What kind of trust in the Church? A theological reflection

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to trust in the Church? The Church is a unique subject, whose identity and mission must be understood in order to determine which form of trust in her is the most appropriate. Understanding the Church as the mystery of the presence of God, who humbles himself to accompany human beings in human reality and history allows us to recognize that she can only present herself as a paradoxical phenomenon, characterized by tensions, the most serious of which is that between holiness and sin. This essay outlines the identity of the Church as a mystery and a paradox, and refers in particular to the thought of Henri de Lubac as support. A keener awareness of the paradoxical nature of the Church, which emerged in the twentieth century, led to significant gestures such as the request for forgiveness made by John Paul II in the Jubilee at the start of the new millennium. Evil in the Church provokes scandal and inevitably leads to a loss of trust. Paradoxically, however, a faith based on God and his promise can subsist, and it allows us to make sense of evil itself, without justifying it. It becomes an occasion for a greater revelation of God’s mercy on the Church herself, and on the world.

1. Introduction: what does it mean to trust in the Church?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to give definitions of what is original, of primary attitudes or actions that are irreducible to others. Thus, if we ask ourselves what it means to trust, we must resort to analogies with similar human attitudes so that we can attempt to distinguish and specify the nature of the attitude of trust. As soon as we try to do so, we realize that trust is always directed toward a subject, it is based on motivations, and it has a specific scope or content. In fact, trusting actually has something in common with believing, with expecting something and having confidence; but each of these acts is directed at someone, at a subject, which is usually another person or institution. Nonetheless, one can also trust in oneself or in God. The act of trusting, moreover, is motivated by and based on an experience or a positive evaluation of that subject’s behaviour, which convinces, guarantees, and offers proof of its reliability.

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Finally, no matter how solid the motivation for the trust placed in a subject, it is never unlimited, but always refers to something, has a scope, and has specific content: the expectations that I can legitimately place in the state are different from those I have in an institution like, for example, the school system or an association with other specific purposes. The expectations that I have of my family doctor, an architect, or a trusted accountant are also different. The differences are evidently rooted in the diversity of the subjects and their roles and areas of expertise. Even in the case of a greater trust, such as in a friend or a parent, it remains clear that this trust cannot be unlimited.1

Focusing on the content of trust, in relation to its subject, is always helpful for avoiding false expectations or misunderstandings, but it is especially so when reflecting on the Church and what it means to place trust in her. The Church is indeed, as we shall see, a very unique subject, as is her purpose and role in the world—we might say—her mission. Only when we understand this uniqueness can we get an idea of the type of trust—also unique—that is most appropriate to place in her. In other words, our topic of discussion—trust in the Church—raises some fundamental questions. What is the identity of the Church? What is her function, her mission? Exactly what, therefore, should she give us, and what could we legitimately ask of her? What should be the ‘content’ of our trust in the Church? Moreover: can we trust that we will find what we should truly seek in the Church?

This last question relates to the problem of the motives on which to base trust in the Church. This is a delicate problem for at least two reasons: the first is that, in anticipation of what we shall more thoroughly discuss soon, what the Church claims she can offer is the most important thing imaginable, and what is most valid for human life—something that would merit the full, absolute trust of the human being. This trust obviously cannot be given lightly but only on the basis of extremely serious and well-founded reasons. The second reason is that, as the history of the Church clearly shows, we do not only find in her reasons for trust, but also objectionable aspects and reasons for blame. And this is true both in her institutional dimension—in the management of economic resources, in communication or in the dynamics of decision making—and in the behaviour of her members, that of both the lay-faithful and ministers.2 We are not concerned here with how to increase or regain trust in the Church by correcting errors and creating the conditions to avoid them. This requires approaches and solutions that are dealt with broadly in the other contributions in this special issue. The reflection that we want to present is, rather, theological. But it is essential, even for this purpose, to assume one thing: in her historical, concrete action the Church also demonstrates objectionable aspects, she has been the subject of actions that everyone can recognize—not only in retrospect, as a result of a more mature awareness or change in cultural sensibilities—as unjust and even scandalous, and has been the cause of sometimes irreversible damage to innocent people, in stark contrast with the truth and with the care for the good of human beings, of which she claims to be the bearer.3 Therefore, the last question that we had just formulated can be completed in this way: can we trust that we will find in the Church what we should really be looking for in her, despite the objectionable aspects that she shows so clearly?

Before we focus on responding to the questions that have been posed, it is helpful to consider the case of a great modern-era witness to the faith. In October of 1845, after a
long and troubled intellectual, existential, and spiritual journey, John Henry Newman, then an Anglican priest, took the step that definitively marked his entry into the Catholic Church. Not even one year earlier, he had written in a letter to a friend: ‘I have no existing sympathies with Roman Catholics. [...] I do not like what I hear of them’ (Newman 1865, 319). And as late as January of 1845 he wrote: ‘The state of the Roman Catholics is at present so unsatisfactory’ (Newman 1865, 322). Even after his admission into the Catholic Church he would face a difficult road, which included suffering at the hands of his new fellow travellers, the Catholics—some of whom viewed his change with suspicion at a time when the tensions with Anglican confession were strong. What compelled Newman to make a decision that required so much personal travail, estrangement from his Anglican friends and colleagues, and the loss of the esteem he once enjoyed, for the sake of joining a new ecclesial group toward which he had no sympathy? He chose to seek the truth above all else: even above his own feelings and his deepest bonds of friendship and life. He made his decision when he became aware that the Catholic Church of his time was the same Church of the Apostles which, as a living organism, was transformed over time while still maintaining the same identity and faith of her origins. It was therefore the Church in which he could find the truth revealed by God in Christ. Newman chose the truth and believed that it can be found in the depositum fidei kept and handed down by the Church, in spite of the errors and limitations of her ministers.

In what follows, we too shall focus on the identity and mission of the Church, to show that what she is called to give the world is in fact the truth and the possibility of experiencing God. This is what we can and should expect, above all else, from the Church. We shall also see that the necessary trust, the most fitting trust to place in her, is not simply or primarily trust ‘in the Church,’ but rather ‘in God himself; and that it is not properly called trust but ‘faith.’

2. The identity and mission of the Church

At the beginning of one of his works on the Church, composed a couple of years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, the great Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac suggested adopting a ‘contemplative’ view of the Church to understand her. While other approaches of a more ‘critical’ or scientific nature (exegetical, hermeneutical, sociological, etc.) are beneficial, he explained that such a gaze, in the case of the Church, is not only good but necessary, ‘if we admit that the alpha and the omega of this great object is summed up in one word: ‘mystery” (de Lubac 1967, 1, our translation). This is the way that the recently concluded Council chose to name the first chapter of Lumen gentium (the document dedicated specifically to reflection on the Church [Vatican Council II 1964]): De Ecclesiae mysterio. That is how the Church understands herself: as a ‘mystery.’ But what does this term mean when applied to the Church? And why is a ‘contemplative’ gaze needed in the face of a reality that, like the Church, is a mystery?

According to the New Testament, mystery is that which pertains to God, his wisdom, and his salvific plan (1 Cor 2: 7) and which is revealed and realized in history. Insofar as it is rooted in God, the mystery is elusive to human beings and superior to
our capacity to understand it; and yet it is made visible and somehow intelligible to us, since it is put into effect and made present in the world. The person of Christ—with his whole life and especially with his death and resurrection—is the mystery par excellence. He is in fact that ‘content’ of the Trinity’s plan of love toward human beings, and it is in him that this plan is revealed and put into action. In the words of de Lubac, ‘in Christ, God has become for us, in the sense that we have just said, a mystery: […] the being who in his intimate life, as well as in his free plans, makes himself freely known, and the knowledge of whom it will always be possible to examine further, without ever exhausting him’ (de Lubac, 1967, 14–15, our translation). In Jesus, the invisible God makes himself visible—‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14: 9)—and he speaks and works through us: ‘The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves.’ (John 14: 10–11).

As mystery par excellence, Christ linked the Church indissolubly with himself, wanting to remain present and active in her forever. ‘I am with you always, until the end of the age’ (Matt. 28: 20), he says to his disciples before ascending to the Father. His mandate to those first members of the Church derives from his own mission, which he received from the Father: ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ (John 20: 21). In this way the risen Lord confirmed what he had said throughout his preaching, when he had gathered and sent forth his disciples: ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me’ (Luke 10: 16). So that the Church may carry out the mission of making Christ present until the end of history, he commands them to perpetuate the memorial of his sacrifice in the Eucharist (Luke 22: 19) and promises to send his and the Father’s Spirit, so that he may make her grow in truth (John 16: 13). These references to Christ’s words and deeds, though essential and by no means exhaustive, may be enough to give us an idea of why we say that the Church herself is a mystery. She is a mystery ‘by derivation’, ‘because she refers entirely to Christ, having no existence, value, and efficacy except by him’ (de Lubac 1967, 15, our translation).

There is a deep analogy between Christ as the Word incarnate and the Church, in their both being a mystery. As in the Word Incarnate, Christ’s human nature manifests his divinity and is a tool, or rather ‘a living organ of salvation’ according to the beautiful expression in Lumen gentium (no. 8), so in the Church, her visible and human ‘social organism’ manifests Christ and serves the Spirit who makes her action effective in the world. Like Christ, therefore, the Church also has a divine-human constitution, a visible and invisible dimension. In her visible, human dimension, she is a sign of the invisible and divine reality. Like an iceberg, whose summit emerges to reveal the presence of the submerged part that sustains it, the human community that constitutes the visible Church, with her structure, rites, and ways of life, makes it possible to get a glimpse of the divine reality that animates her. We can say (to paraphrase a very patristic sounding expression used by the Council) that the Church is a mystery whose roots sink into the very mystery of Christ, and therefore that of the Trinity.

In this way, we can understand why the authentic identity of the Church is only revealed to a ‘contemplative’ gaze. This kind of gaze is necessary for delving into the
mystery and grasping it in its entirety; not focusing on visible and partial elements, but coming to understand the invisible and foundational ones, that is, grasping the presence of Christ in the Church through the work of the Spirit. The result of an exclusively empirical approach with an analytic gaze would be to apply partial concepts and categories to the Church, and these are not sufficient to describe her. For example, according to the type of analysis she is subjected to, one could say that the hierarchical structure of the Church is analogous to other social and political forms; that she is more or less close to a democratic system; that her rites, to a comparative study, show similarities that are more or less marked with those of other religious traditions; that the same could be said for different aspects of her moral doctrine; or that in her realization in the spheres of charity, social welfare, or education, she is similar to other entities or agencies. But no such description, although capable of grasping real aspects of the Church as a subject, can understand her deepest identity. We get much closer to the core of the mystery by contemplating the Church through what theology, starting from Revelation, can say.

To be honest, no category is entirely adequate or capable of exhaustively describing what the Church is—not even if that category comes from Revelation. And this is precisely because the Church is a mystery. As such, she can be known (albeit never completely) only by putting together many concepts, and in particular, many images and analogies. Since no one image is completely sufficient, each one must be corrected by the others and composed with them (Cf. de Lubac 1967, 22). The Church in her tradition has done just that on the basis of Scripture—she has expanded the images through which she understands herself and describes herself, without being able to define herself in a univocal way. It is interesting to recall some of the main images, in order to realize how the inseparable interweaving of human and divine is essential to the reality of the Church: she is the Body of Christ, of whom he is the Head, Bride of the Word, Temple of the Holy Spirit, People of God. The first term in each of these expressions represents the human dimension in which the divine reality, described in the second, is made present. One of the most beautiful and succinct expressions coined by the last Council to designate the mystery of the Church is offered in Lumen gentium, no. 1: 'the Church is in Christ like a sacrament [veluti sacramentum] or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.'

These or similar theological descriptions at least point to the mystery of the Church in her totality and depth. She is where communion between human beings can take place thanks to the initiative of God who communicates himself in Christ, the Son of the Father made man. The personal union of each of the faithful with Christ is the basis of interpersonal communion in the Church. Thus, the actions best suited to this subject sui generis that is the Church are those in which the encounter between God and human beings is realized: they are the proclamation and teaching of the Word of God, the sacraments, and in particular the Eucharist, where Christ communicates himself to those who are gathered in his name, charity, which is participation in his Spirit of love. The historical origin of the Church, her formation around the nucleus of Jesus’ disciples, and the impetus to evangelization that brought her to all continents and cultures, can only be explained on the basis of this fundamental awareness: the Church
knows that she is the community in which Christ is present and that what she has to offer the world is nothing other than the encounter with him.10

In discussing the identity of the Church, we have already stated also her main purpose, her mission: to make possible for everyone a personal encounter with Christ and participation in the communion that he generates. Saint John Paul II summarized this mission as such: ‘In my first encyclical, in which I set forth the program of my Pontificate, I said that ‘the Church’s fundamental function in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct man’s gaze, to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity toward the mystery of Christ’ (Pope John Paul II 1990, no. 4). And Pope Francis, who from the beginning of his pontificate recalled that ‘missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity’ (Pope Francis 2013, no. 15), explains that this action consists primarily in the annunciation (kerygma) of the Gospel, in whose ‘basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead’ (no. 36). All that the Church is, is for this mission. Her whole visible, institutional dimension must indeed serve the proclamation of Christ, in the conviction that he is the way, the truth, and the life of humankind (John 14: 6). In this way, the Church who evangelizes does not teach her own truths, but the Truth that is Christ. She does not intend to bind people by arbitrary moral precepts, but to show them the Way—that is Christ himself—for a just and good human existence, for a happy and fulfilled life. The Church, in short, based on her own experience in the faith, is convinced that human beings cannot fully become themselves unless they freely adhere, out of love, to the truth about themselves and about God who comes to meet them in Christ; and her end is nothing other than supporting such an encounter.

In his contemplation of the Church, while attempting to penetrate her mystery which is revealed and at the same time hidden in many images, Henri de Lubac identifies a word to express what she is for him: ‘a word that is the simplest, the most child-like, and everyone’s first: the Church is my mother. Yes, the Church, all the Church, that of the past generations who have passed to me her life, teachings, examples, habits, and love—and that of today; the whole Church’ (de Lubac 1967, 4, our translation).11

In saying that the Church is a ‘mother’ he basically expresses in personalistic terms the Church’s raison d’être as we have just described it. Indeed, he adds: ‘In a word, the Church is our mother because she gives us Christ. She generates Christ in us and in turn generates our life in Christ. She tells us, like Paul to his dear Corinthians: ‘I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel’ (de Lubac 1967, 6, our translation). In a text that is impressive for its depth of faith and intensity of love, in which one can certainly intuit his personal experience, he describes the Christian’s relationship with the Church (de Lubac 1953, 165–166, our translation):

The Church has stolen his heart. She is his spiritual home. She is ‘his mother and his brothers.’ Nothing that touches her leaves him indifferent or insensitive. He is rooted in her, he is formed in her image, he becomes part of her experience, and feels rich in her richness. He is aware that he participates, through her and her alone, in the stability of God. From the Church he learns to live and die. He does not judge her but lets himself be judged by her. He joyfully accepts every sacrifice for her unity.

Henri de Lubac testifies that a contemplative gaze is one of faith and love. Such a gaze is what allows us to grasp the deepest truth in the mystery of the Church. His
testimony has special significance if one thinks that the book *Méditation sur l’Église (Meditation on the Church)*, in which he wrote these words, was printed at the end of a few years of suspension from teaching imposed on him by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In those years of suffering, incomprehension, and silence, which he endured with humility, his closeness with and love for the Church, rather than waning, became even deeper and more mature, and the book that came out of it is a true love song to her.

We can therefore summarize the Church’s identity and mission by saying that she is the mystery of God’s communion with human beings, the bride of Christ, the mother who wants to generate the true life of human beings by giving them the life of Christ himself through the Holy Spirit who dwells within her. Therefore, this is precisely what she intends to offer the world, and what those who look to the Church should seek in her before and above all else. This is where we find the proper content of the expectation and ‘trust’ with which people should approach her. It has already been said, moreover, that only a contemplative attitude, which unites faith and love, can grasp the identity of the Church as a reality that is animated by the Spirit of truth and love, who mysteriously unites her to Christ and therefore to God, and makes her capable of communicating him to the world. The necessary ‘trust’, in short, seems to be closer to faith in the strict sense—theological faith, which has God as its object and guarantor—than to a form of trust based on human motives. God’s presence in the Church should be the most decisive reason to direct the right trust—faith—toward her. However, we must now address the following point: it is thanks to the witness of the Church that God wants to make himself ‘visible’ and ‘encounterable’ in the world, but this witness is far from clear and unequivocal. It has a paradoxical nature in that it ought to be the visible manifestation of God, of truth and good, while it often presents itself as murky, obscure, and even scandalous. How, then, can it make God visible? How can the Church’s testimony render him, and thus itself, credible?

3. The paradox of the Church and her credibility

During the great Jubilee that marked the start of the third millennium, John Paul II wanted to make a solemn act of asking God for forgiveness for the sins committed by Christians throughout history: ‘As the Successor of Peter, I ask that in this year of mercy the Church, strong in the holiness which she receives from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters’ (Pope John Paul II 1998, no. 11). During a Eucharistic celebration on 12 March 2000, the Pope took that action, recognizing, alongside the Church’s holiness and dedication to Christ and our neighbours, the infidelities to the Gospel for which her children have been responsible. Forgiveness was asked both for past events—in particular ‘for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions’—and for the responsibilities of Christians ‘for the evils of today,’ because, ‘we must ask ourselves what our responsibilities are regarding atheism, religious indifference, secularism, ethical relativism, the violations of the right to life, disregard for the poor in many countries’ (Pope John Paul II 2000, no. 4).
The decision of John Paul II, despite its exceptional nature, was in keeping with a process that had begun some time before and had its authoritative precedents in Paul VI and in the Second Vatican Council. In the constitution *Lumen gentium* (no. 8), the Council had made a clear distinction between the fidelity and holiness of the Church and the weaknesses, errors, and sins of her members, pastors, and lay-faithful, at every time in history: ‘the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal.’ To be honest, this awareness has always been present in the Church. The New Testament writings themselves show contrasts, divisions, and miseries in the early Christian communities, and later documents of the tradition all bear witness to this. The ecclesial authority has often corrected abuses and culpable attitudes of ministers, religious, and laypeople. Moreover, the fact that Christians must have recourse to God’s mercy in the sacrament of Reconciliation for their own sins has always been clearly recognized. Yet the request for forgiveness in 2000, followed by other similar expressions by the Popes over the years,13 shows a clearer awareness of the Church as a reality that we can call ‘paradoxical’, and of the need to recognize her as such, to acknowledge faults, and to take full responsibility.

Theology, as early as the second half of the twentieth century and especially after the Council, has reflected and focused on this paradoxical nature of the Church, which stands out to anyone who looks at it dispassionately.14 De Lubac, that great lover of the Church, expresses it like this (de Lubac 1967, 2, our translation):

> What a paradox, in her reality, is this Church, in all her conflicting aspects! [...] Yes, I believe it, the Church is *complexio oppositorum*; but, at first blush, is it not necessary for me to recognize that the clash of the *opposita* hides the unity of the *complexio* from me? [...] I am told that she is holy, and I see that she is full of sinners. I am told that her mission is to pull man from earthly concerns, to remind him of his vocation to eternity, and I see her incessantly occupied with the things of our earth and time [...]. They assure me that she is universal [...], and I very often see her members, by a kind of fatality, shyly withdrawn into closed groups, like human beings everywhere. She is proclaimed immutable [...], and suddenly, before our eyes, she disconcerts a number of the faithful with her abrupt renewals ... Yes, the paradox of the Church.

Upon closer inspection, it is not only because of the presence of sin in her members that the Church looks to us like a paradoxical phenomenon. This is how she manifests herself, as paradoxical, because in her identity she is ‘mystery’, an earthly reality with divine roots, a visible body with a spiritual soul. Truly, that is to say, ‘the paradox is the veiling of the mystery’ (Latourelle 1971, 226, our translation), and in a certain sense it is ‘natural’ that contrasting aspects coexist within the Church—dimensions that would seem incompatible and tensions that seem unsustainable. René Latourelle distinguishes three main paradoxical figures, each of which contain several tensions: the paradox of unity—with the tensions between the locality and universality of the Church and with the wounds of communion provoked by the divisions between confessions; the paradox and tensions between temporality and perenniality—with the problems of difficult interaction between Christianity and cultures, the Church and earthly powers, etc. and finally the most serious, the paradox/tension between holiness and sin in the Church.15
Now, it is undoubtable that at first glance the paradoxical appearance of the Church is an obstacle to her comprehension and, especially in her dimension of sin, a scandal for the conscience of faithful and non-faithful who are thus dissuaded from trusting her. More or less understandably, they indeed criticize the Church for many reasons and reproach the behaviour of many of her members. We can certainly say that what her children so frequently offer is a counter-witness to the presence of Christ in the Church, which makes her less credible in her identity and in her mission of proclaiming and ‘giving him’ to the world. One could surely contrast this fact with opposing (that is, positive) evidence and show that the history of the Church is studded with luminous examples, with witnesses of coherence between life and professed faith, of integral conduct, of authentic and generous love of Christians toward each other and toward non-believers, of contributions that Christianity has made to civilization in the most diverse fields, from assisting every class of needy people, to the establishment of universities to promote culture. But, although the value of the positive witnesses is great, it remains indispensable to reflect on negative data, to understand them, if possible in the very light of what the Church is: of her identity. Only this way, those facts that seem to deny any claim the Church has to presenting herself as the repository of a special knowledge and mode of God’s presence in the world, can cease to be stumbling blocks and, paradoxically, become steps for a deeper access to her mystery.

It is necessary, first of all, to provide a theological explanation of the fact, the scandal, of evil in the Church; secondly, to show the sense that can be given to this fact in the light of faith. If we consider the way in which God has intervened in human history in that process that we call Revelation, starting from Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, to the coming of his Son into our midst—Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us—we see that God never intended to act alone. He involves human beings. The initiative is his, God’s initiative, as is the gift of ‘power from on high’—his Spirit (Luke 24: 49; Acts 1: 8)—but the acceptance, the response, and the fidelity to this initiative and this gift is up to human beings. To very briefly summarize, the reason for this way of acting—this salvific economy, to put it in theological terms—is described by Saint Augustine: ‘He who created you without you does not save you without you.’ God’s work in each person and in the world—salvation—is indeed essentially the gift of his love which, if accepted, establishes communion with him and generates a positive tension toward communion among human beings. But love cannot be imposed. Its acceptance presupposes the partner’s freedom. God therefore carries out salvation in the life of the human being with condescension (con-descendere, to descend with or alongside), that is, in a way that conforms to the personal nature of the human being himself, who is capable of self-determination and of accepting God’s communication only within a dynamic of freedom. Moreover, humans are also social beings and salvation inevitably has a social dimension, in that it involves interpersonal communion. Indeed, the Church is where God’s salvation is fulfilled in a personal and communal way and in a historical way, that is, one characterized by freedom. Therefore, we should expect to find in the Church all the limitations and instances of resistance to God’s love and truth resulting from human freedom, conditionings, deviations, and infidelities, as well as the fruits of living a good life, of luminous and fruitful love that awaken when grace is accepted and actualized. But precisely in this way, the Church can be recognized as
the place in which God’s salvation truly touches human beings, in that historical and condescending way that is proper to God’s action. It is also possible to recognize that the only adequate explanation of the phenomenon of the Church as she manifests herself, with her paradoxical tensions, is the Church’s own explanation of herself: that her whole being and action proceed from God’s salvific initiative which culminated in Jesus Christ and his presence, accepted, however, in the chiaroscuro of freedom, in human hearts marked by frailty.¹⁹ This explains why, as the Council states in a sentence that we only partially quoted above: ‘While Christ, ‘holy, innocent and undefiled’ (Heb 7: 26) knew nothing of sin (cf. 2 Cor 5: 21) but came to expiate only the sins of the people (cf. Heb 2: 17) the Church, embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal’ (Vatican Council II 1964, no. 8).

Instead, what is the meaning that can be given to the painful fact of sin and all kinds of error and human limitations in the Church? Asking about this means asking ourselves whether, in addition to judging evil and sin as unacceptable and taking responsibility for them (before God and other people), the Church can also learn something. In this regard, the words of Benedict XVI in 2010 to the victims of abuse and their families are enlightening in their gravity. They deserve to be quoted in full, but space does not allow it. The Pontiff began by demonstrating a deep understanding of the ‘grievous’ suffering of the victims and how extremely difficult it is for them to reconcile with the Church. After having expressed ‘shame’ and ‘remorse’ on behalf of the Church, he humbly described the way back to communion with her, with these words of encouragement:

At the same time, I ask you not to lose hope. It is in the communion of the Church that we encounter the person of Jesus Christ, who was himself a victim of injustice and sin. Like you, he still bears the wounds of his own unjust suffering. He understands the depths of your pain and its enduring effect upon your lives and your relationships, including your relationship with the Church. I know some of you find it difficult even to enter the doors of a church after all that has occurred. Yet Christ’s own wounds, transformed by his redemptive sufferings, are the very means by which the power of evil is broken and we are reborn to life and hope. I believe deeply in the healing power of his self-sacrificing love—even in the darkest and most hopeless situations—to bring liberation and the promise of a new beginning (Pope Benedict XVI 2010, no. 6, our italics).

In spite of everything: the difficulty and the perhaps (humanly speaking) near impossibility of regaining trust after the trauma experienced, Benedict XVI invites people to return to the Church in order to encounter the person of Jesus Christ—and him in his suffering, capable of understanding and able to break, with his love, the power of evil that poisons and paralyzes life with despair. The Pontiff therefore invites people to return to the Church to find Jesus Christ along with consolation and hope in him. He emphasized again: ‘Speaking to you as a pastor concerned for the good of all God’s children, I humbly ask you to consider what I have said. I pray that, by drawing nearer to Christ and by participating in the life of his Church—a Church purified by penance and renewed in pastoral charity—you will come to rediscover Christ’s infinite love for each one of you. I am confident that in this way you will be able to find reconciliation, deep inner healing and peace’ (Pope Benedict 2010, no. 6).
Here we find a possible meaning that the experience of evil can take on. As far as the Church is concerned, this experience—the sin that is present in her children, especially in ministers in exercising their mission—leads her to remember that her raison d’être is not to gain followers but to foster an encounter with Christ, and that she has no other purpose or anything of her own to offer, other than Christ. Nor should she be concerned with maintaining and protecting herself, but only the dignity and good of people, in the name of Christ who died and rose again to redeem and save each one of them. However, something similar can also be said for all of us who look to the Church and, seeing shadows and shortcomings, feel our trust in her diminish or fade away. Following the invitation of Benedict XVI, we can then turn with a more penetrating gaze—the gaze of faith—to the search for Christ hidden in the Church, who continues to offer himself to human beings through her, to be encountered in his Word, in the Eucharist, and in the charity of the saints.

Let us try to review what has been said so that we can conclude. Being a mystery of a divine presence—that of Jesus Christ and his Spirit—in a human reality marked by frailty, the Church has a paradoxical nature that becomes particularly and painfully evident when she manifests corruption and sin, which cause scandal and can stamp out trust in her. However, in this paradox and scandal, a new element is strengthened: the fact that the Church is not and cannot be seen as anything other than a ‘sign of Christ,’ and that she is, in her true nature, a mystery ‘by derivation,’ entirely dependent on the mystery of God made man, of Emmanuel. Tradition has devised an evocative image: the Church is mysterium lunae; that is, like the night-time star, she reflects the light of the Sun-Christ in the darkness of earth.20 This darkness is also found in her. She herself suffers from it—like a mother suffers and bears the evil that she sees in her children—but at the same time she never ceases to reflect the light of Christ. Indeed, when it shines on the sin in the Church, this light reveals the merciful face of the Lord like never before. The Church then bears first-hand witness to the fact that the God in whom she believes and places her hope is the God of patient and merciful love. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in recent years, in which signs of sin and corruption which also affect the Church have sometimes virulently emerged, her proclamation of God’s mercy has increasingly gained strength.21

But is this very annunciation not what is critically needed by the world, by each individual and human institution? Is it not precisely the paternal patience of God, his love that is able to gather, heal, embrace, and restore dignity and hope (Luke 15: 11-32), to which we should all appeal? Thus, the Church, which finds herself in such need of mercy, can also invoke it with even more strength upon the world. Thus, God who in the Church is hidden by the sin of his children—precisely because of this—paradoxically appears revealed in his merciful countenance.

4. Conclusion: in what can we believe?

At the beginning of these reflections we asked ourselves some questions about the Church as the subject in which to place trust and about the credentials that she can offer. However, we have also highlighted the fact that it is the ‘content’, the object of this trust, which has special importance, and that this depends on the identity of the
subject and its declared mission. Now we can say that this content or object is nothing less than the presence of Christ in the Church, or rather the possibility of encountering him in her. This is the object because it is how the Church conceives of herself and her mission. The possibility of encountering Christ, and nothing else, is what she believes she can give the world and not even sin, from which she is not immune, can really stand in the way. In this sense, the Church is a subject that is essentially defined in relation with Another, that is, with Christ. Her ‘reliability’ is therefore ultimately based on Christ’s promise to remain present in her forever, through the gift of his Spirit.

How should this reliability be described? And how should one refer to the corresponding attitude towards it? We said that it is a God-given reliability. And its content or object is the encounter with God as much as possible in the Church. Then, in the most proper sense, we must say that one can have ‘faith’ (in the strict sense, that is, theological faith) in the Church as a subject capable of realizing—by the power of the Spirit—that for which she exists, that is, the mission for which God has established her in Christ. We specifically say ‘faith’, and not just ‘trust’, because it is an attitude based on the credibility of God and God’s faithfulness to what he has promised (Matt 16: 18; Matt 28: 18-20; John 16:13). It is an attitude, moreover, that is sustained by the inner grace of the Spirit, by the power ‘to see’ in the visible aspects of the Church, with a contemplative gaze, sufficient signs to believe that she is truly the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit; and this in spite of her evident shortcomings.

Faith can be seen as a kind of trust, but a trust that has both an object and a motivation that are not simply ‘human’, but supernatural. An attitude of trust in the Church as a human institution is clearly possible for anyone, faithful or non-faithful. This human trust, which expects from the Church the virtuous behaviour of similar institutions, to whatever degree those other institutions are truly analogous, can only be based on the credentials she provides in terms of virtuous behaviour. And it can, indeed it must, be given or revoked based on these. It is obviously desirable that, also as a human institution, the Church should show herself to be as worthy as possible of this trust and commit herself to recovering it when it has been diminished or lost entirely. And yet, even though she may sometimes be unworthy of trust, paradoxically the Church is always worthy of faith, in the theological sense.

In fact, it is clear that even an attitude of faith is undoubtably hampered by the scandal of evil in the Church: it becomes more difficult to ‘see’ God in her and through her. That is to say, it is valuable, including for the purposes of faith, that the Church as a whole and in her individual members should be ‘transparent’ to the presence of Christ, showing in herself the effect of this presence in communion and in the unity that she embodies in herself, as well as in the witness of truth and love that she offers to the world. It would be desirable for her to always prove virtuous in the management of resources at her disposal, the clarity of her communication, and the coherence between her principles and actions. However, when these credentials should, to a greater or lesser extent, fail, the distinction between the attitude of theological faith and simple trust would become apparent. This is because there would be every reason for trust to be withdrawn: it is based on what is visible and expects what the people or the institution perceptibly do and give. It does not search for the ‘more’, which is the possibility of the encounter with Christ, because it does not see the reality of the Church in
her mystery. Faith, instead, can remain, because it is really adherence to God, who wants to be present in the Church in spite of everything. And whoever is animated by it seeks Christ in the Church and can have the security of finding him in spite of everything.

This distinction between mere trust and theological faith may explain why the faith of God’s people is so tenacious and why it is not lost in crises and scandals, even though it gets wounded and shaken. It has its deepest roots and drops its anchor in a seabed that remains stable despite the turbulence on the surface. When it is disturbed, faith knows that it can turn with greater intensity to the Church as mother who holds within herself the most precious treasures, which no internal or external force can tear away from her. Faith makes it possible to trust in the teaching of the Word of God that is authoritatively presented by the Church, in the efficacy of the action of Christ in the sacraments and in his real presence in the Eucharist, in the fact that Christ is irrevocably united to his Church and that in her he always offers himself to people as salvation, and in the fact that holiness, even in the midst of filth, will never be extinguished because the Spirit will always make it shine in some authentic witnesses. Finally, faith trusts in the mercy that, even through the Church’s wounds, God continues to effuse throughout the world.

We have been witnesses to a powerful sign in the distressing moments of the pandemic that has stricken the whole world. We have seen the Pope praying alone in a deserted Saint Peter’s Square, with no crowds or solemn liturgies and no power to concretely solve anything. Alone, as if himself representing the whole Church, standing before the Crucifix and before the image of the Christ’s Mother, the Mother of us all. In this essential sign we could see the essence of the Church, what she can give, what we can always expect from her in faith. Before that ancient and venerated Crucifix, coming from the Roman church of San Marcello al Corso, Pope Francis prayed for the world. Before that same Crucifix, in 2000, John Paul II had raised his solemn request for forgiveness. The open heart of the crucified and risen Christ is the source of all the good of the Church, of the mercy that washes away her sins and cleanses her visage, and of the grace that the Church implores him to pour out as forgiveness and blessing over the whole world.

Notes

1. The topic of trust has come to the fore in the past few years in several different fields: sociology, communications, and even theology have all taken an interest in it in various ways. For some references, see: Luhmann (2002); Natoli (2016); Scillitani (2007); Manicardi et al. (2013); Maiolini (2005).

2. The awareness of the limitations and errors that characterize the concrete action of the Church is a constant in her history, expressed, for instance, in the formula Ecclesia semper reformanda. See, in this regard, the fundamental study by Congar ([1968] 1972). As Pié-Ninot recalls (2008, 638), in the years surrounding the Second Vatican Council there was a special awareness of the paradoxical character of the Church, radically holy and at the same time marked by the sin of her members, which prompted a renewal of ecclesiology. The writings of Rahner (1968, [1980] 1982), von Balthasar (1961), and Ratzinger (1970, 1971) bear witness to this. The renewal promoted by the Council is very well described in De Salis (2017). For an interpretation of the current situation and the challenges facing the Church today, both from within and without, cf.: Dianich (2014); Taylor et al. (2016); Spadaro and Galli (2016); Regoli (2016); and Repole (2019).
3. At a conference in 1970, Joseph Ratzinger could state that, regarding the luminous image of the Church as *signum levatum in nationes*, outlined by Vatican Council I, "today the opposite seems entirely true: she is not a prodigiously widespread institution, but an empty and stagnant association that is unable to seriously transcend the confines of the European and medieval spirit; not a deep holiness, but a set of all the shameful actions of men, soiled and mortified by a history that has not been without any kind of scandal, from the persecution of heretics and the witch trials, the persecution of Jews and the enslavement of consciences, to self-dogmatisation and resistance to scientific evidence—so much so that those who are part of this history can only hide their faces in shame" (Ratzinger 1970, 147, our translation). In our time, in 2020, it would not be possible to conclude this essential list without adding the shame for the sexual abuse of minors committed by men of the Church. The gravity of this scourge and the force with which it has progressively rocked the conscience of the Church is in a way represented by the series of measures and provisions taken by the ecclesial authority, especially from the early years of the new millennium. There is an entire section of the Holy See's website titled: *Abuse of Minors. The Church’s Response* (http://www.vatican.va/resources/index_en.htm).

4. As he would later say in the *Apologia*, regarding his acceptance of certain truths taught by the Catholic Church, such as Eucharistic Transubstantiation, his difficulties went away once he recognized that the Catholic Church, in her Tradition, is a faithful witness to divine Revelation: ‘People say that the doctrine of Transubstantiation is difficult to believe; I did not believe the doctrine till I was a Catholic. I had no difficulty in believing it, as soon as I believed that the Catholic Roman Church was the oracle of God, and that she had declared this doctrine to be part of the original revelation’ (Newman 1865, 332).

5. For a closer examination of the concept of mystery in light of Scripture, cf. μυστήριον, in Kittel (1964) and Silva (2014). The first chapter of *Lumen gentium* is fundamental for its application to the Church, especially no. 8.

6. A passage of the International Theological Commission’s document (1985, 1.5), on the intimate relation, in the Holy Spirit, between Christ and the Church, states: ‘Founded by Christ, the Church does not simply depend on him for her external—historical or social—provenance. She comes forth from her Lord in a much deeper sense, since he is who constantly nourishes her and builds her up in the Spirit. According to Scripture, as understood in Tradition, the Church takes her birth from the riven side of Jesus Christ (cf. John 19: 34; Vatican Council II 1964, no. 3); she is ‘obtained by the blood of the Son (Acts 20: 28; cf. Titus 2: 14). Her nature is based on the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ and His salvific work. Thus, the Church constantly lives by and for her Lord.’ The last part of the passage is absent in the English version of the document, while it is present in the other versions. We have translated from the Italian one.

7. In *Lumen gentium* (Vatican Council II 1964, no. 4) we read that the Church is ‘a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’ The council is referring here to Saint Cyprian, Saint Augustine, and Saint John Damascene.

8. ‘Within the New Testament corpus, up to eighty comparisons for the Church have been counted. The plurality of images to which the Council draws our attention is intentional. It is meant to bring out the inexhaustible character of the ‘mystery’ of the Church’ (International Theological Commission 1985, 2.1).

9. It is worth noting that the Council employs the word ‘sacrament,’ in reference to the Church, in an analogous way to its proper meaning, which designates the seven ‘sacraments’ as efficacious signs of the grace of Christ communicated by the Spirit. This is the sense of the expression *veluti sacramentum* used in the official text in Latin, which can be rendered in English as ‘like’ or ‘as.’ The theological debate about the meaning of the Church as a ‘sacrament’ is broad and we must mention at least here that, as we said for the notion of mystery to which it is closely connected, the first preaching of ‘sacrament’ is Jesus Christ. Cf. Mazzolini (2005, 640), Congar (1976). Pié-Ninot (2008) developed all his ecclesiology around the analogy of the Church as sacrament.
10. The dialogue of Peter, together with John, with the paralytic man at the temple gate comes to mind. In a way, this dialogue is paradigmatic of that between the Church and the world: ‘I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, [rise and] walk.’ (Acts 3: 6).

11. The image of the Church as a mother was widely used by the Fathers. Rahner ([1951] 1972) offers an extensive documentation of this.

12. The suspension came after the book Surnaturel published in 1946, which drew criticism from several Roman theologians and a harsh reaction from the ecclesiastical authority for some of the ideas expressed in it. In 1950, some of de Lubac’s books were taken out of circulation, and he was asked to suspend his teaching and publication.

13. Think about the Pastoral Letter to the Catholics in Ireland (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010) following the scourge of child abuse, in which Benedict XVI expressed to the victims ‘the shame and remorse that we all feel’; Pope Francis has recognized the responsibility of men of the Church many times and asked forgiveness in their name, as in the General Audience of 14 October 2015: ‘The word of Jesus is powerful today: ‘Woe to the world, for scandals’. Jesus is realistic and says: ‘It is inevitable that scandals arise, but woe to the man who causes scandal to occur’. I would like, before beginning the catechesis, on behalf of the Church, to ask for your forgiveness for the scandals that have happened in recent times both in Rome and in the Vatican. I ask your forgiveness’ (Pope Francis, 2015).

14. In addition to Henri de Lubac, René Latourelle has done an important reflection on the Church as a paradox. Latourelle is a great interpreter of the Second Vatican Council especially in aspects of fundamental theology. See, in particular, Latourelle (1971).

15. Cf. Latourelle (1971, 112–113): the distinction set out here structures the chapters of the central part of the book. We find something similar in de Lubac, who identifies three dialectical pairs in which the paradox of the Church is visible: ‘the Church is of God (de Trinitate) and of human beings (ex hominibus); —she is visible and invisible; —she is earthly and historical, and eschatological and eternal’ (de Lubac, 1967, 25, our translation).

16. In Gaudium et spes, the Second Vatican Council did not hesitate to recognize the possibility that Christians contribute with their behaviour to generating critical reactions toward God and religion: ‘Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in the faith, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion’ (Vatican Council II, 1965, no. 19).

17. Ratzinger notes that, upon closer inspection, there are many spheres in which one can recognize ‘the liberating power of faith’ kept by the Church in her history: she has given life to such figures as Augustine, Francis of Assisi, or Vincent de Paul; and she has inspired beautiful masterpieces in music and art and is capable even today of making ‘people more human, tying them to God’ (Ratzinger 1970, 158–159, our translation).

18. Augustine of Hippo, Sermo 169, 11, 13. The recent document from the International Theological Commission (2020), titled The Reciprocity between Faith and Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy, presents the entire salvific plan of God implemented in history, in terms of a ‘sacramental’ economy. This is an interpretation that seems especially well-suited to giving a reason for the mysterious presence of God and his action in visible and earthly realities, especially in the Church.

19. In this explanation we were loosely inspired by Latourelle (1971, 224–225).

20. In this regard, see de Lubac ([1967] 1979, 16–18), who also offers many references to ecclesiastical authors.

21. We are limiting ourselves to a few essential references here: the second encyclical of John Paul II, Dives in misericordia, was dedicated to God the Father, emphasizing the attribute of mercy (John Paul II, 1980); Divine Mercy Sunday was established by him in 2000; Benedict XVI in turn wrote his first encyclical on God as love (Deus caritas est) because
of the vital importance that he attributed to this aspect; as for Pope Francis, it would be impossible to recall all the occasions on which he has referred to mercy as God’s main attribute and to the necessity that all missionary and pastoral action of the Church allow people to encounter divine mercy: it will suffice to recall the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy which he called for in 2015.

22. It may be worth nothing that in the Apostles’ Creed the article regarding the Church is in the article about the Holy Spirit. Faith toward the Church is dependent on this for the twofold reason we have already explained: it is not faith in the strict—theological—sense if it is not by the action of the Holy Spirit; moreover, faith in the Church is based on faith in God and his promise. In fact, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains (Catholic Church, 2000, no. 750): ‘In the Apostles’ Creed we profess ‘one and Holy Church’ (‘Credo […] Ecclesiam’), rather than professing to believe in the Church, so as not to confuse God with his works and to attribute clearly to God’s goodness all the gifts he has bestowed on his Church.’ Something that a great lover of the Church, Saint Josemaría Escrivá, loved to say comes to mind: ‘For more than twenty-five years when I have recited the creed and asserted my faith in the divine origin of the Church: One, holy, catholic and apostolic, I have frequently added, in spite of everything. When I mention this custom of mine and someone asks me what I mean, I answer, I mean your sins and mine’ (Escrivá de Balaguer, 1974, no. 131).

23. What we are saying here in terms of a gaze of faith can also, with Ratzinger, be described in terms of love: ‘Whoever does not go at least a little into the experiment of faith, whoever does not agree to experience the Church, whoever does not confront the risk of looking at her with the eyes of love, only ends up getting angry. The risk of love is the prerequisite for reaching faith. Those who have dared to do so do not need to hide from the dark sides of the Church but discover that she is not reduced to these alone’ (Ratzinger, 1970, 157–158, our translation).

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