

MYSTICI CORPORIS CHRISTI - THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST
ENCYCLICAL LETTER FROM POPE PIUS XII

Pope Pius XII delivered *Mystici Corporis Christi*¹ in June 1943 during World War II when people all over the world were questioning their faith in light of the sufferings and persecutions many were enduring. Pius XII recognized that “even in our turbulent times there are many who, though outside the fold of Jesus Christ, look to the Church as the only haven of salvation.”² It is important to understand that Pius XII recognized his audience as more than just the Church laity. In fact, he addresses the encyclical to “other local ordinaries enjoying peace and communion with the Apostolic See.”³

Reflect for a moment on those words and the intentions of the encyclical. Pius XII knew that we, humans – not male or female, not Canadian or European, not Christian or Jew – but humans, resemble our divine Lord. He was certain that in those stormy times, people needed to be moved by the Holy Spirit and understand the unity that only the Mystical Body of Christ could ensure. He willed to “set forth before the eyes of all and extol the beauty, the praises, and the glory of Mother Church to whom, after God, we owe everything.”⁴

This encyclical reminds us that we are all members of one body in union with the divine Redeemer. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26) This is as relevant now as it was in 1943. The Second Vatican Council used the pastoral teachings from *Mystici Corporis Christi* in its reflections in one of its major documents: *Lumen Gentium* – Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

The head of this body is Christ. He is the head of the body which is the church. By the magnitude of his power he rules heaven and earth, and with his all-surpassing perfection and activity he fills the whole body with the riches of his glory (see Ephesians 1:18-23). All the members must be formed in his likeness, until Christ is formed in them (see Galatians 4:19).⁵

It could not be clearer – we are all members of one body – the Church – of which Christ is the head. “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:12,27) I read those words and I find myself standing taller, praying longer and working harder. Just as the hand depends on the eyes and the legs depend on the knees, you and I depend on each other. I don’t want to let you down, my fellow member. Like you, I take my lead from the head of our body – Christ. And I have been graced with gifts just as you have. I have skills just as you do. And I have weaknesses just as you do. And I depend entirely on Christ to show me how to work with you to “make us grow toward him, our head.”⁶

We are in it together! But by being members of the same body, we don’t need to give up our own individual personalities, our differences. Our diversity is what makes our body – the Church – so strong. Through Christ’s gift of the Holy Spirit and grace, we have been

given “different gifts for the welfare of the Church.”⁷ In Pius XII’s encyclical, we are asked to “contemplate [the Church’s] divinely-given unity – by which all men of every race are united to Christ in the bond of brotherhood – and with the guidance and assistance of divine grace will long to share in the same union and charity.”⁸

In our unity, we ‘help one another along the way of salvation.’⁹ But Pius XII ensures that we remain confident that we are continually guided as a body by Christ. “Our Savior communicates strength and power to His Church so that the things of God are understood more clearly and are more eagerly desired by the faithful.”¹⁰ We are assured that it is the Holy Spirit, in an abundant outpouring, who communicates with us as members of the Mystical Body of Christ. If Christ is the head of that body, the Holy Spirit is her soul.

Take joy in knowing that you are a member of this transcendental Body! Rejoice in the Holy Spirit as you are moved with greater diligence to “perceive the light of heavenly mysteries.”¹¹

As you finish the final paragraph of this reflection, close your eyes and reflect on how loved you are as a dear sweet member of the Mystical Body of Christ. How lovingly Christ cherishes His Church. Reflect on the gifts you bring to the Body and how special you are to its Head and its Soul.

Lord, You engender the Body of the Holy Church in a way which You alone know and understand. . . . By means of Your Blood, You make a well-organized, well-formed Body of which You are the Head. The angels delight in its beauty, the archangels admire it, the seraphim are enraptured by it, all the angelic spirits marvel at it, and all the souls of the blessed in heaven rejoice in it. The Blessed Trinity takes delight in it in a manner beyond our comprehension.

St Mary Magdalen dei Pazzi
Quoted from *Divine Intimacy*, First Week After The Epiphany, 44.

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¹ Pope Pius XII. *Mystical Body of Christ (Mystici Corporis Christi)* (Vatican, 1943)
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi_en.html.

² Ibid, 3.

³ Ibid, Introduction.

⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* (Vatican, 1964)
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, 7.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1995), 794.

⁷ Ibid, 791.

⁸ *Mystici Corporis Christi*, 5.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 794.

¹⁰ *Mystici Corporis Christi*, 49.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.