

**WHAT CONDITIONS MUST
A CHRISTIAN SCHOOL FULFIL
IN ORDER TO BE
AN ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY?
(1/3)**

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The Church has always concerned itself with the education of its faithful. It uses a number of means and in particular Christian schools to pursue its mission in a given society. However, one rarely hears of a Christian school being called a "living cell of the Church". And yet, it is sufficient for it to be run by priests, religious or committed lay Christians for it to deserve to be called "ecclesial". The aim of this article is to reflect on the conditions a Christian school must fulfil in order to be an ecclesial community. This reflection will centre around the following questions:

1. What is an ecclesial community?
2. What conditions must the Christian school fulfil in order to be an ecclesial community?
3. In practice, what suggestions can we give a Christian school to help it fulfil its mission in the Church?

1. The ecclesial community

It would be useful to define the word "church" on the basis of its etymology before going on to consider it in the light of Vatican II.

Etymology of the word "church".

The word "church" comes from the non-religious Greek word "ecclesia" (1) meaning "a political meeting for citizens". In the biblical Greek Septuagint, however, the word translated was the Hebrew "quahal" meaning "the liturgical gathering of Israel", "assembly" or the "holy meeting" of the People of God. And so the word "church" now means an assembly that is called to perform a religious action. What does Vatican II say about it?

**THE CHURCH: THE PEOPLE OF GOD
A TRIPLE VOCATION.**

(A) The identity of the Church

1. What is it essentially?: The mystery of the Trinity

The Vatican II constitution "Lumen Gentium" (L.G.) presents the Church to us in chapter 1 as a mystery. This mystery is part of the mystery of the Trinity. The Church is included in God's plan: from all time he had planned to save all mankind. When the time came, he sent his only Son to save the world. Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, fulfilled his mission through his death and resurrection by granting the pardon of sins and giving access to the promise of the kingdom of God. The appearance and gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost gave birth to the Church. The Holy Spirit continues to be present in the assembly and in the heart of the faithful. He is the "soul" of the Church, its life-principle and source of unity. And so, the Church represents the accomplishment of the plan of God the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.

2. A community: The sacrament of salvation

The Church is the image of the Trinity: "a communion in unity". It is a community of believers united in the Holy Spirit. In Christ, it is a sacrament of salvation, that is, the active presence of God among people. He it is who sends the Church to continue the work of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, it proclaims the Kingdom of God to people till such time as Christ returns in glory.

3. The People of God

Lumen Gentium gives a number of images of the Church. The Church is the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit, etc. We will shall restrict ourselves to the image of the people of God. This is a completely biblical image and is based on the tribe of Israel. In the Old Testament, there were three principal roles in the tribe of Israel: priest, prophet and king. They were servants of God who mediated between him and his people. And so we find St Paul saying that Moses was the servant of the first covenant (2 Co 3, 7-9). In the New Testament we see that Christ has taken on the three roles of priest, prophet and king. Jesus Christ, the only word of God made flesh, offers the sacrifice of salvation by his death and resurrection and makes a new and eternal covenant between God and his people. He is the Kingdom of God.

(B) Triple vocation

By baptism, the entire people of God is united to Christ and enabled to share in the threefold function of Christ as priest, prophet and king. This means that the Church is a people made up of priests, prophets and kings. Let us go a little more deeply into this threefold function of the people of God acquired through Christ.

1. A people of priests (sacraments, sanctification, prayer)

The word "priest" comes from the Greek word "presbyterus" meaning "elder" or "senior person" appointed to preside over the assembly of believers (2).

(a) Christ the priest

In the Old Testament, the High Priest of the Jews repeatedly offered sacrifices of animals to obtain God's pardon. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ offered himself in sacrifice for the salvation of the world. In one single act he achieved fully what the Jewish priests had been trying to obtain (3): the communion of the faithful with God by his death and resurrection accomplished once and for all time. He is the Priest par excellence. He is the one and only mediator between God and mankind (1 Tm 2,5).

(b) A people of priests

Through his faith in Jesus Christ and thanks to the shared priesthood received in baptism, every Christian can participate in the sacraments and prayer in order to unite himself with God. Every Christian is invited to identify with the person of Jesus Christ. Every believer must carry Christ within himself (Lk 9,6) and bear witness to him by his life.

Paul exhorts all Christians to offer a type of spiritual worship which includes three stages (Rm 12, 1-2): first of all, offering one's body as a living sacrifice pleasing to God; secondly, conforming to Christ; and thirdly, discerning the will of God. In this way, one no longer does anything except through him and for him. This is something more than ritual: it is sacramental (4). In union with Christ, the people offers itself to its father and, in doing so, acts as a priest. As each one offers himself he makes his own unique contribution to the liturgy (L.G. 11) in keeping with the priestly ministry received: the ordinary priesthood (lay people) or the ministerial (clergy). This same people is a people of prophets. Let us look at the origin of the word "prophet".

2. A people of prophets (announcing the Gospel)

The word "prophet" comes from the Greek "phēmi" meaning "to say" and the word "pro" meaning "in the place of", "beforehand" or "in public". The prophet is a spokesman for God. He is a person inspired and sent by God to communicate his thoughts and will to people. The Hebrew word "nābî" meaning "to call" "to announce" has the same meaning (5). And so, a prophet is God's messenger to people. Through him, God implements his plan of salvation and speaks in a way that affects the present and announces the future.

(a) Christ the prophet

Jesus acted as a prophet: he condemned the excesses of the religious leaders and of the Jews; he explained the signs of the times; and he was conscious of being destined to have a tragic end like the prophets. At the same time, however, he proclaimed his unique destiny. He accepted death from mankind in order to fulfil his Father's plan. Nonetheless, he is superior to all the prophets because he obtains salvation and speaks with authority. At Pentecost, he gives the Holy Spirit to the Church so that it can continue his work and announce the Gospel. In this sense Christ is the Prophet because he is the messenger, the Word of God who fulfilled the plan of salvation. Which members of the people of God have the mission to be a prophet?

(b) A people of prophets

The people of God as a whole has a mission to announce the Gospel. Each one fulfils his mission according to the

ministry conferred on him by the Church. The Holy Spirit is the one who distributes gifts, ministries and charisms so that the body of Christ may be built up (6). He impels believers to bear witness to Christ to the praise and glory of God. It is the Holy Spirit who acts in the sacraments that nourish the faith, since the Word of God is the first source of inspiration. Among the various ministries there is a sharing of responsibilities and a complementarity in their work for the common good.

Announcing the Gospel will be effective only to the extent it is in contact with the world. The task consists in showing the road to the kingdom in the midst of everyday life. This presupposes a willingness to accept what is new in the world, while remaining at the same time faithful to the Gospel, in order to create other ways of living and of fulfilling the mission of the people of God to mankind. The people of God, following in the footsteps of Christ its leader and king, fulfils its mission in the world also in its role as king. What kind of kingship is this?

3. A royal people (transformation of the world, catholicity)

(a) Christ the King

During his life, Jesus was very discreet about his title of king. He was afraid it would be misunderstood and that he would be taken for a political leader (Lk 23,2). His kingdom, however, "was not of this world". His kingdom is revealed by the witness given to the truth (Jn 18, 36f) which is identical with his person. He, who became man, undertakes once and for all the salvation of mankind. He takes sides with the poor, the starving, the afflicted, the sick, the sinners, etc. His words, actions and his whole life were directed towards defending the dignity and freedom of people. By his death and resurrection he freed people from the power of death and sin, and entered his kingdom as king. His life is the Gospel in action, the Gospel of the Beatitudes (7). How does the people of God share in Christ's humanising mission?

(b) A people with a humanising mission

The people of God shares in the royalty of Christ by defending human rights and working for better justice in everyday life. Its commitment to the poor is an integral part of the proclamation of the Gospel. This work of humanisation presupposes listening to people, as well as respect and a willingness to speak with others in order to work for peace together. The service that the people of God renders is offered to all people of goodwill. All people without exception are called to be part of the people of God, whatever their language, race, culture or religion. And so when the Gospel is made a part of everyday life, it opens the way to the kingdom of God throughout the modern world.

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(1) **Léon Dufour, Xavier**, *Dictionnaire du Nouveau Testament*, Seuil, 1975, p. 221.

(2) *Idem.* p. 443.

(3) **Manaranche, André**, *J'aime mon Eglise*. La Sarment, Fayard, 1991, p. 195.

(4) *Idem.* p. 198.

(5) **Léon Dufour**, *op.cit.* p. 448-449.

(6) **Rigal, Jean L'** *Eglise en chantier*. Cerf, 1994, p. 82-84.

(7) *Id.* 6, p. 86.