

Reflection on Lumen Gentium
Chapter II. "On the People of God"
Peggy Brechtel
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The church is the "people of God" because it pleased God to sanctify and save men not in isolation but by making them into one people gathered together by the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. From all eternity God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right, regardless of each man's race. He did not want to save them merely as individuals. It pleased God to bring men together as one people. God set up a covenant with the people of Israel, a people unto Himself. Step by step He taught and prepared this people, making it holy. "Behold the days shall come saith the Lord, and I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel, and with the house of Judah...I will give my law in their bowels, and I will write it in their heart, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Christ instituted the new covenant in His Blood, calling together Jews and Gentiles, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new people of God. For those who believe in Christ, who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit, are finally established as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people...who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God."

One becomes a member of this people through faith in Christ and Baptism. This people has for its origin God the Father; for its head Jesus Christ; for its hallmark the dignity and freedom of the sons of God; for its law the new commandment of love; for its mission to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world; and for its destiny the Kingdom of God, already begun on earth.

Christ is the head, "Who was delivered up for our sins, and rose again for our justification," whose name is above every other name and who reigns now in heaven. The people have the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in a temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us. Its end is the kingdom of God, which was begun by Christ while on earth, and brought to perfection by Him at the end of time when Christ, our life, shall appear.

Christ was sent by the Father "to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart", "to seek and to save what was lost." The Church imitates Christ in encompassing with love all who are afflicted with human suffering, seeing in them the image of their suffering Founder.

The people of God participate in Christ's priestly office insofar as the baptized are consecrated by the Holy Spirit to offer spiritual sacrifices. Though the ministerial priesthood differs from the common priesthood they are nevertheless interrelated: each in its own way is a participation of the priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest teaches and rules the priestly

people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise their priesthood by receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity.

They share in Christ's prophetic office when with a supernatural sense of faith they adhere unfailingly to that faith and deepen their understanding and witness to it.

The people of God share in his kingly office by means of service, imitating Jesus Christ who as King of the universe made himself the servant of all, especially the poor and the suffering.

All men are called to belong to the new people of God. This people, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the world and must exist in all ages, so that God's will may be fulfilled. In the beginning God made human nature one, and declared that all His children, even though scattered, would finally be gathered together as one. It was for this purpose that He sent His Son, that he might be teacher, king and priest of all, the head of the new and universal people of the sons of God. God also sent the Spirit of His Son as Lord and Life-giver. He it is who is the well-spring of their unity in the teaching of the apostles and in fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers.

Even though there are many nations, there is only one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than of an earthly nature. All the faithful, scattered around the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit.

In explicit terms Christ affirmed the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby affirmed the necessity of the Church. Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved.

Those who are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion. He is not saved, however, who, though part of the body of the Church, does not persevere in charity. All the Church's children should remember that their exalted status is to be attributed not to their own merits but to the special grace of Christ. If they fail to respond to that grace in thought, word and deed, not only shall they not be saved but they will be the more severely judged.

Since the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, the people of God in striving to establish His kingdom, takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people. On the contrary it fosters and takes to itself, insofar as they are good, the ability, riches and customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself. It purifies, strengthens, elevates and ennobles them.

The Catholic Church strives constantly and with due effect to bring all humanity and all its possessions back to its source in Christ, with Him as its head and united in His Spirit. All the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and be ready to give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.