

LESSON

The Church, a foretaste of Heaven

ECCLESIA

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**dom Gérard
Calvet**



We propose a lesson that Dom Gérard Calvet (1927-2008), founder of the Abbey of St Mary Magdalene in Le Barroux (in the photo, [taken from the Abbey's website](#), some monks in procession with the Blessed Sacrament), gave to his novices in 1995. At a time similar to the present, in which continuous disturbing news, not infrequently scandalous, comes from the ecclesial context, there is the serious risk of no longer looking at the Catholic Church, the one Church of Jesus Christ, for what it is: the virgin and beautiful Bride of Jesus Christ, full of all grace and truth, the only ark of salvation amidst the storms of the world, the temple of the

adoration of the Most Holy Trinity, the city of the Angels, of the Blessed and of us, poor sinners, yet saved by mercy.

(The text is taken from Qui es-tu, Église de Dieu? Instruction pour le novices, in Benedictus, Écrits spirituels, II, Éditions Sainte-Madeleine, Le Barroux, 2010, pp. 555-563, our translation)

One day you will tell me that the Church of modern times is less beautiful than in other times and less easy to love. I do not agree with this opinion.

When a man sees his old and sick mother die, when he remembers that she was a young woman full of joy and enthusiasm, whose face, once radiant, is now shrouded in the mist of his memories, he enters a wonderful world, which we could call the world of gratitude.

Well, this is what happens when a child of the Church contemplates the face of his Mother. Certainly, the Bride of Christ is neither sick nor dying; Scripture depicts her to us as a virgin "all glorious, without spot or wrinkle or anything similar, but holy and spotless" (Eph 5:27); yet, the human element that makes her and the difficulties she encounters on the way give her a perhaps distressing appearance. Something to be ashamed of and not daring to speak about. This is the moment when one must reflect on the Bride's appearance, not with the sceptic's curiosity, but in the manner of the angels of whom St Peter speaks (1 Peter 1:12), with a gaze of admiring longing and infinite respect that can only be born in us by the liturgy, before entering into the beatific vision. (...)

Let us read together the preface of the Mass of Dedication. We ask: "Who are you, Church of God?". Let us listen to the answer:

Vere domus orationis visibilibus ædificiis adumbrata

We translate: She is truly the house of prayer signified by the visible buildings. But *adumbrata*, that is, figuratively signified by shadows; there is in this admirable term all the theology of the Church, portrayed and reproduced with the colours of shadow that belong to the earth, but capable of happily signifying the more sublime realities of up above.

We belong to the Church of Heaven, but a Church that is signified down here by the shadows and signs of the earthly city. We do not belong to a sinful and miserable assembly, but to a holy People, *Plebs sancta*, to a heavenly Fatherland, to a triumphant

Church, we stand in spirit by the throne of the Lamb, stantes ante thronum, no longer strangers and guests, but fellow citizens of the saints and family members of the house of God (Eph 2:19), in the midst of myriads of angels who are the court of the great King (Heb 12:22).

Templum habitaciónis gloriæ tuæ

Who are you, Church of God? Let us hear again: it is the temple where the glory of God dwells. We no longer realise what this glory is, because the democratisation of society has thinned out earthly representations that by analogy tend to express the magnificence and pomp of sacred things. No more coronations, triumphal processions, hierarchy, replaced by a uniform greyness, an implacable sign of an obligatory levelling. Only the liturgy - at least the one worthy of the name - responds to the challenge of a tired and cerebralised society, in search of signs and living symbols, capable of translating the sacred dimension of eternal man; but three Latin words would suffice to reveal its greatness (...). We love to tell God, as was done in liturgical times, that the Church in which we live is already for us a foretaste of Heaven, a Temple shrouded in shadows, but in which divine glory dwells. And in counterpoint, the liturgy of the canonical hours accompanies this announcement of future goods with a lyricism full of amiability and tenderness; thus the hymn of praise:

*Omnis illa Deo sacra et dilécta civitas
plena móduli in laude et canóre júbilo.
She is entirely consecrated to God, beloved city,
full of songs of praise and joy.*

And at vespers:

*Urbs Jerúsalem beata, dicta pacis visio ...
quæ constrúitur in cælis, vivis ex lapídibus
et Angelis coronáta ut sponsáta cómite.
Jerusalem, blessed city, called the "vision of peace"...*

Built in the heavens, made of living stones,
and crowned by Angels, as by a wedding procession.

You see how this great Lady is not to be pitied: it is She who hides beneath the mantle of history. For there are not two Churches, but only one on two different planes. Let us love the Church! Let us look upon the Church full of admiration!

The praise of the heavenly city continues: She is the seat of immutable truth: sedes incommutabilis veritatis. Let us not forget, especially today, this other title of glory: in her dwells royally the integral, unchangeable, salvific truth; the Church, which is the voice of Truth, does not deceive us. There is no doubt that she is the only one in the world who can infallibly define - according to certain precise conditions - on the one hand the truths useful for salvation, and on the other hand, and this is less known, to benefit from the prudential assistance of the Holy Spirit that requires the inner assent of the faithful. This is what is called the ordinary Magisterium, a sign of another form of the Spirit's presence in the Church. This clearly has nothing to do with the unnumbered and unmentionable nonsense that is daily uttered by many ecclesiastical mouths; nor does it have anything to do with their even more numerous and equally deadly errors of governance for the salvation of souls; but we can see again and again that children of the world, far from the Church because of numerous prejudices, return to the fold where the Good Shepherd awaits them, not so much from the astonishment of miraculous events as from the beauty and harmonious coherence of doctrine, beauty that attracts souls and invites them to admiration and love.

Since God is both Light and Love, the Church will in turn be the guardian and bestower of Light, the guardian and bestower of Love. Theologians teach that, in the Trinity, Charity is not a distinct faculty of God. Rather, it is the very life of the three divine Persons in the bosom of the Holy Trinity, the act by which each of the Persons eternally gives itself to one another. Now, the outpouring ad extra of this life of love, at a precise point in space and time, is the Incarnation. And the extension of the Incarnation in the unfolding of the centuries is the Church. The Church is the future Temple contemplated in vision by Ezekiel, from which he saw the water of divine grace flowing to flood the earth: Vidi áquam egrediéntem de Templo a látere dextro. And all who were reached by this water were saved: et omnes ad quos pervénit aqua ista salvi facti sunt.

The Holy Church is this ever-open sanctuary of love, which unceasingly lets flow the bubbling streams of sacramental grace, the waves of contemplative life and apostolic charity. This is how the Church is at the centre of the world: it is She who gives rise to Father de Foucauld, the contemplative orders, the distant missions, Father Damian and Mother Teresa. How can we not love this Church, all mercy and love? Let us never set her against the Church that teaches order and the light of dogma. It is the Church itself.

It is the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church of that God who is Light and Love.

Hæc est arca quæ nos, a mundi eréptos dilúvios, in portum salutis indúcit.

Who are you, Church of God? The Holy Spirit answers us again with the voice of the liturgy: She is the ark by which we are snatched from the flood that ravages the world and through which we are led to the port of salvation. The problem of ecumenism: those who do not enter the ark will be swept away by the flood and will not be saved. Above all, let us fear the fashionable discourse according to which all religions are equivalent and the ark of salvation would be none other than the world itself, with its technological equipment and false goodwill, which thwarts the redeeming Cross. Certainly, the influence of grace that touches humanity spreads beyond the visible boundaries of the Church; but this perspective, far from relativising the causality of the redeeming Blood, only further emphasises its supreme efficacy (...).

Let us therefore admire this valiant Bride who takes up arms and fights in the midst of the battles of this world. Let us take care never to be shocked by the wounds she receives in her flesh: the errors and failures of her children do not compromise the purity and holiness of their Mother. They remain intact, like the beauty of Christ under the outrages and ignominies. I propose one last theme to give thanks: You see how every day the liturgical inspiration unceasingly directs our gaze not to temporal works (...), but towards the ultimate ends, towards the blessed Homeland of which earthly cities are but the footstool, which we await and where "our brothers in Paradise" call us, a life so intertwined and shared with ours here below, that even the latter, despite its decadence, every day in the grip of humiliation and trial, deserves to be considered an incipient eternal life.