

The Ecclesiology of St. Thomas Christians in the Light of *Lumen Gentium*

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As an epoch-making event, Second Vatican Council has a unique and profound role in the history of the Catholic Church. The Council opened new horizons in the inner and outer life of the Church to witness to the modern world. Since we are entering into the 60th anniversary of the starting of the Council, we can evaluate the reception of the Vatican Council II according to the ecclesial background, cultural, religious, political, and economic situations of each individual Churches. The acceptance of the Council in the last sixty years after the council can be seen in three phases. The first stage was that of an exaggerated euphoric period which witnessed upheavals of many traditional self-understanding and practices in the vision and mission of the Church, especially in the Western world. The second phase was a time of growling and frustrations and the third is the period of a productive confrontational phase where happens a new hermeneutic of the council doctrines. In all these three phases there sprouted different theological as well as ecclesiological approaches regarding the self-identity of the Church.

Consequently, there appeared different concepts and ecclesiology like the Church as a mystery, the People of God, the communion of Churches, eucharistic ecclesiology, and pilgrim ecclesiology. All these were developed mainly based on the “Constitution on the Church,” *Lumen Gentium* (LG), and the Constitution “the Church in the Modern World” *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). Regarding these ecclesiological approaches, there was enough and more theological scholarship and they attained wide acceptance in the world. When we are studying the ecclesiology of St. Thomas Christians in the light of the Second Vatican Council, we find that almost all these

ecclesiological tenets had been already present in the structure, tradition, liturgy, spirituality from the beginning. The ecclesiology of St. Thomas Christians is an excellent example of the ecclesiology of the Vatican Council II. Here we are trying to explain the ecclesiology of St. Thomas Christian based on three important ecclesiological concepts of the Second Vatican Council, which are evident in *Lumen Gentium*.

Church as a Mystery

The concept of the Church as a Mystery is fundamental in the self-understanding of the Church in the Second Vatican Council. The first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* itself is named Church as a Mystery. The English term “mystery,” which is derived from the Greek term *Mysterion*, Latin word *Mysterium*, or *Sacramentum*, and Syriac translation *Raza* acquired different meanings in different cultures and stages.¹ Starting from the mystery religions, the term “mystery” is used significantly in the religious realm where it “embraces in the first place the broad concept of ritual, ‘memorial’-commemoration- the ritual performance and making present of some act of the god’s upon which rests the existence and life of a community.”² In the Christian understanding, this term expresses not only the concept of rituals related to worship but also the realities and doctrines in God’s revelation.³ The term or the concept of mystery thus bridges the ritual performance, God’s revelation, and a community. To get a clear ecclesiological vision of the concept of the Church as a mystery in *Lumen Gentium*, we have to look at the history of the inclusion of the term and its meanings.

¹ To understand different meanings of the term “mystery,” refer to Odo Casel, *Mysterium der Ekklesia. Von der Gemeinschaft aller Erlösten in Christus Jesus*, (Mainz: Grünwald, 1961.); Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962); G. Bornkamm, “*Mysterion Myeo*” G.Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of New Testament*, Vol. IV, 803; Jose Poovannikunnel, *Concept of Mystery (Raza) in the Syro-Malabar Qurbana: A Study on the Biblical and Theological Dimensions of the Liturgical Theology of the Eucharistic Celebration*, Kottayam, OIRSI, 1989, 133.

² Odo Casel, 1962, 53.

³ Odo Casel says: “The whole ancient terminology passed into Christian usage, but in keeping with the higher spiritual level of the new religion it was made the bearer of higher and more spiritual concepts. The spiritualising process did not, however, lead to an evaporation of content; the word remained concrete, and kept its constant relationship to worship.” Odo Casel, 1962, 56-57.

Inclusion of the Concept of Mystery

When we understand the history of the formation of the Constitution on the Church, we can understand the importance of the inclusion of this concept of mystery, which changed the whole paradigm of the Council.⁴ When the *Constitutionis dogmatica de ecclesia* as the first of four schemas presented to the Council by the *Theological Preparatory Commission* under the direction of Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani and the help of Secretary Sebastian Tromp, with eleven chapters and an additional chapter on Mary, many Council Fathers criticized it as one which discusses only theologically one-sided and accentuated questions, and go back to a merely juridical-counter-Reformation view of the Church.⁵

They argued that when the visible Church is granted the monopoly of Christ's grace, there follows a juridic and exclusive mentality. In this strict equation of the Roman Church with the mystical Body of Christ, there is no place for the mystery of the Church. Council Fathers, like Cardinal Achille Liénart, Sunens, Msgr. Charue, Melkite Patriarch Msgr. Hakim etc. criticized this schema and wanted to find the identity of the Church as a mystery. Yves Congar reports the intervention of Msgr. Hakim:

He ought to make the voice of the East and of its patristic tradition heard. The schemas are foreign for him in their orientation, their structure, and their conceptualisation. It is purely Latin. He expressed regret that not knowing the catechesis and theology of the East, those who had drafted it had monopolised the universal faith for the benefit of their

⁴ Even though the First Vatican Council was trying to give answers to the questions like rationalism, semi rationalism, pantheism, fideism and devaluation of reason, there were seven references of the term "mystery" in the council documents, *Pater Aeternus* and *Dei Filius*. But for First Vatican Council, the concept of 'mystery' denoted something trans-rational and unrevealed truths. It was something opposite to the revealed truth. The emphasis of the council was on the *corpus visible*, the visible body of Christ. The concept of mystery was not connected with the Church in the documents but was related to the mystery of Eucharist in Vatican Council I. But at the same time Vatican I confirmed the existence of *mysteria stricte dicta*, which gave an authoritative starting point of the neo-Scholastic school of theology in the question of the *mysteria*. The discussions of new scholastic theology were around the concepts *mysteria stricte dicta* or "*mysteria absoluta*" i.e., "true and proper mysteries" or "mysteries of faith (*mysteria fidei*) in the strict sense.

⁵ Cf. Peter Hünenmann, "Theologischer Kommentar zur Dogmatischen Konstitution über die Kirche Lumen Gentium," *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, Hünermann, Peter & Hilberath, Bernd Jochen, Eds. Vol. 2, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004, 263-582, 298.

particular theology. In Eastern theology, in which the liturgy is the place where the transmission of the faith actually occurs, the mystery of Christ is put forward as an economy unfolding in the course of history. The concrete nature of the Word of God manifests the presence of this in the world. Every disjunction, even if only apparent, between Scripture and Tradition will be deemed violence done to the unity of the paths of transmission. Easter theology gives full importance to the idea of humankind in the image of God.⁶

After seeing the bundle of criticism and suggestions, Cardinal Suenens, a member of the Central Commission, argued for a reduction of all suggestions into two focal points or poles of tension: *ecclesia ad intra*, i.e. the mystery of the Church, and *ecclesia ad extra*, the relationship of the Church to the world.⁷ Moreover, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, later Pope Paul VI, wrote a letter to his predecessor before the start of the Council, in which he advises that the Council should concentrate on the theme of the Church in a threefold way: the mystery of the Church, then the mission of the Church, i.e. its action, and finally the Church's relations with other groups of people who do not belong to her. Pope John XXIII supported this program, which Montini would implement as Pope Paul VI. Cardinal Suenens asked Gérard Philips, a member of the preparatory Schema Commission, to prepare an alternative scheme, which would essentially be the basis for the pattern for the second session. This concept will then be reworked for the third session to be finally adopted as *Lumen Gentium* in the fourth session. The new perspective was extended to the entire mystery of the Church whose temporal and eschatological phases were now given equal weight. The mystery of the Church is inserted in the place of the *ecclesia militans*.⁸ Thus, the insertion of the term "mystery of the Church" in the second draft by Gérard Philip became the central concern of the Council.

The question of the mystery of the Church opens up the whole meaning of the Council. Gérard Philipps says: "But already the history of the Constitution on the Church, whose stages we have faithfully traced,

⁶ Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, Dennis Minns Eng.tr., Minnesota, Liturgical press, 2012, 184.

⁷ Cf. Hünermann, 2004, 320f

⁸ Cf. Benedict J. Michal, „*Die Kirche als „Mysterium“ Eine analytische und synthetische Lektüre des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, A Doctoral Dissertation, Vienna, 2012; available from <https://theses.univie.ac.at/detail/22774#>, accecessed on 10.10.2021, 56.

shows us an overall view of the mystery of the Church, the depth and richness of which has seldom been attained in history.”⁹ Even if this vision is rarely attained or the Church does not reinvent herself with this Constitution, it expresses her self-understanding from Scripture and Tradition to outline its mystery.

Different Dimensions of the Concept of Mystery

The Council Fathers attempted in eight articles (LG 1-8) to define the mystery and the sacramentality of the Church in terms of symbols, images, parables, figures, theological ideas, and analogies. But this attempt to capture the mystery of the Church in human language faces also difficulties because the mystery is at the same time hidden and revealed in history. To call the Church a mystery points to the surplus of the meaning of the mystery that transcends all time and place. Benedict J. Michal points out seven dimensions for the concept of mystery in *Lumen Gentium*.¹⁰ 1) LG uses the term ‘mystery’ to show the mystery of the Trinity. 2) Mystery in the sense of a truth revealed by God which transcends human knowledge – the secrets of knowledge with *mysteria strice dicta*. 3) The mystery of the Logos, already revealed in the Old Testament. 4) The eschatological mystery, which points to the future that awaits humanity in Christ. 5) The mystery of salvation history, which refers to God’s plan of salvation, and leads humanity back to its true home in the mystery of the Trinity. 6) Liturgical mystery with the seven concretized individual sacraments. 7) The mystery as a Theandric structure, which connects the mystery of God in the mystery of Christ (and his mysteries) with the mystery of man. When we understand the Church as a mystery, the council Fathers intended that all these dimensions of mystery are evident in the visible and invisible nature of the Church.

The Vatican Council II presents the Church as a mystery primarily because her origin lies in the mystery of the Trinity. LG 2 says that God the Father is the one who deals with the Trinitarian origin of the Church and the history of salvation in which the people of God and the Church are embedded.¹¹ The Church is not a fourth divine person, but a creation of the tri-personal God. The Church is based on the free act of the grace of

⁹ Gérard Phillips, “Die Geschichte der dogmatischen Konstitution über die Kirche ‘Lumen Gentium’, *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. 12, Freiburg: Herder, 1966, 138-155, 155.

¹⁰ Cf. Benedict J. Michal, 2012, 312.

¹¹ Cf. Benedict J. Michal, 2012, 204-205.

God. It is therefore a disposition from above.¹² The Council Fathers emphasized the divine origin and its place in God's plan of salvation history.

The history of the Church becomes the history of salvation because it originated in the divine plan even before the origin of human beings and gathered together into one flock in the Old Testament. The Council refers to the patristic term "ecclesia ab Abel."¹³ The names of St. Augustine, Gregory the Great, and John of Damascus in the footnote of LG 2, give the impression that the Council Fathers wish to bring out the patristic idea of the mystery of the pre-existence of the Church. The twofold sacrifice of Abel, one of the firstlings of his flock with the fat (cf. Gen 4:4) as well as his own life, points to the Passover mystery of Christ.¹⁴ The term *ecclesia* from Abel emphasizes the historical preparation of the Church too. As in an imminent love affair, God starts a covenantal relationship with his people from the very beginning. According to Benedict J. Michal, since the mystery of the Church has been rooted in the mystery of the old covenant this mystical relation between God and the Church can be called a love story.¹⁵ It is the concept of "people of God" that emphasizes the historical character of the Church, which in the term "Mystery of the Church" could be overlooked. The council defends misunderstanding of the mystery of the Church in the second chapter LG on the people God.

Benedict A. Michal analyses the third article of LG in the relationship between mystery and revelation, which is explained in *Dei Verbum*.¹⁶ Revelation is stepping out of the hidden and at the same time leading into the mystery. Therefore, with revelation, the mystery becomes not smaller, but bigger. Revelation itself is a mystery that can be made accessible to people. In Revelation, the mystery emerges and shines as truth proclaimed through the words of Christ and the events of the Paschal mystery. In that way, the revealed mystery became the work of salvation through the incarnation, preaching or restoration of the kingdom of God in his life,

¹² Cf. Benedict J. Michal, 2012, 204-205

¹³ Congar points to the connection of the question of the beginning of the Church with the question of the pre-existence of Christ. Cf. Yves Congar, „Ecclesia ab Abel,” *Abhandlungen über Theologie und Kirche*, Reding Marcel, Ed., Düsseldorf, 1952, 79–108, 79.

¹⁴ Cf. Congar, 1952, 81.

¹⁵ Cf. Benedict J. Michal, 2012, 212.

¹⁶ Cf. Benedict J. Michal, 2012, 221-223

death, resurrection, the ascension of Jesus Christ, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Here we understand the Church as a mystery in its relation to the salvific and revelatory events in the life of Jesus Christ.

Another important meaning of the concept of the Church as a mystery is understood in its relation to the liturgical mystery. The Council Fathers were affirming that the liturgy is a celebration or commemoration of the events of the paschal mystery. The Paschal mystery can be seen as a “short formula” of God’s self-communication in the Salvation history. The Paschal mystery revealed the mystery of God in its fullness. In Liturgy, the Church celebrates these mysteries. Second Vatican Council exposes this bridge from the liturgy constitution to the constitution of revelation regarding the concept of the mysteries.¹⁷

To carry out the will of the Father, Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth and revealed to us the mystery of that kingdom. By His obedience, He brought about redemption. The Church, or, in other words, the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world. This inauguration and this growth are both symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of a crucified Jesus, and are foretold in the words of the Lord referring to His death on the Cross: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself”. As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which Christ our Passover was sacrificed, is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried on, and, in the sacrament of the eucharistic bread, the unity of all believers who form one body in Christ is both expressed and brought about. All men are called to this union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and toward whom our whole life strains (LG 3).

Dei Verbum also says the same thing. “Just as the life of the Church is strengthened through more frequent celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, similar we may hope for a new stimulus for the life of the Spirit from a growing reverence for the word of God, which “lasts forever” (DV 26).

The Council Fathers also point out the mystery of the Cross and Pentecost as the two special founding events of the Church. The Church as a mystery unfolds its foundation in the Paschal mystery and the dynamic act of the Holy Spirit in Pentecost. The work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Church is discussed in the fourth article of LG which anticipates the

¹⁷ Cf. Benedict J. Michal, 2012, 224

images of the Church in article six. They explain the first task of the Holy Spirit as to sanctify the Church and the Church is a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit or a temple for the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit also unites the Church in communion and service. It is the Spirit of God who worked in the history of salvation, in the paschal events revealed in Jesus Christ and the life of the Church. The Holy Spirit guides the Church through the charisms and gifts towards the Trinity in the time of eschatological fulfilment.

The first historical stage of the mystery of the Church begins with the proclamation of the Gospel by Jesus Christ: through his word, his work, and his presence. This beginning of *Ekklesia* as it proceeds from Jesus, the *Lumen Gentium*. The Council sees the content of this message realized in the coming of the kingdom of God, which is compared to a seed sown in the field. This germinating kingdom of God can be received by only a few people with the help of faith and at the same time points to the time of harvest - an image of God's judgment. The miracles of Jesus are in the service of proclaiming this presence of the Kingdom of God, We read: "The mystery of the holy Church is manifest in its very foundation. The Lord Jesus set it on its course by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Kingdom of God, which, for centuries, had been promised in the Scriptures: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" In the word, in the works, and in the presence of Christ, this kingdom was clearly open to the view of men" (LG 5).

Thus, we see that the concept of the Church as a mystery presented in *Lumen Gentium* opens a new self-understanding of the Church. The Council Fathers did not focus on the visible character of the Church, but the real nature of the Church, which is hidden in the divine plan from the beginning and shadowed in the history of salvation, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and fulfilled in the eschatological union with Trinity. They also emphasized the central role of liturgical mysteries which commemorate the divine mysteries of salvation.

The Church as the People of God Coextensive with the Body of Christ

Another very important ecclesiological notion of the Second Vatican Council presented in *Lumen Gentium* is the concept of the Church as the people of God coextensive with the Body of Christ. This ecclesiological

¹⁸ PO 1, AG 7; 9

vision of the Church is a refined result of the age-old juridical and organic concept of the body of Christ and a broader description of the concept of the people of God. According to Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), the concept of the People of God opens new horizons in the self-understanding of the Church.¹⁹ This vision focuses on the collegiality of bishops, the role of the laity, the significance of local Churches as against the Church as a whole, and the opening up of the Church in an ecumenical sense and to the religions of the world. Even though the second chapter LG mainly focused on the paradigm of the People of God, it should be understood coextensive with the concept of the body of Christ. That means the concept of the People of God is concertized and specified by the image of the body of Christ. These concepts can be seen as signs of the move of the Church from exclusiveness to a broader self-understanding of the Church. The concept of the People of God is manifested as the body of Christ in a worshiping community concretely. We are discussing these dimensions of the concept in the following.

People of God as an All-Inclusive Reality

According to Ratzinger, by including the concept of the People of God in connection with the traditional understanding of the body of Christ, the council Fathers constructed two basic statements which directly deal with an ecclesiological position, and opened a new horizon.²⁰ The first one is that the council Fathers replaced the verb 'is' (*est*) in the definition of the body of Christ as the Catholic Church, with the verb, 'subsist,' (*haec ecclesia ... subsistit in ecclesia catholica*). This shows that the council Fathers wanted to change the position of the body of Christ equalizing the Catholic Church and showing the openness of the body of Christ. The second one is that the council Fathers consciously and emphatically proposed the new concept of communion to the body of Christ. This change from 'is' to 'subsist' explains on the one hand that the body of Christ is really present in the Catholic Church and on the other hand that the Catholic Church is not fully identical with the body of Christ. Therefore, there can be elements of the body of Christ outside the Catholic Church.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, Stefan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, Eds. translated by Henry Tylor, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005, 126-127.

²⁰ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes. Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie*, Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1969, 236.

According to Ratzinger, these double attempts of renewal in the concept of the body of Christ clearly express the new phase of the ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. For him, these changes express a double-sided deficiency that means a double-sided duty, in the Catholic Church as the body of Christ.²¹ On the one side, the Catholic Church as the body of Christ needs to accept a plurality and on the other side, all the Churches outside the Catholic Church need to accept singularity. Ratzinger explains further that the omission of the exclusive position of the Catholic Church on the one side invites all other Churches who are plural in their existence and on the other side it urges the Catholic Church to accept the plurality of the existence of the Churches.²² This change is not merely a change in the terms but is a new ecclesiological vision of the body of Christ. The identity of the body of Christ is no more of exclusion but of inclusion and integration. Instead of excluding the members of other Churches and other religions to define the identity of the body of Christ, the council opened a new door that invites all human beings to become the body of Christ.

According to Ratzinger this opening of the Church brings a new meaning to the concept of the body of Christ in its relation with the concept of the People of God.²³ For him, the image of the body of Christ together with the people of God expresses the new covenant of God that is specified and fulfilled by Christ. Ratzinger says that the concept of the People of God first of all expresses a continuation of Israel on the one side and the coextensive nature of this people as the body of Christ expresses the newness on the other side. Just as the Word of God and His continuing presence gathered Israel, the Word and the presence of the Lord in the Holy Eucharist also gather the new people of God.²⁴

Ratzinger also points out that the concept of the People of God coextensive with the body of Christ shows that the Church exists not for her own sake but should be the instrument of God for the gathering of people to him.²⁵ That means the identity of the Church is not only in her inner nature but also in her mission for the people outside the Church.

²¹ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 236.

²² Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 236.

²³ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 237-238.

²⁴ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 108.

²⁵ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 2005, 129.

According to Ratzinger, especially the concept of the Body of Christ is not something that limits the Church to keep her identity by excluding others but it is a concept that opens her up to others and welcomes others as an instrument of the love of God in the world.²⁶ That means the Church is called to be a channel of communion and light of the world (*Lumen Gentium*). In this sense, “one can say that the Council introduced the concept of ‘the People of God’ above all as an ecumenical bridge.”²⁷

It is such a concept of the Body of Christ that is the basis for the new concept of membership in the Church and for the missionary activities of the Church. According to Ratzinger, the missionary activity of the Church is based on the Church’s immediate role of salvation together with her inner dynamic which is a symbolic expression of the hospitality of God who invites all human beings to the wedding feast of his son.²⁸ The Church as the Body of Christ functions as the medium of the everlasting and unconditional love of God who gathers all men and women in the world, who are divided and disunited based on many reasons.²⁹ In contrast to the disruptions in humanity because of sin symbolized as Babel, the Spirit of God gathers all human beings in the body of Christ which is symbolized in Pentecost.³⁰ Therefore the role of the Church in missionary activities is to fulfill this wonder of Pentecost where the healing of humanity from the disruption that was caused through sin happened. That means the role of the Church, as the Body of Christ is to realize fully the unity of humanity that Jesus attained in his crucified body.³¹

People of God as Worshiping Community

This collection of the new People of God is not restricted to any culture, language, race, or any human limits but is open to all nations and peoples. But at the same time, this “people” is not a collective whole as it is in political language.³² Ratzinger says that the concept of the People of

²⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 245.

²⁷ J. Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of Vatican II,” Message at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa, available from <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/ecclesiology-of-vatican-ii-2069>, accessed on 14th October 2021.

²⁸ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 104.

²⁹ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 104.

³⁰ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 104.

³¹ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 104.

³² Cf. J. Ratzinger, 2005, 127.

God expresses nothing other than the collection of each and every individual in the worshiping community or Eucharistic assembly in every parish, the collection of many such communities in different cultural scenarios, and in the universal level.³³ That means the Second Vatican Council paved a new way of understanding the concept of the Body of Christ coextensive with the People of God. As against the previous understanding, from the universal and organic concept of the Body of Christ, the Council moved to its concrete representation in the form of the local Church, which in its essence is the Eucharistic assembly. From the universal perspective of the mystical body, the Council concentrated on the local Eucharistic communities. According to Ratzinger, the universal Church as the people of God exists as *Ecclesia* in the world in different concrete local parish communities.³⁴ LG 26 says it clearly as follows:

This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament. For in their locality these are the new People called by God, in the Holy Spirit, and in much fullness. In them, the faithful are gathered together by the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord's Supper is celebrated, that by the food and blood of the Lord's body the whole brotherhood may be joined together. In any community of the altar, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, there is exhibited a symbol of that charity and "unity of the mystical Body, without which there can be no salvation." In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence, there is brought together one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. For "the partaking of the body and blood of Christ does nothing other than make us be transformed into that which we consume (LG 26).

According to Ratzinger, the new concept of the Church is clear from the very procedures of the council. The first text of the council on the liturgy made good sense for the new ecclesiology.³⁵ According to him, the Church is derived from adoration, from the mission of glorifying God. And the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Council talks about the Word of God, which calls the Church to renew itself always. the pastoral constitution explains how the glory of God presents itself in an ethos.³⁶ In

³³ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 87; 107.

³⁴ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 1969, 107-108.

³⁵ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 2005, 126.

³⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, 2005, 126.

its document on the liturgy, the Council had already stated: “The principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full, active participation of all God’s holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers” (SC 41). Thus, from the outset, the Council lifted the Eucharist out of the inner workings of the Church and put it firmly into the spotlight. Local gatherings around the bishop of each place are properly to be called ‘Churches’, just as they were in the letters of St. Paul (LG 26, CD 11). McPartlan also observes: “When the Eucharist is restored to the prominence it had for the early Christians, the pyramid that scholasticism constructed to understand the Church collapses.”³⁷ Whenever such a community celebrates the Eucharist, Christ himself is present, actively constituting the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Thus, the concept of the Church as People of God could describe the inclusive nature of the Church which can foster its relationship with non-Catholic Christians and with non-Christian religions. This concept also expresses the vision of the Church as a worshiping community in its concrete existence at local and universal levels. It can also give the sense of the sinfulness of the Church and the need for purification and renewal. This phrase also conveys the unity of salvation history which comprises both Israel and the Church in her pilgrim journey.

Church as Communion

One of the wide-discussed ecclesiology sprouted from the Second Vatican Council is the ecclesiology of communion. In the general sense, the English word, ‘communion,’ Latin word *Communio*, and Greek word *Koinonia* means fellowship or participation, etc. Based on the vertical and horizontal dimensions of biblical usage of the word *Koinonia* (Acts, 2:44; 4:32; Rom 15:26; 1Cor 10:16; Phil 1: 5; Tit 1:4; Heb 13: 16; Jude 3), the Fathers of the Church used it as an expression of the visible Church.³⁸ They experienced the Church as “fellowship of the Spirit, of the Holy

³⁷ Paul McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation: An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995, 42.

³⁸ Cf. Sophy Rose, *The Church as Mystery (Raza) ad Communion (s^hawtāpūt^ha) in the East Syriac Liturgical year. An Ecclesiological Analysis*, Kottayam, OIRSI 207, 1998,113.

City, ..."³⁹ It is this patristic vision manifested in the liturgy of the Church that was perceptible everywhere in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁰ The extraordinary Synod of 1985 and the Letter of the Congregation of Faith in 1992 also gave many explanations and clarifications regarding the ecclesiology of communion reflected in the Council Documents.

Communion as the Core of the Mystery of the Church

Even though the Second Vatican Council did not explicitly highlight the notion of Communion, it is an integral, all-embracing, and multivalent category in the documents of Vatican II. It is not a description of the Church's structure but it describes its nature as a mystery.⁴¹ The final report of the extraordinary Synod says: "The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents. Koinonia/ communion, founded on the Sacred Scripture, has been held in great honour in the early Church and in the Oriental Churches to this day. Thus, much was done by the Second Vatican Council so that the Church as communion might be more clearly understood and concretely incorporated into life."⁴² According to Pope John Paul II, the concept of communion is the 'heart of the Church's self-understanding.'⁴³ Referring to the Council documents Ratzinger also says that the concept of *communion* (*koinonia*), which appears with a certain prominence in the texts of the Second Vatican Council), is very suitable for expressing the core of the Mystery of the Church, and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology.⁴⁴

³⁹ Joseph Powathil, *Church as the Mystery of Communion: A Tribute to the Ecclesial Vision of Father Placid J. Podipara*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 49.

⁴⁰ "Not very explicit, often intermingled with positions based on another ecclesiology and preserved at the request of a restless minority, this movement of Roman Catholic thought toward the old patristic vision-still manifest in the liturgy- is perceptible everywhere, except perhaps in the minor documents." J.M.R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1992, xi.

⁴¹ Joseph Powathil, *Church as the Mystery of Communion: A Tribute to the Ecclesial Vision of Father Placid J. Podipara*, Bangalore, Dharmaram Publications, 2014, 85.

⁴² Final Report of 1985 extraordinary Synod, available from <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/final-report-of-the-1985-extraordinary-synod-2561>, accessed on 8th December 2021.

⁴³ JOHN PAUL II, Address to the Bishops of the United States of America, 16-IX-1987, n. 1: "Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II" X, 3 (1987) p. 553.

⁴⁴ Cf. LG. 4, 8, 13-15, 18, 21, 24-25; DV. 10; GS. 32; UR. 2-4, 14-15, 17-19, 22, referred in the Letter from the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, available <https://>

The ecclesiology of communion is not an invention of the second Vatican Council. It was the consciousness of the early Christian communities. The biblico-theological analysis of the concept of the Church as a Communion given by Joseph Powathil, Mathew Vellanickal, and the patristic sources of the ecclesiology of communion given by J.M.R. Tillard, express its significance in understanding the identity of the Church. Tillard says:

This ecclesiology of communion, sacramental and mystical before becoming juridical and sociological, is the ecclesiology of what is called the undivided church, the church of the centuries in which Constantinople—from which the communities that rejected the Council of Chalcedon later on cut themselves off—and Rome are not yet separated. The best way to verify this is to reread three contemporary Fathers of the Church, from three different traditions, whose thought dominated ecclesial life in the fifth century: Augustine for the West, John Chrysostom for Antioch, Cyril of Alexandria.⁴⁵

The communion ecclesiology explains different aspects of the identity of the Church. The final report of the Synod of 1985 says that the ecclesiology of communion helps us to understand the mystery of the Church which is rooted in the Trinitarian communion, the correct relationship between unity and plurality, the clear notion of collegiality, the relationship between Petrine ministry and individual, particular Churches or episcopal conferences, participation and co-responsibility in the Church, and ecumenical communion.⁴⁶

Church as Communion Realized in Liturgy

Originated from the Trinitarian communion and nourished in and through the Word of God, the Church as a communion realizes herself in the liturgy. The Church is Communion in the Spirit coming from the Trinity.⁴⁷ It is a divine initiative which is sacramentally expressed through the Word of God and the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, “The Eucharist is

www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communio-notio_en.html, accessed on 9th December 2021.

⁴⁵ J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Sources of the Ecclesiology of Communion*, Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 2001, 33.

⁴⁶ Cf. Final Report of 1985 extra ordinary Synod.

⁴⁷ Cf. Mathew Vellanickal, *Church: Communion of Individual Churches: Biblico-Theological Perspectives on the Communion Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, Mumbai, St. Paul Publications, 2010, 99.

the source and the culmination of the whole Christian life (cf. LG 11) The communion of the Eucharistic Body of Christ signifies and produces, that is, builds up, the intimate communion of all the faithful in the Body of Christ which is the Church (1 Cor. 10:16).⁴⁸ It is the Eucharist as the anamnesis of the paschal mysteries that reconcile humankind with God and with one another. The Eucharistic communion with Christ who nourishes the life of the Church is at the same time communion within the Body of Christ.⁴⁹

The ecclesial communion is at the same time both invisible and visible.⁵⁰ The invisible communion of each human being with the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit and with others who are fellow sharers in the divine nature, in the passion of Christ and in the same faith, in the same spirit take place in the Eucharistic celebration. At the same time, a visible communion of faithful in the teaching of the Apostles, in the sacraments, and in the hierarchical order also happens in the Eucharist. Thus, there is an intimate relationship between this invisible and visible communion which occurs in the Eucharist, is the creative force and source of the Church as a communion. In such a deep relationship, “Christ carries out in different ways in history his prophetic, priestly and kingly function for the salvation of the mankind.”⁵¹ It is in this sense that the Church becomes a sacrament and instrument of unity and of reconciliation of humankind expressed in *Lumen Gentium* 9. The concept of communion also denotes the communion of saints.

According to the final report of the Synod, the ecclesiology of communion also provides the sacramental foundation of collegiality. Synod explains the real sense of LG 22 which speaks about the collegiality of the bishops and their relation with the Pope. Vatican Council II also speaks of the role of the episcopal conferences of a nation or a territory in the exercise of pastoral services (CD 38). The ecclesiology of communion also affirms the participation and co-responsibility of all in the Church. LG 28 mentions the cordial relationship between bishops and priests and between priests and the faithful. The participation of the laity in the administration and pastoral activities of the Church in the West is also an

⁴⁸ Final Report of 1985 extra ordinary Synod.

⁴⁹ Vellanickal, 2010, 101.

⁵⁰ Cf. Letter from the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, no.4.

⁵¹ Cf. Letter from the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, no.4.

outcome of the new ecclesiological understanding. It is the ecclesiology of communion that fastened and deepened the ecumenical dialogues and thereby facilitated the relationship with other sister Churches. There arose a spirit of trust and collaboration between the Catholics and other Christians.

The Ecclesiology of St. Thomas Christians

When we look at the St. Thomas Christians, in the light of the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*, we find that all the above-mentioned ecclesiological emphasis are the important traits of their ecclesiology. It is common to all Eastern Churches that the liturgy of a Church is the manifestation of its ecclesial uniqueness. It is in the liturgy, tradition, structure, and spirituality of the St. Thomas Christians, as a worshiping community, that we encounter the apostolic origin and their growth in the unique ecclesial heritage, which is known as “*Marthoma Margam*,” or “The Law of Thomas,” that highlight their ecclesiology. We make a brief analysis of the concept of the Church as a mystery, as people of God, and as a communion reflected in the ecclesiology of St. Thomas Christians.

Church as Mystery Realized in Liturgy

For St. Thomas Christians, the liturgy is the time and locus where the mystery dimension of the Church is well manifested concretely. As we understand the ancient axiom, *lex orandi lex credidi*, the law of prayer stands for the liturgy, and the law of belief stands for the faith or the identity of the Church, they are aware that the liturgy is the moment that expresses the ecclesiology of the Church. Archbishop Powathil quotes Edward J. Kilmartin regarding the role of the liturgy in expressing the mystery dimension of the Church: “What sacraments manifest and realize is the Church in its the deepest being, namely, the communion of life between the Father and humankind in Christ through the Holy Spirit, which entails sharing of the life of faith between those who participate in the mystery of the shared Trinitarian life.”⁵² The ecclesiological concepts of the Church as a mystery, as People of God, the Body of Christ, and as Communion are obviously present in the liturgy, structure, and way of life of every individual Church. “Each Liturgy represents the theology and spirituality of the particular Church which uses it. As the witness of the traditional faith of a Church, it has dogmatic importance. It is through the study of the Liturgical texts

⁵² E. J. Kilmartin, “Sacraments as Liturgy of the Church”, *Theological Studies* 50, (1989), pp. 527-547, 527; Joseph Powathil, 2014, 157.

that different branches of theology should grow. Each liturgy enriches the faith and gives a particular dimension to it.”⁵³

The concept of mystery and communion are very significant in the Eastern, especially in the Syriac tradition. When we study the Eastern understanding regarding the concept of mystery which is especially behind the Syriac word *Raza* and its profound meanings, we find the same or more intuitions regarding the concept behind the Greek word *Mysterion* and Latin word *Sacramentum*. “In the Syriac tradition word, *Raz* provides in addition to the hidden plan of God’s salvation, the sacramental theology with a revelatory significance and explains the Holy *Qurbana* and all the sacraments of the Church in terms of revelation.”⁵⁴ There is enough research regarding the meanings and ecclesiological implications of the Syriac words *Raza*, *S^hawtaput^ha*⁵⁵, and *M^edabranut^ha*⁵⁶ and affirms that the concept of the mystery of the Church is an accepted fact in the Eastern ecclesiological understanding.

It is this *M^edabranut^ha*, realized in Jesus Christ continued through the Church, that is the core of East Syriac liturgical year which the Syro-Malabar Church has been using for centuries. The liturgical year of St. Thomas Christians is particularly centered around the mystery of divine dispensation, *M^edabranut^ha* accomplished in Jesus Christ and continued through the Church. The *Raza* or mystery of Trinity is revealed through *Oikonomia* as *koinonia* or communion. *Oikonomia* is God’s benevolent will and plan of salvation that was hidden from eternity but revealed through Jesus Christ. The feasts, commemorations, prayers, and rituals in different seasons of the liturgical year of the Syro-Malabar Church, express this concept of the divine origin and the unfolding of *M^edabranut^ha* of the Church very intensely.⁵⁷ The liturgical year begins with the weeks of Annunciation, which

⁵³ Thomas Manoorampambil, “Restoration of the Syro Malabar Qurbana,” *Christian Orient*, 8 (1987), 6

⁵⁴ Sophy Rose, *The Church as Mystery (Raza) ad Communion (s^hawtaput^ha) in the East Syriac Liturgical year: An Ecclesiological Analysis*, Kottayam, OIRSI, 207, 1998, 107-108.

⁵⁵ *M^edabranut^ha* is the Syriac word equivalent for Greek *Oikonomia* and Latin disposition and dispensation and denotes the revelation of God through the incarnation, life, and works of God.

⁵⁶ *S^hawtaput^ha* is the Syriac word equivalent to Greek *koinonia* and Latin *communio* and denotes fellowship or sharing with someone or something.

⁵⁷ Cf. Sophy Rose, 1998, 123.

focus on the revelation of the Savior, and ends with the weeks of the Dedication of the Church, the crowning of salvation, and the union of the Church with the Lord.⁵⁸ “Consequently, the redeemed community, the Church, is perpetually united with its Lord in the eternal bliss. The whole liturgical year is arranged in such a way as to help the faithful to attain salvation realized in the mysteries of Christ and the Church.”⁵⁹

There are a number of prayers in the *G'hanta* prayers in the *Anaphora of Mar Addai and Mari* in the *Anaphora of Mar Theodore of Mopsuestia* and in the Divine Office, which clearly remembers the wonderful economy of salvation. They explain the Trinitarian foundation of the Church as a mystery and the role of the Church. They show that the mystery of God, the mystery of God’s plan of salvation, and the mystery of the Church are intrinsically and intimately related. Thus, we can affirm that according to the self-understanding of the Syro-Malabar Church, “The mystery of the Church is rooted in the other two mysteries. As a mystery rooted in the divine mystery, the Church is revealed along with the revelation of God’s eternal plan of salvation and that is through the *ad extra* mission of the Son and Holy Spirit. Hence, the Church is derived from the divine economy of the Holy Trinity.”⁶⁰

Eucharistic Community Reveals the Nature of the People of God and Body of Christ

The Eucharist is the core of the ecclesiological identity of St. Thomas Christians as the People of God. They called the liturgy *Qurbana*, in which they celebrate the memory of the salvific events. They experience in their liturgy, which contains many Judeo-Christian elements, that they are the new People of God. They gather in the Church in the name of Jesus to commemorate and celebrate the tremendous awesome, holy, vivifying, and divine mystery of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings, and feast days, all the people gathered in the church to join with the priests in the recital of the divine

⁵⁸ Cf. John Moolen, *Liturgy of the Hours, (Divine Praises) Syro-Malabar Church*, Kottayam, OIRSI 389, 2014, 155; Maryann Madhavath, *Liturgy as a Sacrament of the Paschal Mystery: A Study of the Theological Relations between the Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours in the Roman and Syro-Malabar Rites*, (An unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 2016),7.

⁵⁹ Vellanickal, 2010, 309.

⁶⁰ Sophy Rose, 1998, 161.

office. They know that the liturgy is the manifestation of the Church as its apostolic faith *par excellence* and their Eucharistic assembly is the place where the Church is concretely manifested as the body of Christ. For them, it is through the Eucharist that the Church continually lives and grows, and all the members are united or linked by the very bonds by which the Body of Christ wishes it to be formulated. They acknowledge that the Eucharistic community is the full realization of the body of Christ concretely. It reveals the space-time dimension of the body of Christ.

Thus, just through the human body of Jesus Christ, the salvific action took place in the world concretely, the Eucharistic community or the Church as people of God becomes the sacrament of the body of Christ within a particular time and place. Various types and symbols used for the Church in the East Syriac liturgical sources especially in the liturgy of Syro-Malabar Church, also remind us clearly that the Church is a reality inseparably linked with the salvation history through the people of God and through the saving mystery of Jesus Christ, whose is finally endowed with the mission of leading the entire world into the eschaton.⁶¹

Since the St. Thomas Christians consider themselves as People of God, the role of the laity is very much prominent and active in their ecclesial administration. The ordinary lay faithful are not mere subjects of the hierarchical authorities as it was in the Western Church, but they involve actively both in Christian life and in the administrative affairs of the Church.⁶² The System of *Palliyogam* or parish Assembly at the grass-root level is the model of participatory administration even from the early times in the history of St. Thomas Christians. There were three kinds of *Yogams*, namely, *Palliyogam* (parish Assembly) at the parish level, *Desayogam* (Regional Assembly) at the regional level, and *Mahayogam* (General Assembly) at the national or general level concerning the whole Church. The *Palliyogam* was a kind of decentralized system that gave a sense of autonomy and responsibility to the parish assemblies.⁶³

The *Palliyogam* was the responsible body to take decisions in the parish level on matters like financial matters, construction of churches, support

⁶¹ Cf. Joseph Powathil, 2014, 163.

⁶² Cf. James Thalachelloor & Mathew Madathikunnel “Palliyogam among the St Thomas Christians,” James Thalachelloor, (ed.), *Mar Thoma Margam: The Ecclesial Heritage of the St Thomas Christians*, vol. V, Kottayam, OIRSI, 2012, 157- 165, 157.

⁶³ Cf. Thalachelloor & Madathikunnel, 2012, 158.

of priests, administration of temporalities of churches, determination of policies regarding the life and activities of the community, presentation of the recommendation letter to Bishop for those to be ordained from the parish, electing representatives to regional and national assemblies, assisting the poor, conducting *nerchas* (agape) on solemn feast days. The *Yogam* has also the duty to make decisions on cases and even to inflict punishments. According to Bishop Kallarangatt, the assemblies express the collegial or the communion aspect of the Church. They were effective means of decentralization and co-responsibility in the Church. They created participation at all levels of administration. They were blocking the one-sided monarchical and authoritarian elements in Church. They also created belongingness and brotherliness to each other. They enhanced a strong feeling of sisterhood and brotherhood among the St. Thomas Christians in Malabar.⁶⁴

Concept of the Church as Communion among St. Thomas Christians

Based on the concepts of the ecclesiology of communion also we can affirm that the St. Thomas Christians are well aware of the identity of the Church as a communion. The liturgy of Syro-Malabar Church is a magnificent expression of the ecclesial and cosmic communion. The Pauline formula of Trinitarian blessing, the prayers addressed to the Holy Trinity in the different Anaphora, the importance given to the 'Epiclesis' express the Trinitarian dimension of the Church as a communion.⁶⁵ The liturgy of Syro-Malabar Church is also expressing a universal or cosmic communion. "The concept of *communio* embraces not only the liturgical ministries or the participants but also the entire earthly and heavenly bodies and likewise all the elements of the universe. This means that the East Syrian liturgical theology considers the liturgical assembly as a *communio* in the Risen Lord which is extended from locally gathered liturgical assembly to the entire creation."⁶⁶

For St. Thomas Christians, the Eucharistic community is also a sacramental manifestation of ecclesial and hierarchical communion. They believe that when they belong to a local Eucharistic community or an individual Church, they are participating in the Catholic or universal

⁶⁴ Cf. J. Kallarangatt, 2012, 146-147.

⁶⁵ Cf. Vellanickal, 2010, 306.

⁶⁶ Joseph Powathil, 2014,181.

communion. For them, the Holy See of the Apostle Thomas is the principle of their communion. The head of their Church is the bond of their communion within themselves and with other sister Churches. “He serves as the link with the apostles and between the different Christian communities. It brings out the fact that a bishop is an ecclesial man. He is the guarantee of the intimate and interlocking relation between the community of believers and the mystery of Christ.”

The ecclesiastical organization of the St. Thomas Christians also expresses the aspect of the Church as communion. The administration of the Church was not concentrated on a single person as a bishop or a priest but on a collegial or Synodal administration under the leadership of *Jathikukarthavyan* (Archdeacon) until the coming of the Western missionaries. In the pre-Portuguese period, the prelates from the East Syrian Church were their spiritual head and was revered enthusiastically. The prelates were saintly persons who did not interfere in the temporal and social administration of the community. They concentrated mainly on the sanctification of the faithful through the administration of sacraments and the preaching of the Word of God. The Archdeacon handled the temporal and social matters at the national level and by the *Yogam* (Assembly) at the parish, regional and national levels. It is the Archdeacon, who was the real head and Governor of St. Thomas Christians from early times. The Archdeacon of all India was the royally privileged unifying head of the St. Thomas Christians who preserved, protected, and promoted individuality, identity, and heritage of the Church and safeguarded its autonomy, prestige, and independence. His was an office and dignity which the Church of India adopted from her Sister Church and adapted to her peculiar organizational structure. Archdeacon has a unique, distinct, and important respect in the East Syrian or Persian Church.

After analyzing the ecclesiology of St. Thomas Christians in the light of different ecclesiological notions of Vatican Council II reflected in *Lumen Gentium*, we can easily conclude that even centuries before the Council, the St. Thomas Christians were conscious of their unique identity. They could keep the fundamental Eastern patristic notions regarding the essence of the Church as a mystery and a communion whose source is the Trinitarian communion. They understand, live, and proclaim their ecclesial identity as people of God co-extensive with the Body of Christ, which they celebrate in their liturgy, and live in their own way of life as *Thomayude Margam*.