

The True Face of the Church

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This excerpt was first published in the period immediately after the Second Vatican Council. The author's insights take us back to the Church's first centuries, laying before us a deep and continually unfolding reality.

I rejoiced to see how the Holy Spirit called the Church to once again model herself on the spirit of the first Christians, in order to give back to the Church her true countenance.

In early Christianity, the original reality of the Church was one of *communion*, of charity. All other values have meaning and importance only within this framework.

For this reason, Cyprian -- though he had great respect for the episcopacy -- turned to his clergy and declared, "From the beginning of my episcopate, I have made it a rule not to decide anything without your counsel and the people's consent."¹ Besides the words "common-counsel" and "consent", Cyprian used other words like "co-priests", "co-bishops", and "colleagues", all of which express communion. The important common denominator for him was this "co-being".

Augustine affirmed: "What consoles me is being with you (in communion, in charity), because I am a bishop *for* you, but I am a Christian *with* you. The former is the name of an office, the latter of a grace."²

The fact is that with Christ as its head, the Church really is the "body" of God, and God is charity. Tertullian explained: "Where there are the three, that is, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, there is the Church, which is the body of the three".³

If it is true that the Church is charity in action, then [...] proclaiming mutual and constant charity is for the entire Church. The entire Church, all of us as Christians today, must be this charity before all else.

¹ *Epist.* 14. 4

² *Serm.* 340, 1: PL 38, 1483, cit. in *Lumen gentium* 32.

³ *De Baptismo*, 6: PG 1, 1206.