

EMERGING CHURCH: CHAOS OR INCARNATION?

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WHERE WILL it all end? What will be the fate of this recklessly pluriform Church of ours? In the civil sphere, we look nervously towards the end as a bang or a whimper; in the ecclesial realm, it is quite possible that our impoverished imaginations cannot even come up with a genuinely moving contemporary scenario. The Book of Revelations, of course, has long since supplied us with sufficient end-time imagery for centuries of dreams and nightmares. Unfortunately, beasts with numbers on their foreheads have now been pre-empted by comic books and rock-freaks; whilst even the image of a new city of peace may be too remote, when it is foreseen as coming down out of heaven adorned like a bride (cf Apoc 13, 11-17; 21, 2).

All of which is not to say that the question is not genuine; it is, and with a soul-wrenching reality. The issue is placed differently by different Catholics, of course. Some would ask: 'how can we put a *stop* to the dizzying fragmentation of the Church, the loss of our distinguishing identity?' Others would say: 'why don't they just bring up some of those medieval instruments lying rusting in the Church's basement and use them?' On? Well, on Archbishop Lefebvre, that's who! (Oh, you think that they would be better used on Hans Küng? I have to admit, I hadn't thought of that. Let's call it a draw, shall we?) Yet others would declare: 'there's no issue left; in fact, we've merged already, at least with the other main-line christian Churches; it's just that the official machinery will take some time to catch up with the people'.

We live with a bewildering array of attitudes among Christians towards elements once thought to be the bed-rock of christian faith and practice. It is all caught up simultaneously in the funnel-cloud: theological questions like the knowledge and *dicta* of Jesus, or the nature and meaning of the virgin birth; practices like auricular

confession and rites which evoked in us at least the sentiments of mystery; universal moral guide-posts, certain beyond question; even ecclesio-political sureties like the incompatibility of Marxism with the christian gospel, to name only a few items on the list.

In the face of the phenomenon of such pluriformity and the numbing anxiety it produces, one can think of at least three possible approaches.

Three vantage points

Theologically, one might ask all sorts of limit-questions, as we sort through various layers of assumptions and conditions of possibility for the Church. Is pluriformity intrinsic to the Church? What are its limits? When is pluriformity legitimate? Does it make sense even to ask that kind of question? Can the nature of legitimacy and its vehicles be determined in advance of the Church's *experience* of the new deviation from recent norms? Can the Spirit be harnessed and remain Spirit? Can the Spirit be formless and still remain the Spirit of Jesus?

Or one could approach it from a purely psychological point of view, by examining the nature of the anxiety we all experience when an old identity has vanished, and a people is confronted with a panoply of activities experienced as disintegrated and personally disintegrating. By learning to understand the anxiety, we might proceed to fashion some mechanisms to cope with it.

The modest effort proposed here for confronting the phenomenon of ecclesial diversity adopts neither of these approaches, valuable though each may be in itself. The conceptual questions call for a much more penetrating exploration of foundational theology than this writer is equipped to undertake; while the purely psychological approach might turn the situation into one more example of identity-crisis: one rather more complex than the common or garden variety, but basically just another 'case'. Theology and psychology shed light upon, but are not of themselves adequate for, the business which concerns the readers of this journal: the living out of a christian spirituality. How do we respond, as persons of faith in Jesus, to the diversity of self-presentation of this people, who purport to be his body on this earth? How do we situate ourselves within this people?

When we pose the question in this way, it becomes clear that there is no simple recipe; each of us must make a lonely existential choice, in touch with but different from our neighbour's. As the personal history and perspective of each will differ, so will the risks

in each one's decision and stance. The reflections which follow here are simply personal perspectives offered as possible foils for the similar reflection and personal search of each reader: flotsam and jetsam, the 'fall-out' of some years of living within this people. They include some conceptual tools which might help to pose the question in a better way, along with some personal commitments which would resist purely logical analysis. They may appear a bit messy and pre-rational, especially as they are mixed in with the writer's own experience of sin and irrationality.

Identifying the 'who'

Perhaps the first step would be to identify ourselves, to name the 'we' who are going through this experience. If we name that 'we' as a group of people (even hundreds of millions) who have experienced the Church only as monolithic but recently appearing as hydra-headed, our inquiry is doomed from the start. If we name a 'we' which has no experience beyond a congealed identity, fashioned between 1870 and, say, 1950, we have already jettisoned one of the elements alleviating our anxiety: a sense of historical perspective. Historical solipsism, whether individual or communal, exacts a heavy toll.

But, in truth, you and I are part of a much bigger 'we' than that. Our Church has a history, and its two thousand years of experience is ours: it is who we are, if we can appropriate it and live out of it. The word 'diversity' has been allowed to roam about and work a lot of mischief, simply because we have identified it with the phenomena of one short historical period: the years since Vatican II, taken in isolation from the nineteen hundred and sixty years that preceded it. Suppose, instead, we remove its false face, identify it properly as *contemporary* or simultaneous diversity, and situate it face to face with another figure, which we could designate as *longitudinal* diversity. Imagine all the different faces of the Church, stretched out along a two thousand-year time-line, like so many slide-transparencies in a row. Then collapse them together, shine a powerful light through them, and place the resultant mosaic face-to-face with what we presently call 'diversity'. How monochromatic the present would seem by comparison!

Diversities through time

When we consider longitudinal diversity, the different faces and postures of the Church down through the centuries, the illustrations

are endless. One thinks of a period in the western Church, extending over the better part of two hundred years, in which once-in-a-lifetime confession, on one's deathbed, was the normal thing for even holy men and women. Or one recalls missionaries pleading for the acceptance of chinese rites, or early nineteenth-century north-american bishops telling Rome that the Church in the United States would die, unless it adopted a vernacular liturgy. (Today's version is the calm introduction of the peace-pipe into amer-indian liturgies; or african missionaries wondering out loud if polygamy just might be a humane way of ordering the institution of marriage in some cultures, and thus be an acceptable expression of the christian world-view.) There are people still living today who were brought up in a Church where frequent Communion for the laity was unthinkable.

We might walk back through our history and try to re-live the experience of a Church in which there are three claimants to the papacy; and no one can give ordinary lay-folk a definitive answer as to which claim is legitimate. And this situation lasts more than a generation: longer than the normal life-span of a man or woman of the time. That it was a traumatic experience there can be no doubt; and undoubtedly much of the Church's life, for the next couple of centuries, was devoted to coming to terms with what it had experienced, and making sure such a state of affairs would never happen again. But this is scarcely the most profound lesson of the experience. Evidently, the reality of Church can survive even the loss of that anchor of certainty. We, God's people and Christ's body, are living at another, more profound level than that supplied by a secure papacy.

To walk further through our history, we need to go back to a time when the Church is not in a position to answer the question: is Jesus truly God-and-man? She does not because she *cannot*. The technical language has not yet been shaped — we are in the second and third centuries, remember — which can allow the question to be asked in words which do not force an heretical conclusion. The Church's answer will be forged in the fourth century, and pass thence to the catechisms of schoolchildren in the first grade. But by that time the Church will be using formulae which would have been denied the second-century Christian, because the words would have meant something else. Yet through the four centuries which began with Jesus, the faith-life of the christian people could go on. Apparently, once a question is posed in a certain way, among a

certain people sharing a common cultural base, it must receive a certain answer. But equally apparently, the life can be lived for a while without our needing to be preoccupied by the question.

Eventually, our longitudinal diversity takes us back to the constitutive documents of christian identity, to the scriptures themselves, and the gospels in particular. The question of the development of the biblical canon — the texts acknowledged by the christian community as carrying the authentic revelation, is one of the most difficult in the whole of historical theology, and is outside our present perspective. Yet we cannot by-pass the extraordinary fact that the christian Church sanctioned not one but four different accounts of the story and reality of Jesus of Nazareth, not to speak of the many different theologies within the Old and New Testament books. Would the prophet Amos, for example, have appreciated the Jesus depicted by Luke? The ways by which these particular writings came to be accepted as authentic, whilst other candidates for canonicity, other holy writings of the christian communities, fell by the wayside, may be historically obscure. The efforts at harmonizing all that remains into one coherent revelation about the Father, and our relationship to him, are indeed worth the Church's contemplation across the centuries. But still the inescapable fact remains. The Church looks at four very different accounts of Jesus and says: 'Yes, each of them is a faithful and faith-filled representation of Jesus the Christ. You can give your life for that'.

The point of all of this is not to denigrate the need and function of dogma, to advocate abandonment of confession, to dishonour the office of the papacy, or to undermine the gospel-witness to Jesus. It is simply to remind ourselves that these eras and these experiences are part of our christian heritage, part of ourselves. If the present sweep of diversity disorients us more than it should, simply because we have lost touch with our longitudinal diversity, then surely the loss of our lived history constitutes a sickness much more serious than could be cured by any contemporary return to a more rigid uniformity of expression, ritual, practice, or politics. Our God is the God of history; and if we lose the thread of our history, we have lost both ourselves and him. In that case we are the children, not of Moses and Jesus, but of Orpheus.

Naming the scope of our situation: a struggle of paradigms

Let us grant, then, that a genuine internalization of our history might bring into better perspective our present experience of diver-

sity. Are there other pairs of spectacles which might provide a better, less distorted vision for the contemporary Catholic? Thomas Kühn's book was clearly not intended as a treatise on history in general, much less on that of the Church.¹ But we may profitably appropriate his reflections, as we attempt to put a name to the unique stage of development we are experiencing in the life of today's Church.

Every community of persons operates out of a deeply-ingrained frame of reference. Kühn calls it a paradigm. The community may also have some shared rules, shared practices, shared ways of behaving: things expected of a community-member by the rest of the community. These latter flow out of the paradigm in ways which may or may not be able to be traced by logic; but they are not the paradigm itself. Rules and procedures function as expressions indicative of the paradigm. The paradigm itself functions at another, deeper level of the community *psyche*. It is at once more encompassing in its power to hold the community together, and more difficult to seize and describe. It is shaped out of a whole host of individual choices which have coalesced into a basic posture; and this has become, as we say, 'second nature' to the individual or the group. It has dimensions of the rational within it; but ultimately it is founded on existential, *ad hoc* commitments and decisions which, at the time when they were made, were experienced as 'right', as connatural to the life of a given era. Depending on the breadth of reality which they control, these paradigms may develop over centuries. Examples would be the world-views of an Aristotle, a Ptolemy or a Copernicus.

Kühn's reflections on the history of science lead him to several conclusions about the development and functioning of paradigms in human communities. First, when a paradigm is genuinely in power within a community, the activities which characterize it are largely peaceful efforts at working out and perfecting the rules and procedures for, to use his illustration, 'doing science'. In our context, this might be expressed as 'being Church'. Secondly, for some time after the old rules have begun to gather to themselves all sorts of exceptions and anomalies, practitioners within the particular community will still use much of their energy in formulating yet other auxiliary rules to make the old vision 'work'. What is actually happening, however, is that the old paradigm has lost its power to hold the community together. This process goes on at a level too

¹ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd ed, Chicago, 1970).

deep for the community to identify its actual experience or express it in rational language. Thirdly, old paradigms do not lose their hold unless new ones are being formed to supplant them. The new will thus once again constitute and empower the community.

Using Kühn's glasses, it seems safe to say that we are living in a time when the basic problem is not the struggle for more adequate elaborations of old paradigms. What is at issue is the paradigms themselves: age-old postures, stances and perspectives, clusters of world-views, attitudes, and affectivities. There seems little doubt that we are spending our days in the midst of the most profound paradigmatic change in the history and experience of the christian community. Small wonder that our corporate anxiety should be correspondingly profound! But the very lenses which focus for us the extreme difficulties in our situation should alert us to the only possible christian attitude towards it. There is a new paradigm straining its way to birth. Two children are wrestling within the womb for the passage to life; creation groans only because birth is taking place.

We do not know the form of the new paradigm. Those called to world leadership in our Church know that it will be shaped within the hazardous processes described by the deceptively simple term *acculturation*. The late pope and our bishops in synod have called for forms of evangelization whereby the christian gospel may find different expressions in the vast range of cultures which make up our world. It may be fair to say that this very posture is itself one of the components of the new paradigm. It would not have characterized the Church of thirty years ago. How easy to enunciate in theory this call for acculturation, yet how complex to bring it off when humanity is continually spawning new sub-cultures! Is the world-as-global-village any more than a disguised version of the discredited America-as-melting-pot? Some signs of our times might seem to be calling for a vision of the world-as-galaxy. . . . And that, too, need not be a paralysing possibility. We may not know how they do it, but evidently the components of a galaxy are held in some kind of inter-dependence; perhaps fully indigenized local Churches might be able to learn the art as well.

The issue is incarnation

In this final analysis, concepts such as longitudinal diversity, substitution of paradigms and acculturation of the gospel, though they may help to situate us within the reality of our experience of

ecclesial diversity, will not do the task for us. The only way in which we shall respond faithfully to the diversity of our present experience is by being diverse ourselves. Ultimately, the issue is not conceptual. It is incarnational. Just as it is true that every ecclesiological question eventually becomes a Jesus-question (how could it be otherwise if the Church is genuinely his body?), so every Jesus-question eventually becomes a flesh-and-blood decision. It is something we need to learn again and again through life: even incarnation can be turned into a theorem, a conceptual principle, with Jesus as *gnosis*. In reality, we only know God when we 'do the truth in love'. Beyond that, all is memory of it. In our present case, we will encounter the Spirit, who holds this diversity in creative tension only when we ourselves act out of our own personal diversity, and make our own creative act integral to the network, the body, which is in process of being created (cf Eph 4, 15-16).

This is a lonely business. The late Paul VI had to take the lonely risk of promulgating a *Humanae Vitae*; episcopal conferences still have to risk their own modulations of it; Bishop Dozier has to go forward with his own personal discernment of the pastoral need of his uniquely acculturated people; Camillo Torres will have to put his risky conclusion on the line, as will Berrigan — and Lefebvre and Küng. How diverse will the latin american bishops dare to be ten years after Medellin and at the beginning of a new pontificate? And if we are to take the gospel of the sparrows seriously, each of us and our personal diversity of expression are of no less importance before our Father (cf Mt 10, 29-30). Thus, through all our reflection, we may have simply transferred our anxiety from the cosmic to the more intensely personal level. One can only hope that the clearer focus may also generate in us a more genuine compassion for the diverse decisions of our brothers and sisters. If we diminish in the slightest the ideological warfare by which good christian men and women, seeking truth humbly and with integrity, are bludgeoned every day by their brothers and sisters, our conversation together will have been well worth the time.

The transformation of anxiety

One final pair of spectacles. Anxiety can be met by two kinds of activity. One is by rubrical repetition of ceremonies and incantations and meaningless routines: formulae designed to dissipate anxiety by willing it away. This is totemism. The anxiety will come to heel if we can domesticate it: that is to say, by opting for one of the

poles whose apparently dichotomous relationship makes us anxious. Choose freedom *or* law, conform *or* rebel, favour the individual *or* the institution: that way lies the prolongation of non-redemptive death. Anxiety is as protean as the sea, the totem as futile as sea-walls pretending to protect the walking dead.

Incarnation is achieved only in ritual and in liturgy, which is a different matter altogether. In ritual, we walk through anxiety together, refusing the deadly seduction of easy polarities. We are totally alone and totally in communion. You are not I, nor I you; but in genuine liturgy, in communion, a 'we' comes into being: one that swims freely in a sea which is no longer *tohu-bohu*, but baptism. It may be the ritual of Eucharist or the sacrament of reconciliation; perhaps the embrace of two lovers, the washing of a cancerous body, or a silent vigil outside the chambers of nuclear insanity. It may even be the timid word of christian experience uttered into the antiseptic ideology of a religious chapter. It may be experienced merely for an instant; but it is real. It is totally in time and utterly timeless, entirely without precedent and the oldest of the world's everyday occurrences. A living-with not to be looked at but entered into. It should not finally be strange to us; for it is the only behaviour which is ultimately con-natural to the compassionate human beings created by an incarnating God. It *is* the who we are: diverse and irrevocably in communion and covenant. And it creates galaxies. . . .