

# The Church in the Johannine Literature

LUCIUS NEREPARAMPIL\*

Although the word *ekklesia* is not found in the Gospel of John, the whole outlook of the Johannine writings is saturated with the idea of the Church. A student of the Johannine literature can easily understand that the highly spiritual idea of the Church enshrined in these writings is nothing but a necessary consequence of the highly developed Christology found therein. The presentation of Jesus of Nazareth as God's definitive Word or revelation to men becomes complete only by the rich idea of the Church which is a sign and condition of man's response to that Word. The challenging character of the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ calls for an irrevocable decision from the part of men to be incorporated in Christ. Now this incorporation in Christ is made possible only by a simultaneous incorporation in the community, of which Christ is the vital centre and the Holy Spirit is the life-principle.<sup>1</sup> A close analysis of the Johannine writings, beginning from the Book of Revelation, passing through the Letters and ending with the Gospel, will help us to discover Johannine ecclesiology.

## I The Idea of the Church in the Book of Revelation

In the Book of Revelation the word *ekklesia* occurs twenty times, and there is an open appraisal of the Church present at the time of the author, and a looking forward to its future. The theological setting of the book is an open scene of warfare where Christ and his Church encounter the world and Satan. Here a spiritual picture of the Church emerges, which helps the Christian to evaluate rightly his present life of suffering and strain in view of his eschatological glory.

The book states that Jesus Christ by his suffering and death has given existence to the Church as a priestly Kingdom of God (Rev. 1:5-6; 5:10; 20:6; 22:5). If in the Old Testament God had said to Israel, "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"

\* Fr Lucius Nereparampil C.M.I. teaches New Testament studies at Dharmaram College, Bangalore.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. my article: "John's Gospel, a Gospel of Decision and a Gospel of the Church," in *India's Search for Reality and the Relevance of the Gospel of John*, C. Duraisingh and C. Hargreaves, eds., I.S.P.C.K., Delhi, 1975, pp. 56-63.

(Exod. 19:6), the author sees that it has become now a reality in the Church, which is the new Israel of the New Testament. The 144,000 chosen from all the twelve tribes of Israel represent the Church as the eschatological Israel.<sup>2</sup> Here the Church appears as the perfect and triumphant society with God's protecting seal. It is a universal Church containing "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" (Rev. 7:9). They rejoice in their victory and sing songs of thanksgiving saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10).

The paradoxical nature of the Church of having unconquerable strength and at the same time being in the state of distress is well depicted in the figure of the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and with a crown of twelve stars, and who was in pain of child-birth and had to flee to the wilderness to escape from the attack of the dragon (Rev. 12:1-6).

The holy nature of the Church is indicated by the description of the 144,000 virgins who have not defiled themselves with infidelity to God.<sup>3</sup> These were always united with the Lamb, and this union made them triumphant and happy. The Church is the holy temple of God where God is worshipped by offering sacrifices on its altar.<sup>4</sup> The Church is wonderfully protected by God, so much so that it survives all the efforts of the evil powers to exterminate it. Satan knows that he has only a short time and therefore with great fury makes desperate attempts to destroy the Church.<sup>5</sup> But the Church conquers Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of its testimony, by self-sacrifice unto death.<sup>6</sup> The situation of the Church on earth is such that all its members on earth have to wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb by sharing in the suffering of Christ.<sup>7</sup> The Church on earth and the already triumphant Church in heaven form but one community which is the Bride that marches to the marriage of the Lamb, the Bridegroom.<sup>8</sup> This Bride is privileged to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure which represents the righteous deeds of the saints (19:8). This Bride, the Church, when she is well prepared and perfected, enters into the eschatological Kingdom of God, and becomes the new creation and new city in the new heaven and new earth.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament*, London, 1965, pp. 113ff.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rev. 14:1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rev. ch. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rev. 12:12 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Rev. 12:11.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rev. 7:14f.; 13:7-10; 20:4.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Rev. 19:7ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Rev. ch. 21.

Thus the Book of Revelation envisages a Church in the world which originated from the saving work of Christ and which continues in its existence because of its intimate union with Christ and which firmly resists the seduction of the world and Satan by means of its faithful witness to the Word of God. The future victory is certain and what is needed on the part of the Church is to continue to hold fast to the gifts bestowed on her up to the very end.<sup>10</sup> The Church is a community that lives by strong faith in Jesus the Saviour and by firm hope in the eschatological glory. The description of the heavenly Jerusalem as built upon the twelve Apostles (Rev. 21:14) and the description of the heavenly court (Rev. ch. 4) may well reflect a Church order which was well known to the author as well as to the readers of his time.

## II The Church in the Johannine Letters

The Johannine Letters envisage a radical approach to the reality of the Church. The Church is primarily not a formal institution, but an intimate union of its members, which is the expression of their communion with God. For, "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8). Hence the community is the arena in which love for God can be well expressed.<sup>11</sup>

The Church is a community formed by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. For the author of the First Letter says: "They (the anti-Christ) went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One" (1 Jn. 2:19-20). Here the Church is viewed as an orthodox community anointed by the Holy Spirit.

According to the First Letter, the Church is the community of the children of God whose nature of being God's children is manifested through their doing righteousness, by loving their neighbour (1 Jn. 2:9ff.; 3:9-10; 3:14, 23; 4:20f.; 5:2), and by true confession of Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 2:22; 4:2f.; 5:1). This community possesses communion with God. For John says: "... that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with Christ" (1 Jn. 1:3). Again he says: "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:6-7). The Church, therefore, indicates a fellowship with Christ and God and with fellowmen through the medium of the Holy Spirit who is the gift of Christ. For "all who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit he has given us" (1 Jn. 3:24). Again he says: "By this we know that we abide in him and

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rev. 2:10.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. 1 Jn. 3:14-15.

he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit" (1 Jn. 4:13). Thus here we find the idea of the Church quite parallel to the Pauline concept that the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit.

### III The Church in the Gospel of St John

It is a fact that the explicit ecclesial terms such as "church," "people of God," and "body of Christ," are not found in the Gospel of John. Other ecclesial terms such as "kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3, 5), "flock" (10:16), and "bride" (3:29) are rarely found in it. Nevertheless one can see in this Gospel the concept of the Church interwoven with the christological and soteriological concepts. Hence, if we analyse this Gospel from an ecclesiological point of view, we can clearly see that this Gospel provides us with a rich theology of the inner reality of the Church. Although this Gospel does not use the word *ekklesia*, it draws clearly the picture of the Church in the form of a community that adheres to Christ by responding positively to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. An analysis of the origin, nature and function of this community will give us a bird's-eye view of the Johannine concept of the Church.

#### (i) *The Origin of the Community*

Following the line of the "remnant theology" of the prophets, John seems to view the new community of the New Testament as the remnant of Israel as well as of the humanity who adhered faithfully to God's Word, and thus received the privilege of divine sonship. For he says: "... yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not" (Jn. 1:10c-11). Thus Israel and the world in general rejected him. But there was a remnant who received him. "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:12). Thus this new community is a community of the children of God. Its origin is divine, for its members "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). The new community, therefore, comes into being by a new birth from above (3:3, 5). This new birth, however, is effected by the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit (3:5-8). Baptism is the effective sign of this new birth from above. Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in ch. 3 and his long Eucharistic discourse in ch. 6 make clear that the Fourth Gospel has already acknowledged the existence of the Church as a reality and is trying to explain the meaning of its various cultic practices such as those of Baptism and Eucharist.

In all these, the evangelist emphasizes that this new birth of men as God's children or the origin of the Church is a gratuitous gift of God. For authorization to become God's sons is gratuitously conferred on those who receive God's word by believing in him (1:12). Similarly the new birth by Baptism is effected by the Holy Spirit

whose activity is as mysterious as that of the wind (3:8). This gratuitous nature is also clear from the fact that the regeneration by spirit and water is closely linked with the lifting up of the Son of man (3:14-15) and with the gratuitous and generous love of God who loved the world as to give his only begotten Son for its salvation (3:16). This interrelation between the birth of the children of God and thus of the new community of believers and of the saving activity of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus and of the activity of the Holy Spirit, is well exposed also elsewhere in the Gospel. Thus in 7:37-39 living water according to John symbolizes the Holy Spirit whom the glorified Christ had to confer on those who believed in him, so that they may have life in abundance.<sup>12</sup> In 20:22 the risen Lord confers Holy Spirit on his disciples by breathing on them, which symbolizes that Jesus by his passion, death and resurrection is now giving the Holy Spirit to his believers as the breath of the new creation. This leads to their regeneration as God's children. In 19:34f. the water that flowed along with blood from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus may also symbolize the coming down of the Holy Spirit from the person of Jesus from the point of his death onwards to be active in the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist to regenerate and sustain the community of believers as God's children.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the origin of the Church is a gratuitous divine regeneration effected by the Holy Spirit who is active in the sacraments and is conferred by Christ who suffered, died and was glorified. In the scene of Jesus' baptism there is mention of the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and staying on Jesus (Jn. 1:32). According to modern authors this symbolism of the dove recalls the hovering of the Spirit over the waters in creation (Gen. 1:2). In the Old Testament the dove symbolizes the chosen people of God (Hos. 7:11; 11:11; Isa. 60:8). Hence in the Baptism scene, although the dove directly symbolizes the Holy Spirit, it indirectly indicates that Jesus, being filled with the creative Spirit, is now going to give existence to the new people of God which is the Church.<sup>14</sup> Thus the origin of the new community is from above, from the saving activity of the Word become flesh and the Holy Spirit.

#### (ii) *The Nature of this Community*

The Community is one of true worshippers. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus said: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit

<sup>12</sup> Cf. my article: "Holy Spirit as Living Water," *Biblehashyam*, 2 (1976), pp. 141-52.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 1 Jn. 5:6f. which holds that spirit, water and blood all become perpetual witnesses whose testimony converges in favour of Jesus Christ. Cf. also Jn. 6:62-63a.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Isa. 11:1-9; cf. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor Bible), Vol. I, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1971, pp. 57, 65; J. H. Bernard, *St. John* (ICC), Vol. I, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1928, p. 49.

and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (4:23-24). Hence Jesus saw the Church as the future community of true worshippers in contrast to the Jewish community which worshipped in Jerusalem and the Samaritan community which worshipped on Mount Gerizim. This community, being united with the Holy Spirit and Jesus the Truth, will truly worship the Father. This idea in John is not entirely new. Paul also has said: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). When we are in possession of the Holy Spirit and he makes us children of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, we cry spontaneously to God "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:6). John is therefore only articulating what was already present in the theological mind of the early Church. Hence the new community, according to John, would be a community of true worshippers who are moved by the Spirit and stand united with the Son to converse with God with all sincerity and confidence as children would do with their father. It is good to remember in this connection that by his temple-cleansing Jesus was reacting against the then existing Jewish system of worship, because it lacked interiority and sincerity.<sup>15</sup>

It is a community fed on the person of Jesus, and thus living, being filled with him. In the long eucharistic discourse, Jesus says: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will never be hungry, he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35).

Jesus said to them, 'Truly truly I say to you unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed . . . He who eats me will live because of me' (6:53-57).

Here flesh and blood indicate the whole person. Hence here the members of the new community of believers are invited to feed on the person of Jesus, to be filled with him and to live by him, just as Jesus himself lived by the Father, his food being to do his Father's will (4:34). Just as he multiplied the bread and distributed it to the hungry people at the lake-side of Galilee (6:1-13), so he is offering himself to the new community as the bread of life, so that the new community may be filled with him and be spiritually transformed into him. Here again this bread of life becomes effective in the believer only by the activity of the Spirit. For he says: "It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail" (6:63a). Just as the new community is invited to feed on the bread of life, it is also invited to come to Jesus and drink from him the living water (4:10, 14; 7:37-39).

<sup>15</sup> A detailed study of this topic is given in my book, *Destroy This Temple*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 1978.

Thus the Church seems to have been understood as the new community that depends totally on Jesus for its supernatural life.

It is a community walking in the Light which is Jesus (8:12; 9:5). It does not join the side of darkness, but always adheres to Jesus who is the light of life (3:19-21). It follows him as the only way to the Father (14:6), always listening to him who is truth (18:37). Thus it consists of the "people of the way" who always adhere to Jesus by faith and follow him faithfully.<sup>16</sup>

It is a community of believers who adhere to Jesus as the branches to the vine or as the sheep to the shepherd. The Johannine symbol of the vine has its roots in the Old Testament. In Isa. 5:1-7 and 27:2-6 Israel is pictured as God's vineyard. In Jer. 2:21 and in Ps. 80:8-16 Israel is portrayed as God's choice vineyard. In the latter case, the Septuagint has identified this vine with the "Son of man." This "Son of man," however, has a collective sense in Dan. 7:13, denoting "the saints of the Most High" (Dan. 7:18). The Johannine symbol of the vine and the branches, therefore, indicates that Jesus takes the place of Israel as the authentic vine on which the believers blossom like fresh branches that bear fruit and thus glorify the Father.<sup>17</sup>

In this allegory the intimate union between Christ and his believers is very well explained. It is like the organic unity between the vine and the branches, and is thus comparable to the Pauline symbolism of the Church as a body. Just as the branch has no existence outside the vine, so there is no possibility of the believer having supernatural life without his constant union with Christ. Now this union is possible only through a loving obedience to Jesus' commandment (15:9-10), which demands that the disciples love one another as he has loved them (15:12). Hence the new community is a community of people who remain in Jesus' love by observing his commandment which is expressed through brotherly love. Thus the new community has an organic unity which implies not only the union of the members with Jesus, but also the union of the members among themselves. This community formed by the communion is again united with the Father with an inner relationship that binds together the Son and the Father. The Pauline idea of "Church of God" seems to recur here when in John the relation between God and the new community is compared to the relation between the gardener and the vine with branches (Jn. 15:1-10).

If we consider the allegory of the vine and the branches along with the parable of the good shepherd, we get a complete system of thought concerning the Church. Jesus is the good shepherd. God is the real owner of the flock who has entrusted it to Jesus; but it belongs both to the Father and the Son as they are so intimately united with each other (10:26-30; 17:10). Here there is no room for a dis-

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jn. 6:66ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

inction between "Church of God" and "Church of Christ," as there is in Paul. Jesus is not like the hirelings; he is the good shepherd who knows and loves his sheep and takes care of them as Yahweh shepherded Israel in the Old Testament (Ps. 23). He is even ready to lay down his life for them (Jn. 10:11-13). There is an intimate communion between Jesus and the believers after the model of the union between the Father and Jesus, by means of knowledge, love and obedience (10:14-18). The good shepherd knows his sheep and he calls his sheep by name (10:3). He leads them out, he goes ahead of them and the sheep listen to his voice and follow him (10:3-5).

The universalistic aspect of the Church is indicated in Jesus' words: "There are other sheep that are not in this fold. I must bring them too; they will listen to my voice, and they will become one flock with one shepherd" (10:16). It is good to remember in this connection that Jesus' death was meant not only to redeem the Jewish people but also to gather together all the scattered children of God into a unity in Him (11:15). Unity is an important characteristic of the Church. In his priestly prayer Jesus prays in a special way for the unity of all the believers of all times which should be the mark of his new community: "I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me" (17:21-23).

The life-style of the new community is one of selfless love and service. In the scene of feet-washing Jesus gave to his followers a new life-style which is one of self-abasing service to others (13:1-16). In his farewell discourse he gave them a new law as the motive force of this new life-style. "A new commandment I give to you," he said, "that you love one another even as I have loved you, that you love one another" (13:34). This is indeed a new life-style, different from that of the Pharisees and tax-collectors who love only those who love them and hate those who hate them (Matt. 5:43-48). Here the followers of Jesus are asked to love as Jesus loved them with an undeserved love, a purely altruistic intensive love that prompts one even to lay down his life for others (Jn. 10:15; 13:1). This new life-style is a distinguishing mark of the new community of Jesus. For he said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35).

The new community is one which would be constantly helped and guided by the Holy Spirit. In his farewell discourse Jesus promised to send down the Holy Spirit to remain with the community always and thus to assist it to grow in the knowledge and conviction of the meaning and purpose of Jesus' deeds and words (14:16-17; 16:4-15). The Holy Spirit seems to have been considered in the Fourth Gospel as the soul of the new community. As living water, the Holy Spirit vivifies the new community (7:37-39). At the death of Jesus, he "gave up the Spirit" to be the breath of life for the new community (19:30; cf. 20:22).



### (iii) *The Function of the New Community*

The function of this new community is to continue Jesus' mission in this world. After the resurrection when Jesus appeared to the community of his disciples, he said: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (20:21). This mission is primarily one of sanctifying the world. Hence it is said there: "And when he had said this he breathed on them and said to them 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained'" (20:22-23). Jesus' primary mission in this world was to give life to it (10:10; 1:4-5, 14, 16; 3:16). The purpose of his existence on earth was to liberate man from the grip of sin (8:34-36), darkness (8:12), death (5:24-29), Satan (12:31) and the world (16:33) and thus bring to man true peace (24:27; 20:19) and joy (16:20-22; 20:20) and perfect happiness.<sup>18</sup> The new community has no mission other than to continue this same mission of Jesus.

### (iv) *The New Community Entrusted to the Pastoral Care of Peter*

John chapter 21 explicitly shows that the risen Lord has entrusted the Church to Peter so that he might have pastoral care over the flock (21:15-19). This chapter is considered to be an epilogue added by the final redactor; nevertheless the material of this chapter is still of Johannine tradition. The leadership of Peter in the early Church is discernible even in the Johannine narrative of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus which we find in the original body of the Gospel itself. There Peter is given a prominent place. When Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb she ran to "Simon Peter and the other disciples" (20:2). Although the beloved disciple reached the empty tomb first, he waited there until Peter came and examined the tomb officially (20:3-9). This again is a sign of Peter's well accepted leadership in the new community.

Thus in the Gospel of John we recognize a theology of the Church which tries to explain the radical meaning of the origin, nature and function of the Church. Here the Church is viewed as the new community that emerges from the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, animated by the Holy Spirit who is the gift of the risen Lord. It is a body of the believers who are knit together into an indissoluble unity in Christ, by means of their faith and love for one another, which is expressed through their bearing witness to Christ and through their serving one another even at the cost of self-sacrifice. It is a community of true worshippers, whose liturgical life, unlike that of the Pharisees, squares with their daily life. It is a community which is through and through Christ-centred, Spirit-centred and neighbour-oriented with a new life-style of true brotherly love and humble service in imitation of Christ.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. my article: "Liberation as Salvation: A Johannine Interpretation," *Journal of Dharma*, 2 (1977), pp. 68-81.