

# Unity: Present and Future

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The true Church is a believed Church; in a real sense we have to 'believe' the Church, for the Church can only be recognised in its essential nature through faith. Yet the Church as the 'called out' community of the faithful is not simply invisible; it is both visible and invisible. As the people of God, the Church is essentially a 'people', and thus is visible. As the body of Christ, the Church is a 'body', and thus is visible. In the concrete visible Church there is a mixture of wheat and tares. Because the Church consists of human beings, and sinful human beings, renewal and reform of the Church is always necessary. In every age and generation she is faced with the task of presenting herself anew. It is with this understanding of the constant renewal of the Church – *ecclesia semper reformanda* – that we approach our subject.

The Unity of the Church is not primarily a unity of members among themselves, but is essentially a *given* unity which has its origin in God himself in his triune being of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This unity was actualized in Jesus Christ himself and made efficacious in the Holy Spirit. The whole New Testament message bears witness to this unity of origin. The classic texts are well known: 1 Cor 1: 10-30; 1 Cor 12; Gal 3: 27f; Rom 12: 3-8; Acts 2:42; 4: 32; John 10: 16; 17; 20-26; Eph 4: 1-6. There was indeed a consciousness of unity everywhere, and it was this consciousness of unity which was one of the factors which constituted the Church. This consciousness of unity became an essential element in the Church's self-definition, as one of the four characteristics of the Church set out in the Nicene Creed: 'We believe one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'.

Together with the unity of origin, and the consciousness thereof, was diversity. Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone of the building of unity, was interpreted in diverse manners. Already in the New Testament there were different presentations of Christ – the Pauline Christ, the Synoptic Christ, the Johannine Christ. About the person of the one and same Jesus Christ there were different types of Christology. As it has been put, there was one Jesus, but many Christs.<sup>1</sup> Hand in hand with this plurality of theologies went a plurality of life styles, gifts, vocations and spirituality among Christians. So Paul attested: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of

the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge, according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Cor 12: 4-11 Revised Standard Version). Paul clearly grasped the significance of diversity within the essential unity, and went on to compare it with a living body.

These diversities of theological interpretations and practical Christian living emerged from different kinds of Churches. There were indeed essential characteristics which marked all the New Testament Churches, and thus portrayed family resemblances, but there were also differences in belief and practice. The Church appears differently in the Epistles of Paul, the Gospel of Matthew, the two-volume witness of Luke-Acts, the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, to name some areas of the New Testament. There were different types of Churches (Judaean-Christian, Hellenistic); there were regional Churches (in Judaea, Galilee, Galatia, Macedonia, Asia). We get a picture of Churches of different provinces, dioceses, nations and continents we have a picture of Churches of different rites and theological emphases! <sup>2</sup>

There is of course real danger in espousing a kind of 'primitivism' – an insatiable yearning to restore a golden age of the Church, even of the Church of New Testament times, as a norm for the Church in every time and place and clime. Yet the New Testament does bear testimony to the fact that unity and diversity belong together in the Church. Where the tension between unity and diversity is experienced, the Church is likely to be renewed. We have been plagued so much in the West by 'Acts of Uniformity' that we find it difficult to grasp the fact that unity does not mean uniformity. Only unity and diversity together can be creative and fruitful. Of course there have to be checks on diversity, for if diversities cannot be held within the unity, then divisions appear. This can be evidenced in the First Epistle of John. We must therefore be vigilant about the point at which a difference of opinion or of practice, however Christian may be the claim, becomes so extreme that it breaks the unity of the Church and leads to separation.

The history of the Church has shown the tension between unity and diversity, which has led to the renewal and development of the Church, as well as saddled her with some unhappy divisions. Sometimes relentless clutching of unity has produced centralized authority, arid uniformity and a stultification of personal freedom and growth. Sometimes the prodigal indulgence in divers-

ity has led to alienation and anarchy. In the early centuries of the Church her life was marred by a series of heresies and schisms, though many had their grains of truth. Later came the gradual estrangement between East and West, reaching a climax in the schism of 1054. In the Middle Ages the Church in the West held fast to centralized structure and power, but still did not enjoy a haven of unity, as Pope crossed swords with anti-Pope, and as anathemas flew left and right. At the Reformation new divisions occurred and the national and regional Churches, Lutheran, Anglican and Reformed, set out on their separate roads. Each of these Churches sought to establish unity in each region, and there were even attempts to bring the Churches of the Reformation together.

It has been pointed out that for about two hundred years there was an 'incubation period' in which efforts were made towards the expression of Christian Unity.<sup>3</sup> In this century we have witnessed the emergence of the ecumenical movement. The initiative was taken by the Protestant Churches, perplexed particularly by the problems that division were causing the Christian missions overseas. It was indeed a historic moment when the World Council of Churches was inaugurated in 1948. Under the inspired leadership of Pope John XXIII, and with Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church committed itself to the ecumenical movement. Thus as Christians have learnt that difference of interpretation and practice should not mean division, to the detriment of the mission of the Church, and as Roman Catholics have come to greet Protestants as 'separated brethren', we have seen that unity and diversity can be held together in a creative tension, leading to a clear understanding of the objective of unity. The inauguration of the Caribbean Conference of Churches has also been a living testimony to the fact that the differences of opinion that led to divisions in other continents and cultures do not belong to us in this Caribbean community, as we seek to renew the Church in Unity that we may truly be the sign of that unity which must be the mark of our Caribbean peoples. The Churches have the great imperative of bearing the motto of 'Unity in Diversity' before our peoples.

So far we have looked at the givenness of unity, unity of origin, which allows for creative diversity of theological interpretations and Christian practice within the Church. This unity is God's work and He has given it to us in Christ. We know it by faith and we experience it in our baptismal and eucharistic life, in repentance and renewal in holiness. This unity of origin persists among all who call themselves Christians. But unity is also something we grow into; herein lies the eschatological strand in unity, unity of the end. We therefore rightly pray for redemption from the evil of divisions, from prejudices and misunderstanding. When we pray, we do not pray against one another -- that 'others may join us' -- for renewal

in unity will not be realised by people leaving one denomination to join another. When we pray, we do not pray that our will be done, but that God's will be done, for the reunion of the Churches will not take place as we imagine it will, but as God wills it. Our motives in prayer for renewal in unity must always spring from a desire that God's will be done.

Our Lord himself prayed for unity in John 17, and in this prayer we see that unity is something into which the disciples have to grow as a goal and consummation – "... that they may *become* perfectly one" (verse 23, RSV). The goal is in part in history where the world will come to believe as a result of the unity of the disciples; the goal is also beyond the world and in heaven, when the disciples will come to the vision of the glory in which they already share. There is therefore a dynamic theme to Christian Unity. The ecumenical movement must not be portrayed as if it were the reconstruction of a ship of unity which has run aground. If there had not been schisms in the Church, if there had not been a Reformation, there would still have been the spiritual and intellectual struggle into the fulness of the unity which was once given in Christ. If this is accepted, it is possible to hold together a loyalty to one's tradition as well as a generous recognition of what others who have another tradition bring to the unity of the future. Father Yves Congar, that distinguished Roman Catholic theologian, has well put this in the right perspective: "... We can freely admit that if reunion does take place one day it will be with a Church which differs in some ways from the present condition of the Catholic Church, different because it will have developed and been purified and reformed in more than one respect through living contact with its deepest sources, particularly with Holy Scripture ... Ecumenism ... does not consist directly in leading our separated brethren, either individually or in groups, into confessional adherence to the Catholic Church such as it is at the moment. To be sure, no Catholic worthy of the name, would refuse to help a separated brother who, doubtful of the truth of his own position, wished to become a Catholic. Nevertheless, the ecumenical worker as such feels himself impelled to work for unity at a different level and in a different way. For him the aim is to help other Christian communities and, if one may so speak, his own Church also, to approach and converge upon the plenitude which lies before us, in the light of which integration will really be able to take place."<sup>4</sup> I have quoted this passage to show a Roman Catholic theologian holding fast to his own tradition and accepting the significance of other communions, because of his emphasis on the Church moving dynamically towards a future fulness. Decrees of the Second Vatican Council on Ecumenism sound a similar note: "Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling.

Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement towards unity. Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she goes on her pilgrim way."<sup>5</sup> Also Vatican II asserts: "Nor should we forget anything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can be a help towards our own edification."<sup>6</sup> These theological considerations have greatly aided the fraternal relationships between Roman Catholics and those of other communions.

One of the fruits of this vision of the unity of the Church in the future has been the great thrust in ecumenical theology in which a worldwide community of scholars are exploring those theological issues which have been divisive in the past with a view to discovering a fresh approach which will lead to reconciliation. Perhaps the most remarkable ecumenical thrust can be seen in the field of Biblical scholarship where a new ecumenical understanding has been reached on the relationship between Scripture and Tradition. The model now is not one of autonomy, either of tradition over scriptural interpretation (the Catholic model of post-Reformation times) or of the scriptural interpretation over Church Tradition (the popular understanding of the Protestant position). The model is one of mutual influence. If the 'Protestant principle' insists solely on returning to the sources, especially the New Testament, in its search for a "primitive faith", then it tends to overlook historical development.

Similarly, if the 'Catholic substance' makes an absolute of the Church and her magisterium, then it tends to be uncritical and authoritarian. In a real sense Protestantism and Catholicism need each other. For example, Protestant theology has prided itself in its own interpretation of the doctrine of justification; in recent times a brilliant work on this doctrine has been done by the Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Kung in his *Justification*, in which he deals with the Catholic and Protestant interpretations. With regard to the nature of tradition and its role in theology, the 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' of Vatican II and Yves Congar's *Tradition and Traditions* have helped considerably to bridge the gap between Catholic and Protestant interpretations. On the nature of the ministry, the Eucharist and Authority other significant developments have been made. We have also witnessed the great boom in Roman Catholic interest in Biblical Studies through the Biblical Institute at Rome and the Biblical School of the Dominicans in Jérusalem, and through the work of many other Roman Catholic scholars.

Our understanding of the objective of unity must embrace aspects of human life wider than those of the realm of the ecclesiastical. The unity of origin which we have and the unity of the future fulness of the Church for which we pray and work, must

not seem to involve us in a movement of ecclesiastics preoccupied with ecclesiastical problems. Ecumenism must involve a stand for a just economic, social and political order of society in which our Caribbean peoples can live with freedom, dignity, and self-fulfilment. Ecumenism must include healing the wounds of races and classes, and binding up the broken bits of humanity. Ecumenism must involve us in working for a genuine Caribbean community.

It is within this search for a pluralist society in which one recognises dynamic change, and in which individuals and particulars are taken seriously, that the task of ecumenism must be faced. Within the unity of God's creation there is a variety of human beings. We are face to face again with the tension between unity and diversity in creation itself, and this is evident in any community. The Church has a responsibility to point the way in a unity which does not mean uniformity and in a diversity which does not mean divisive denominationalism. This, and only this, can be the objective and understanding of unity in our pluralist Caribbean community.

There is another dimension to the ecumenical task, which is the unity of all things. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 4 verse 10, we read: "He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things". Elsewhere we read in the same Epistle and in other Epistles that this uniting of all things involves the dethroning of 'principalities and powers' (Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12 Rom 8:33), demonic forces that divide. Man seems today to be in the grip of impersonal, rebellious powers, and in many ways we may well put a question-mark after 'man' and ask whether he will survive amidst the aggressiveness, greed and abuse of the earth's natural resources. It is for man to use his growing power over nature, not for divisive selfishness, but for the unity of mankind and to the glory of God. The economic forces which create the great contrast between wealth and poverty, affluence and hunger, and the problem of man's pollution of land, sea and air, pose the great obstacle to the unity of all people and all things. A concern for social and environmental problems is therefore an imperative for the ecumenical movement.<sup>7</sup> It is most encouraging to note that the Barbados-based Caribbean Conservation Association and the Caribbean Conference of Churches planned together for the observance of World Environment Day on 5 June 1977, and declared their concerted aim to "awaken people to a better understanding of the need for positive action in environmental matters".<sup>8</sup>

We have seen that the Church is both invisible and visible, and must always be in the process of being reformed. It is in this process of being renewed that we realise the givenness of the Church's unity in Jesus Christ as well as the task of praying and working for

the future fulness of the Church. The themes which must thus mark the ecumenical task are: renewal in holiness, the Church's given unity and future plenitude, and the unity of all peoples and all things. In this ecumenical endeavour we shall not equate unity with uniformity, but will maintain a creative tension between Catholic substance and Protestant principle in the other tension between the unity of origin and the unity of the end.

- 1 Don Cupitt, 'One Jesus, Many Christs?', *Christ, Faith and History*, ed. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton, CUP 1972, pp 131-144.
- 2 Hans Kung, *The Church*, Search Press 1973. p 274.
- 3 George H. Tavad, *Two Centuries of Ecumenism*, London. New American Library N.Y. 1962 p 18.
- 4 Yves Congar, *Dialogue Between Christians*, London, Geoffrey Chapman Ltd. 1966. pp 95-96.
- 5 'Decree *De Ecumenismo*', Decrees of the Second Vatican Council, chap 5.
- 6 *Ibid* chap 4.
- 7 Michael Ramsey and Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens, *The Future of the Christian Church*, Morehouse-Barlow Co. N.Y. 1973 p 69.
- 8 *Advocate-News*, Barbados, Wednesday 18 May 1977. p 2.

## Reviews

**SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY** by Jordan Aumann O P *Sheed & Ward*. 1980 pp 456. £11.50.

In this book the author, who is the director of the Institute of Spirituality at the Angelicum, attempts to respond to students' demands for a "complete and definitive" textbook on spiritual theology. It would plainly be hopeless to attempt any genuinely exhaustive survey of christian spirituality, if only because so much of the terrain is still covered by largely virgin forest, and it might very well have to be admitted that the more material we bring into the discussion, the more confusing the picture becomes and the more aporetic, accordingly, our theology of it all will have to be. Anyone who proposes to tackle spiritual theology seriously has no alternative but to reduce his scope in one way or another. Fr Aumann reduces his by confining himself essentially to the prevailing form or forms of spirituality of the western catholic church since the period of the reformation and counter-reformation. The sources of this spirituality are predominantly Jesuit and Carmelite. Fol-

lowing in the footsteps of great Dominicans like Arintero and Garrigou-Lagrange, Fr Aumann injects into the mixture a healthy dose of (more or less) Thomism. The result is a remarkably coherent picture of the basic pattern of christian development, and Fr Aumann's presentation of it is lucid and well-organised. And there is no doubt that the enterprise is worth undertaking, both because it charts a world in which many catholics are still living, and because it clarifies theologially what is generally taken to be the christian component in modern comparative studies of mysticism.

The Thomist element, it must be admitted, is not entirely at home in this kind of theology. Bits of St Thomas are brought in to undergird a structure which does not really reflect the shape of St Thomas' thought. But all the same the neo-Thomists brought some much needed correctives to catholic spiritual theology. They insisted on the importance of a proper