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## THE CHURCH AS *LUMEN CHRISTI ET SAL TERRAE*

Harry McClifty

### 1. Introduction

*“You are the salt of the earth ... the light of the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

Christ’s remark is greater than simple rhetoric or mere encouragement. At its core, therein lies a deeply relevant, and timely, reminder for the Church. Those who are members of the *Corpus Mysticum* are called to be a source of life and light in a world tainted by the death and darkness that sin brings. As such, the aim of the subsequent paragraphs of this essay is to explore this aforementioned metaphor of Christ’s and unpack some of its meaning for the Church today. Furthermore, this essay will address some of the ways in which those in the Church can heed the call to be the light of the world and salt of the earth, before noting some of barriers that can hinder man’s attempts to live out of this divine calling.

### 2. The Church as *lumen Christi*

#### 2.1 Accidental or Essential?

Reading the books of the New Testament can lead the reader to discover a seemingly apparent contradiction. Or, more specifically, a confusion of metaphors. In the Gospel of John, Jesus introduces Himself as “the light of the world,”<sup>2</sup> and again in first John, Jesus is portrayed as a light in whom “there is no darkness at all.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the audience also sees in the Gospel of Matthew that the children of God are to be known as “the light of the world,”<sup>4</sup> and a little later in the Epistle to the Ephesians as a “light in the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> So what seems to be the problem here? Wherein lies the contradiction? Here it appears at first glance, that the New Testament writers disagree with each other as to who possesses the job of being a source of illumination to the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:13-14. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent verses will be taken from Jeffrey Cole (ed.), *Didache Bible-RSV: With Commentaries Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco, California: Press, Ignatius, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> John 8:12.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 1:15.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:14.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 5:8.

world. Is it Jesus, who is true God from true God, yet who no longer remains with His people in corporal form? Or is it the Church of Christ, founded upon the rock of Peter, yet is also composed of sinful members? In addition, the question remains as to whether the Church of Christ on earth, existing as the *Corpus Mysticum*, possesses in itself a sort of ontological illumination or do the faithful act as mere channels of the divine light of the Trinity to flow through them as an accidental property? The ensuing paragraph will attempt to address this apparent contradiction of metaphors.

In Sacred Scripture, Christ identifies Himself as the “the light of the world,” stating that “whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”<sup>6</sup> Here Christ is unambiguous; He claims to be the sole source of spiritual illumination for the world and teaches that those who believe in Him may also become partakers in this divine and heavenly radiance. Even in the Old Testament, we see how the Psalmist David recognised God as being the source of illumination, “the Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”<sup>7</sup> Keeping this in mind, one can read the apparently contradictory passages of Matthew and the Epistle to the Ephesians in a new light. The disciples, and the wider community of believers, can rightly be considered “the light of the world” for they have now received their radiance from the one in whom “there is no darkness at all.”<sup>8</sup> By virtue of their baptism and living out the call of discipleship, the faithful become participants in the mission of Christ and are called to bring this light to those who live in the land of darkness and shadow.<sup>9</sup> Thus it is rightly said that the people of God “do not generate the light any more than salt generates its own saltiness. For the metaphors (of light and salt in Matthew 5) picture the church as having-been-lit, recipients of a light from God which is the source. They have been lit not for their own sakes, but for the sake of the world.”<sup>10</sup> Hence it may be said that the Church, the *Corpus Mysticum*, does not possess itself any form of divine or heavenly illumination. Yet, through baptism and living out the call of discipleship, the faithful partake in the *lumen Christi* in a real and objective sense; for God’s ontological composition is light itself.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John 8:12.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 27:1.

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 1:15.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 4:16.

<sup>10</sup> Leander E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Matthew, Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 1:5.

## 2.2 *Societas Imperfecta*

Now that we have established that the Church itself is not ontologically disposed with the gift of divine illumination, for this heavenly radiance flows from Christ and by grace into the *Corpus Mysticum*, the next step will be to determine in what way does the Church “shine like a star in this crooked and perverse generation.”<sup>12</sup> It can be said that the Church manifests the light of Christ in two ways. First, through her existence as a final authority of matters of morality, and also through the bringing about of the kingdom of God in the *societas imperfecta*.

First, the Church “must make claims and demands on public law and cannot simply retreat into the private sphere.”<sup>13</sup> Those in the *Corpus Mysticum* are not called to hide their light under a bushel, but rather shine as beacons on a hill so that the whole of society is bathed in the saving radiance of Christ. The Church, which has been lit by the light of life Himself, is called to challenge both political laws and societal norms that are contrary to the law of the Gospel. For the “primary function of light is not to be seen, but to let things be seen as they are. In a provocative contrast, the metaphor of the city on a hill presents the disciples as inevitably and unavoidably being seen.”<sup>14</sup> And what is this light and bushel bucket Christ is referring to? “Here by bucket he [Christ] means vice, and by lamp virtue. People who intend to perform some illicit act walk in darkness, avoiding, if possible, the light.”<sup>15</sup> The Church must bring illumination into the very heart of society for “if the Church is done away with as a public and publicly relevant authority, then too freedom is extinguished, because there the state once again claims for itself the justification of morality.”<sup>16</sup> The state cannot simply do away with Christianity and exalt itself as the sole source of morality, for in doing so it fails to recognise that “a basic, Christian framework of values is the precondition for its existence.”<sup>17</sup> The state, through the public witness of the Christian faithful, “must learn that there is a continued existence of truth which is not subject to consensus but which precedes it and makes it possible.”<sup>18</sup> Only in light of the Church does the objective reality of morality remain carefully preserved and not dispensed with at the consensus and whim of a public majority.

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<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:15.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, trans. Robert Nowell (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1988), 163.

<sup>14</sup> Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 182.

<sup>15</sup> Manilo Simonetti (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Sacred Scripture, New Testament IA: Matthew 1-13* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 94.

<sup>16</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 163.

<sup>17</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 217.

Secondly, the Church is called to bring about the rule and reign of God, right here and now, in the midst of society. This idea is known as “Messianic dynamism,”<sup>19</sup> and has as its *telos* the kingdom of God made manifest on earth as it is in Heaven.<sup>20</sup> While one of the drawbacks of Messianic dynamism is the “temptation to leap-frog the limited and imperfect sphere of the nature of the earthly state and to ignore or fight the state,”<sup>21</sup> this leap frog type of extremism (called “Messianism”) can be avoided in a number of ways. Jesus, perhaps foreseeing the likelihood that man would misinterpret his teaching on the kingdom of God, provided one means by which this extremism could be avoided. Christ in the gospel of Matthew, does not challenge His followers to “try harder” and neither does He call them to “more self-exertion,” but rather, His disciples are reminded that by being simply “followers of Jesus they are salt and light of the world.”<sup>22</sup> Those who are in Christ Jesus, “are what they are, not because of inherent potential that they are called upon to recognise and develop, but by Jesus’ own word.”<sup>23</sup> This is an important point to make for this idea acts a sort of barrier to those wishing to change the structure of the *polis* through humanistic endeavours, an idea which the late John Paul II cautioned against in his encyclical *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*. It was in this letter that John Paul II warns the faithful against enacting social change that does not find its root in Christian theology and ethics, but rather in “some vague entity or anonymous collectivity such as the situation, the system, society, structures or institutions.”<sup>24</sup> For the kingdom of God, the ultimate *civiltà dell'amore* (civilization of love), will not come about through man’s efforts which are filled with “hatred, contention and avarice,” but rather through the love of Christ, which “generates man’s love for man ... prevailing in the distress of relentless social struggles and giving the world the dreamed of transfiguration of finally Christian humanity.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 212.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 6:10.

<sup>21</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 212.

<sup>22</sup> Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 183.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, Apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, December 30, 1987, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html), sec. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Paul VI, *Homily of the Holy Father Paul VI on the Nativity of the Lord*, Homily, Vatican website, December 25, 1975, [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/homilies/1975/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_hom\\_19751225.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/homilies/1975/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19751225.html), sec. 6.

### 2.3 *Messianism*

Yet, while it can rightly be said that the Church exists as a manifestation or continuation of the light of Christ, the Church as an institution and hierarchical structure must always take great pains to ensure that it does not bring about “Messianism” in the political sphere. “Messianism,” an ancient concept used first in the Jewish tradition, refers to the practice of elevating a social, religious or political figure in order to seek liberation and restoration from seemingly unjust laws so that an ideal utopia may be actualised. The term utopia has many connotations and meanings, yet here it is understood as “the rational construction of the optimal institutions of a community that make a happy life possible and that there are held up as a critical mirror before existing abuses.”<sup>26</sup> Messianism seeks to undermine the relevance and value of already existing structures in society in order to bring about the reign of a perfect and sinless community that fulfils man’s every desire. Yet, Cardinal Ratzinger noted that “from the start, the Church taught and made possible the acceptance of what is imperfect.”<sup>27</sup> Thus the Church is called to reject a radical “enthusiasm that seeks to elevate the kingdom of God into a political programme,”<sup>28</sup> and to seek to enact real and meaningful social change that flows from a sincere heart and attitude of servanthood.

## 3. The Church as *sal terrae*

### 3.1 *Accidental or Essential?*

Akin to how this essay began on the Church as *lumen Christi*, one must similarly ask the question as to whether the preservative effect of salt is “accidental” or “essential” to its nature? This is an important clarification to make because the answer will have great sociological and theological ramifications. For example, if the preservation of food is only an accidental property of salt, then it could be argued that living as a Christian witness (one who shares the *kerygma* with others) is not a necessary requirement of Christianity, rather it is an optional extra which one may choose to either regard or disregard. Yet if this was to be the case, the belief that man is not required to be the delightful seasoning and long lasting preservative of society, then how can one reconcile other passages in Scripture which clearly state the opposite? Passages such as the command of Jesus to “go therefore and make disciples of all

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<sup>26</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 238.

<sup>27</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 216.

<sup>28</sup> Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics*, 216.

nations,”<sup>29</sup> and the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to “present your bodies as a pure and living sacrifice?”<sup>30</sup> Saint Chromatius, in response to the aforementioned accidental or essential question, argues that the preservative quality of salt (being a metaphor for the Christian person) is essential to its nature, in so far as the Christian is “seasoned with divine wisdom by ... the true and eternal light, the sun of righteousness.”<sup>31</sup> The disciple of Jesus does not receive his or her preservative effect as a consequence of anything that they themselves have done, nor due to some innate and inherent potential that needs merely to become actualised, but rather the Christian becomes a sweet smelling fragrance to the world as result of Christ making His home in the heart of the believer.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.2 Solidarity

Exactly two months before he was tragically shot dead by James Earl Ray on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. gave a sermon to a crowd who had gathered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. King, reflecting on his life and the legacy he wished to leave behind, gave an apt description of the Catholic principle of solidarity in action, albeit unbeknownst to him at the time. King states:

[i]f any of you are around when I meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. I want you to be able to say that I did try to feed the hungry, I want you to be able to say that I did try to clothe the naked, that I tried to love and serve all of humanity ... I'd like for somebody to say that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.<sup>33</sup>

King, whilst primarily reflecting on the term *momento mori*, also touched upon the Catholic Church's social teaching regarding solidarity. Solidarity is the principle by which man is brought to a knowledge “in a particular way of the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity.”<sup>34</sup> It is also a virtue which enables the faithful to “see the other – not as some sort of instrument – but as their neighbour who is called to the banquet of life to

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew 28:19.

<sup>30</sup> Romans 12:1.

<sup>31</sup> Manlio Simonetti (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Sacred Scripture, New Testament IA: Matthew 1-13* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 92.

<sup>32</sup> Galatians 2:20.

<sup>33</sup> Martyn Percy, *The Salt of the Earth: Religious Resilience in a Secular Age* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 279.

<sup>34</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 2011), 98.

which all are equally invited by God.”<sup>35</sup> King recognised that in order to bring about this unity of persons, one must first strive to live out works of charity and also to bridge the gap of division and mistrust left behind by the scourge of sin.

This may be one reason as to why Christ called His disciples *et sal terrae*, the salt of the earth.<sup>36</sup> For just as one does not merely season a piece of meat with a single grain of salt, but rather with many grains, so too are the faithful called to season the world together in unity. The virtue of solidarity can hence be described by using the metaphor of salt. Solidarity, which “seeks to go beyond itself,”<sup>37</sup> cannot operate in isolation, it only becomes active when there exists a unity in both body and spirit. Solidarity can be understood as the complete antithesis of the structures of sin, which are inherently self-seeking and self-gratifying.<sup>38</sup> For as Chrysostom notes while reflecting on this passage of Sacred Scripture, “Jesus says in effect: ‘You are accountable not only for your own life but also that of the entire world. I am sending you not to one or two cities, nor to ten or twenty, nor even to one nation, as I sent the prophets. Rather, I am sending you to the entire earth, across the seas, to the whole world, to a world fallen into an evil state.’”<sup>39</sup> Much as a single grain of salt does not season a piece of meat, so too is one person alone unable to “restore the whole created order to its original succulence, which has degenerated into rotteness.”<sup>40</sup>

### 3.3 Structures of Sin

Yet what are some of the barriers to the obtainment of solidarity and how can the Church seek to overcome them? The first, and perhaps greatest, obstacle to the “awareness of the common fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all in Christ”<sup>41</sup> is the existence of structures of sin, structures which permeate the very fabric of *societatis*. These institutions of sin can be understood as the “accumulation and concentration of many personal sins,”<sup>42</sup> such as how the piling together of many individual rocks (personal sins) come together to create a large and

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<sup>35</sup> John Paull II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Encyclical letter, Vatican website, December 30, 1987, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html#%241T](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html#%241T), sec. 37.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 5:13.

<sup>37</sup> John Paull II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, sec. 40.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford Longley, “Structures of Sin and the Free Market,” in *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Paul Vallely (London: SCM Press, 1998), 113.

<sup>39</sup> Longley, “Structures of Sin,” 92.

<sup>40</sup> Longley, “Structures of Sin,” 91.

<sup>41</sup> John Paull II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, sec. 40.

<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, sec. 16.



heavy mass (structural sin). Yet the question can be asked, does an entity such as “structural sin” actually exist? For is it not so that sin is a purely private matter by which man exercises the faculty of his will to make a free choice between “life and death, blessing and curse?”<sup>43</sup> In answer to this question, it may be said that “by virtue of human solidarity, which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual’s sin in some way affects others.”<sup>44</sup> There exists no sin, no matter how private or secret it may appear to be, that does not have “repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.”<sup>45</sup>

It is also important to note that while it is indeed true that “man, already born with a bent towards evil, finds in structural evil new inducements to sin,”<sup>46</sup> man must refrain from justifying his selfish and unjust actions through the creation of fictitious or illegitimate social institutions. An example of this type of behaviour would be the “watering down and almost abolition of personal sin ... and placing the blame rather on some vague entity or anonymous collectivity such as the situation or the system.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, it may be said that there indeed exist legitimate obstacles to man’s flourishing in society and the obtainment of the virtue of solidarity. And that these obstacles are the presence of structures of sin, structures which are a result of “the all-consuming desire for profit and the thirst of power.”<sup>48</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay looked at two different metaphors of Christ and how they can be understood as references to the Church. The first half of this essay went into length describing the Church’s role as *lumen Christi*, and how those in the *Corpus Mysticum* are called to bring the divine radiance of Christ into the *societas imperfecta*. The latter part of the essay looked at the metaphor of *sal terrae*, and the important role the virtue of solidarity plays in tearing down structures of sin. To close, I would like to finish with a quote from a book on the life of social activist Martin Luther King Jr. While not specifically relating to the metaphor of salt and light

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<sup>43</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19.

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, sec. 16.

<sup>45</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, sec. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965,” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), sec. 25.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, sec. 16.

<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, sec. 36.

present in the Gospel of Matthew, I believe it aptly sums up what was discussed in the preceding paragraphs:

[t]he love, power and justice of God are not only eschatological; they are also work themselves out in contemporary life, and perhaps most especially through practical-prophetic ecclesiology along with political and social action.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Percy, *The Salt of the Earth*, 282.

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