

HOLINESS AS A NOTE OF THE CHURCH

The notion that the holiness of the Church has comparatively little probative value in demonstrating that the religious society over which the Bishop of Rome presides as the visible head is actually God's kingdom on earth has acquired an unfortunate but undeniably widespread popularity among theological writers during the past few years. The scholarly monograph, *Les notes de l'église dans l'apologétique catholique depuis la réforme*, has contributed a great deal to the diffusion of this teaching. The author of this monograph, the distinguished Dr. Gustave Thils, of the Malines Major Seminary and of the University of Louvain, is under the impression that the notes of the Church as a group do not form the basis of any completely valid argument for the authenticity of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, he believes that each one of the notes, taken individually, is quite ineffective in the form in which it appears in scholastic ecclesiology.

Dr. Thils examines the various descriptions of the Church's sanctity given by the great theologians since the time of the Cardinal John de Turrecremata. He observes that the earliest writers under consideration contented themselves, for the most part, with a listing of many different factors which go to constitute the Church's holiness. Then he notes that, in their anxiety to limit themselves strictly to those elements which might serve in the visible note of holiness, the later theologians tended to restrict their discussions to the possession of indubitable means of sanctity by the Church, to the holiness of the members of the Church, and, finally, to the attestation of that holiness, at least in the cases of the Saints, by authentic miracles. According to Dr. Thils, the literature of Catholic theology itself has come, for all practical purposes at least, to minimize or even to reject the probative value of these elements as factors in a genuine note of the Church.

It would seem, however, that Dr. Thils' conclusions are motivated by a certain basically unscientific prejudice of his own more powerfully than by the evidence he has gathered from the writings of the classical apologists and ecclesiologists. In describing the

way in which an author of the twentieth century would deal with the writings on the *nota sanctitatis* in sixteenth-century theological works, the distinguished Louvain writer states that the modern author would reject a great deal of the material to which his predecessors appealed.

He would suppress the holiness, in the sense of consecration to God, because it is not visible. That [holiness] which comes from the presence of the Spirit in Catholics [would be rejected] because heretics of good faith share it with the Catholics. That [holiness] which the Church possesses by reason of its founders, Christ and the Apostles [would not be considered] since the Protestants are counted as Christians. Finally, that [holiness] produced by the sacraments, the laws, and even the morality [would not be considered] since these elements are common to the Orthodox Church and to the Catholic Church.¹

It is, moreover, Dr. Thils' idea that "the adage *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, interpreted strictly in the sixteenth century, slowly takes on the more tolerant meaning of *extra Ecclesiam nulla sanctitas*" in the writings of subsequent theologians.² He is also convinced that, after the writings of Perrone a century ago, the meaning of this axiom was revised so as to deny merely the existence of "eminent, permanent, and widespread holiness" outside the limits of the true Church of Jesus Christ.³

In other words, Dr. Thils' difficulties about the note of holiness stem, in some measure, from a failure to realize the essential truth in the writings of the classical ecclesiologists, the truth that the visible Catholic society is actually the kingdom of God on earth, the one social reality really necessary for salvation with the necessity both of means and of precept. This is the conclusion to which the argument from the notes of the Church leads directly. A man who has lost sight of the fact that this conclusion is literally true will certainly not be in a position to evaluate the various theological demonstrations which lead only to it. A man who can per-

¹ *Les notes de l'église dans l'apologétique catholique depuis la réforme* (Paris: Desclée, De Brouwer, 1937), p. 126.

² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 138.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 149.

suaire himself that tolerance or any factor other than truth itself can have any function in the interpretation of a Catholic dogma can hardly be expected to appreciate the theological proofs which show that this statement or dogma is really contained in the deposit of Christian revelation.

One of the most brilliant modern apologies for the Catholic Church, Dr. Martin Jugie's *Où se trouve le christianisme intégral*, is affected and somewhat lessened in value by the author's adoption of the position previously taken by Dr. Thils with reference to the notes of the Church, and particularly with reference to the note of holiness. Dr. Jugie agrees that real sanctity, or the sanctity of means, personal sanctity, or the holiness of its members, and charismatic sanctity, or the witness of miracles, observable in the life of the Catholic Church as it exists in our own time, conspire to manifest this society as the religious organization founded and maintained by Christ Our Lord. He makes, however, the very significant and valuable observation that a "dynamic sanctity, or zeal in utilizing the means of sanctification confided to the Church, resulting in a fruitfulness in all kinds of good works,"⁴ should be added to the other aspects of the Church's holiness in order to make this note of the true Church function properly. Unfortunately, Dr. Jugie will not ascribe any practical probative force to the argument from the note of holiness, even after he has shown the existence of an aspect of that holiness too often neglected in contemporary writing.⁵

In reality, it is quite unscientific for a theologian to deny the effectiveness of the Church's holiness precisely in its function as a note or mark of God's kingdom on earth. Indeed, from the scriptural point of view, the claims of holiness in this respect are superior to those of the other properties of Our Lord's society which are commonly employed as notes. In the New Testament itself there is ample evidence that the company of Christ's disciples was established as an organization manifestly catholic and apostolic. Nevertheless we do not find any assertion in the New Testament directly

⁴ *Où se trouve le christianisme intégral? Essai de démonstration catholique* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1947), p. 261.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 261 f.

and immediately announcing that the city of God in this world is recognizable as such in function of its catholicity and apostolicity. In the New Testament there is direct and explicit teaching to the effect that the Church's unity is a true sign, but it is presented directly as a motive of credibility, rather than as a genuine note.

Our Lord prayed to His Father that His disciples might be one "that the world may believe (*πιστεύωσῃ*) that thou hast sent me,"⁶ and also "that the world may know (*γινώσκῃ*) that thou hast sent me and hast loved them, as thou hast also loved me."⁷ It is true, of course, that the Christian revelation itself patently recognizes unity, catholicity, and apostolicity as true marks of the Church of Jesus Christ on earth. The monuments of Christian tradition offer ample and unassailable evidence in this direction. Yet the New Testament itself gives no direct and explicit testimony on this particular point.

In the case of the Church's holiness, however, the situation is quite different. Our Lord explicitly admonished His followers that "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another."⁸ This mutual affection within the true Church of Jesus Christ is the mandate Our Lord made incumbent upon the society as a whole. "A new commandment I give unto you: That you love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another."⁹ Thus the affection of supernatural charity within the company of the disciples, the affection of which the love of Christ for His followers is at once the cause and the exemplar, stands in the divine teaching as a sign whereby the disciples of Our Lord are to be recognized as such by the world at large.

Now it is quite obvious that the possession of charity was never meant to be either the sign or the condition of an individual's membership in the company of the disciples. The whole tenor of the parables of the kingdom is to the effect that God's household in this world, the society of the disciples of Christ on earth, will contain a certain number of sinners, people devoid of charity, until the end of time. Hence, according to divine revelation itself, a man can be and can remain a member of the Church militant without

⁶ *John*, 17:21.

⁷ *John*, 17:23.

⁸ *John*, 13:35.

⁹ *John*, 13:34.

having the affection of charity for his fellow-Christians which Our Lord commanded him to possess and to exercise. Such a person is an unworthy member of the *ecclesia Christi*. He cuts himself off from the supernatural life of charity, the perfective element in the spiritual bond of unity of the Church. Nevertheless, until the final purification at the time of the last judgement, such persons can and must be counted among the real members of the Church.

The affection of mutual charity, then, is manifested in the Gospel according to St. John as a sign marking, not the individual member of the Christian community, but the community itself. All men are to realize that these men are the true disciples of Jesus Christ because of the evident existence, within the activity of the company as a whole, of a strong mutual charity. In other words, the corporate conduct of the group, clearly manifested before the world, is to be such that right-thinking men can recognize this society as the true company of Our Lord's disciples.

Now sanctity, by its very definition, constitutes an abiding attachment to God and a stable aversion to all that is opposed to Him. We must not allow ourselves to forget that, as the human race has actually been disposed or ordered by God Himself, there is no firm and abiding attachment to God and opposition to sin other than that which is connected with the virtue of supernatural charity. Furthermore, charity is distinctly *one* virtue. Hence it is one and the same virtue which brings about a supernatural love of friendship for God and a genuine supernatural affection for our fellow men, and primarily for those who are most effectively our "neighbors," our brothers and sisters within the household of God which is the true Church of Jesus Christ. Thus, in teaching that His disciples would be recognizable as such by reason of their mutual charity, Our Lord brought out the basic truth that holiness would serve as a note of His company on earth.

It is most important to note, however, that in the statement by Our Lord and in the teachings of classical ecclesiology, it is the corporate charity, the communal holiness, of the Church which is held up as an indication of this society's identity. Unfortunately, perhaps in an attempt to reply most directly to heretical objections, this central and essential aspect of the kingdom of God's holiness

has been somewhat neglected among recent theologians. In modern times the scholastic treatment of the Church's holiness or charity has tended to center around the spiritual status of individual members of the Church. The Church is described as manifestly holy because of the existence within its membership of innumerable persons who lead holy lives, and of an ever-present but less numerous group remarkable for extraordinary or heroic sanctity. These theologians have worked to show that the Church possesses in itself authentic and recognizable principles of holiness, which make it evident that the spiritual perfection of its members flows from causes existent within the company itself. And, to further or to complete their argument, they point to the fact that the existence of heroic charity, in the cases of the canonized Saints at least, is attested by the existence of true and undeniable miracles.

All of this, of course, is perfectly true. Nevertheless, the sanctity of the individual, or even of many individuals, is not the central element in the Church's note of holiness, and it should not be treated as such. The reality, the charity or holiness of which is meant primarily to function as an indication of the identity of the true company of Our Lord's disciples, is the society itself, not simply a group of its members. The Church exists and acts as a holy society, and its corporate sanctity is readily observable. It is precisely this corporate holiness which is directly and primarily meant to show the character of this society as the true company of Christ on earth.

The company of Christ's disciples is, according to Our Lord's own teaching, endowed with a manifest and dynamic corporate holiness. This sanctity is quite evident in the social activity of the Catholic Church, and in the activity of the Catholic Church alone. The basic communal activity of the Church is the Eucharistic Sacrifice, around which all its sacramental system revolves. The Eucharistic Sacrifice is the effective expression of the Church's prayer, or petition to God. The central prayer of the Church is to be found in the petitions of the Mass and of the other liturgical books. These petitions, in their turn, are expressions of the intentions or desires of the Church in this world. The recognized and authentic teaching of the Church, through the statements of its

hierarchy, constitute the interpretations of these petitions. Hence we can seek, in the petitions of the Mass and in the official teaching of the Church, the expression of the charity or holiness which, according to the explicit statement of Christ, was to constitute an indication of this society's status as the true company of His disciples.

Despite the fact that many liturgies are in use throughout the religious society presided over by the Bishop of Rome, the rite of the Roman Missal can be accepted as typical of all of them, as far as the quality and the direction of the Church's petitions and intentions are concerned. The complete holiness of the petitions embodied in this ceremony is immediately apparent. In the canon of the Mass, the Church begs God that its sacrifice should be acceptable to Him, and that God may grant it, with its universal visible ruler and the bishop of the individual congregation for which the sacrifice is being offered, the divine peace, protection, and guidance. It begs that these blessings may be given to all the faithful throughout the world, and especially to the members of the individual congregation gathered together for the sacrificial offering. The prayer of the Mass describes the Eucharistic act as something offered for the redeeming of the souls of the faithful and for the hope of their safety and salvation.

The Church is mindful that it offers the sacrifice together with the blessed in heaven, with the hope and desire that the people co-operating in this act may be the associates of the elect forever. In the act of consecration itself, the priest makes the words of Christ his own, and professes that his offering is made in commemoration of Christ, as He has Himself commanded. Thus, begging that the souls of the faithful departed may enter into their eternal rest, the Church on earth pleads that its members may enter into the Church triumphant, and may ever be joined in union with Our Lord.

The basic intention or desire of the Church, manifested in the basic prayer of the Mass, is manifestly the motivating intention of sanctity or charity itself. The Church seeks the ultimate good of its children, the attainment of eternal and supernatural life. The members of the Church, participating in the offering of the

Church's sacrifice, express the most perfect and effective mutual charity by desiring and working for this greatest of benefits in one another's favor. Thus the Church manifests an efficacious desire for God's supernatural glory. It presents itself as an agency sincerely loving God with a supernatural love of friendship. Thus, from this fundamental point of view, it stands before the observer as uniquely a holy institution or company, endowed with the sanctity of Christ Himself.

It may be objected, of course, that there are other religious societies in which the Christian Mass is offered validly, and that thus the testimony of the Mass in favor of the Catholic Church is of no demonstrative value. Such an objection, however, misses the essential point of the matter under consideration. The Church is manifestly a holy society precisely because its corporate activity is clearly in line with the intention expressed in the Mass. The other religious organizations, in which the Mass is offered validly though illicitly, show no such harmony with the basic desire of the Eucharistic prayers in their corporate activity.

We must not lose sight of the fact that it is the corporate activity of the Church, and this alone, which is under consideration at this juncture. It is precisely this official and corporate activity which the world can recognize and compare with the official and corporate activity of other religious groups. No one can pretend to have any clear and perfectly certain knowledge about the intimate spiritual status of an individual. Anyone, however, can readily see and evaluate the intentions and the activity of a society, once the authentic documents and history of that society have been made available to him.

The official corporate activity of the Catholic Church is evidently a work of charity and holiness. Primarily the Church is a teaching organization. In its doctrinal mission, the Church manifests to anyone willing to examine the matter a clear and perfect teaching about God and about the redemption of the human race. It uncompromisingly sets itself against sins, even those which appeal most to the perverted taste of a generation or a nation. It holds this position despite the fact that many of its own members take umbrage at its teaching. It resists the temptation to overlook some

offences, on the grounds that an insistence upon the right would bring it into difficulties it can ill afford to meet.

The Church preaches a love for all men, and commands its own children to regard one another as brothers, even in times when such a doctrine runs manifestly counter to the popular tendencies of the day. As a social unit, it evidently acts as the agent of Christ on earth. The corporate activity of the Church is in line with both its prayer and its teaching. Its charity is manifest over the whole world through its practice of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

This social sanctity of the Church is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that, during all the time of its earthly sojourn, it is composed of both good and evil members. The corporate work of the Church is violently opposed always by the tendencies and even the activities of some of its members, sometimes by the activities of those placed in authority within the Church itself. The Church preaches and insists upon charity, justice, and gratitude even when the contrary vices are manifest in the lives of many of its own children. It is precisely this manifestation of holiness in a society composed partially of evil men that makes the Church a miracle of the social order and thus an incontrovertible witness to the authenticity of its own message as divine revelation.

The corporate holiness of the Catholic Church stands out in still greater relief when we compare the conduct of this society with that of rival religious bodies in the world today. It would be blasphemous to designate as holy the activity of an organization or set of organizations slavishly subservient to the atheistic policy of communist governments. It would likewise be ridiculous to designate as holy or charitable the corporate conduct of religious societies which have, for all intents and purposes, abandoned all concern for the accurate teaching of divine revelation, and which have degenerated into merely semi-political social groups whose only common concern is that of unrelenting and malicious opposition to everything Catholic.

The note of holiness, in function of which the Church is recognizable as the true company of Our Lord's disciples, is, then, to be found from an examination of the corporate activity of the Church,

viewed in itself and then considered in the light of the corporate activity of rival religious bodies. From this consideration and from no other can the argument from the note of holiness be effectively and accurately treated. Obviously, if we restrict ourselves to an examination which centers around the holiness of individual members, we are in a realm in which scientific demonstration is quite ineffective. It is, in the last analysis, impossible to say with absolute certainty whether or not any individual man, Catholic or non-Catholic, is actually in the friendship of God here and now. Indeed, try as we will, we cannot be absolutely sure of even our own spiritual status. The goodness or the evil of a corporate activity, however, is something which we can readily recognize. And it is precisely this manifest sanctity of the Catholic Church in its communal activity which must be used as a basis for an effective proof from the note of holiness.

This concept of the Church's holiness as an evident argument in its own favor is at once more difficult and more traditional than that notion which centers around the holiness of individual members within the Church. It is more difficult because the very extension and perfection of the Church's corporate activity along liturgical, doctrinal, and charitable lines demand a painstaking and detailed description if the demonstration is to stand out in all of its effectiveness. It is, however, more traditional because this manner of treating the holiness of the Church is more in conformity with the approach of the classical ecclesiologists. A few examples will serve to show how the earlier scholastics dealt with the teaching on the holiness of the Church.

St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Expositio super symbolo apostolorum*, limited himself to a brief discussion of the principles of the Church's sanctity. He mentions the fact that the faithful are washed with the blood of Christ, anointed with the spiritual anointing which is the grace of the Holy Ghost, and recipients of the Blessed Trinity, dwelling within them as in a temple.¹⁰

The fourteenth-century ecclesiologist, James of Viterbo, offers a much more complete treatment of this quality of the Church. In

¹⁰ Cf. the *Opuscula omnia*, edited by Fr. Peter Mandonnet, O.P. (Paris: Lethielleux, 1927), IV, 379 ff.

his *De regimine christiano* he teaches that the Church is holy because it is preserved immaculate from sin by the grace of the sacraments, preserved from the uncleanness of ignorance and error by the sacred teaching, and because it is most securely dedicated to the worship and service of God. He refers always to the Church as a social unit, rather than merely to some of its members.¹¹

The same tendency is observable in the teaching of the Cardinal John de Turrecremata. In his *Summa de ecclesia* Turrecremata, like James of Viterbo before him, made use of the definitions of sanctity offered in the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Isidore of Seville. Both insisted that the Catholic Church conforms entirely to both of these definitions. Turrecremata teaches, furthermore, that the Catholic Church must be recognized as holy by reason of the worship it offers to God, because it is endowed with all the supernatural virtues and gifts of the Holy Ghost, because it is ruled by what are obviously the most holy laws, because of its doctrine, abounding in sanctity, because of its sacraments and other means of salvation, and, finally, by reason of its relation to the Church triumphant in heaven.¹² All of this teaching refers directly to the corporate activity of the Church rather than merely to the conduct and status of certain individual members. And, it is interesting to note that while no one of the three authors we have named uses the expression "note of the Church," all treat of the Church's holiness in the manner of a note, since they all insist that the true Church can be distinguished from the *ecclesia malignantium* precisely by reason of that holiness.

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, on the other hand, makes no effort to utilize the holiness of the Church directly as a note. It teaches that the Church is holy because of the fact that it is something consecrated to God, because it has Our Lord as its Head, and because it has the true sacrifice and the sacraments.¹³

¹¹ Cf. *Le plus ancien traité de l'église: Jacques de Viterbe, De regimine christiano. Étude des sources et édition critique* par H.-X. Arquillière (Paris: Beauchesne, 1926), pp. 129 ff.

¹² Cf. the *Summa de ecclesia* (Venice, 1561), pp. 11^r ff.

¹³ Cf. Pars I, art. 9, XVII.

St. Robert Bellarmine appeals directly to the sanctity of the Church's doctrine in his demonstration *per viam notarum*.¹⁴

Incidentally, Dr. Thils is gravely in error when he speaks of this particular section of St. Robert's *De notis ecclesiae*. He writes that the prince of the ecclesiologists eliminated the sanctity of doctrine from consideration as a factor in a proof from the notes of the Church, and he explains it by the statement that "in refuting the first note of the Protestants,—the possession of the pure doctrine—the Roman professor categorically refused to recognize this as a criterion of truth, since, he assures us, it can also be found in false churches."¹⁵ Thils neglected to add St. Robert's highly interesting comment, to the effect that the pure doctrine is found in all dissident groups "at least according to their own account."¹⁶ He rightly rejected the probative force of any argument taken from the purity of the faith as a note of the Church. Indeed, the possession of the faith in all of its purity by the Church is something which the proof from the notes seeks to establish.

The sanctity of the teaching in the actually existent Catholic Church is another matter altogether. Far from repudiating or eliminating this argument, St. Robert actually appeals to it as the eighth note of the true Church of Jesus Christ.

In his *Controversies*, Francis Sylvius speaks of six aspects of the Church's sanctity. The Church is a holy society because it is consecrated to God, because it is pure and free from any crime (obviously not in each one of its individual members, but only in its corporate reality and activity), because it has a holy worship and laws, because it has the Source of sanctity within itself, because it has Christ as its Head, and, finally, because it persists firmly in this attachment to God.¹⁷ In proving that this sanctity is a real note of the Church, Sylvius, like St. Robert Bellarmine before him, appeals primarily to the evident holiness of doctrine within the Catholic Church.¹⁸

¹⁴ Cf. *De notis ecclesiae*, cap. 11.

¹⁵ Cf. Thils, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹⁶ Cf. *De notis ecclesiae*, cap. 1.

¹⁷ Cf. *Controversiae*, Lib. III, q. 2, art. 6.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, art. 7.

The holiness of the Church in its corporate activity is thus a doctrine based upon the best traditional teaching in scholastic ecclesiology. Through the use of this factor, it is possible to construct an adequate demonstration of the Church's authenticity *per viam notarum*. The sight of less effective methods employed in certain contemporary text-books should not bring our theologians to reject the validity of the proof as such, but should motivate them to reconstruct this demonstration along traditional and effective lines.

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ST. AUGUSTINE: PREACHER OF GOD'S TRUTH ABOUT HIS CHURCH

For Augustine, the Church is a sign, by means of which God wills that men should know him, a sign lifted up in the midst of the nations. At the same time that it determines what we are to believe, it serves us as a reason for believing.

For Augustine, the *Catholica* is not only great with its historical and social greatness, great by reason of its authority in the realm of truth, great in the holiness of its Saints; it is not only an organic unity, a unity that is necessary and commanded by God; it is the worker of our salvation. The invisible Christ works through the instrumentality of its hands, speaks with its lips, sanctifies with its sacraments.

Augustine wishes to reduce religion to two loves, the love of God in heaven and the love of the Church on earth. God is the Father. The Church is the mother. We love God as our Father and the Church as our mother.

—Msgr. Pierre Batiffol, who died Jan. 13, 1929, in the posthumous work *Cathedra Petri* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1938), p. 19.

Answers to Questions

RESTRICTION OF DISCRETIONARY POWER OF CONFESSORS

Question: What is to be said of the following custom in a clerical religious community: Before a priest is appointed a regular confessor of the students, he must promise in writing that he will observe certain rules in hearing their confessions. In these rules it is stipulated that no boy who has ever had illicit carnal relations will be permitted to make profession in the institute or to receive Holy Orders—even if the sin took place only once. Again, it is decreed that the same procedure is to be followed in the case of a boy who at any time in his life attempted to seduce another person to a sin against chastity. Furthermore, these same rules prescribe that a clerical novice is not to be allowed by the confessor to take the vows if even once in the course of the preceding year he was guilty of a grave external sin of impurity?

Answer: It is difficult to see how the superiors of this institute are justified in demanding such a promise from those appointed to hear the confessions of the students and novices. Certainly, it is the wish of the Church that the discretionary power of the confessor shall not be unduly limited. Thus, the Code of Canon Law lays down in detail the conditions that must be fulfilled before a bishop may reserve certain sins, and goes on to prescribe that the number of such reserved cases shall not be more than three or four (Can. 895, 897). The purpose of this legislation is to check the imprudent zeal of any bishop who might wish to retain for himself too much of the power which normally should be exercised by the confessor, acting on his own judgment. Now, surely, the limitations on the confessor's judgment involved in the custom described by the questioner far exceed those which a bishop may impose. The former render mandatory the exclusion of a young man from the holy state to which he aspires even for a single sin which may have been committed years before, involves no scandal, has been forgiven and atoned for, and has left no noticeable inclination toward a repetition of the act. A similar grave limitation is that which commands the confessor not to allow a young man to make religious profession if he has fallen only once in the course of the previous year.

While it is vitally important that candidates to the priesthood and to the religious life prove their ability to preserve their chastity