

Session 3

We Are the Church, Sheep No Longer

Who doesn't grin when a chorus performing Handel's *Messiah* sings, "All we like sheep?" None of us think of ourselves as sheep. Few of us raise sheep or like them on Facebook. A little more than a century ago (1906), Pope Pius X wrote, "The one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors."

In its Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), Vatican II proclaims that we, the baptized, are the Church. The Church is not its buildings or hierarchy but first and foremost its people. Our baptisms call us to holiness and bind us in common faith. The Church is people, the People of God.

"Christ is the light of humanity," the constitution begins. The Church in Christ makes visible the possible unity of the human family. Together we are the primal sacrament, the sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among the human race (#1). The ties of love that grow among us cultivate the "sure seed of unity" that is the Holy Spirit alive in us, sighing in our hopes, rejoicing in our loves, fretting and regretting in our failures, discerning with us in our choices.

The Church exists in history and in the world as a community of real human beings who love and quarrel, share and hoard, help and hurt, befriend and snub, forgive and alienate. We are the *ecclesia*, those who gather in Jesus' name, *the assembly*. We are Church, called to live so all can see the light of Christ in us.

The Second Vatican Council makes this message clear. It purposely places the chapter on the People of God (chapter 2) before the chapter on the hierarchy (chapter 3), the laity (chapter 4), and religious (chapter 6). All baptized, confirmed, eucharist-sharing Christians are people of equal dignity in the Church.



"All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society" (Chapter 5, #40).

To describe the Church, the Council goes to scripture for imagery. The Church is the People of God, a field, a vineyard, a sheepfold, a building whose cornerstone was once rejected, the household of God, the dwelling place of God, a temple, a bride, the Body of Christ.

As the People of God, the Church is a community. "At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to God," say the first words of chapter 2 on the People of God. It continues, "God has willed to make people holy and save them, not as individuals without any bonds or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge God and serve God in holiness" (#9).

The Church is a mystery rooted in God, who made a covenant relationship with freed slaves that required them not only to worship God alone

but to respect each others' lives, reputations, marriages, property, elders. In becoming the people of the covenant, the Israelites became the original People of God, our forebearers in faith.

With Christ as head and his commandments to love God and neighbor as its law, Christians form a new People of God. The Church is us, pilgrims in history, each with a capacity for communion with God and with each other, each with the mission to share the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and its promise for us all.

Reflect

- What image best expresses the mystery of the Church for you?
- What is your importance in the Church? How do you act on who you are?
- What does being saved through our mutual bonds rather than simply as individuals ask of you?