

The Unity of the Church

(Taken from "The Church in the Early Centuries" by Thomas Lindsay)

"The unity of the Church of Christ is a primary verity of the Christian faith: 'There is One Body, and One Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' (Eph. 4:4-6) And because the Unity of the Church of Christ is a primary verity of the Christian faith, it can never be adequately represented in any outward polity, but must always be, in the first instance at least, a religious experience. Its source and centre can never be an earthly throne, but must always be that heavenly place where Jesus sits at the Right Hand of God.

This enables us to see how the word 'church' can be used, as it is in the New Testament, to denote communities of varying size, from the sum total of all the Christian communities on earth down to the tiny congregation which met in the house of Philemon. For the unity of the Christian Church is, in the first instance, the oneness of an ideal reality, and is not confined within the bounds of space and time as merely material entities are. It can be present in many places at the same time, and in such a way that as Ignatius says, 'Where Jesus Christ is, there is the *whole* Church.' The congregation at Corinth was, in the eyes of St. Paul, the Body of Christ or the whole Church in its all-embracing unity – not a Body of Christ, for there is but one Body of Christ; not part of the Body of Christ, for Christ is not divided; but the *Body of Christ* in its unity and filled with the fulness of His powers. It is in this One Body, present in every Christian society, that our Lord has placed His 'gifts' or *charismata*, which enable the Church to perform its divine functions; and all the spiritual actions of the tiniest community, such as the Church in the house of Nymphas – Prayer, Praise, Preaching, Baptism, the Holy Supper – are actions of the whole Church of Christ.

The Christians of the early centuries clung to this thought, and we have a long series of writers, from Victor of Rome, in the second century, down to Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who tell us that the whole Church of the redeemed, with Christ and the angels, is present in the public worship of the individual congregation. The promise of the Master, that where two or three were gathered together in His Name there would He be in the midst of them, was placed side by side with the thought in the Epistle to the Hebrews that believers are surrounded with a great cloud of witnesses; and the combination suggested that in the simplest action of the smallest Christian fellowship there was the presence and power of the whole Church of Christ." (Pages 14-15)

Please prayerfully consider these words from Hebrews. Jewish worship, and Christian worship are contrasted by this stunning comparison. Christianity is not like Judaism. We do not come to a physical mountain, like Mount Sinai: **"But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel". (Heb 12:22-24)**

The spiritual implications of this passage are important for everyone, but in particular, for those who are being persecuted. In times of persecution believers are fragmented and often isolated. The thought that where two or three are gathered together, the whole church is also gathered, is a powerful incentive to be faithful. The "great cloud of witnesses" includes, God, Christ, an innumerable company of angels, the spirits of just men made perfect, and the general assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.

As we prayerfully keep the unity of the Spirit, let us remember that: **"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."** (Eph 4:4-6)