I AM THE VINE,
YOU ARE THE BRANCHES.
THOSE WHO ABIDE IN ME
AND I IN THEM
BEAR MUCH FRUIT,
BECAUSE APART FROM ME
YOU CAN DO NOTHING.

JOHN 15:5

The People of God

THE RISEN JESUS CHRIST, AS PRIEST, IS THE ESSENTIAL protagonist of the liturgy. Christ joins the people of God to himself in the celebration. Now we ask ourselves: Who are the people we call the people of God? On what basis can they be defined as such? We know that different people are defined according to common history, language, culture and customs. In the Christian vision, what is it that, in the people of God, corresponds to these cohesive components? To find the answer, we must speak about the doctrine that since the Middle Ages we have been accustomed to calling the “Mystical Body.” By this we mean the reality of the union of Christ with his people.

In the Gospel of John (15:1 – 10), Jesus is spoken of as the “true vine,” the Father as the vinegrower and we as branches of the vine. Jesus does not say that he is part — perhaps the most important part — of the plant but that he is the vine as a whole, the vine of which we too are part. It is obvious that the same sap, the same life force, runs in every branch of the same plant. In Jesus and in us, then, there is the same life, which is the life of God given to us as a gift, which we call “grace.” Its presence in us is essential in order to be alive in communion with God; it is just as necessary as sap is for the life of plants and blood is for bodily life.

The necessity for the Christian to remain united with Christ is stressed by the frequent repetition of the word “remain” or “abide” (Greek: meno), which occurs ten times in ten verses. For the best understanding of the vocabulary, see John 6:56, where the one who “remains” or “abides” in Jesus is the one who eats his flesh and drinks his blood. “Remaining” in Jesus leads, therefore, to a communion of life. See also John
14:10, where the Father "remains" in Jesus and becomes the source of his actions, which indicates the closest possible union between two persons. In John 15:9 the concept is explicit: The "remaining" of the faithful in Christ is a union of love, and the love of Jesus for those who are his is like the love of the Father for him.

So our "remaining" in Christ brings us, through him, into the secret of the inter-Trinitarian life, the union which binds the Father to the Son, because we are in Christ and Christ is in the Father, and the Father is with the Son, and in the person of the Son we meet the Father. "Remaining in love" is explained on the level of practical realization: It is manifested in carrying out the will of the beloved.

The life which the Christian receives by remaining united to Jesus is manifested in "fruit," that is, in the actions being done for the glory of the Father, the vinegrower, who does all the caring for the vine. It is impossible for the branch to bear fruit if it is cut off from the plant: "without me you can do nothing." The doctrine is found already in 1 Corinthians 12:ff. Paul speaks of the different tasks each one of us has in the church, although the animating source is the same God who works in all. Each of us, as a member of the church, has his or her own particular function, as in the human body, one organism endowed with one life, each part has its own task. This establishes a solidarity among the members through which the action of one has repercussions on the others (v. 26).

This variety of tasks among the members of the body of Christ — the body which is in the process of being built up — leads us to "grow up in every way into him who is the head" (Ephesians 4:11, 15). The body of Christ is not a static reality; it is not completely finished. Rather, it is being built through the collaboration of humanity with the action of God and will be completed only when "God will be all in all." In the body of Christ, each one carries out his or her own particular work, but it is carried out "in him," that is, united to Christ, who is the source of the unity among the members.

In the First Letter of Peter (2:4ff), a different comparison is used to illustrate the same truth: Jesus is a "living stone," and thus Christians are "living stones" that are used to build a spiritual temple. The temple is the place of worship for the glory of the Father. This clarifies the purpose of the building up of the body of Christ. The image of the stone is completed with Ephesians 2:11ff., where, always in reference to Jesus as the source of unity, Jesus is specified as the "cornerstone" of the building, the stone without which the building could not exist and in which the building finds its connection so as to be able to "grow into a holy temple in the Lord."

We find another image in relation to the same doctrine outside sacred scripture. The image is in a letter to the Ephesians from St. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, a disciple of the apostles who was martyred in Rome at the beginning of the second century. St. Ignatius uses the image of a chorus in which each of us, "taking the tone from God," sings "in the harmony of concord with one voice, in unison, through the mouth of Jesus Christ to the Father; and he will listen to you, and by your good works he will know that you are members of his Son." The image is different, but the doctrine is the same: The one who brings the songs of everyone together is the "mouth" of Christ who — here as well — is the means by which our praise reaches the Father.

Every image we have examined presents fundamentally the same doctrine, yet each one has a particular aspect that helps us to form a complete idea, as far as is possible, of the reality of the presence of God's life in us and the effects of that presence. The idea common to them all is the vital necessity of being united to Jesus. Such a union leads us to a communion of life with God (true vine). The image of the true vine also makes it clear that the union of the believer with Christ brings union with our brothers and sisters, since I cannot be part of a plant without being united to its branches also. There is, then, a union we could call vertical, by which Christ links us to the Father,
and a horizontal union that, always in Christ, links us to our brothers and sisters.

From one point of view or the other, the connecting point of relationship, the vital trunk of the plant, is always Christ. Here we could formulate one of the basic liturgical laws: We do not save ourselves by ourselves. There is no salvation without God or without our brothers and sisters, because more than saving individuals, God wants to establish a kingdom, that is, a community, in which the good of one is the good of all and the evil of one is the evil of all. As Christians, we cannot be indifferent to the salvation of others, because we will be fully saved only when we come into possession of our glorified body, that is, at the moment of parousia; and this will happen when “God will be all in all.”

In the kingdom of God, each one of us has our own work to accomplish, not only for our personal advantage but in order to build the whole body of Christ so that it reaches its perfect stature. It is actually a reality in the process of developing. The one who makes the different parts of the body form a single organism is the cornerstone. United to it, the living stones build up that holy temple which represents their objective, because the purpose of the people of God is to give praise to the Father in Christ.

In this fundamental point of the Christian message we have the sublimation of the social interchange among people. Even at the human level, an individual cannot live in isolation; however, the bond among people is a moral, social or spiritual one, a spirit of fellowship that does not go beyond the human plane. When we speak of the people of God, that which unites us with God and with one another is a union that is vital in nature, a real communion of life that we are accustomed to calling “grace,” a communion that raises human beings from the human world up to God’s world and gives us access into the intimacy of the life of the three divine persons.

The Christological-Trinitarian Structure of Liturgy

As we try to investigate the vital function of liturgy for the people of God, we begin again with the image of the body. Just as it is essential for our body to breathe, it is essential for the body of Christ to perform liturgy. We can consider liturgy to be the breath of the body of Christ, the function by which it receives life from God and by which it gives the praise that is God’s due.

Worship, like breathing, comprises two moments: the first when everything is given to us from on high, the second when everything returns from humanity to God. This is the dynamism by which the Mystical Body lives. Accordingly, liturgy can be understood as an exchange between heaven and earth and between earth and heaven, heaven sending its gifts to earth and earth, as far as it is able, responding and reciprocating the gifts from heaven through Christ and the Spirit’s operative and animating presence.

Here we must pause to consider something of primary importance. When I said “God,” I implicitly affirmed the great mystery of our religion: unity and trinity. Recall that we understand mystery to mean something that belongs to God, something that is hidden in God and which God’s goodness has made known to humanity.

The Old Testament revealed God as the one God. The New Testament revealed to humanity that God is triune. There are two terms in this truth: unity and trinity. I may give one or the other first place, not by attributing greater actual importance to one but only by giving greater attention to one or to the other from my own subjective point of view. In this sense I can begin by focusing on the unity of God’s nature in such a way that it comes to the foreground of my attention, and then, in a second moment, come to consider the distinction of the persons in the Trinity. In doing so, even though there is no
affirmation of a doctrinal nature being made of the preeminence of one of these elements over the other, the major focus of our attention is in fact the unity of God.

This focus on the unity of God has been the prevailing way of approaching the trinitarian mystery in Western theology since Augustine; after Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics it became the exclusive way. This method, in itself permissible and perfectly orthodox, eventually brought about the result in some cases that the other aspect of God, while not forgotten, was nonetheless overshadowed: namely, the New Testament revelation of the knowledge of another secret of God, the Trinity.

Scripture, and consequently liturgy, followed a different path. Scripture offers a close-up of the Trinity, of really distinct persons, presenting what each one does on behalf of humanity and presupposing the uniqueness of the nature of the three persons. Merely leafing through the Gospel of John one will notice how the distinction of the persons is put into such clear relief (John 14:16–26; 16:7ff.)

This second way of looking at the mystery of the Trinity offers the advantage of focusing on the new element revealed in the New Testament. Besides introducing us to the three persons through the specific deeds each performs on behalf of humanity, it adds to our knowledge an aspect of God that is more concrete and closer to our human life. With this method we do not reflect so much on God as a cold abstraction, which can lead to a sense of the insurmountable distance between us and God. Rather, through this approach we come to know God at work, particularly in the magnificent deeds God works in each one of us.

As we said, this is the method of scripture whereby God’s self-communication is made known to us through the events in the history of salvation, whereas the other method we mentioned shows traces of the influence of Greek philosophy, which proceeds by abstractions. We will follow the method of scripture and reflect on the function that each person of the Trinity performs in the work of our sanctification, which comes about through the worship we define as the “breathing” of the body of Christ.

The Father is the source of everything: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). The Father is the alpha and the omega: In the history of salvation, he is the creator and the end of everything, since the history of salvation prepares the moment when “God will be all in all” and Christ will hand back the transformed world to the Father.

We know already that the mediator of every gift from the Father is Jesus (see in particular the priestly discourse of Jesus, John 17:1ff.), that is, the incarnate Son who is in a position to unite humanity to the Father precisely because Christ assumed our human nature. The sanctifier is the Holy Spirit, whose name comes from precisely that function. The Holy Spirit makes the Father’s gifts alive, efficacious and efficient in each one of us, gifts of the Father which, however, come to us solely through Jesus, who is the “way” to the Father, the “gate of the sheepfold.” If we recall the image of the true vine, we can say that the life of the plant comes from the Father, that it reaches the branches obviously by passing through the true vine who is Jesus, and that it is the Holy Spirit who makes the sap in the branches full of life and life-giving. This three-fold work carried out in us is the seal of the Holy Trinity on each one of us.

Thus, everything comes from the Father through the mediation of the Son, in the operative presence of the Holy Spirit. This is the moment liturgists call “coming forth from God” (exitus a Deo), when God appears as the source of all things, that is, alpha. Yet God is also omega, the end to which all things are directed. This is the second moment of encounter, when the creature, having received everything from the Father, gives the Father praise for his greatness and for the gifts received. This second moment unfolds in the same way as the first: We have received, through the humanity of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies us. Once sanctified, we are capable of giving praise to
the Father. But our praise cannot reach the Father except through the Son and with the Holy Spirit giving it life. Corresponding to the exitus is the “return to God” (reditus ad Deum).

Liturgists synthesize this structure of worship with this formula: from – through – in – to, which means from the Father (a Patre), through the Son (per Filium), in the Spirit (in Spiritu Sancto), and through the Son to the Father (ad Patrem). This structure is still evident today, for example, in the conclusion of the Roman Canon and other eucharistic prayers:

Through Christ our Lord
you give us all these gifts.
You fill them with life and goodness,
you bless them and make them holy
[all comes from the Father through Christ].

Through him, with him, in him,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father,
forever and ever.

Everything returns to the Father always through Christ, in the operative presence of the Holy Spirit.

Ways of Living Liturgy: Prayer

LITURGY, which we defined as a sort of “breathing” of the body of Christ, uses certain means by which the Father’s gift reaches humanity and humanity gives to the Father the honor and love that is his due: These means are prayer and the sacraments.

We are used to thinking about prayer especially in terms of what we might call the human part in prayer, which is actually the second moment of prayer, when the person responds to God. In liturgy, as in life, there is always, as we have seen, a twofold movement: from above to below and from below to above. The descending movement always comes first, because its origin is in God, the source of everything. Prayer is the response to the One who speaks to us first. Prayer is listening to the One who has spoken before we do, to the One who calls each of us by name. Above all, prayer is receiving God’s gift. The psalmist says: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Psalm 51:15).

In prayer, too, the Father’s gift comes through Jesus, and, always through his mediation, the praise of God’s creatures rises to the Father while the heavenly gift and the person’s word are vivified by the Holy Spirit. If we examine prayer primarily in its first phase or moment — the descent from the Father to humanity — we will understand how prayer is always valid and effective in whatever form it is expressed.

Prayer is our acceptance of the vital “sap” the Father sends us through Christ the “true vine.” Prayer is always an enrichment, whether or not we obtain whatever it is asking for in particular, since it is always contact with God. Prayer is not oriented toward exerting an action on God so that God will lavish grace on us. Rather, prayer is inclined to exert an action primarily on the person who prays so that he or she might receive the Father’s grace.

Prayer is first of all a state of being before it is an act; it is above all an attitude of openness, desire and acceptance. When prayer becomes word, it is expressed in various forms. The “Our Father,” which Jesus taught us, is petitionary prayer. The first part is especially a petition for the general needs of the kingdom of God, an invocation for its fulfillment. Therefore it is charged with eschatological tension. Nonetheless, eschatology is built already within the hearts and actions of humanity right
now, so that in the second part, the “Our Father” expresses requests which deal with our present situation and needs.

Without doubt, Jesus insisted on petitionary prayer. Petition expresses a desire, and desire is the wealth of the poor. This form of prayer makes us conscious of our poverty, aware that we are not yet saved except in hope. However, this poverty is placed into the hands of God, with whom is all fullness. Jesus taught us how and when to pray in petition. In the parable of the insistent friend (Luke 11:5ff.), the man goes to ask help of his friend on behalf of the person who has arrived at his house, because he himself is in no way able to provide for the traveler’s needs. Even more, he asks insistently and with confident trust. Nonetheless, the focal point of the parable is the “three loaves of bread” and the meaning they contain. They are loaves to satisfy a friend’s hunger, but also and primarily they are the Holy Spirit, whom God “gives to those who ask him” (see Luke 11:13ff.). What is important to highlight in the parable is that the friend who welcomes the guest “has nothing”; his hands are empty. It is when we can do nothing that it is just and proper to ask.

Another form of prayer is thanksgiving, which expresses an awareness of the gifts received and recognizes God as their source.

Finally, in the prayer of Jesus there is the prayer of praise: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants” (Matthew 11:25). Praise expresses an interior movement that introduces nuances that are different from the prayer of thanksgiving. In the prayer of thanksgiving, one begins with the enjoyment of a gift in order to rise up to God. Whereas prayer of praise first springs forth from the contemplation of God’s presence and goodness, a second moment reveals these divine attributes in God’s works.

Prayer of praise is like a cry of wonder and astonishment in the face of a magnificent reality; it is the expression of enthusiasm in the presence of the greatness of God. Prayer of praise is truly an elevation of the soul, which is then made concrete in the contemplation of a specific work of God: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them” (Luke 1:68). The why comes after: in the first moment one’s gaze is turned to God, without realizing, as it were, that God works these great deeds on our behalf and for our good (C. Di Sante, La preghiera d’Israele [Marietti: 1985], passim.). Prayer of praise does not begin with the benefit received. Instead, the one who prays fastens on the person of God and is enchanted by God’s goodness and greatness. “Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 100:4, 5). Praise is a form of prayer frequently found in the Old Testament and in the Jewish liturgical tradition (where it is called berakhah).