

People of God

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." ~ 2 Corinthians 6:16-18

IN CREATING THE WORLD, God the Father had in his heart the desire to create men and women to live together both in communion with himself and with the created order. The human family was to be a people created and called into communion with God. The book of Genesis tells us what happened when Adam and Eve sinned, rejected God's friendship, and were alienated from God. God's providence allowed this to happen in order to show the depths of his love in sending his Son Jesus to heal the wounds of division caused by sin and to restore us to friendship with him as the People of God, the Church.

The plan of God, however, was not realized overnight but, according to the history narrated in the Old Testament, was fulfilled in stages. At the very moment our first parents fell, God made his first covenant with them, promising a savior who will defeat Satan (see Gn 3:15). God next made a covenant with the eight members of the family of Noah (see Gn 9:8-17), and then with Abraham as the patriarch of his tribe, promising to make him the father of many nations (see Gn 17:1-14). At the foot of Mount Sinai, God, through Moses, made a covenant with the Israelites as his Chosen People (see Ex 19:3-6). With David the king of the Israelites, God made a covenant promising to the line of David a perpetual Kingdom (see 2 Sm 7:9-16), a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of David, our eternal high King (see Mt 16:16; Mt 21:9; Mt 25:31). Through these covenants, God the Father was preparing the world for the Church that would bring to fulfillment, in the new and final covenant in the blood of Jesus (see Lk 22:20), his desire to draw all people to himself (see Jn 12:32) and establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth (see handout on The Covenants of

God with Us for a fuller discussion). The Church, as that People of God called into fellowship with the Trinity, realizes "*the plan of the mystery hidden for ages*" (Eph 3:9), as St. Paul says, by communicating the grace and merit of Christ to the world.

The Church, united in Christ and entrusted with his authority and grace, is God's instrument

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Union in Prayer, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

or sacrament through which communion with him is made possible. "As sacrament," explains the *Catechism*, "the Church is Christ's instrument. 'She is ... the universal sacrament of salvation,' by which Christ is 'at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of

God's love for men"¹ (CCC 776). Through the working of grace, Christ reunites all people and fashions them into the one People of God. St. Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Just as God's will is creation and is called 'the world,' so his intention is the salvation of men, and it is called 'the Church'"² (CCC 760). The Church is thus the goal of creation; "the world was created for the sake of the Church"³ (CCC 760).

The call of Christ is for the Church to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). For this reason the Church, spread throughout the world and seeking always to bring the message of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard it, is a family of a great diversity of cultures. Wounded by sin, we too often succumb to the temptation to divisiveness, rather than heed the call to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). We, all of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, are called to belong to the People of God, restoring our original unity under Christ our Head. We know that God gives grace to all to seek and find him; and "in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35).

As the People of God united in Christ, the Church participates in his ministry. Christ came as the true priest whose sacrifice was acceptable to the Father; as the true prophet whose message revealed the fullness of God's plan of salvation and the mystery of the Church; and as the true king whose throne has been established forever and made visible on earth through the Church. Through Baptism, the Christian becomes a member of the People of God and is given a share in each of these roles. The priestly office of God's people is realized through the sacraments of the Church. Baptism, the door to all the other sacraments, regenerates

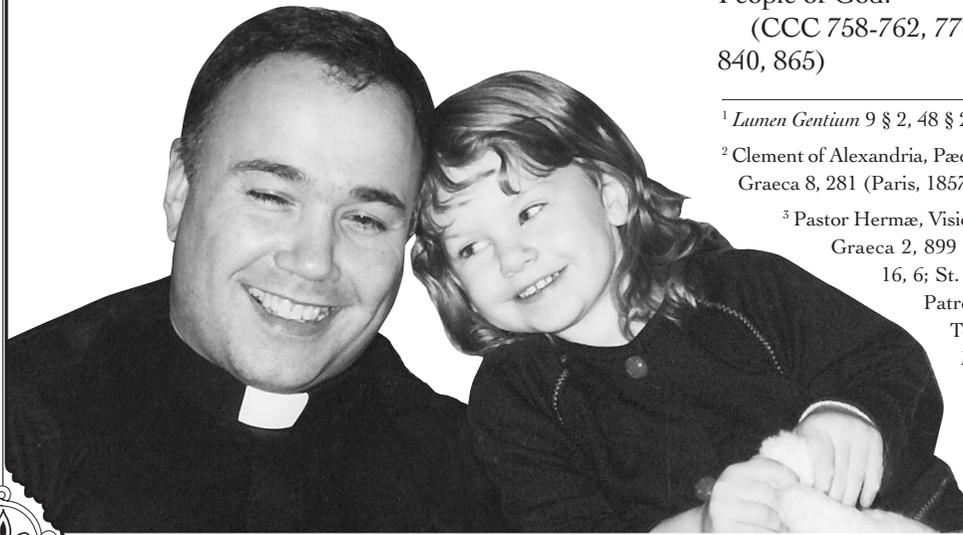
the human soul and establishes the People of God as "a spiritual house, ... a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 2:5) (see handout on The Priesthood of the Faithful). As a prophetic people, the Church witnesses to the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the example of authentic Christian living. Finally, the Church is a royal (kingly) people when its members, like their master who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28), make themselves the servant of others, especially the poor and the neglected. The kingship of Christ can only be extended through works of charity, because only love has the power to change hearts and bring people to conversion.

In a mysterious way, Jews who have not accepted the Christian faith live still under the covenants that God has made with them, for "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29) and "they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (Rom 11:28). They were the recipients of the entirety of God's promises and covenants, right through the New Covenant in Jesus' blood which was intended first of all for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (see Mt 15:24), but which many of those living at the time of Jesus rejected. Although the Jews still look for the coming of the Messiah, rather than to his return as do Christians, we share a desire for his coming.

"The Church 'is the visible plan of God's love for humanity,' because God desires 'that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit'"⁴ (CCC 776). At the end of time, God's plan will be completely fulfilled, and everyone that Jesus has redeemed will be gathered together as one People of God.

(CCC 758-762, 776, 781-786, 814, 831, 836, 839-840, 865)

***"The Church is the visible plan
of God's love for humanity"***



¹ *Lumen Gentium* 9 § 2, 48 § 2; *Gaudium et Spes* 45 § 1

² Clement of Alexandria, *Pæd.* 1, 6, 27 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 8, 281 (Paris, 1857-1866)

³ Pastor Hermæ, *Vision* 2, 4, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 2, 899 (Paris, 1857-1866); cf. Aristides, *Apol.* 16, 6; St. Justin, *Apol.* 2, 7 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 6, 456 (Paris, 1857-1866); Tertullian, *Apol.* 31, 3; 32, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* 1, 508-509 (Paris: 1841-1855)

⁴ Paul VI, June 22, 1973; *Ad Gentes* 7 § 2; cf. *Lumen Gentium* 17