

Many Happy Returns: When *was* the Church's Birthday?

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As a child, I doubt if I were alone in finding the notion of the Queen's two birthdays (official and unofficial?/natural and unnatural?) puzzling. Apart from the tantalising questions as to whether she received two sets of presents, two cakes and two parties, the basic difficulty lay in the fundamental oxymoron. It is the same question as that posed by Nicodemus: 'Can a man be born more than once?' (cf. Jn 3:4). I was reminded of this conundrum when a postgraduate student friend recently asked me about the birthday of the Church. On reading through his thesis for the umpteenth time, he had just realised that he had referred to the resurrection of Jesus as the birthday of the Church. Had he made a dreadful mistake? he wondered. Remembering countless sermons, he felt that it was surely the issue of blood and water from the side of Christ on the Cross, not the resurrection, that marked the birthday of the Church. Was it better to acknowledge the error before it was pointed out to him, or was there some way he could justify his rash claim during the 'defence' (the fancy continental name for a *viva*), if called upon to do so by an eagle-eyed examiner?

On first thinking about his predicament, it became clear to me that, like the Queen, the Church has at least *two* birthdays: the transfixion on the Cross and the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. Closer reflection revealed, however, that the Church has even more birthdays than the Queen, and it is hard to decide which one is the 'real' one.

Calvary

Certainly the opening of the side of Christ and the flowing of blood and water following Jesus' giving up of his spirit or Spirit (Jn 19:30, 34) has traditionally been claimed as the Church's birthday,¹ and not without reason. Most

¹ The Council of Vienne in 1312 formally adopted this tradition, as old as Tertullian (*De Anima*, xliii), declaring that the Church was born from the side of Christ as he hung dead on the Cross. The tradition depends on the parallel between the dead Christ and the sleeping Adam of Gen 2:22 from whose rib Eve was modelled. However, the parallel is insubstantial. Instead of a solid rib, it is the liquid blood and water that flows from the side of Christ, and, whereas the rib of Adam is fashioned into a woman, the fluids from Christ simply drain

commentators see the blood and water as typically reticent Johannine allusions to the Church's chief sacraments, the Eucharist and Baptism. Not a few see the preceding reference to the s/Spirit as an indication that in the evangelist's view the death of Jesus involved the gift of the s/Spirit which, in other circumstances, is taken to be a gift to and constitutive of the Church (Jn 20:22; Acts 2:1-4). After all, the Fourth Gospel earlier identifies such a giving of the Spirit with Jesus' glorification which the author sees as much in the Cross as in the resurrection (Jn 7:39; 12:23).

Yet this scenario is not without its difficulties. At his death in John, Jesus gives up his s/Spirit, but, unlike the Easter Day and Pentecost events, it is not handed over to a specific group, and, in any case, the reference could simply be to his death, giving up his spirit with a small 's', as is the case in Matthew (27:50). The blood and water may indeed be sacramentally symbolic, though we may ask why the natural order water/Baptism, blood/ Eucharist is inverted. After all, another Johannine text prefers to speak of water and blood (1 Jn 5:6). Be that as it may, it would be possible to consider this event as the birth of the sacraments, if not of the Church itself, were it not for the fact that the Fourth Gospel itself, though it denies rather awkwardly that Jesus himself baptised, states quite clearly that his disciples did so at an early stage in the Public Ministry (Jn 4:1-2). While, for theological reasons, this is generally held not to have been Christian baptism as later understood, it was clearly not John's baptism either. Perhaps it was proleptic of the Christian sacrament, but if so, it muddies the waters where the birthday is concerned.

Moreover, although John famously omits an explicit account of the institution of the Eucharist, most commentators would agree that the narratives in Jn 6 and Jn 13:1-11 show an awareness of that event. In any case, the Christian reader is fully cognisant of the import of the Last Supper as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels and will naturally interpret what John says in that canonical context when considering a question like this that is theological rather than purely exegetical. The institution of both Dominical sacraments appears to precede their possible representation at the transfixion on the Cross. The final difficulty in viewing Calvary as the birthday and birthplace of the Church is the paucity of guests at the party. By contrast with the ten on Easter Sunday evening and the twelve on the Day of Pentecost, the Cross is a lonely location. Certainly, unlike the Synoptics, John does not leave Jesus completely alone. However, it is hard to see how Mary and the Beloved Disciple, exalted though they become in later theology and spirituality, could be said here to represent the Church. While it may be true that Jesus' mother becoming the mother of the Beloved Disciple is

away. R. E. Brown *The Gospel according to John* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1970), p 949, notes that there is 'little evidence that the Genesis story was in John's mind here'.

central to this part of the Johannine Passion Narrative,² it is by no means clear that motherhood is the overriding category here. Sonship seems at least as important, possibly more so, as the pericope concludes with that disciple taking Mary, his new mother, into his own home (Jn 19:27). This is a strange inversion: if Mary is meant to represent mother Church, it should surely be she who takes the disciple into *her* home. It is possible that the portrayal of Mary here is intended to recall the figure of Eve. ‘Woman’ is Jesus’ peculiar, though not discourteous, form of address to her here, as in Jn 2:4, and could be an allusion to the name Adam gives his wife on her first appearance in Gen 2:23. If this is so, it may be intended as a way of portraying her as the mother of those who will come to believe and so in some way as representing the Church. However, it does little to support the thesis of a Church born from the side of Christ since it comes *before* the death of Jesus and the opening of his side. Once examined in detail, therefore, this traditional locus of the birthday of the Church leaves a lot to be desired.³

Pentecost

At first sight, Pentecost is a more promising option. The Spirit is given to (at least) the Twelve (including Matthias), it is bestowed visibly and publicly, and the immediate result is the baptism of about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41). This is clearly an ecclesial event of some importance and it fulfils the eschatological prophecy of Joel (Joel 2:28-32, cited by Peter in Acts 2:17-21). Yet it is not the first time that the Spirit has been given to the Apostles.⁴ As we have seen, John narrates just such a happening on Easter Sunday evening. Moreover, again, it is not the first occasion of the baptism of followers of Jesus or of the ministry of the Apostles. If any single event has a claim to being the *official* birthday of the Church, then this is probably it, but we have yet to pinpoint the ‘real’ birthday.

Easter

On thinking over my friend’s apparently rash suggestion of the resurrection as the Church’s birthday, it became evident that it is actually a much stronger proposal than may be supposed initially. In the first place, the events on Easter Day evening as described in the Fourth Gospel narrate a giving of the Spirit to the Twelve (as represented by the Ten), together with a sweeping commission

² Brown (1970), 925.

³ *Pace Lumen Gentium*, 3 and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5, as cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 766.

⁴ Pentecost is probably more accurately described as the manifestation of the Spirit to and in the Church rather than the gift of the Spirit. Similarly, The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1076 states that ‘the Church was made manifest to the world on the day of Pentecost’. In the same way, it could perhaps be argued that the blood and water of Jn 19:34 is the manifestation rather than the birth of the sacraments.

which surely sums up the Church's self-understanding: 'As the Father has sent me, even so send I you' (Jn 20:21). The universal commission in Mt 28:16-20 reflects an identical viewpoint. It does not take place on Easter Day but it is one of the First Gospel's major resurrection appearances.⁵ Moreover, as is clear from both the Pauline Epistles and Acts, the resurrection of Jesus was *the* key moment of the eschatological process, the longed-for coming of God and his kingdom (Rom 1:3-6; 1 Cor 15; Acts 2:22-36, 3:13-15, 4:8-12). If there were to be an eschatological community, a Church, this would be not only the most suitable but the only possible occasion for its birth. This is clearly the view of 1 Pet 1:3 which states that 'we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'. Not only that, the resurrection marked the moment when Christ received his glorified body, the body which represents the Church and into which its members are individually incorporated. Far from being an error, then, the resurrection has probably the best claim to be the 'real' birthday of the Church.

The Last Supper

Even then, however, we have not exhausted all the possibilities. Despite conciliar support for Calvary as the time and place of the birthday of the Church, liturgical sources seem to be looking in another direction. The *Missale Romanum* of 1971 prescribes that the homily at the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday should illustrate the mysteries of the day which are then enumerated as the institution of the holy Eucharist, the institution of the priestly order and the commandment of brotherly love. It is hard to see how any of these could be enacted before the birthday of the Church. According to Vatican II, the Eucharist is the 'source and summit of Christian life'.⁶ It, therefore presupposes the existence of the Church. In fact, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,⁷ the very document that identifies the birthday of the Church with Calvary,⁷ later talks about the institution of the Eucharist on the night of Jesus' betrayal as a gift to his Beloved Spouse the Church which *ex hypothesi* did not yet exist to receive it! There is some confusion here, one feels. To some extent, this is partly due to an overemphasis on the link between the priesthood and the Eucharist, an overemphasis which Catholic authors can slip into almost unconsciously. This process is not a consistent one, however. Vatican II documents stress the pride of place that preaching the Gospel has among the important duties of bishops⁸ and note that 'it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men'.⁹ In that case, the ordination of priests must surely

⁵ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, II (London: CTS, 2011), p 260: 'the encounter with the risen Lord is mission, and it shapes the nascent Church'.

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

⁹ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

be put back from Maundy Thursday, when nothing is said about preaching, to the first commission of the Twelve to go out and preach the Gospel of the Kingdom.¹⁰ Such a move *ipso facto* pushes the birthday of the Church even further back. A better case for Maundy Thursday as the Church's birthday would base it on Jesus' words over the cup, 'This is my blood of the covenant.'¹¹ These are a direct echo of the words of Moses at the establishment of the covenant at Sinai: 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you this day' (Ex 24:8), and, as such, appear to represent the inauguration of the new covenant promised by Jeremiah.¹² If Sinai was the occasion of the birth of the old covenant people, then the Cenacle has a good claim to be that of the new. This seems to be the view of the Holy Father. In the second volume of his work on Jesus of Nazareth, writing as Josef Ratzinger, he states that : 'with the Eucharist, the Church herself was established'.¹³ As one would expect from such a subtle and profound theologian, he bases this claim precisely on the fact that the Eucharist as an anticipation of and along with the Death and Resurrection of Christ is the establishment of the new covenant, and so of the new covenant people. Interestingly, he sees Jesus' post-Resurrection meals with the disciples as covenant meals confirming the new situation but he does not specifically relate this to the origin of the Church.

Sinai

In fact, given that the Twelve, who themselves represented the eschatological Israel, were sent in the first place to the old Israel,¹⁴ and that the Christian Church claims to be 'the Israel of God',¹⁵ there is a case for seeing the Church, a unified whole of old and new, as born at the foot of Sinai. There, the children of Israel under Moses were established as '[God's own possession] ... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation',¹⁶ words ascribed to the Christian Church by the author of 1 Peter:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people (1 Pet 2:9).

¹⁰ Mk 6:7-13 and pars.

¹¹ Mk 14:24.

¹² Jer 31:31-34. The Eucharist was almost certainly in the mind of the author of Hebrews in his exegesis of these texts in Heb 8-10.

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth II* (London: CTS, 2011), 138. In discussing, the piercing of the side of Christ, the Pope mentions, but does not explicitly endorse, the opinion of the Fathers that the stream of blood and water created the Church and was the 'origin' or '*Ursprung*' of the Church. Cf, *ibid*, p 226.

¹⁴ Mt 10:6.

¹⁵ Gal 6:16.

¹⁶ Ex 19:6.

The parallel is even more exact. The Sinai event was known as the ‘Day of the Assembly’¹⁷ when Israel, the assembly (Hebrew, *qahal*; Greek of the Septuagint, *ekklesia*) or ‘Church’ of God entered into the covenant.

A Qumran Parallel

At first sight, the Dead Sea sect provides an interesting parallel. They too thought of themselves as a *qahal* or assembly/church,¹⁸ governed by twelve leaders.¹⁹ Unfortunately, however, we know very little that is definite about their origins,²⁰ still less about how they theologised about them. We do know, though, that at a relatively early stage, they or their (Essene?) predecessors regarded themselves as belonging to a new covenant²¹ which had taken the place of that made with Israel to which the majority of their fellow Jews still belonged. Indeed the ceremony by which this covenant was renewed annually seems to have been one of the high spots of their year.²² Perhaps on account of their deterministic beliefs, they were much more supersessionist than most of the New Testament authors. It is hard, therefore, to see them as looking back to Sinai as the authentic moment of their foundation. At the same time, they recognised the provisional nature of their arrangements which were to last only ‘until the coming of the Messiah [*or* Messiahs] of Aaron and Israel’.²³ To that extent, their ‘church’ was much less firmly established than that of Jesus Christ, the Messiah who had already come.

From Eternity

Does not the variety of possibilities we have considered suggest that we are barking up the wrong tree? Perhaps there is no such thing as the birthday of the Church. After all, for the author of Ephesians, the Church existed from all eternity: ‘He chose us in him before the foundation of the world’ (Eph 1:4).²⁴ This seems to be what he has in mind in the famous passage where he speaks of

¹⁷ Deut 9:10.

¹⁸ 1QS 1,1; 2,22; 3,11-12.

¹⁹ 1QS 8,1.

²⁰ The Damascus Document regards three hundred and ninety years after God had given Israel into the hand of the King of Babylon, i.e. 196 BC, as a crucial date for the sect. It was then that God ‘visited them and caused a plant root to spring from Israel and Aaron’ (CD 1,5-7). But is the birth of the root, the birth of the plant? The raising up of the Teacher of Righteousness twenty years or so later seems have been equally if not more significant (CD 1, 9-11). Perhaps all this demonstrates that it is fruitless to speak of any one event as the ‘birthday’ of a movement!

²¹ 1QS 1,8, 16; 2,18; 3,11-12; CD 3,13; 6,11.

²² The gathering of the inhabitants of the camps in the third month as attested in 4Q266 11,17, is ‘widely understood to refer to a covenant renewal festival’. Cf. C. Hempel, *The Damascus Texts* (CQS 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p 80.

²³ 1QS 9,11; CD (B) 19, 10.

²⁴ Along these lines, Vatican II’s Constitution on the church, *Lumen Gentium*, 2, observes that the Church was already prefigured from the beginning of the world (*‘ab origine mundi praefigurata’*). It goes on to say that it was prepared in marvellous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and in the Old Covenant.

Christ loving the church and giving himself for her. In order to do this, she had to exist already, at least in some sense. Such pre-existence is probably only in the mind of God. It is far less metaphysical than is, arguably, that of Christ in the New Testament or the Son of Man in Second Temple Judaism. More concrete is the picture of the heavenly Church, the New Jerusalem, descending, as a bride, to earth in Rev 21. This is, however, a difficult passage. The picture is complicated by the double metaphor whereby the bride, the author's preferred image for the Church,²⁵ is also the city. The author probably envisaged this dual picture as a way of being able to describe the beauty of the eschatological community without having to rely on the sensual vocabulary of Canticles. It also provided him with a neat way of contrasting the holy city of God with both the city of Rome and the old Jerusalem.

Even more puzzling is the nature of this city's journey. If the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, where is the New Jerusalem coming from and where is it going to? If it is coming from the new heaven, then it must be a new creation altogether and certainly has not existed from eternity. But this is perhaps to press the details too far.²⁶ It is more likely that the author had in mind something already prepared. But what? A set of buildings? A people? Both? At first sight, the description seems to dwell on the construction of the city, especially its walls and gates, so that one almost gets the impression that it is uninhabited – except for God and the Lamb.²⁷ If that is the case, then, for this author, the Church as an assembly of people would not have pre-existed. However, the argument as to whether the city is a place or a people is otiose. Metaphors like this are fluid.²⁸ In the Old Testament, Jerusalem could be used as an image for both place and people,²⁹ and if the same is true here, then the Church is probably being viewed as eternal.

The eternity of the Church is more explicit in a passage of the *Shepherd of Hermas* where the seer is in communication with an old woman.³⁰ On enquiring as to her identity, he is told by 'a young man of comely appearance' that she is the Church. Naturally he finds this puzzling on both theological and aesthetic grounds and makes further enquiries. The interpreter explains that she is old 'because she was created first of all ... for her sake was the world made'. Of course, this testimony to the pre-existence of the Church does not explain just what kind of a 'Church' the author has in mind. It is hard to see how an

²⁵ Cf. Rev 19:7, 21:9, 22:17.

²⁶ Another oddity is that in 21:2 the bride descends 'from God' as well as out of heaven. Yet God dwells in her as her temple (21:22).

²⁷ Rev 21:22-23.

²⁸ Cf. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (BNTC; London: A & C Black, 1984), p 234.

²⁹ Cf. R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), pp 132-140.

³⁰ *Hermas*, *Vis* II, 4. I owe this reference to Ian Boxall.

assembly of any kind can pre-exist the creation of potential members. Once again, it is probably a case of existence in the mind of God. However, the situation is complicated further when, like Revelation, the author switches to the image of the Church as a building, here a tower. The fact that it is the woman herself who presents the tower as the Church only adds to the confusion.³¹ Later, it is said that the tower is made up only of stones which enter through the gate, explained as the Son of God, ‘who became manifest in the last days of the dispensation’.³² Thus the Church, as old woman, is pre-existent while, as tower, she is relatively recent. This author too had his problems with getting the birthday right!

Into time

The possibility of the eternal existence of the Church naturally leads us to consider its entry into time. A good case could be made for this occurring at the very moment of the Incarnation when the Word took human nature to himself. If this can be seen as the marriage of the Bridegroom, Christ, with his body,³³ the Church, it can also be viewed as the birth of the latter in time. Thus Head and Body move together in parallel. Begotten together from eternity, they are conceived and born together in time.³⁵

To some extent, of course, any debate about the birthday of the Church depends on the aspect under which the latter is viewed. If it is thought of as primarily sacramental, then the Calvary solution is attractive, though, as we have said, not entirely unproblematic. If, even more narrowly, it is thought of as a Mass-machine, then Maundy Thursday has a good claim. If it is thought of as an eschatological assembly, then Pentecost seems to fit the bill. If it is thought of as institutional/hierarchical, Easter Sunday evening seems a better proposition, though, in this respect, the sending out of the Twelve or even the commission to Peter at Caesarea Philippi would seem equally appropriate. Other factors also come into play. A view of redemption as cosmological will tend to see the Church as an eternal entity while focus on the Incarnation as the key redemptive action will open up a different perspective from that suggested by an emphasis

³¹ *Hermes Vis* III, 3.

³² *Hermes Sim* 12.

³³ Cf. Augustine, *On the Epistle of John to the Parthians* 1, 2: ‘The Bridegroom’s bed chamber was the Virgin’s womb ... in that virginal womb were joined the two, the Bridegroom the Word and the bride the flesh’.

³⁴ Superficially, the birth of Christ at Christmas is an even more apt possibility. After all, it is actually a birthday, and presents are offered. However, for Christians, the key theological moment of the Incarnation is at the Annunciation. Moreover, the gifts of the Magi (gold to the king; frankincense to God; myrrh to the Bridegroom) seem to be offered to Christ as Head of the Church rather than to the Church as his body.

on the Cross. Bearing in mind that we are, as always, dealing in metaphors, we could, perhaps, say that from eternity the Church was a twinkle in the Father's eye, conceived at the Incarnation, born in the saving events of Easter, publicly acknowledged at Pentecost.

But that is not all. The Church is not yet complete. With each newly baptised member, the body enjoys a mini-birthday and grows towards 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4:13). Only when that process is complete will the final, great birthday take place, in other terms the final marriage when, pre-existent or not, the New Jerusalem descends 'out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Rev 21:2). The Church will then have reached her age of majority, and Christ will truly be all and in all (Col 3:11).