

# Vatican II on the Church and Ecumenism: *An Anglican Comment* by E. L. Mascall

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The promulgation at the third session of the Second Vatican Council of the three Constitutions *De Ecclesia*, *De Oecumenismo* and *De Ecclesiis Orientalibus Catholicis* is clearly an event of outstanding ecumenical importance, though its full significance will clearly appear only in the light of future thought and activity. Anything like a detailed consideration of the contents of the Constitutions would be quite impossible in the space at my disposal, but I hope that the comments which I shall make from an Anglican standpoint on some of the more striking characteristics of the first two may be of some interest and even perhaps of some usefulness to the readers of *New Blackfriars*.

To begin with *De Ecclesia*. In spite of the vicissitudes through which the Constitution has passed since the introduction of the original schema on November 30th, 1962 (and for information about this I am indebted to the extremely illuminating article by Père G. Dejaifve, S.J., in the *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* of January 1965), the overall impression which one receives is that of a remarkably systematic, comprehensive and unified document; only one section, which I shall refer to in more detail later, bears some visible marks of a clash of views which reached something less than full reconciliation. Most impressive of all is the way in which the presentation of the doctrine of the Church in primarily juridical and governmental terms which has characterized most Roman Catholic documents and treatises in the past has been completely superseded by an approach which is in the fullest sense biblical and theological. Thus the opening chapter is devoted to the Church as a divine mystery (*De Mystério Ecclesiae*) and traces with masterly eloquence the whole scheme of creation and redemption, telling how 'the Eternal Father, created the whole world by the free and hidden counsel of his wisdom and goodness, determined to raise men to a share in his divine life, and when they had fallen in Adam did not abandon them' but, having redeemed them in Christ, set them in his Church, that Church which was prefigured in the old Israel. Any simple identification of the empirical Church with the Kingdom of God is avoided, though the close relation of the two is stressed; the Church is 'the kingdom of Christ already present in a mystery' and to elucidate its nature all the great biblical images – the flock, the house of God, the holy temple, Jerusalem our mother on high and, above all, the Body of

Christ constituted and maintained by the sacraments – are pressed into service. This one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, 'as a society constituted and set up in this world, subsists in<sup>1</sup> the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him', but there are outside its structure (*compago*) many elements of holiness and truth, which 'as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ attract towards Catholic unity'. With a welcome and touching realism, whose wording is perhaps not without a touch of humour, we are told that 'the Church, since it includes sinners in its own bosom, is both holy and always in need of cleansing, and continually seeks penitence and renewal'. *Sancta simul et semper purificanda*: is this an ecclesiological echo of Luther's *justus simul et peccator*?

The theme expands in the second chapter 'On the People of God'. The Church is the Messianic people, with Christ as its Head: 'it has for its purpose (*finis*) the Kingdom of God, begun by God himself on earth, then to be extended, until at the end of the ages it is consummated by him, when Christ our life shall appear'. While the common priesthood of the whole Church and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood differ 'in essence and not only in degree', both are in their own ways participations in the one priesthood of Christ and they are mutually related. Infallibility (though the word is not here used) is seen as the property of the Church as such: 'the whole body (*universitas*) of the faithful, who have an unction from the Holy One, cannot fall away in their belief'. All the parts share in one life: 'In virtue of this catholicity the individual parts bring their own gifts to the other parts and to the whole Church.' And to this Catholic unity all men are called; they belong to it in various ways, some as Catholic believers, some as other believers in Christ, some simply as human beings. One of the most impressive sections of the Constitution is that in which, at great length, the principle is expounded that in one way or another all men of good will belong to the Church of Christ, whether they are in visible communion with the hierarchy and the Sovereign Pontiff, or are baptised Christians not in communion with the successor of Peter, or even men and women who are not consciously Christians at all: first the Jews, then Mohammedans, then those who 'seek the unknown God in shadows and images'. And finally it is affirmed that 'divine Providence does not deny the help necessary for salvation to those who through no fault of their own have not yet come to a clear recognition of God and yet by divine grace strive to lead a decent life'. 'For whatever is found in them that is good and true the Church considers as being a preparation for the Gospel and as something given by him who enlightens every man, so that at length he might have life.' And on the other hand a severe warning is given to those who

<sup>1</sup>Fr Dejaifve remarks that the original schema read, not 'subsists in', but simply 'is'. The change may be significant.

are in full and visible union with the Church that they will not be saved unless they persevere in charity.

After these two splendid chapters on the theological nature of the Church and its universal mission, and only after them, do we come to the chapter 'On the hierarchical constitution of the Church and in particular the episcopate'. It is here that the tensions in the Council have most clearly left their mark. Père Dejaifve has remarked that 'in a chapter dealing with the episcopate the ordinary reader will be not a little astonished to see the successor of Peter mentioned so frequently: forty or so times in the passages about the episcopate and fourteen times in the two paragraphs about the episcopal college and its power of jurisdiction'; and he adds that, even this was not felt to be enough, since before the final vote the Theological Commission brought forward on the order of 'higher authority' (in fact the Pope himself) a long explanatory note, intended to reassure the timid (and conservative) minority.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it is astounding to see how wholeheartedly the Council as a whole took to the principle of 'collegiality', for, to those who think in juridical and governmental categories (and it need not be stressed how strongly the Roman Catholic Church has for the last four centuries, if not for the last seven or eight, been dominated by the canon law and the Curia), the principle is not at all easy to grasp. For the relation which it envisages as subsisting between the Pope and the Bishops – an organic relation, according to which the Pope is *both* a member of the collegium and also its head – is not one that can be exhaustively specified in terms of rights, duties and privileges. However successful canon law may be in laying down the juridical aspects of the collegium, it cannot, by its very nature, penetrate to its theological and religious heart. The somewhat monotonous repetition in the third chapter of *De Ecclesia* of phrases such as '*una cum Capite suo Romano Pontifice et nunquam sine hoc Capite*', while no doubt reassuring the timid minority, only makes it plain that the Council has left a good deal of work for theologians still to do.<sup>3</sup> And this may very well in the long run be a good thing.

To turn to its positive teaching, the Constitution makes it plain that by consecration a bishop receives not only his power to perform sacramental acts (*munus sanctificandi*) but also his power as teacher and pastor (*munera docendi et regendi*), though these latter need to be directed to a determinate sphere by some authoritative act. The concept lying behind this is that by consecration a bishop does not merely receive a certain character bestowed on him as an individual, but is received into the episcopal collegium to which *as a whole* (*una cum . . . et nunquam sine . . .*, of course) there pertains a universal function of

<sup>2</sup>art. cit., p. 12

<sup>3</sup>Cf K. Rahner, *The Episcopate and the Primacy*

performing sacraments, teaching and governing over the whole Church. It belongs to bishops by the sacrament of orders to assume the newly chosen men into the episcopal body.' Nevertheless, 'the canonical mission of bishops can take place, either by lawful customs which have not been revoked by the supreme and universal power of the Church, or by laws openly or implicitly recognized by that authority, or directly from the successor of Peter himself',

It is clear that the collegiality of the episcopate, in union with the Pope, can be expressed in other ways than by an ecumenical council, though the latter provides the most striking manifestation of it. What must, I think, have been disappointing to the 'collegialists' who appear to have formed the great majority of the Council and will, I think, also be disappointing to the *fratres seiuncti*, is that the Constitution does not seem to be satisfied with insisting that no act of the episcopate can be truly collegial without the assent of the Pope as the head of the *collegium*, but also appears to assert that, over and above this authority which the Pope has as head of the *collegium*, he has another supreme authority over the Church which is purely personal. Thus, having been told that 'the college or body of the bishops has no authority except together with the Roman Pontiff, the Successor of Peter, as its head', we are also told not only that the power of the primacy remains entire over all whether pastors or faithful, but also that 'the Roman Pontiff has over the Church, (*in Ecclesiam*) by his own right (*vi muneris sui*) as Vicar of Christ and Pastor of the whole Church, full, supreme and universal power which he can always freely exercise'. This seems to be confirmed by the further statement in the explanatory note, appended by 'higher authority', that the Pope can act '*sive modo personali sive modo collegiali*', and that a distinction is made 'not between the Roman Pontiff and the collective episcopate, but between the Roman Pontiff himself and the Roman Pontiff together with the bishops'. Nevertheless, later on in the chapter, a passage which by its phrasing is clearly intended as an elucidation of the teaching of the Council of 1870, while saying that the Pope when making a dogmatic definition concerning faith or morals enjoys the Church's infallibility *vi muneris sui*, goes out of its way to describe him as *Collegii Episcoporum Caput*. But again the subsequent sentences appear to assert that the Pope has a supreme teaching authority quite independent of the episcopal collegium, as for example when it describes his infallible definitions as made by him *non ut persona privata . . . sed ut universalis Ecclesiae magister supremus*, with no mention of the bishops whatever. I am not sure that there is complete consistency here, but there certainly seems room for discussion whether, when the Pope acts *modo personali* and not *modo collegiali*, he is acting in entire detachment from the universal episcopate or not.

Leaving this now aside, we may notice with interest that the principle

of collegiality is extended, of course analogically and not univocally, from the relation of the Pope with the bishops to the relation of the bishop with his presbyters and even in the following chapter to the relation of the priest with his layfolk. 'The presbyters,' we are told, 'as wise co-operators with the episcopal order and as its helper and instrument, called to serve the People of God, form one presbyterium with their bishop, though assigned to different tasks', and the practical consequences of this conception are emphasized. Chapter Four, 'On the Laity' needs to be read in conjunction with Chapter Two 'On the People of God'; I shall not comment on it in detail, but shall only stress the welcome liberation which it marks from the clericalism which has so lamentably dominated the thought and life of all Christian bodies in the past and which in some quarters seems to be superseded by an equally unbalanced laicism. It is a natural passage to Chapter Five 'On the Universal Vocation to Holiness in the Church' and to Chapter Six 'On Religious'. Their titles indicate their importance, and their contents merit a full discussion, which I cannot give them here.

The Constitution culminates in Chapter Seven 'On the Eschatological Character of the Church on Earth and its Union with the Church in Heaven'. This is especially welcome on two counts, first because the earlier part of the Constitution has perforce been very much concerned with the Church militant and secondly because there has been a tendency in some earlier pronouncements (the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* is a case in point<sup>4</sup>) to slip almost unconsciously from the Body of Christ as a whole to the part of it which is on earth. No such criticism could be made of the present Constitution, and it was a happy thought to combine the consideration of the Church beyond the grave with that of the Church's final consummation. One of the strong points of this chapter is the way in which it exhibits the cultus of the saints and prayer for the departed as organically related both to the present concerns of the Church on earth and to the the future glory in the general resurrection. It is in this light that the relevance can be seen of the warning against abuses both of excess and of defect in our relation to the saints; everything is set in the context of the Church as a whole.

The Constitution on the Church comes to a fitting conclusion with the eighth chapter 'On Blessed Mary the Virgin Mother of God (*Deipara*) in the Mystery of Christ and the Church', though it was only by a narrow majority that it did not become a separate constitution. It is notable for its scriptural emphasis and for its refusal to isolate Mariology from the main corpus of Christian doctrine. She is honoured, it tells us, 'as the true Mother of God the Redeemer (*Dei ac Redemptoris*)'. 'Redeemed by a foretaste of the merits (*intuitu meritorum*, an echo of the Definition of

<sup>4</sup>Cf my *Recovery of Unity*, p. 221

1854) of her Son in a specially exalted way, and united to him by a close and unbreakable link, she is endowed with the supreme office and dignity of being the Mother of God the Son . . . and by the gift of this surpassing grace she far excels all other creatures both in heaven and on earth.' So the Holy Synod has decided to expound both her relation to the Incarnate Word and the Mystical Body and also the duties of redeemed men towards her, but not to produce a complete treatise or settle questions disputed among theologians. Not unnaturally has the Church seen her symbolically represented in the types of the Old Testament, which is itself prophetic of the work of redemption. All her appearances in the Gospel narrative are listed and commented upon. Christ, it is emphasized, is our unique Mediator, and therefore Mary's maternal function towards men is to be seen not as obscuring or diminishing, but as showing forth, his mediatorship. Her whole influence in the salvation of men flows from the superabundant merits of Christ. She is known in the Church by such titles as Advocate, Helper, Assister and Mediator, but 'this must nevertheless be understood in such a way as neither to take anything from nor add anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator'. No attempt is made to go into details of Mary's place as Mediatrix, nor is she called Co-redemptrix. 'No creature can ever be equated (*connumerari*) with the Incarnate Word the Redeemer,' but the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather stimulates a shared co-operation by his creatures in his work.

By her special graces and function Mary is to be seen as a type of the Church (here we are reminded of the recent book by the Protestant Frère Thurian). She is worthy of the highest honour, but not of the adoration<sup>5</sup> which is due to God alone. Theologians are exhorted to avoid both exaggeration (*falsa superlatio*) and niggling meanness (*nimiam mentis angustia*), while the faithful are to remember that true devotion consists neither in fruitless and fleeting feelings (*in sterili et transitorio affectu*) nor in empty credulity, but that it proceeds from a true faith which leads us to recognize the excellence of the Mother of God and stirs us to love her as our mother and to imitate her virtues. Both words and practices which might give rise to misunderstanding on the part of the separated brethren or others are to be avoided.

The whole of this chapter is really quite admirable, though one might perhaps suggest that Mary's status as *Theotokos*, rather than her relation to the Church, could profitably have been taken as its basic principle, though it would have been difficult in the former case to avoid the provision of a separate Mariological Constitution, in the absence of a Constitution on the Incarnation from which the title of *Theotokos* would

<sup>5</sup>*Adoratio*. The terms *latria* and *hyperdulia* are not used

naturally depend. What is most striking is the complete absence of the more questionable Mariological emphases which a few years ago seemed to have got the upper hand. There is no hint of fresh definitions of Mediation or Co-redemption, no mention of Roschini's famous principles of Marian analogy, no sympathy for the view that Mary played a primary and not a subordinate part in redemption, not a murmur of Josephology, not even a reference to Fatima or Lourdes. And even the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption receive little mention beyond a brief passing citation of the operative phrases of the official definitions, though their essential reasonableness stands out all the more clearly in their organic relation to the whole mystery of redemption.

Turning now to the Constitution *De Oecumenismo*, its basic coherence with *De Ecclesia* is plain, though, somewhat remarkably when one considers the controversial nature of many aspects of its subject, it seems to be altogether free from the indications of tussle and strain that mark in places the former document. Its whole tendency is to avoid offence and to lay stress upon the elements that Rome and the various non-Roman bodies have in common. No more inoffensive phrase could well have been chosen than *fratres nostros seiunctos* to designate the 'separated brethren'. Warm appreciation is expressed of the movement for Christian unity and Roman Catholics are urged to take part in it. After a fine exposition of the universality of Christ's redemptive act and of his foundation of the Church as the people of the New Covenant, a unity of faith, hope and charity, the sad fact is recognized that even in the earliest days rifts (*scissurae*) in the unity arose, though the large and lasting separations came later. It is frankly admitted that there were faults on both sides; it is honestly affirmed that Christians today cannot be blamed for the sins of their ancestors or accused of the sin of separation (*separatio*; the word *schisma* is avoided); 'the Catholic Church embraces them with brotherly respect and love.' There are serious differences of faith and practice, which the Ecumenical Movement strives to overcome; but even so, 'those who are justified by faith in their baptism are members of Christ's body, have a right to be called Christians and are fittingly recognised by the Catholic Church as brothers in the Lord'. Many of the elements of the Christian religion exist in the separated Churches and Communities, they can without doubt give birth to the life of grace and open up access to the community of salvation.

These are indeed striking phrases, for it is now clearly stated that all the baptized are members of the Body of Christ, even if defective ones, and the title 'Church' is unambiguously given to some at least of the bodies separated from Rome.

The two conditions for fruitful ecumenism are laid down as, first, the avoidance of all words and actions which do not do justice to the

separated brethren and, secondly, 'dialogue' between competent representatives of the various Churches and Communities. Essentials must be preserved, but a proper freedom must be maintained and charity must prevail in all things. And Catholics are called on to recognize and profit by the riches of Christ and the virtuous works of the separated brethren and to thank God for them. The Church herself is prevented from realizing the fulness of her catholicity by the separation of so many Christians from her.

The basic need in ecumenism, which is the concern of the whole Church, clergy and layfolk alike, is, we are told, her own renewal: Christ summons the earthly Church to perpetual reformation. In addition to matters of conduct and Church discipline, there may also have been defects in the way in which Church doctrine has been formulated (*in doctrinae enuntiandae modo*), though this must be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself. Such movements of renewal as the biblical and liturgical movements, new forms of the religious life and social activity are warmly commended for their ecumenical significance. There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart (*sine interiore conversione*). The sharing in common worship must be governed by the twin principles of bearing witness to the unity of the Church and of sharing in the means of grace. And, as regards the teaching of theology and allied disciplines, stress is laid upon the ecumenical approach and, perhaps significantly, on 'true regard for facts' (*ut usque accuratius rerum veritati respondeant*). Two very striking conditions are laid down: first, that the Faith should be expressed in such a way as never to impede the 'dialogue', while ambiguity and suppression of facts must be avoided; secondly, it must be remembered that there is a proper hierarchy of truths in Catholic doctrine and they must be presented in their proper relation and proportions.

When the Constitution turns to consider the actual situation, it draws a clear line between the divisions which separated the various Eastern Churches first from one another and later from Rome and those which arose in the West in or as a result of the Reformation. An Anglican can hardly pass by without expressing satisfaction the statement that 'among those in which Catholic traditions and institutions in part continue to exist the Anglican Communion holds a special place'.

The Eastern Churches are spoken of with the highest respect and gratitude; they are recognized as having true sacraments and a true priesthood, and some communion *in sacris* is not merely to be allowed but positively to be encouraged.<sup>6</sup> One of the essential prerequisites to

<sup>6</sup>Cf. the remarkable permission in *De Ecclesiis Orientalibus Catholicis* for Catholic and 'separated' Eastern Christians to receive the sacraments of Penance, Communion and Unction from each other's priests (para 27): in cases of necessity 'as often as need or true spiritual benefit requires'.



the recovery of unity is that their power and duty to govern themselves in their own way should be recognized. A most significant passage explains at some length that the various theological traditions of East and West, so far from being contradictory, may be mutually complementary and enriching (*non raro potius inter se compleri dicendae sunt quam opponi*). I do not think there is any exaggeration in saying that the whole tone and bearing of this section of the Constitution views the Eastern Churches not as outside the Catholic unity but as parts of the true Church which, by human sin and historical accident, have lost their external unity with the chair of Peter. The recognition that such a status is possible, quite apart from the question as to which communities it applies, may well have far reaching theological and practical implications. Furthermore certain passages, both here and in the Constitution *De Ecclesiis Orientalibus Catholicis*, suggest that for the sake of unity Rome would be satisfied with a recognition of the Papacy as having only the remotest concern with the normal life of the Eastern Churches and as intervening only on the most exceptional occasions. There seems no fundamental reason why such a concession should not be made to other separated brethren too, if the basic problems of faith and validity of sacraments had been overcome, especially if the vastly overgrown Western Patriarchate were divided. But this would require a discrimination that has not yet been made between the functions of the Bishop of Rome as Patriarch of the West and as Head of the Universal Church; and this is a question that has yet to be clarified.

As regards the separated 'Churches and ecclesial Communities' of the West (the Constitution tactfully refrains from specifying to which bodies each designation applies) the problem of unity is recognized as being both more difficult and less uniform than in the East. Nevertheless, they are commended for their devotion to Holy Scripture, even if they differ both from Rome and from one another about its relation to the Church. Great stress is placed on the sacrament of baptism, though little notice seems to be taken of the fact that many Protestants have never been baptized. 'Wherever it is duly administered as our Lord instituted it and is received with the right dispositions, a person is truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ and reborn to a sharing of the divine life.' It 'establishes a sacramental bond of unity which links all who have been reborn by it'. However, it is only a beginning of the sacramental life, and here a real problem arises from the presumed invalidity of their orders. Nevertheless – and here we seem to hear an echo of Fr Schillebeeckx – 'though we believe they have not retained the proper reality of the Eucharistic mystery (*genuinam atque integram substantiam Mysterii eucharistici*) . . . nevertheless when they make a memory of his death and resurrection in the Lord's Supper, they profess that it signifies life in communion with Christ and look forward to his

coming in glory.' And this is seen as providing an added reason for entering into dialogue. Finally the most generous recognition is made of the sincerity, faith and virtue of the separated brethren, and an urgent wish is expressed that Catholic ecumenism should advance and develop in step with theirs.

I have taken up so much space in selecting and commenting on points in the two Constitutions that I have little left for general remarks. No doubt many questions remain to be determined both within and between the various Churches and ecclesial Communities. In particular, from the Roman side some clarification seems to be needed of the precise dogmatic status of the detailed statements, as distinct from the general teaching, of documents such as these, which, in spite of their great length and their solemn promulgation in an Ecumenical Council contain no formal definitions of faith nor any anathemas.<sup>7</sup> Does every sentence enjoy the character of an infallible utterance? But my final remark must be an expression of admiration for the extraordinary and altogether unexpected readiness shown by the Council to open up questions that had long been thought of as unalterably settled, to initiate the most radical changes in the practical life of the Church, and to subject the most cherished institutions to quite drastic criticism. Dr J. V. Langmead Casserley, in his remarkable little book *The Church Today and Tomorrow* has pointed out that it is Rome rather than the World Council of Churches that has now taken the lead in the Ecumenical Movement, and has suggested that the papal primacy, which has been bolstered up in the past on the theoretical plane by questionable exegesis, may vindicate itself in the future on the practical plane by its sheer power of leadership. In Vatican II Rome has made a gesture of self-criticism, constructive thought and Christian charity such as neither it nor any other Christian body in the course of history has before dared to make. It remains to be seen whether the other Christian bodies will have the courage to make an adequate response.

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<sup>7</sup>Thus, although I have for convenience called all three documents Constitutions, the official title of *De Ecclesia* is *Constitutio Dogmatica* and of the other two simply *Decretum*. The document on Liturgy was simply called *Constitutio*. Yet all of them contain doctrinal material