the fact that the living church is the body of Christ. For the Scripture says, 'God made the human being male and female': the male is Christ, the female is the church . . . and the apostles say that church is not just of the present but has existed from the beginning; for she was spiritual, as was our Lord Jesus Christ, but she [or he] was made manifest in the last days so that she [or he] might save us. (*2 Clem.* 14)

Jesus Christ and the church exist from the beginning – indeed, they are the male and female of Gen. 1:27; but it is only at the end, in the last times, that they are revealed or made manifest, so that we might be saved.

A more unusual example comes from Clement of Alexandria. Here the Virgin is not only our mother, giving us birth into the life of God, but also the one who supplies nourishment to her infants:

> The Lord Christ, fruit of the Virgin, did not proclaim women's breasts to be blessed, nor did he choose them to give nourishment. But when the loving and philanthropic Father rained down his Word, it became spiritual nourishment for the virtuous. O mysterious marvel! There is one Father of all, there is one Word of all, and the Holy Spirit is one and the same everywhere. There is also one Virgin Mother, whom I love to call the church. This mother, when alone, had no milk because, alone, she was not a woman: she is virgin and mother simultaneously, a virgin undefiled and a mother full of love. She draws her children to herself and nurses them with holy milk, that is, the Word for infants. She had not milk because the milk was this child, beautiful and familiar, the body of Christ, which nourishes by the word the young brood, which the Lord himself brought forth in the throes of the flesh, which the Lord himself swathed in his precious blood. O amazing birth! (*Paed.* 1.6.41.3–42.2)

The fruit of the Virgin here is Christ, not simply, however, as the one to whom she gives birth, but as her milk, the milk by which she nourishes those for whom she is mother. And again there is the suggestion that the church already existed, a virgin waiting to become a mother while yet preserving her virginity.

And finally, perhaps with more familiar imagery, we have Cyprian of Carthage, who for whom the church is both the spouse of Christ and our Mother:

> She spreads her branches in generous growth over all the earth, she extends her abundant streams ever further; yet one is the head-spring, one the source, one the Mother who is prolific in her offspring, generation after generation; of her womb are we born, of her milk are we fed, from her Spirit our souls draw their life-breath. The spouse of Christ cannot be defiled, she is inviolate and chaste; she knows one home alone, in all modesty she keeps faithfully to one chamber. It is she who seals for the kingdom the sons who she has borne. Whoever breaks with the church and enters on an adulterous union, cuts himself off from

> the promises made to the church. . . . You cannot have God for your Father if you no longer have the church for your mother. (*Unity*, 5–6)

Rather than thinking of such statements as a secondary layer, applying, somewhat fancifully, the language of 'mother' to a church body already identified through other terms (such as a eucharistic community or an episcopo-centric organisation), it seems to me, given its pervasiveness, that the maternal language is primary. In fact, it is deeply grounded within Scripture (the Old Testament) and already deployed within the writings of the New Testament: in other words, it belongs to the very proclamation of the gospel. There are, as far as I have discerned, two primary scriptural references for this language. The first is the proclamation of Isaiah,

> Rejoice O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail; for the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord. (Isa. 54:1)

The application of this verse in this way is already evidenced in Paul. Taking Genesis 16 and 21 as speaking allegorically, he argues:

> these women are two covenants: one is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar—now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children—while the Jerusalem above is free, she is our mother, for it is written 'Rejoice O barren one . . . ' (Gal. 4:24–6)

In the liturgy of the Orthodox church this is enacted dramatically: the only time in the year when the preceding passage, the hymn of the Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13–53:12) is read is on Holy Friday Vespers, with the deposition of the body of Christ from the cross and its placement in the tomb. But it concludes with this verse from Isaiah 54: the Passion of Christ is, as it were, the catalyst opening the tomb, the womb of the barren one, who now gives birth to many children, for it is into the death of Christ that Christians are baptised, in order to rise to life in him (Cf. Rom. 6:3–11). The final part of the drama was the procession into the building of the newly baptised on Holy Saturday (one of the key days for baptism in the early centuries).

The second scriptural background is alluded to in the description of the crucifixion in the Gospel of John. As is clear from the opening words of his Gospel – 'in the beginning' – John is playing off Genesis. The final word of Christ from the cross in the Gospel of John, I have argued elsewhere, alludes to the switch from imperative to subjunctive in Genesis 1.[3] The opening chapter of Scripture begins with God speaking everything into being – let it be, it is, it is good, next day. Then, having set the stage, as it were, God announces his own project with a subjunctive: 'Let us make the human being in our image after our likeness' (Gen. 1:26). This is a project; indeed, it is the only project that God specifically deliberates upon and announces in this way. That Christ's last word from the cross in the Gospel of John – 'it is finished' (perfected, brought to completion) – refers back to this is witnessed to, unwittingly, by Pilate: 'Behold the Human Being' (John 19:5, 30). Christ is the reality of which Adam was only a sketch, a type of the one to come (Rom 5:12). That this connection was evident in the early church is shown by the way in which Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to Rome to be martyred there, wrote with language similar to that we

[3]Cf. John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel*, 194–217.

have seen, to the Christians in Rome asking them not to interfere with his impending fate: 'Birth-pangs are upon me. Allow me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die. . . . Allow me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I will be a human being [ἐκεῖ παραγενόμενος ἄνθρωπος ἔσομαι]. Allow me to follow the example of the passion of my God' (*Rom*. 6). Having been born into mortal existence this world with no choice, in Christ we can be voluntarily born into life, as children of the free Jerusalem above, our mother, by taking up the cross, our mortality, and in this way become human as Christ has shown this to be.

But John's play upon Genesis doesn't finish here. If the work on the cross completes the project announced in Genesis 1, we now find a parallel in Genesis 2 between what is foreshadowed in the rib taken from the side of Adam and the blood and water flowing from the side of the crucified Christ. This parallel was already noted by Tertullian:

> As Adam was a figure of Christ, Adam's sleep sketched out the death of Christ, who was to sleep a mortal slumber, so that from the wound inflicted on his side might be figured the true mother of the living, the church. (*On the Soul*, 43.10)

According to Genesis, the woman built up from the side of the sleeping Adam was called 'Eve' (*zoe* – 'life'), for she is 'the mother of the living' (Gen. 3:20); but in fact all her children die! In reverse the church, the blood and water flowing from the side of the crucified Christ, is the true mother of the living, although it is through their conformity to Christ's death that her children are born into life.

John's playfulness continues even further. Until the cross, the 'woman' addressed, or spoken about, by Christ in the Gospel of John is the 'mother': at the marriage in Cana on the third day, 'Woman, what have you to do with me? My hour is not yet' (John 2:1–4); then in his farewell discourse, where the woman is in travail, giving birth to a human being (16:21); and culminating at the cross, where Jesus addresses 'the mother' with the words, 'Woman behold your son' (John 19:26). Moving from Gen 1 to Gen 2, before Eve is led to Adam, he has only been identified as the one who was to work the garden (2:8); similarly in John, after the cross, the risen Christ is thought to be 'the gardener' by Mary (John 20:15 – another Mary: we will turn to Mary shortly). And so begins the second-part of what Peter Leithart has called the 'two-part royal romance' that is the Gospel and Revelation: the first part, the Gospel, presents the Bridegroom, the son born by the woman; the second part, Revelation, describes the building up of the bride, the church, in those who witness to their faith with their blood: the narrative begins in the Gospel with a marriage at Cana, on the third day although Christ's hour had not yet come, and concludes at the end of Revelation with the eschatological marriage feast.[4]

This ancient way of speaking of the church as the Virgin is preserved in the Byzantine hymnography still used in Orthodox worship. For example, the troparion for the resurrection in Tone Six:

> Angelic Powers were at your grave, and those who guarded it became as dead,
> and Mary stood by the tomb, seeking your most pure Body.
> You despoiled Hell and emerged unscathed; you met the Virgin and granted life.
> O Lord, risen from the dead, glory to you![5]

[4]Cf. Peter Leithhart, *Revelation 1–11*, International Theological Commentary (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 22–3, and *passim*.
[5]Translation from *The Divine Liturgy*.

The Virgin, to whom the risen Christ come, granting life, is the church, now become a virginal mother, granting life to those who are born in her womb through their death in confession of Christ. According to the Gospel accounts, however, it is Mary Magdalene who came to the tomb seeking Christ's body. That here she is spoken of simply as 'Mary' introduces us to our next theme: the way in which, with this strong and vivid sense of the church as 'Virgin Mother', Christians began to think of, and speak about, Mary.

Speaking of Mary

The Apostle speaks of the Son having been born of a woman (Gal 4:4), but does not mention the name Mary. After being written about in the Gospels, when Mary begins to appear in early Patristic texts, it is usually in terms of her being the New Eve. We find this first in Justin Martyr (e.g. *Dial*. 100) and then extensively in Irenaeus: if Eve had been led astray by a word, it is by receiving the word from the angel that Mary became an advocate for Eve, virginal disobedience being balanced by virginal obedience (*AH* 5.19.2); and as God formed Adam from virgin earth, so Christ comes from our own virgin earth, to preserve the likeness of formation while maintaining the continuity of earth (cf. *AH* 3.22.4; *Dem*. 32–3). Yet, as we have seen, speaking of the relationship between Eve and Mary is already bound up with the relationship between Eve and the church. And so, Irenaeus takes Mary's 'Magnificat' as her 'prophesying on behalf of the church' (*AH* 3.10.2)

From the fourth century onwards, the connection between the church as Virgin Mother and the Virgin Mother who is Mary comes to the fore. Ephrem the Syrian, whose poetic writings lend themselves most readily to such associations of images, develops this point extensively. For example:

> The Virgin Mary is a symbol of the church, when she receives the first announcement of the Gospel. And, it is in the name of the church that Mary sees the risen Jesus. Blessed be God, who filled Mary and the church with joy. We call the church by the name of Mary, for she deserves a double name.[6]

Ephrem's apparent identification of the two Mary's is based on the fact that Mary is the one who receives the gospel: it is when she received the first announcement of the gospel that the Virgin Mary is a symbol of the church (and, indeed, at other times in the Gospel narratives she is not generally spoken of as 'Mary', but rather as 'his mother'): in the infancy narratives she receives the word of God and keeps it, giving birth to Christ. Likewise the (other) Mary encounters the risen Jesus, and so represents the church, the one who now gives birth to the body of Christ. In both cases it is the reception of the gospel that defines 'Mary', so that Mary is not the archetype of the church, as is sometimes said, but rather, to use Ephrem's words, she is a 'symbol of the church'. The church is created first, older than the world; she prefigured in Eve, and she is seen as Isaiah's barren woman who gives birth through Christ's work; it is this one who is then personified, in the Gospel narratives, by Mary. The theological reflection we have traced began with the work of Christ and what is brought into being by him – the church as the Virgin Mother – and then understands Mary in this light. So strong is the identification

[6]Ephrem, *Sermo ad Nocturnum Dominicae Resurrectionis*, 2 (Lamy, 1, 534); trans. in L. Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 115.

between the church and her symbol, Mary (when seen in this light), that Ephrem can simply call the church 'Mary'.

In the period after Ephrem, from the fifth century onwards, the two become virtually synonymous, as we can see especially in iconography, hymnography, and in the homilies for the feasts of Mary. For instance, the image of Mary frequently depicted in the apse behind the altar in Byzantine temples – with her arms outstretched in prayer and Christ in a mandorla positioned between her arms – describe her as the one whose womb is wider than the heavens (Πλατυτέρα των Ουρανών; hardly a physiological statement). The hymnography for her feasts frequently refers to her as the Temple, or the parts of its architecture, (such as the gate that remains closed) or its furniture (she is the ark of the covenant, in whom the Word of God was contained), or even Jerusalem, as in the Paschal hymn to the Theotokos:

> Shine Shine O New Jerusalem! The glory of the Lord has shone upon you. Exalt now and be glad, O Zion. Be radiant, O pure Theotokos, in the resurrection of your Son.[7]

In the words of Gregory Palamas for the feast of her Dormition, 'she alone stands at the border between the created and the uncreated nature, and no one can come to God unless he is truly illuminated by her' (*hom*. 37.15); she is 'an icon of everything good', 'a world of everything good, both visible and invisible' (*hom*. 37.10).

As I noted earlier, this maternal imagery of the church, with its deep scriptural roots and grounding in the very proclamation of the gospel, is as pervasive in early Christianity as it is absent in modern ecclesiological reflection. Hugo Rahner gathered together many passages from the first millennium praising the church as 'Mater Ecclesia'.[8] And Henri de Lubac wrote a study entitled *The Motherhood of the church*, which briefly touches on the themes we have been discussing, though usually proceeding from the Virgin Mary to the church by analogy.[9] More in line with what we have seen is the brief suggestion of Vladimir Lossky that the hypostasis of the church is to be found in the person of Mary,[10] and one can find similar ideas worked out, in a different manner, in the Sophiology of Sergius Bulgakov.[11] None of these, however, seem to have impacted contemporary ecclesiology in any significant manner. And so we must next ask, what contribution would be made by thinking again of the church, beginning, not with structures and rituals, but with this maternal dimension.

Further considerations

The perception of the church as the Virgin Mother in whose womb we are born to become the body of Christ, opens up several aspects for further consideration. There are two that I would like to touch upon briefly.

The first point concerns the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist and, bound up with this, the 'royal priesthood' of believers (1 Pet. 2:9). When James and John approach

[7]See the hymnography for the Marian feasts in *The Festal Menaion*. Cf. Krastu Banev, 'Myriad of Names to Represent Her Nobleness: The church and the Virgin Mary in the Psalms and Hymns of Byzantium'.
[8]Hugo Rahner, *Mater Ecclesia: Lobpreis der Kirche aus dem ersten Jahrtausend*.
[9]Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*.
[10]Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.
[11]Cf. Andrew Louth, 'Mary the Mother of God and Ecclesiology: Some Orthodox Reflections'.

Christ to ask to sit at his right and left hand when he comes into his glory, Jesus asks them: 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' (Mark 10:38). As we have seen, our entry into the Paschal mystery of Christ is through our voluntary, martyric death, following Christ, to be born into the life of the resurrection. This is what it is to drink the cup and be baptised. That this is so for baptism is clear: it is indicated by the significant change of tense in the Apostle's statement: 'if we *have been* united within him in a death like his, we *shall certainly be united* with him in a resurrection like his.' (Rom. 6:5). The reason for this change of tense from past to future is simply the fact that we are not yet dead! And so Paul urges us: 'consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). The same point can be made regarding the Eucharist: the invitation to share in the Cup is an invitation to share in his Passion. One can, I think, go even further. When Ignatius wrote to the Christians in Rome, urging them not to interfere with his impending fate, he saw his martyrdom as his becoming the very Eucharistic Gifts: 'I am God's wheat and through the beasts' teeth I shall be found to be the pure bread for Christ' (*Rom*. 4.1). One can see same point in the Martyrdom of Polycarp: when his body was finally put to the flames, those around him smelled baking bread (*Mart. Poly*. 15.2). As such, when Ignatius describes the Eucharist as being 'the medicine of immortality' (*Eph*. 20.2), he is not saying that if we partake as often as possible we will not die, but rather that by sharing in the cup, in the fulness of what that means, we are already partaking of the life that comes through death and so cannot be touched by death. Irenaeus takes this further by drawing a parallel between the Eucharist and our own death and resurrection: as the grain and the vine are planted in the earth, raised by the Spirit, and turned into the body and blood of Christ by the invocation of the Spirit, so too, we, participating in them, when deposited in the earth will be raised by the Spirit into the immortality and incorruptibility of the Father – our own lives, culminating in our death and resurrection is the Eucharist of God. As such, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist are anticipations of our own entry into Christ's Paschal mystery through our own actual death and resurrection. It is this that marks believers as a 'royal priesthood', as those who, in our own actual death (anticipated in baptism and taking up the cross to live for others not ourselves), are the ones who are both doing the offering and that which is offered (as Christ is 'the who one who offers and is offered'), and so each of us – whether male or female, lay or ordained – is *the* priest of our own entry into Christ's paschal mystery.

The Spirit given in the seal of the sacrament of baptism is, as Paul puts it, 'the pledge [ἀρραβών, guarantee] of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it' (Eph 1:13). Even now, Irenaeus says, the pledge 'tends towards perfection, preparing us for incorruption'. But what shall it be like when the complete grace is given, he asks: 'it will render us like unto him and accomplish the will of the Father, making the human being in the image and likeness of God' (*AH* 5.8.1). It is, moreover, as Irenaeus puts it, 'a gift of God, entrusted to the church, as the breath was to the first created human being', so that 'where the church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the church' (*AH* 3.24.1). If, then, as the Psalmist addresses God, 'you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust, you send forth your Spirit and they will be created and you renew the face of the earth' (Ps. 103/4:29–30), we can perhaps say that the church, the *ekklesia* which is embodied, manifest, realised in each local community is not simply a community of those called out *from* the world into yet another grouping in the world

alongside many other bodies, but rather those who are called out *into* the life of the new creation, the eighth day, already anticipating that eschatological reality. These ecclesial communities are, as it were, the signs of the new life that comes through death, as fresh grass and crocuses appearing in winter, amidst the deadened world, herald the springtime of the renewed earth. Which in turn, or in reverse, means that the church is really the whole of creation seen eschatologically, for the church is not only our mother, but also the bride of Christ, being prepared for the eschatological marriage, to become one with Christ, and thus the church is also the Body of Christ, when all things have been brought into subjection to him, as the head of the body, so that he in turn can subject all things to God, and so God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

The second point concerns organisation. If the church is our heavenly Virgin Mother, in whose womb we enter into the Paschal mystery of Christ, an entry which is anticipated in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist and realised in our own priestly death and resurrection, the church is nevertheless instantiated in particular local communities where the life of the Kingdom is already beginning to be lived. What then can we say about the relationship between these particular local communities?

As the number of Christians grew and there were more than one ecclesial body in a given place, it became necessary to coordinate the activity of these different communities. We see this happening first in big cities such as Rome and Alexandria.[12] Already before Paul arrived in Rome, there were a number of different Christian communities in existence there (cf. Rom. 16). In Antioch, Ignatius speaks of the bishop, the presbyters, the deacon and all the people gathered together comprising the body of the church; though he is referring to a single community – a house church – not a diocese composed of many parishes headed by a bishop. In Rome, on the other hand, there were a number of communities alongside each other, and the leader of each community was known as both bishop and presbyter, even as late as the time of Irenaeus: as the head of his own community, he was the bishop, the overseer; but when gathered together, as we can see from Hermas, these figures were referred to as presbyters, 'elders', constituting together a college. How they related to each other was, inevitably, difficult and fraught: Hermas describes how there was jostling among the leaders for the 'first seats' or for 'privileges and reputation' (*Vision* 3.9.7; *Similitude* 8.7.4–6) – nothing changes! It was only by the end of the second century or even early in the third, that this federated system coalesced into a single body under a single head, for whom the term 'bishop' was reserved, with the term 'presbyter' now being used for the leader of the various communities under the bishop's oversight. This change is also evident in the practice of the fermentum: whereas originally each community shared its Eucharist gifts with all the other communities, it now became exclusively the bishop's eucharistic gifts that were distributed to his presbyters leading the different parishes. Over time, this coordination was extended beyond the cities, into a system of dioceses headed by a bishop, comprising of parishes headed by the bishop's priests, and then, in due time, ever greater areas, archdioceses, patriarchates and so on, into todays national churches.

[12]See especially Alistair Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Centuries*. For Rome see Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*; and more briefly John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, 21–57.

It was and is necessary, of course, to coordinate the various local ecclesial communities. But it is not clear (to me at least) that the word 'church' is the appropriate term for this institutional coordination – as if there can be national 'churches' when in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. Interestingly, this point is reflected in the language of the Orthodox liturgy: in the course of celebrating the Liturgy, the bishop is primarily spoken of as being the 'archpriest', for it is his priestly ministry that is exercised in the liturgy; his 'episcopal' work as overseer or administrator, holding together the various communities under his oversight, is an administrative function. In the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, as we remember the bishop we pray that he 'may serve your holy churches in peace': the word 'church' is used for each of the communities which he oversees; the diocese for which he has the administrative role of oversight (*episkopē*) is not a church. To put it the other way round, the bishop, in this administrative role, might well be (and should be!) for the *bene esse* of the churches, but the bishop is not of the *esse* of the church.

Words are, however, slippery; and as I noted at the beginning of this essay, the word 'church' has been used in many ways over the centuries. But we should be careful in our usage, lest we end up transferring to one thing what really belongs to another, for instance by speaking of the church of Rome or Constantinople or Canterbury as the 'mother church' – we should not transfer to a particular see what really belongs to our heavenly mother.

As I also mentioned at the beginning, much modern ecclesiology is given over to questions of organisation, of hierarchy and territory: these, of course, need to be dealt with, just as how, in the earliest period, the way the different communities were to relate needed to be established. And just as in the early period this was difficult and often resulted in splits, so too in modern times. But from our explorations into some of the earliest ways of talking about the church hopefully a bigger and broader vision of the church has opened up: the church as our heavenly Mother in whose womb we are born into life by taking up the cross, manifesting already now the resurrectional life that is to come, a life that can't be touched by death because it has been entered into through death, and a life, moreover, that is the first flowering of the new creation.

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