

# *Reasons for Believing*

7

## **The Church: Christ with us Always**

EDITED BY

Stephen Dingley MA, PhD, STL

 faith pamphlets

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## REASONS FOR BELIEVING (7)

# The Church: Christ with us Always

### **Introduction: Why does the Church Exist?**

At Caesarea Philippi, just after Simon Peter had confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God”, Jesus solemnly said to him, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.” (Matt 16:16-18) Clearly the Church is of central importance to Jesus. It is also vital to the vision of St Paul. Writing to the Ephesians he says that God has made Christ “the head over all things for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Eph 1:22-23) Later in the same letter he calls the Church Christ’s bride (cf. Eph 5:25-32). Again, writing to Timothy he says it is the “household of God”, “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). The Church is therefore a wonderful gift of God, founded by Jesus and continuing his presence and saving work among us throughout the whole world until the end of time.

However, during its history many people have misunderstood what the Church is; the true face of the Church has been obscured and it has had to dispel false images. Today the situation looks even worse. Perhaps more acutely than ever before the Church’s role and very existence is being challenged in our society. The scandals and the widespread dissent and lukewarmness within the Church have not helped, but the crisis runs deeper.



The dominant culture in the developed world simply has no place for the Church. The world-view that surrounds us, and that most of us drink in unconsciously, excludes any possibility that the Church might be a meaningful reality. At root, it is not this or that aspect of the Church or its claims, whether its authority to teach or even the often controversial things that it teaches, which require justification. The deeper question is: why does the Church even exist? Isn't this two thousand year old, out of date institution just an absurdity in the modern age? Most people outside the Church would answer that question with a resounding yes, and many of our contemporaries within the Church have implicitly answered that question for themselves the same way by lapsing. Even those of us who are well disposed towards the Church can feel the weight of that question. If you identify with this scenario, if you feel the burden of the question why does the Church exist at all, then this pamphlet is written with you in mind.

The aim of this pamphlet is to show that it is through the Church that we encounter the person of Jesus Christ. Even though we live some 2000 years after his birth, death, Resurrection and Ascension, nonetheless in and through his Church Christ continues to place himself within our reach, and he continues to do this in the flesh. The Church is quite literally the continuation and extension of Christ's taking flesh—the Incarnation—throughout the world and throughout history.

In fact, this pamphlet is part of a series and the preceding pamphlets provide the vital context for the presentation of the Church given here. This is because the full relevance and credibility of the Church only really become clear in the context of creation, human nature and the Incarnation. This perspective brings to the fore the most profound answer to the question: why does the Church exist? Christ is true God and true man, and as such he fulfils us as human beings created by and for God. He fills up and gives meaning, purpose and completion to our human nature. Because (as we shall see) Christ continues to be present and active supremely in his Church, it follows that the Church answers the most profound needs of our human nature. The Church—despite what our secular society may tell us—cannot be irrelevant and out of date because it is now the way Jesus gives meaning, purpose and completion to our human nature. The Church, in fact, is the only environment in which we can fully flourish and come to authentic perfection and happiness as human beings.



## **The Unfolding of God's Plan<sup>1</sup>**

God has one plan for his creation. Even before the universe began to exist, in the mind of God there was a single purpose and intention for creation. St Paul sums up this intention beautifully as “a plan to unite all things in Christ.” (cf. Eph 1:10) It encompasses everything that exists. The material universe, the laws that govern matter, and spiritual realities, even though they are very different kinds of things, nonetheless are created according to and governed by God's one wisdom. We can talk of God framing the whole of the cosmos around a single ‘Unity-Law’, that is, a principle of interrelation and interdependence that governs everything that exists and directs it towards a single end.

We can see the sweep of this Unity-Law from the moment the cosmos comes into being with the Big Bang. It runs through the emergence of stars and planets and eventually life on earth in all its different forms. Through a process of material evolution governed by the laws of science these life forms tend towards increasing complexity until the process arrives at us human beings.

However, we humans are different from other forms of life. Our brains are so highly developed that they are beyond meaningful use or control in a purely material environment. But the moment that this life form evolved was the moment that God created our spiritual soul. The soul both makes sense of our highly developed brains and also enables us to relate to spiritual realities—even God himself. It also means that we cannot find our true fulfilment in the purely material realm. Our full and lasting happiness can only be found in God. Even so, we do not shrug off our bodily aspect when God creates the soul. Indeed, our bodies are created by God and are good; they are part of his eternal plan for us. So in order to fulfil us, God chooses a way that is both material and spiritual. Our ultimate fulfilment can only be in Jesus Christ, true God and true man. But there must first be a lengthy process of preparation by which humanity is gradually made ready for such a definitive encounter with God.

Throughout the Old Testament, beginning with the first human beings, which the book of Genesis calls Adam and Eve, we see God drawing a people to himself and so preparing a human community that would receive

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<sup>1</sup> See the first six pamphlets in this series for a fuller presentation of the ideas sketched here.



Christ. The individual Abraham was called, but he did not remain alone: he became the father of a nation. This community, the people of Israel, was saved and set free from slavery in Egypt by God in the Exodus. Through Moses they were given the Law; through Aaron the priesthood. In due course they were taught and called to conversion by the prophets. These gifts ultimately pointed forwards to the reality of the Church; but more immediately they were to be fulfilled in the One who was to come, who would be true King, and who would establish peace for his people. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. (Is 9:6-7)

All this long process of preparation had a single goal. God created the whole universe so that, in his generosity, he could freely communicate *himself* to us his creatures. God communicates himself to us *personally* in Jesus Christ, God incarnate. He communicates *himself*—because Jesus is truly divine—to us human beings in an authentically human way, *body and soul*—because Jesus is also truly human. With hindsight, after the event of the Incarnation, we can see that the whole of creation has been ordered through the Unity-Law towards God's coming in the flesh in Jesus Christ.

Finally, before turning to the Church itself, we must acknowledge the way in which the work of Christ has been influenced by the tragic reality of sin. Christ comes to us as the one who fulfils us; but now, because of our sins, he must also come as the one who redeems and heals us. He will have to suffer rejection, persecution and cruel execution at the hands of the sinners he has come to save. But his love for us is stronger than death and proves victorious in his glorious Resurrection.

### **The Church is central to God's Plan**

The earthly life of Jesus lasted only for a period of about 33 years after which he ascended to heaven. Does this mean that God's act of self-



communication comes to an end with Christ's Ascension? Certainly not! As we have seen, God's whole purpose in creating the universe is for the whole of humanity to be united to Christ and fulfilled in Christ. Therefore God's providential plan continues into a new stage after the Ascension, to enable the presence and work of Christ—his whole Incarnation—to be extended to people in all places and times. This gift of God, by which Jesus reaches out to, touches and transforms all of humanity, is what we call the Church. The Church is thus the next stage in the development of God's plan under the Unity-Law.

The Church cannot therefore be reduced to some sort of Jesus 'fan club' that assembled after the end of Jesus' life, and in which well meaning people got together to remember the good things that Jesus said and did. The Church is neither a purely human institution nor an afterthought on God's part: it is willed from the beginning. Indeed, the *Catechism* teaches us, "Christians of the first centuries said, 'The world was created for the sake of the Church.'"<sup>2</sup>

## **The Church is founded by Christ**

Christ himself did not leave us a single written word. He could have done this: St Paul certainly wrote letters. But Christ does not intend for us to relate to him as isolated individuals reading a book. Instead, he founded a Church.

The Gospels show us Jesus drawing around himself a human community of believers. These disciples are shaped by the impact of Christ's personality and his teaching. The Gospel records, "He taught them as one who had authority." (Matt 7:29) Jesus also gave this community a structure, a hierarchy. That is, within the community of disciples there were twelve apostles who had a special place and role, and within that group of apostles there was one, Peter, who had an even more particular role: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church." (Matt 16:18) With these words our Lord showed that it was his express desire to leave behind him a visible, hierarchically structured community under the primacy of Peter. Christ called this community "my Church". Christ intended to found and in fact did found the Church.

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<sup>2</sup> CCC 760.



## **The Church continues the Work and Presence of Christ**

Moreover Christ's words show that there is a continuity between his actions and the actions of his apostles within his Church. "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." (John 20:21) The same mission that Christ has received from his Father he passes on to his apostles. The apostles continue the work of Christ. The way in which Christ relates to humanity, the way in which Christ healed, forgave and restored wholeness to those he encountered, the way in which he taught and drew human beings into a new relationship with God: all this continues in the ministry of the apostles.

From the very beginning the first Christians understood that there was a profound connection between Christ and his Church. St Paul, writing to the Colossians, expresses this relationship in a very powerful way. He writes, "Now the Church is his body, he is its head." (Col 1:18) On the one hand there is a distinction between Christ and the Church: he is the head, we the body. But on the other hand there is a unity because head and body form one, united person. So Christ is indissolubly united to the Church.

## **The Holy Spirit makes Christ present**

The Incarnation came about through the Holy Spirit. When our Lady asked how she would conceive the Son of the Most High, the angel Gabriel told her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." (Luke 1:35) In a particular way the Holy Spirit was active in Christ's public ministry from the outset, manifesting the Lord's identity at his baptism (Mark 1:11) and driving him into the desert. Because of the intimate continuity between the Incarnation and the Church the Holy Spirit continues to be active in and through the Church. Thus on the day of Pentecost Christ in glory poured out the Holy Spirit upon the apostles who were assembled in the upper room.

The work or mission of the Holy Spirit is not an alternative to Jesus. It does not lead away from Christ; rather the Spirit draws us to Christ. The Spirit brings to our mind the things of Christ. Jesus himself said, "But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." (John 14:26) It is the Spirit who through his grace prepares us to accept Christ and draws us to him. It is the Spirit who manifests Christ and opens our minds to accept his truth in faith. It is the Spirit who guides the Church's Magisterium—the Pope and the Bishops—to hand on the teaching



of Christ authentically and completely. This is such an important topic that it is the whole subject of the next pamphlet in this series.<sup>3</sup>

In the Creed we call the Holy Spirit “the Lord the giver of life”. The Holy Spirit gives life to the Church by bringing us, its members, to share in God’s life. Above all the Spirit does this by bringing us into contact with our life-giving environment—most especially through the sacraments.

## **The Sacraments make Christ present**

The Church celebrates seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Confession or Reconciliation, the Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Holy Orders. These are seven ritual, symbolic actions through which in a special way God pours out grace upon us. They are material realities which give God’s spiritual grace in and of themselves.

The sacraments were instituted, or ‘set up’, by Christ in his earthly life. They are not simply rites that the disciples dreamt up after Jesus’ Ascension. This does not mean that Jesus set out the detailed rites of the sacraments as the Church celebrates them today. It does mean that in his public ministry he intended their basic reality and meaning. Moreover, the sacraments are rooted in Christ’s own work among us, most especially his Passion and Resurrection. He did not use a confessional box, nor did he specify the exact prayers to be said when anointing the sick. However, he did forgive sins and did heal the sick; and by dying he redeemed the world from sin, and by rising he gave us ultimate victory over suffering and death. There is thus a fundamental continuity between the actions of our incarnate Lord and the actions of his Church.

The *Catechism* teaches that “The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit they make present efficaciously the grace that they signify.”<sup>4</sup>

They are signs because the performance of the rites involves material objects and acts that we can observe and that point to the spiritual realities they bring about. For example, water is essential to life and is the material reality in which we wash our bodies. In the rite of Baptism it is made an

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<sup>3</sup> Pamphlet 8 in this series: *The Church: Christ’s Voice to the World*.

<sup>4</sup> CCC 1084.



effective sign by which God really washes away our sins and gives us new life.

God's way of acting upon us in the sacraments therefore echoes the Incarnation and the Church itself. By the Incarnation God takes the flesh of our material nature to himself, and thus enters into a new and deeper relationship with us. And Christ founded the visible, tangible reality of the Church which continues to be the way he acts upon us. For this reason both the Church and saving work of Jesus Christ himself are sometimes referred to as 'sacraments'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover this basic dynamic of God communicating spiritually with us through material realities is in profound harmony with our nature. We are both body and soul, matter and spirit; so in the sacraments God gives grace to our souls through material signs that are accessible to our bodily senses.

The sacraments confer God's grace efficaciously because they are actions of the God-Man Jesus Christ. It is the same Christ who acts in the Incarnation and in the sacraments of the Church. The principal actor in the giving of the sacraments is therefore not the priest or minister, but Christ acting through his ministers and through the material aspects of the rite of the sacrament. One of the Church's greatest teachers, St Augustine of Hippo, said "Peter may baptize, but still it is Christ who baptizes; Judas may baptize, but still it is Christ who baptizes."<sup>6</sup>

Technically, we say that the sacraments confer grace *ex opere operato*. Literally this translates as "by the work having been performed." What it means is that the sacraments are not dependent on the personal holiness of the minister; rather, because Christ acts in the sacraments, they are his actions and, therefore, do not depend on our holiness for their power. Christ's action upon us is brought about simply by the rite being performed by an appropriate minister who intends to perform the rite according to the will of the Church. The sacraments are therefore the greatest way in which we truly come into living contact with Jesus who is our personal fulfilment.

The sacraments therefore draw us into the life of Christ and deepen the life of grace within us. Baptism, by which we are reborn in Christ and become members of his Church, forgives original sin and the sins we have personally committed, and makes us adopted sons of God. Confirmation

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. CCC 774.

<sup>6</sup> St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 6.7.



perfects and completes baptismal grace, deepening the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We noted above that Christ's relationship with us is shaped by the impact of sin. Confession forgives the sins we have committed after Baptism, reconciles us to God and the Church, and increases our strength to follow Christ more perfectly. The Anointing of the Sick unites us to Christ at times of serious illness or old age, giving us inner strength and peace, forgiving our sins, and—according to God's will—bringing bodily healing or preparing us for death and eternal life. The sacrament of Matrimony sanctifies an important point and choice in our lives and gives us the grace to live out the vocation to marriage and family life. Holy Orders also consecrates a person in response to God's call to the ministerial priesthood.

### **The Eucharist makes Christ present**

In all the sacraments we can be certain that Christ acts upon us and gives us his grace. However there is one sacrament that is different because it is even greater: the Eucharist. In the Eucharist Christ not only acts upon us, he is really and truly present among us.

The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as "the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend."<sup>7</sup>

Through the words and actions of the priest at Mass, the Holy Spirit makes Christ present, body, blood, soul and divinity. In other words, what was bread and wine before the words of consecration at Mass is afterwards literally and truly Christ himself, whole and entire. This change from bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ is what the Church calls *transubstantiation*. In the Incarnation 2000 years ago God took flesh and dwelt among us to give us life and to be our fulfilment. It is the same Christ who gives himself to us now, just as really and completely, in the Eucharist. Through his abiding presence in the Eucharist Christ fulfils the promise he made to his apostles, "Behold I am with you always: yes to the end of time." (Matt 28:20)

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<sup>7</sup> CCC 1374.



Our Lord instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Perhaps the earliest written account of this event that we have is to be found in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he tells us,

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:23-24)

Two things stand out in this account. First, Christ says, "This is my body". What was bread is now his body. It is not merely symbolic of his body, nor does it contain his body, nor does it remind us of his body. It *is* his body. Second, Christ tells his apostles to continue to enact this rite: "Do this in remembrance of me." Christ wills that his apostles continue to perform this rite by which he becomes present under the appearance of bread and wine. This same rite is what we now call the Mass.

The Eucharist is also a sacrifice. Our Lord chose to institute the Eucharist "at the time he was betrayed and entered willingly into his passion".<sup>8</sup> He deliberately linked the Eucharist to his Passion. Furthermore he did so at the time of the Jewish feast of Passover, which entailed the sacrifice of paschal lambs and commemorated God's liberation of his people from slavery in Egypt. Christ's sacrifice fulfils this Old Testament sign: he is the Paschal Lamb whose death liberates his people, the Church, from the deeper slavery to sin and death. The words of consecration at Mass make clear the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist: "This is the chalice of my Blood, the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." Christ is offered for us to the Father. The sacrifice of the Eucharist brings about our redemption.

The Mass does not repeat Christ's sacrifice on Calvary (as Catholics have often been accused of believing). Nor does the Mass simply apply the fruits of Christ's Passion to us here and now: it does do that, but the Mass is more than this. In and through the rite of the Mass, through the ministry of the priest, the one sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is re-presented, or offered anew, but in an unbloody manner. Nevertheless, it is the same Priest—Christ, Head and members—who offers the same Victim—Christ, Head and

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<sup>8</sup> Eucharistic Prayer II.



members—to the same Father for the same end, namely our eternal salvation.

In receiving Holy Communion we feed on Christ himself. This food increases our union with Christ because he is present; it is literally him we consume. It increases sanctifying grace in us, frees us from venial sin and strengthens our will against mortal sin because we come into contact with the saving act of Christ's sacrifice which redeems us. In uniting us to Christ and overcoming our sins Holy Communion is therefore a foretaste of heaven and "a pledge of the glory to come."

Because it is Christ himself whom we receive in Holy Communion we should approach with humility and reverence. In particular, we should receive Communion at Mass only if we are properly disposed. This means that we should be in a state of grace; if we are aware of having committed any mortal sins, we should receive the sacrament of Confession before receiving Holy Communion. We should also keep the Eucharistic fast of one hour before Communion.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Church's life.<sup>9</sup> It is the continuing presence of Christ and therefore most powerfully makes the Church the continuation of the Incarnation, since it is the Church which celebrates the Eucharist. It makes present our Lord's redemption brought about on the Cross, and makes those who participate in it the community of those redeemed by Christ. The Church is the community of those who are in communion with Christ. However the Eucharist is also brought about through the Church, because Jesus has given the Holy Spirit to the Church and instituted the priesthood. Thus the Eucharist is so intimately tied to the life of the Church that we can say the Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Church corresponds to Human Nature**

Jesus has taken on the fullness of human nature so he can give himself to us human beings completely. We therefore expect to see the fullness of human nature reflected in the nature of the Church. In particular we find that the Church embraces the social dimension of who we are in a way that preserves our personal freedom, and so it is united by the mystery of love.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. CCC 1324.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 26.



We all feel the impact of our family and friends. We are emotionally, intellectually and even spiritually shaped by the impact of others. The contemporary phenomena of globalization and social media only highlight how important the social dimension is to our humanity. So when Christ chooses to continue his presence among us through a community of human persons gathered around himself, he is answering a yearning that is deeply rooted in our nature. The social nature of the Church allows us to be shaped by Christ. It is also a reflection of the unity of the whole human race. Christ wishes to reunite us and overcome the divisions our sins have created by restoring us into one reality: his Church.

However, our understanding of who and what we are is also inextricably tied to our experience of ourselves as free. Any unity with others that compromised our freedom would therefore be a false unity. True unity is an interpersonal reality, and it has to be freely chosen. The only reality capable of doing that is love.

It is therefore love which unifies the Church. But for love to be true it cannot be dominated by our selfishness or tendency to sin. Hence we must be liberated by Christ to love in freedom. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins ... We love, because he first loved us." (1 John 4:10,19) Within the Church we experience Christ's self-sacrificing love for us. We undergo a gradual healing of our own selfishness through the experience of Christ's forgiveness. Our experience of this healing love is what enables us to love others in a way that is non-grasping and that fully respects their integrity. Love is therefore both the fruit of the Church and what unifies the Church.

### **The Church: holy and sinful at the same time**

In this pamphlet we have made weighty assertions about the Church. In the wake of the many moral scandals that have afflicted it, and also because in many ways its members have misrepresented or been unfaithful to the reality of the Church's nature, it is necessary to reconcile these claims with our actual experience of the Church. How can it be a holy and God-given institution, and simultaneously so marked by human weakness?

The Church is holy because it is founded by Jesus Christ, the "Holy One of God". It is holy because of the undeniable holiness of some of its members: the sufferings of the martyrs and the lives of the saints. It is holy because its teachings hand on the truth and wisdom of Christ. It is holy



because in its sacraments the same Christ infallibly acts upon us. Above all it is holy because it is through the Church that we receive the Eucharist. Finally, the Church is holy because it will be perfected in holiness once and for all when Christ comes again in glory.

However, often in our parishes we experience the Church as a less than perfect reality: the liturgy may be celebrated in a slapdash fashion, the homily poorly prepared, and the singing tuneless. Sometimes the people we encounter in the pews or the parish clergy can be less than inspiring. What is worse—and we simply cannot deny it—in the history of the Church its members have been involved not just in trivial sins but in heinous and truly scandalous crimes. In 2005 the then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote the meditations for the Stations of the Cross to be prayed at the Colosseum in Rome that year. At the ninth Station, Jesus' third fall, the Cardinal called to mind the state of Church at that time. He wrote with searing honesty: "How much filth there is in the Church ... how much pride, how much self-complacency!" The shortcomings and sinfulness of its members are not new in the Church's history.

Since the Church is the extension of the Incarnation, we might initially expect it to be marked by the sinlessness of Jesus himself. However the Church not only prolongs Christ's presence, it also prolongs his ministry. Just as Jesus gathered sinners around him 2000 years ago, he will continue to do the same throughout the history of his Church. Christ said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners ..." This does not mean that it is Christ's final goal to surround himself with sinners. Significantly he finishes his declaration, saying that he has come to call sinners "to repentance." (Luke 5:32). Just as in the Incarnation Christ does not encounter human beings as already perfect, but rather on a journey of repentance, so too the members of the Church today are not 'finished'; rather they are immersed in the ongoing reality of a transforming encounter with Christ. The human condition has been fractured by sin. In the Incarnation Christ puts himself in contact with fallen humanity so that he can heal and overcome the wounds of sin. Because the Church continues the work of Christ, we should not be surprised to find it too gathers to itself members who are scarred by the impact of sin. Moreover, Christ's ministry to fallen humanity was carried out in the often squalid conditions of everyday life. We should expect the circumstances of the Church's ministry to mirror those of its Founder and Head. And so in fact we find it to be; for the Church is the means of our



encounter with Christ here and now amidst all the foibles and frailties of our lives.

## **Our Lady, Mother and Model of the Church**

In the Incarnation God took flesh. He took that flesh from Mary; and he did so only with her free consent. When Gabriel brought news of God's plan to our Lady, he had to wait on her free response: "Let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) Thus the flesh that God took is literally Mary's flesh.

We are not called to conceive Christ physically like our Lady. However we are called to something similar. We are called to offer our lives, our very selves, to Christ so that he can transform them through his grace and make us partakers in his life. Christ is God, and to share in his life is to reach beyond ourselves. It is to reach above what we are capable of through our unaided human nature. In this sense the life of grace is referred to as *supernatural*. This means above all that our hearts are expanded and we are made capable of loving in the way that Christ loves. To continue loving even when it is difficult, in the face of suffering or injustice or even indifference, to love with self-sacrificing generosity, to love our enemies, this is truly supernatural. And this increase in charity is the surest sign that Christ's life is taking root in us—that he is becoming 'incarnate' in our lives.

All this depends upon us saying yes to God. Mary is the pattern of how we should do so. Therefore Mary has a profoundly important role in the lives of every individual member of the Church and of the Church as a whole. Mary is the perfect example of how created persons can conform themselves to the will of God. Mary is a free human person who put her whole being at the disposal of God. In doing so her life became a place in which Christ is present and active. We therefore are called to share, and to echo in our lives, Mary's yes to God. We are called to emulate her generosity. She is the pattern and exemplar of the Church and of each one of us.

But Mary is more than just a pattern that we should strive to imitate. Her life encourages us. She is a source of hope. In Mary, full of grace, we see perfected what we should be as members of the Church. At the end of her earthly pilgrimage she was assumed body and soul into heaven. In this we see the promise of resurrection already fulfilled in one member of the Church. Because we see that God is faithful to his promises we are inspired to hope that in the fullness of time he will extend his generosity to the whole



Church—even to us. Mary, assumed and crowned Queen of Heaven, is the image of what the Church with all its members is one day to become.

Our Lady is not divine. She stands alongside us as creatures before the uncreated God. It is perhaps because she is so close to us that she inspires such confidence in us. But our confidence and intimacy with our Lady is reinforced by our Lord's actions. From the Cross he gave us his mother. The Gospel narrates how from the Cross, "He said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!'" (John 19:27) The disciple John stands there receiving Mary as his mother on behalf of all of us. Mary is the mother of the Church and she is our mother. It would be deeply mistaken, therefore, to think of Mary as no more than a sign or exemplar. In Mary we have a mother in heaven who loves us with a mother's heart and who assists us always with her prayers. Mary will always lead us to her Son. We must therefore stay close to her in our prayers.

## Conclusion

This pamphlet has attempted to show why the Church is necessary, and a wonderful gift of God, by explaining the meaning and purpose of the Church in the eternal plan of God. Pope John Paul II summed this up beautifully in an address at a general audience in 1991, so we leave the last word to him:

In the eternal design of God the Church constitutes, in Christ and with Christ, an essential part of the universal plan of salvation in which the love of God is expressed.

That eternal plan contains the destiny of human beings ... who have been called to the dignity of children of God and adopted as children of the heavenly Father in Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 1:4-6). ... The Church is part of the plan, centred on Christ, designed by God the Father from all eternity. ...

The destiny of the human person, chosen and called to be an adopted child of God, [is] not only in the individual dimension of the human race, but in its community dimension as well. God conceives, creates and calls to himself a community of persons. This divine plan is expressed more explicitly [by St Paul]: "He has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favour that he set forth in him



[Christ] as a plan for the fullness of times, to recapitulate all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.” (Eph 1:9-10) Therefore in God’s eternal design, the Church, as the unity of humanity in Christ the Head, becomes part of a plan which includes all creation. It is a ‘cosmic’ plan, that of uniting everything in Christ the Head. The firstborn of all creation becomes the principle of ‘recapitulation’ for this creation, so that God can be “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). Therefore Christ is the keystone of the universe. As the living body of those who belong to him by their response to the vocation of being children of God, the Church is associated with him, as participant and minister, at the centre of the plan of universal redemption.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Discourse*, General Audience 31 July 1991.