

The Church as Institution and the Church as Spirit

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The Church has two imperative dimensions: institutional and mystic. Through them, she lives by the Holy Spirit and bears witness to Him in the world. The mystic dimension corrects her structure, drives her mission and purifies her institutions. In return, the institutional dimension communicates her spirit and mission to the world, and through it, God extends His gifts to His creation.

When we speak of the Church as an institution, we mean the Church as patriarchates, dioceses, parishes: priests, faithful, houses of worship, departments, institutions that are meant to witness to Christ and serve Him. The institutional dimension also includes ecclesiastical administration such as councils, conferences, publishing presses, Sunday Schools, fellowships, monasteries, and centers of evangelism. We also mean philanthropic ministries such as orphanages, senior homes, homes for people with special needs, charities, and whatever relates to them. We also mean ecclesiastical endowments and their finances, policies, investments and operations; pastoral activities such as pilgrimages, agape meals, lectures and similar events; and organizations that are priestly, monastic or for the laity.

The gifts of Christ reach this world through the Church as an institution. People see the embodiment of Christ's grace, as they touch love, humility, compassion and mercy. Evangelical virtues must be embodied in the Church. They are practically embodied in the institutions of the Church, which are supposed to be the hands of Christ on earth.

At the same time, the mystical, inner or spiritual dimension is the heart of Christ in the Church. It is the spirit with which the Church works to satisfy her Lord first. It is the placement of the gospel and its requirements at the center of every action, body, activity, witness and institution. Without this dimension, the Church becomes an institution of this world, thinking as this world thinks – secularly – planning, executing, managing and acting not according to the heart and gospel of Christ, but according to the mind of the world and the evil one.

The saints of the Church sustained the mystical dimension and preserved it in the Church. They accomplished this through their constant communication with God and by their constant quest for inspiration by the Holy Spirit. The spiritual and mystic dimension is preserved in the life that seeks Christ first and foremost and is well aware that He is the Alpha and the Omega and therefore He is the Helper, the Supporter, the Sustainer and the Savior. He is the Giver of Life as we sing in our liturgy.

The mystical dimension protects the institutional church from deviating into the trap of worldly institutionalism. It reminds her of her essential vocation, her gospel and her only Master, lest she be unjust, cruel, passionate, volatile, subordinate and materialistic.

If the Kingdom of God is within us, and if the call of the Gospel is to seek the Kingdom of God first and foremost, how great must we focus on the mystical dimension to be a Church whose Lord looks at her and smiles and blesses! What can the hands offer if the heart is empty of God's mercy?