

THE OXFORD SUB-COMMISSION

ECCLESIOLOGY IN THE LIGHT OF VATICAN II1. The Church in the Mystery of Salvation

'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself'. (2 Cor. 5.19). This is the mystery (mysterion, sacramentum) once hidden but now revealed and effected, God's eternal plan 'to bring the world into the fellowship of salvation with himself in Christ'. (A. Grillmeier). As God's purposes are neither discerned nor seen to be carried out without his concretely manifesting them, so the first manifestation of this hidden mystery under the New Covenant is Christ himself, who in this respect may be called 'the sacrament of God'. (cf. E. Schillebeeckx, Christ the Sacrament). Similarly, as the sacramental expression of God's redeeming love may be seen in the life and work of the person of the Incarnate and Glorified Christ, so too Christ's saving work is embodied and made manifest in the community of men and women which he unites to himself and which by his presence and power proclaims and effects the reconciliation of men to God and of men with one another. In this respect, the church is integral to the mystery or economy of our salvation; and it is because she is so intimately linked to God's saving action in Christ that she is called by Vatican II 'the universal sacrament of salvation'. No longer is she to be considered as simply the 'sancta societas', nor does the image of the Body of Christ mean that the church is merely a body corporate like any earthly institution. Rather, according to modern theology, the church is the communion by belonging to which men are incorporated into the mystical body of the redeeming Christ to share in his life and to grow up into him 'who is the head' or again as the communion of those who have been called and brought into fellowship with God and with one another by the Holy Spirit and now share in the life of the Blessed Trinity.

2. The Church in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the mystery of the church is conveyed by a series of images (Body, Vine, Temple, Bride, People of God, Sheepfold, Plantation, Olive Tree, Ark of Noah, Mother). Though clearly from the beginning the primitive church was not without institutional forms and order, what these images primarily describe is not the organisational features of the christian community, but the communication of the mystery of redemption through Christ in the Church. That is to say, they are concerned

not simply with what the Church 'is', but with the experience of life in the church i.e. of life in Christ. They are dynamic rather than static (e.g. Body, Vine, Bride, Plantation, Olive Tree are 'organic' images of living things - even the Temple is made of living stones and grows); they are images of union with Christ (we are members of Christ's Body, branches of the Vine, ontologically one with Christ as a bride with her husband). Again these images are eschatological (the church is the 'new Israel', the 'new Temple', the body of the Second Adam, the new Jerusalem which like a bride adorned for her husband descends from heaven), for though the church is pilgrim, there is a sense in which she is the anticipated realisation of God's plan for mankind's eschatological fulfilment. And further, these images imply that the church is not of human creation (she is the body of Christ, the Vine that God has planted, the Temple that God will bring with him, the new people that God has chosen, called and set on the road of eternal salvation to be His light in the world).

It pleased God, then, 'through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believed'. The earliest christian communities were formed as the result of the preaching and teaching of the apostles. Men believed, they repented, they were baptised, they were called into the fellowship of the assembly. The New Testament affords comparatively little insight into the ecclesial life of the primitive church. We do know however that where the gospel was preached, there grew the local 'ecclesia'. We know also that though composed of men and women exercising a variety of gifts and ministries, some local churches at least were governed by those officially appointed for the work of oversight; and from our knowledge of the Corinthian church we can probably safely assume that all local churches assembled for the celebration of the eucharist. So too Pauline theology would suggest that the images of the church and of Christ's work of redemption applied to the local community (they occur, after all in letters to local communities - i.e. the church at Corinth is the Body of Christ, the Church at Ephesus is the Temple of Christ); but because the mystery is the same for each local church, so these images are of universal application, (Christ, in whom all things were created, who is 'before all things', is also head of his Body the church, wherever the church is manifested).

In the New Testament therefore we have a picture of a number of local churches called into existence by God through

the Spirit, through the preaching of the apostles, and constituting recognisable assemblies with a recognisable order, governed and served by the whole variety of ministries. Through life and prayer together, especially at the eucharist, each experiences that same redemption through union with Christ in the Spirit, and therefore despite occasional differences, the local churches together realise a sense of identity and unity. Together also they recognise and acknowledge the authority of God's revelation imparted to them by those whom Christ first entrusted the gospel message.

3. The Local Church

'The Church of Christ is truly present in all lawful local congregations of the faithful. These congregations, in attachment to their pastors, themselves have the names of churches in the New Testament. They are for their own locality, the new people called by God, in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. ...In these Churches, the faithful are gathered together by the preaching of Christ's gospel; in them, the mystery of the Lord's Supper is celebrated "so that the whole brotherhood is linked by the flesh and blood of the Lord's body"'. So Vatican II describes the local church. Gregory Baum, in his commentary on Lumen Gentium can say that 'the entirety of the ecclesial mystery may be seen in the local congregation'. Emmanuel Lanne (in One in Christ, 1970-3, p. 448) similarly notes that 'the texts of Vatican II affirm that the Church of God manifests itself, exists and works within the local church'. And N. Afanasieff, an Orthodox theologian (in Ecclesia a Spiritu Sancto edocta p.85) notes of the primitive church that 'L'unité et la plénitude n'étaient pas dans l'ensemble des églises locales, ni dans leur confédération - qui n'avait jamais existé, mais dans chaque église locale'.

It is quite clear on the one hand that Vatican II would go further than this to provide what its authors would consider to be a complete ecclesiology. 'Christ is present in these communities' (i.e. the local churches), the text continues, 'though they are often small in number and resources, or widely dispersed, and by his power the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church is drawn together' (LG 26). (This text is debated - I presume here that the 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church' refers here to the sum total of all local churches in communion with the see of Rome. On the other hand, Emmanuel Lanne is probably right in observing that there has been a shift in emphasis in the ecclesiology of Vatican II compared with that of Vatican I. '...The conciliar texts...')

[of Vat. II], he writes 'never put forward a concrete image of what the Church might be above the local level. For the doctrine of collegiality and the entities in which it is expressed....do not appear in themselves and theologically to manifest the catholic and apostolic Church any more than does the local community in its eucharistic celebration. [The local, hierarchically constituted Church...] seems to be the centre of ecclesiological reference especially in the proclamation of the Word and in the celebration of the sacraments; it is in virtue of it, in short, that the Church manifests itself as catholic and apostolic.' (He quotes in support of this in another article the Decree on the Liturgy (41) and the Decree on Bishops (11) (One in Christ 1970-3 p.312.)

4. The Catholicity and Apostolicity of the Local Church

It has been argued in a number of recent articles that the terms catholic and apostolic are as applicable to the local christian community as they are to the various unions of local churches within a single communion. Indeed the term 'the catholic church', first used by Ignatius of Antioch has, by some scholars, been seen to have been applied by him to the local church rather than to the universal church. J. Zizioulas, for example (One in Christ 1970-3 pp. 319 ff) suggests that the context in which Ignatius uses this phrase illustrates his concern for the unity of the eucharistic community, rather than his interest in the unity of the local churches. Clearly the term 'catholic' (kath holon) is descriptive of the 'wholeness of the church in a variety of its aspects'. In the eucharistic community of the local church, for example, we find the 'totality of the body of Christ' (ibid.), and the community is inclusive of the whole of society (transcending all social and natural divisions). So too the community is catholic in its structure. There is one bishop, one altar, one throne, the bishop in the eucharistic rite and in the celebration of the other sacraments, expressing in his person the 'multitude' (polupletheia) of the faithful in that place. As their representative, he teaches the common faith 'once delivered to the saints', as their representative, he presides at the eucharist, as their representative, he ordains and regulates into a harmonious unity the diverse ministries of the church. The local church, that is to say, has an inner unity and wholeness which is guaranteed by its structure. As she is the creation and manifestation of the whole Christ, as she is the whole ecclesial mystery, so she

is a unity in herself, for the sake of transcending the divisions of mankind. This in a real sense is the 'whole church' i.e. the 'catholic church'.

The local church must also be seen to be apostolic. The term expresses both the mission of the church and the identity of its faith with that of the apostles. The designation 'apostolic' also conveys the notion that the local church is not an ad hoc assembly of believing christians but has its roots in its apostolic origins and acts and lives by what she has authoritatively received. That is to say, her authority is not solely in herself but received from her origins and shared with her contemporaries. Of this authority the apostolic ministry is both a sign and a guarantee. (See Agreed Statement on Ministry para 16). Yet for all this, the whole 'apostolic presence' (in Scriptures, ministry, eucharist and ecclesial life) is to be found in each local church in its entirety. Whence the local church may truly be called 'apostolic' as she is called 'catholic'.

5. The Unity of Local Churches: College and Synod

Local churches are in no sense completely independent entities whose relationship with one another can be treated as a matter of indifference. As 'no man liveth unto himself', so no local church can live for itself or indeed by itself. From the earliest times not only was the interior unity of the local church a matter for concern (witness the Corinthian troubles, both in the time of St. Paul and of St. Clement) but the maintaining of relationships with other local churches was an issue of first importance. The unity of local churches may be expressed in a variety of ways. It may be seen in their teaching of a common faith, in their reading and exposition of the same Scriptures, in their common apostolicity and origins, in their common basic structure, in the celebration of the eucharist (however diverse the forms and liturgies) and in their common purpose in the world. Their unity is given sacramental expression in the reception of members of other local churches to communion and in the exchange of ministries; it is also sacramentally expressed by the participation of the bishops of several local churches in the ordination of a new bishop. The collegiality of bishops expressed in this way has a twofold reference. On the one hand, the bishop expresses in his person the collegiality of the local church, being the officially appointed representative and co-ordinator of the local church's faith and practice. In turn, since the rite of ordination incorporates into the episcopal college, the bishops signify

and effect the unity in faith of all local churches. Synods or gatherings of bishops again symbolise and serve to effect the unity of local churches. Different communions vary as to the authority accorded to such synods. The Roman communion would see the universal council of bishops, with the Pope at the head as the supreme organ of authority in matters of faith and morals (though it is expressly stated by Vatican II that bishops are not vicars of the Roman pontiff). Clearly, some form of synodical government would have to be a feature of any united church.

6. Unity and pluralism - typology and typologies

The term 'typology' is borrowed from philosophy (e.g. P. Ricoeur's Histoire et Verité) to suggest the possibility of a single truth finding expression in a plurality of forms. Applied to the christian church, it may be observed that as there is a pluralism of members, a pluralism of different vocations and ministries, a pluralism of traditions, a pluralism of worship, a pluralism of cultures, a pluralism of theological emphases, so in this sense one may speak of different 'typologies'; for it is through this pluralism that we receive the one Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The possibility of different 'typologies' within a single united church has obviously been recognised in history as it is in the present. This is a fertile notion and deserves pursuit. Nevertheless, as Cardinal Danielou said in 1963, it is 'difficult to trace the dividing line between issues raised simply over the multiple forms in which the faith is expressed and those which are the result of minor divergences from the faith itself' (E.C.Q. 1964-1, p.12). So that in the attempt to discern whether the life and teaching of a particular communion is recognisably the same as one's own, one may come to the point of having to say 'this is not my faith' rather than saying 'this is a different expression of my faith'. This caution should therefore be borne in mind while the attempt to discern one's own faith in that of other communions continues. (Note, in both Agreed Statements so far, the chairmen have assured readers that both Roman Catholics and Anglicans will be able to discern in the statements 'their own faith').

7. Uniatism

'By uniatism I mean the introduction of the liturgical and canonical rites of one Church into the communion of another

Church which undertakes to respect those rites in return for allegiance to its theological typology' (E. Lanne) (One in Christ 1970-3, p.443). Clearly the prime examples of this are the arrangements reached between certain eastern churches which have entered into communion with the Roman church, accepting the latter's theological typology while retaining their own rites and customs.

The Uniate model of unity has also recently been proposed for the Anglican/Roman Catholic union of the future. According to the above definition, the Anglican communion would retain its own liturgical and canonical traditions while recognising in the Roman communion its own faith and the Roman communion likewise recognising in the Anglican communion its own faith. This would be a slight variation on traditional patterns of uniatism. Lanne observes that earlier uniate schemes depended on the uniate churches accepting the Roman Catholic typology in theological matters; but since (as he continues) the 'liturgical and disciplinary typologies of a Church in the concrete are intrinsically linked to its doctrinal typology' (op. cit. p.444), it is hard to see how in the case proposed (or indeed in any future case) the Roman Catholic typology in theology should be binding on Anglicans or indeed vice versa.

8. Dissidence and charity

There is a sense in which unity in matters of faith must be matched with a charitableness of disposition of one church towards another. Doctrinal heterodoxy may be the cause of disunity in the first place; but the formation of a 'party', the refusal to communicate, the setting up of rival episcopal thrones and rival altars etc. is an outward sign not only of disunity but of uncharity, which in itself is an obstacle to the unity of the church. St. Augustine, for example, considered the sacraments of the Donatists to be inefficacious on account of their refusal on the one hand to recognise the catholicity of the catholics and on the other hand to cease the practice of outward signs of hostile opposition. The sacraments being incarnate charity, he argued, how could the Donatists express their charity with their fellow christians in baptism and at the eucharist, while persisting in creating civil disorder and hostile attacks on catholics. For Augustine, again, there is a direct parallel between the schismatic and the catholic in grave sin - in neither are the sacraments efficacious on account of the absence of charity.

The history of divided christendom illustrates with sad regularity the same phenomenon. Hence in any proposed reunion of two communions, it should be asked on the one hand whether any remaining causes of dissidence remain; and on the other hand whether at the original schism (e.g. between Rome and the orthodox), dissidence and party spirit was the primary factor and that a restoration of charitable relationships would in fact lead to an acknowledgement by each communion of the full catholicity of the other.

9. Some conclusions

(a) The Church of Christ is not an institution of human design, but has been brought into being by God through Christ and the Spirit for the redemption of mankind and for the manifestation of God's glory in the world.

(b) This mystery is manifest as the visible Church, through the forms and structures that have so far evolved (and may be capable of further development). The mystery may be seen as fully in the local church as in the assembly of local churches in communions.

(c) Catholicity and apostolicity are as much the characteristics of the local church as of the universal church (See 4 above).

(d) So far as authority is concerned, the bishop of a local church does not in any communion draw his authority from a central source (Rome, Canterbury or Constantinople), but exercises it in his own right in virtue of his apostolic commission (LG 27). This does not however mean that each local church may act independently without reference to other local churches. The principle of collegiality insists that as the bishop does not act without reference to his people, so also he does not act without reference to other bishops of other christian congregations. Some synodical form of government would in any scheme of reunion seem essential to incarnate and express the divine commission and apostolic authority of each local church.

(e) It would seem possible that local churches may vary to a considerable extent in theological, liturgical and devotional typology. Union between them does not mean the abandonment of one's own and the acceptance of the other's typologies.

We hope to have shown in the above that an agreement on

the doctrine of the church is fundamental to any scheme of reunion, and that such an agreement in the light of recent Roman Catholic discussion of the subject may in fact be possible. We hope also to have shown that it bears strongly on the whole question of authority.

Bibliography:

The most valuable collection of articles on ecclesiology has been collected in One in Christ, 1970-3.