

5-1-2009

All the World is Church: The Christian Call in Henri de Lubac

Benjamin M. Durham

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Durham, Benjamin M.. 2009. All the World is Church: The Christian Call in Henri de Lubac. *Obsculta* 2, (1) : 38-42. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol2/iss1/13>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

All the World is Church: The Christian Call in Henri de Lubac

Benjamin M. Durheim

Introduction

For Henri de Lubac, the fundamental problem with humankind is its disunity; the original state of humankind was one in which each person was in unity with his or her neighbors and the entire race.¹ Sin disrupted that unity, however, and the current ruptured state is irreparable by human means. The only way humans may reenter that original unity with one another—the only way they may be *saved* from their present disunity—it to allow themselves to be aided by the one who entered history from without in order to effect just such a salvation. For de Lubac, salvation—which is the restoration of the unity of all with God and each other—comes from Jesus Christ and through his church.²

This essay explores the meaning and social implications of de Lubac's theology. Beginning with his notions of the natural and supernatural, this essay briefly surveys de Lubac's anthropology, followed by the social aspects of his ecclesiology.³ Finally, this paper draws some social and political implications from de Lubac's theology and argues that in light of his work, Christians are called to view the entire world as church.

De Lubac's Anthropology

De Lubac begins his work *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* by citing the views of the church fathers, in which the restoration of the primordial unity between the human race and God and the unity among its members was a central eschatological hope.⁴ To understand de Lubac's view of human unity, however, one must first understand his view of the human. For de Lubac, the human per-

son is a synthesis, or more correctly, a *paradox*—a joining of the natural and supernatural.⁵ The natural aspect is easily apparent; humans live in a natural, physical world, and can manipulate their surroundings and themselves. They depend on natural things for life, they reproduce by a natural process, and they perish away through natural courses. De Lubac, however, standing squarely on the shoulders of the Christian tradition, argues that the entirety of human existence is also connected to a supernatural order.⁶ Humans were *made* in unity with God their creator, and though through sin that unity has been disrupted, the call to that unity remains, and the way back to that unity has been restored in Christ. The supernatural, according to de Lubac, is not simply an aspect of our humanity; it is rather the very “mystery of our divine destiny.”⁷

De Lubac is very careful to avoid any definition of the supernatural that would suggest that it is merely out-of-the-ordinary experiences, like miracles.⁸ The supernatural is not simply a force, an event, or some unexplainable phenomenon. Instead, the supernatural is an order of existence, which is offered to humankind gratuitously through a *relationship*.⁹ In fact, this relationship cannot be said to have a definite beginning or end; rather, the human is *always* in relationship with the supernatural. The problem is that, unaided, the relationship can only be one of opposition and disunity between the natural and supernatural.¹⁰ The nature of humans is not utterly separated from their call to unity with the supernatural. Rather, the natural-supernatural relationship has been corrupted into one of opposition and disunity, which no human can rectify on his or her own.

This disunity with the supernatural—with God the Creator—can then only translate into the disunity of humans with one another. The one who

¹ Dana L. Dillon, “Public Order, the Common Good, and Our Supernatural Destiny,” Samford University, Birmingham, AL, http://www.samford.edu/lillyhumanrights/papers/Dillon_Public.pdf (accessed July 9, 2008): 7.

² Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 223.

³ A wealth of literature has been produced both by de Lubac and commentators on his sacramental theology and its interplay with his ecclesiology. For the most part, however, this subject matter is beyond the scope of this paper, and so deliberately receives little attention.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵ See Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 101–18.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Richard Arnandez. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984), 22–24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

created human nature must be the ultimate source of the unity of human nature, so to be in a relationship of opposition to the supernatural (as all humans are as a result of sin), necessarily allows opposition to flood into the natural realm of humankind. In de Lubac's words, "any breach with God, is at the same time a disruption of human unity."¹¹ In this way, human unity is tied inseparably to the human race's unity with God. True human unity is impossible apart from the reconciliation (or reunification) of the natural and supernatural.

Another way de Lubac speaks of the human condition is in the language of image seeking likeness. Humans were created in the image of God, that they might also bear God's likeness.¹² As humans sinned and corrupted the image, however, they were no longer able to attain the likeness of God that is the fullness of the image, which means that though they are still *called* to bear the likeness, they can only be moved toward the likeness of God through Christ. For de Lubac, Christ reveals the likeness of God to which humans are called, and that call echoes to the very foundations of human nature.¹³ As the human race was created—in unity with God and with unity among its members, and as an image of God bearing God's likeness—to such an end it is destined. The healing of God's image, the bearing of God's likeness, and the reunification of the natural and supernatural—these are different ways of speaking about the same salvation, but de Lubac's point with all of them is that the entire human race is oriented toward this one common end.¹⁴ As de Lubac articulates, "The whole universe cries out for its delivery and it is sure to obtain it. Its groaning is begotten by hope."¹⁵

It is important to note that for de Lubac, Christ alone provides this hope and effects any true reunification. Only Christ, as a sharer in the substance of both the supernatural *and* natural orders, can bring the two out of opposition and into unity. In de Lubac's words:

Whether humanity knows it or not, it needs Christ. Emerging with difficulty from the cosmos that gave it birth, the human spirit, an irreversible force, needs the irreversible victory of Christ to achieve its divine destiny. His mys-

tical body must be the incarnation of humanity, thus allowing humanity to enter into God. Humanity has been adopted by the Father in the person of Jesus, the Son. Its purification and transfiguration must be accomplished by modeling itself on him and receiving his life. It must 'take the form of Christ.'¹⁶

Here de Lubac makes the point that humankind needs Christ for two main reasons. First, Christ heals the broken unity between God and the human race. Second, Christ both shows humans (by his example) how to model themselves in a way that reflects true unity, and provides humans (by his self-gift) with the means of "receiving his life"¹⁷: the church and the sacraments. This is the beginning of de Lubac's ecclesiology. If Christ restores unity between God and humans in any real way, then a human community must be the expression and proclamation of that unity, or at least of the earthly pilgrimage toward that final unity. In a sense, the church is the community of humans that is striving to become more fully that which it already is, though imperfectly: a comm-unity of humans. Both to be "adopted by the Father"¹⁸ and to receive Christ's life entail living to the greatest degree possible in the unity that was originally meant for humankind—that is, living in such a way as *to become more fully human*. As Susan Wood has pointed out, "Christ is not a particular instance of humanity, but . . . to be fully human is somehow to be related to Christ, as at once the cause of humanity and the restorer of human unity."¹⁹ Unity between the natural and supernatural is constitutive of unity between humans, and more fundamentally, of authentic humanity. Because Christ wrought this unity, and because it is through Christ that one may access this unity, the human is dependent on Christ for his or her humanity. For de Lubac, anthropology really is, in this sense, Christology.

De Lubac's Social Ecclesiology

Though humans rely completely on Christ for any true unity with God and each other, this reliance for de Lubac is never in an individualistic context. Unity between humans makes no sense if the ulti-

¹¹ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 33.

¹² David Grumett, *De Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁴ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 232.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁶ Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, trans. James R. Dunne (Staten Island, NY: Ecclesia Press, 1969), 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Susan Karaus Wood, "The Church as the Social Embodiment of Grace in the Ecclesiology of Henri de Lubac" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1986), 271.

mate category is the individual rather than the human race, and since it is the *human race* that was created in unity with God, and it is the *human race* that is destined to return to that unity through Christ, de Lubac finds it exceedingly important to realize that the context for salvation (reunification) is not the individual but the *church*.²⁰ For de Lubac, since his theological springboard was the original unity of humankind and the problem of its current disunity, and since his notion of salvation is the restored unity of the human race with God and between its members, the pilgrimage to that salvation can only take place in history as a communal trek. Unity cannot be restored if there is no one with whom to be unified; the church provides the matrix in which Christ's saving action occurs.

Just as one cannot understand de Lubac's theology in an individualistic manner, neither can one understand his vision of unity as melting away difference and distinction between humans. For de Lubac, the unity of the church does not connote an objective ideology separated from the reality of the persons who make it up.²¹ Instead the church, as the place that fosters authentic human unity, also fosters authentic human diversity. In his words, "the distinction between the different parts of a being stands out the more clearly as the union of these parts is closer."²² For de Lubac, the unity of humankind is a result of the shared image of God, which is expressed in a diversity of ways and relationships.²³ This unity is still only achievable in its fullness through Christ, but unity in and through Christ does not mean *uniformity* in and through Christ.

In addition to a rejection of individualism and an affirmation of human diversity, de Lubac is also careful to emphasize that the church does not already contain the final unity that is its goal in Christ. As Wood explains, "the unity of the human race is *analogous* to the unity of the Church,"²⁴ but the complete unity of the human race is not produced fully in the church. For de Lubac, the mystery of salvation "expresses itself in historical forms and . . . always tran-

scends these forms."²⁵ The most concrete historical forms in which Christ's saving action is present are the community and sacraments of the church. The church is in this light a powerful spiritual entity and even necessary for salvation,²⁶ but Christians must never confuse the church itself with the kingdom of God toward which the church is oriented.²⁷

This pilgrimage of the church leads to the importance of history in de Lubac's theology. For him, "the stages of history . . . are in reality stages of an essentially collective salvation."²⁸ History provides the stage for the drama of salvation, and consequently for de Lubac the church, as the temporal vehicle by which humans travel to that final reunification with God and each other, is also extremely important as the channel to salvation.²⁹ Without the church, salvation would be impossible.³⁰ De Lubac does not explicitly affirm Cyprian's famous axiom that "outside the church there is no salvation," but neither does he deny it.³¹ Instead, he takes great pains to nuance that claim, by identifying the universal human yearning for the lost original unity, and exploring how that yearning may unfold in light of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

De Lubac acknowledges that "outside Christianity . . . humanity tries to collect its members into unity"³² on its own. Humans attempt, socially and sometimes even spiritually (e.g., through non-Christian religions), to restore the lost unity among themselves. The debilitating effects of sin are easily discernable, but mere human agency cannot correct those effects. Therefore, it is only Christ through the church that can bring one to salvation. But what may happen to those outside the visible church on earth? De Lubac's answer to this question may not be paraphrased as either "they will not be saved" or "they may be saved." Instead, de Lubac rejects the foundations of the question itself. Salvation is communal—it is the restoration of unity of the human race with God and among its members—so if the church is that community that is consciously on a pilgrimage

²⁰ Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizjoulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 14–15.

²¹ See Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. Sergia Englund. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982), 153–68.

²² De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 328.

²³ McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church*, 19.

²⁴ Wood, "The Church as the Social Embodiment," 274. Italics mine.

²⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, trans. Joseph Fessio and Michael M. Waldstein (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 102.

²⁶ See discussion below.

²⁷ Henri de Lubac, *The Catholic and His Church*, trans. Michael Mason (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 72.

²⁸ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 148.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

³² *Ibid.*, 225.

to Christ who makes salvation possible, the church is therefore necessary for the very possibility of salvation itself.³³ The necessity of the church for salvation is not about which humans are saved and which humans are not; it is about the fact that the church rightly sees the goal of salvation and cooperates in history with the saving initiative of Christ. Put simply, if there is no community to cooperate with Christ, then Christ's work reaches no one.

Implications of de Lubac's Theology

This paper is now in a position to answer the following questions: If the church is the vehicle of salvation traveling through history, how should its members interact with their human surroundings? What social implications may one draw from this theology? For de Lubac, the answer to these questions can only effectively be given by someone within the context of Christianity to Christians living within that same context.³⁴ The question of Christianity's relationship with and to the world has relevance only if the answer is given to those whose actions put the answer into practice. Since the question is posed from a Christian context (the *church's* relationship to the world), Christians are the ones who must be concerned with the answer. De Lubac's explanations, though they may be coherent to the world outside Christianity, are meant to be effective specifically in and through the lives of Christians.

For de Lubac, the question of Christians' roles in the world ultimately hinges on the drama of the lost unity of humankind seeking reunification, and thereby the drama of the relationship of the natural and supernatural. If the natural and supernatural are always in this relationship—even a relationship of opposition—then one's actions in the natural order necessarily affect one's relationship with the supernatural order.³⁵ What this essentially means is that for de Lubac, social/political matters and spiritual matters should never be separated from each other, even if the social/political situation were to be nearly perfect: "The happiest and most perfect form of social existence would be the most inhuman of conditions if it were not ordered to the spiritual life."³⁶

³³ Wood, "The Church as the Social Embodiment," 248.

³⁴ See Henri de Lubac, "The Light of Christ," in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996), 201–20.

³⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Theological Fragments*, trans. Rebecca Howell Balinski (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), 214–15.

³⁶ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 360.

One must be careful about de Lubac's claim here that the matters of the world should be "ordered to the spiritual life,"³⁷ however. By this he does not mean that the church should in any way exercise temporal power over or even in conjunction with the state.³⁸ The purpose of the church is not to attempt to establish the kingdom of God on earth. The church's purpose is instead to work for the kingdom of God in heaven, which entails fostering, through and by Christ, unity among humans and between humans and God. The task of the church, however, does carry *into* the affairs of temporal powers. Unity among humans is not merely a supernatural hope; it has a natural aspect, and where that aspect is absent, there also is the unity with the supernatural absent.

One of the best examples of de Lubac's prescription for the interplay of the spiritual and social realms is his concept of "spiritual resistance." Faced with the horrific events resulting from the rise of the Nazi regime, de Lubac claimed that the social crisis was not simply one relegated to the social realm, but one that was essentially spiritual.³⁹ By this he meant that though the Nazi party was a political entity, its actions were directly contrary to the *spirit* of Christianity, and so resistance to the Nazis was not a mere social choice, but rather was a moral mandate. Nevertheless, de Lubac adamantly refused to allow his work on that specific issue to become a political tool.⁴⁰ He did not want Christianity to become an instrument of the state, any more than he would have wanted the state to become a tool of the church. Instead, he claimed that Christians must stay true to the spirit of Christianity,⁴¹ which included resisting the Nazi regime and helping those whom it oppressed.

This example suggests that for de Lubac, while the church should not directly—or even indirectly⁴²—exert any formal political power, the church as a community must act in the political and social arena according to its salvific, reunifying goal. The common destiny of humans that is reunification with

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Grumett, *De Lubac*, 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴¹ Henri de Lubac, "Spiritual Warfare," in *Theology in History*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996), 500–501.

⁴² This is a technical term taken from Robert Bellarmine, the concept of which de Lubac ultimately rejects as incorrect to describe the church's proper role in society (de Lubac, *Theological Fragments*, 199–233).

God and each other is not simply a religious hope. It is additionally a social directive, because the unity of humans with one another and their unity with God are inseparable.⁴³ Since the church is on a pilgrimage through history, the actions of its pilgrims take on a “special dignity and an awful gravity,”⁴⁴ in that the historical, social actions of Christians are *always* done within the context of the drama of salvation.⁴⁵ This means that one’s Christian identity necessarily shapes and is shaped by one’s actions in the public realm. To argue otherwise would be to drive a wedge between the natural and supernatural, because one would assume one’s actions in the natural order do not affect one’s relationship with the supernatural. In this way, the church must shape not just the religious actions of a human, but must instead shape *all* actions of a human, insofar as they affect unity between humans and God, *and among humans themselves*. Put another way, *all* public actions are *religious* actions because all public actions in some way or another affect the unity of humankind among its members themselves and of its members with God.

Finally, if all public actions are religious actions, and the church is the pilgrim community striving to live in and after the example of Christ, then from a Christian perspective that affirms the fundamental unity and common destiny of the human race, all the world is, in effect, church. This should not be misinterpreted to suggest that the entire world is confessionally or sacramentally Christian. Of course it isn’t. Instead, the entire world is church in the sense that all of creation is part of the same story, and that is the Christian story of reunification—of salvation. Every action the Christian takes is done in the context of church. There is no place where the relationship of natural and supernatural is unreal or irrelevant. All the world is church, insofar as no action occurs outside the drama of salvation.

This paper, after briefly exploring Henri de Lubac’s anthropology and the social aspects of the ecclesiology, argues that the relationship of the natural and supernatural ultimately bears on every action

humans take. Humankind is in a broken state of disunity, and trapped in an oppositional relationship between their nature and the supernatural, but in Christ that disunity is healed and that opposition relieved. The church, as the presence on earth through which Christ and his salvific acts are accessed, is necessary for the communal salvation of the human race. Humankind shares a common destiny in Christ, and because all of creation is part of this drama of salvation, no human action is outside the Christian story. In this way the entire natural order is in relationship with the supernatural, and so as the locus of the Christian pilgrimage (of which the whole human race is more or less a part), all the world is church.

Works Cited

- de Lubac, Henri. *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*. Translated by Richard Arnandez. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984.
- . *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*. Translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988.
- . “Spiritual Warfare.” In *Theology in History*, 488–501. Translated by Anne Englund Nash. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996.
- . *The Catholic and His Church*. Translated by Michael Mason. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956.
- . *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*. Translated by James R. Dunne. Staten Island, NY: Ecclesia Press, 1969.
- . “The Light of Christ.” In *Theology in History*, 201–20. Translated by Anne Englund Nash. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1996.
- . *The Motherhood of the Church*. Translated by Sergia Englund. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982.
- . *The Mystery of the Supernatural*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998.
- . *Theological Fragments*. Translated by Rebecca Howell Balinski. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989.
- Dillon, Dana L. “Public Order, the Common Good, and Our Supernatural Destiny.” Samford University. Birmingham, AL. http://www.samford.edu/lillyhumanrights/papers/Dillon_Public.pdf. Accessed July 9, 2008.
- Grumett, David. *De Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: T & T Clark, 2007.
- McPartlan, Paul. *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizoulas in Dialogue*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993.
- von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*. Translated by Joseph Fessio and Michael M. Waldstein. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991.
- Wood, Susan Karas. “The Church as the Social Embodiment of Grace in the Ecclesiology of Henri de Lubac.” PhD diss., Marquette University, 1986.

⁴³ See n. 10 above.

⁴⁴ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 332.

⁴⁵ Of course, all actions of all people are always done within the context of the drama of salvation, because by virtue of humans’ common origin and common destiny, all humans are part of the same story. This paper simply wishes to make the point here specifically that Christians’ actions never occur outside their relationship to the supernatural, or outside the context of their Christian identity. Recall that de Lubac’s discussion is primarily aimed *from* the context of Christianity *to* Christians themselves.