

## The Church as New Creation

Often, when speaking about the new creation made possible through the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, the idea of the Church being the very presence and manifestation of that reality is ignored. In part, this is due to an accurate perception of the Church as devolving into an **institution** that has, from its earliest days, been unfaithful to the Gospel of the cross. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age...” (Galatians 1:6)

The reduction of the Church to an institution has not only, throughout its history, blurred its mission in and for the world but has also relegated it to something added or given to the creation. Gleaning from the prominent strand within the living Tradition to **describe and not define** the Church, it is vital for us as Christians sojourning in America to understand that the Church, rather than being an addendum to the creation, is in fact the very image and goal (**telos**) of creation. In spite of how the image of the Church has been disfigured, often by those professing to be its members, it is our responsibility to reveal it as the very context of new and eternal life. It is our responsibility to apprehend and to allow others to apprehend that the Church is the fullness of life and therefore not bound to concepts oriented only to the past or to ethics. “If one must... apply concepts to the life of the Church, the most appropriate concepts would not be juridical and archaeological ones but biological and aesthetic ones. [Life in the Church] is new life, life in the Spirit. What is the criterion of the rightness of this life? Beauty.” (Father Paul Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*)

The beauty of the Church is the face of Jesus Christ revealed in and through the collective life of its members. **American individualism** has no place in the life of the Church. The Latin maxim holds true, **unus christianus, nullus christianus – one Christian is no Christian.** Christianity is a social phenomenon which makes the Church a social organism continually forming or reforming itself in the communion of persons. This dynamic in which persons are drawn into the mutual bond of love and service is the basis for the ascetical ordeal which rescues the person from individual isolationism and/or anonymous communalism. For unless there is a true communion of persons, unless there is the desire and struggle to love and serve the other, the beauty of Christ’s face is replaced with a distorted forgery. When Christ’s face is distorted the life and work of the Church loses its Christological moorings. The result is ultimately a Christianity and, therefore, a Church without Christ, - a Church that no longer embraces and proclaims the Truth.

Christ is both head and corner stone of the Church. Before the “foundation of the world,” Christ was destined to gather every one and every thing into himself. (cf. 1 Peter 1:20) All of creation was pre-destined to be in Christ. The realities of sin and death could not alter the pre-eternal will and desire of God the Father nor could they alter the desire of fallen creation. “He pre-destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will... For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the

fullness of time, to unite under one head all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Ephesians 1:5, 9-10); [For] “we know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:21-23)

As head and corner stone “Christ is not above or outside of the Church. The Church is in him. The Church is not merely a community of those who believe in Christ and walk in His steps or in his commandments. She is a community of those who abide and dwell in Him and in whom He Himself is abiding and dwelling by the Spirit.” (Father Georges Florovsky, *“The Church: Her Nature and Task”*)

As Christ’s living body the Church is formed, nurtured and guided by the Holy Spirit. Proceeding from the Father, it is the faceless person of the Trinity who gives face to Christ’s body. It is the Spirit who marks and seals each of us as belonging to Christ (Romans 8:9). It is the Spirit who enables the Church as **totus Christus, caput et corpus** to change the world into sacrament. In this sacramental context, culminating in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church experiences the polarity or tension **of being in the world but not of the world**. In and through the sacramental life of the Church the world, bound to sin and death, is made new. The Church does not abandon the world. It sojourns in the world – it exists in history so that the world may achieve its eschatological completion when Christ will be all and in all. (cf. Colossians 3:11) It is this eschatological fulfillment that reveals the divine pre-eternal origin and purpose of history. The old is born again. What has become dark and corrupted is raised into light and beauty. Through the Spirit, the Church in her historical sojourn, reveals here and now what is to be fulfilled in the future. Through the Spirit, the world as sacrament begins to be unveiled. Every one and every thing is drawn into and forged into the body of Christ. From a Eucharistic perspective all who concelebrate the new and eternal covenant are made into the one Christ “so we, though many, are one body in Christ and each of us members of one another.” (Romans 12:5)

As the one Christ the Church offers a glimpse of the Trinity where there is unity in diversity and diversity in unity; where there is intercommunion and interpenetration of divinity and humanity “without change, division, mixture or confusion”; where hierarchy is made possible through conciliarity and conciliarity is maintained by hierarchy; where male and female are again bestowed with equal honor and glory. Indeed, now we see in part, through what is familiar, that which is yet to come. “But it will be the **same** world, the **same** life. ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ These were God’s last words to us , and they only say at the end, and eternally, what was in His mind at the very beginning, when He looked on the sacramental world of His creation and saw that it was good.” (Father Alexander Schmemmann, *“The World as Sacrament”*)