

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## Ecclesiology, I: Differing Gifts

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL was a catalyst for ecclesiology in our time, for both as an event and in its documents its major focus was the nature and mission of the Church. Moreover, ecclesiology continues to be an important area of theological reflection because the Council, which provided new insights, left many questions concerning the Church open for further probing.<sup>1</sup> These questions have provided an agenda for ecclesiologists during the post-conciliar period. A survey of periodicals, both scholarly and popular, indicates that theologians are grappling with these issues. Questions of authority loom large. Who speaks for the Church? If the Church is the whole people of God, what is the role of the laity, of the ordained, of members of religious congregations, of the magisterium? What is happening ecumenically? More basic questions about the very nature of the Church and its mission in the late-twentieth century continue to be raised but these questions are being asked in new ways.<sup>2</sup>

This article and a subsequent one will focus on the nature and mission of the Church in the light of two theological trends in ecclesiology: first, the emergence of the local church and the eucharistic community, rather than the universal Church, as the starting point for theological reflection on church; second, the emergence of New Testament scholarship as a resource for ecclesiology. The second trend supports the first. Since the turn of the century the documents of the New Testament have been studied as projects of the early Christian communities. Through the careful study of texts, more information concerning these communities is available which in turn provides valuable insights for contemporary ecclesiology. Both trends support a deeper recognition of the diversity of Christian experiences of church and the necessity of differing gifts to manifest the one Spirit. In the light of these two trends, this article will consider the nature of the Church as a communion of communities. The second article will focus on the mission of the Church, recognizing that the nature of the Church cannot be separated from its mission.

### *A new starting point*

Christian communities are reflecting on their experience of being church, thus providing a new starting point for ecclesiology.<sup>3</sup> Vatican II, although primarily focusing on the universal Church, recovered the ecclesial significance of the local church, and of the eucharistic community, concepts which had been lost in the western Church. This recovery,

supported by scholarship on the early Christian communities, is enabling contemporary Christians to experience that the church is 'always first of all a concrete reality, *this* group of men and women, at *this* time and in *this* place, within *this* culture, responding to the Word and grace by which God gathers them in Christ'.<sup>4</sup> As communities of faith reflect on their experience of church, voices which have not been heard before are being raised: voices from churches in Africa and Asia, voices of the poor, particularly from the base ecclesial communities in Latin America, and voices of women. The ecclesiology of the past and even the ecclesiology of Vatican II are challenged as scripture scholars and theologians listen to these new voices. The result is a pluralism in ecclesiology that is both enriching and disturbing.<sup>5</sup>

#### *New look at biblical roots*

In order to understand the church we must look at its genesis. How did it begin? What were the first communities of disciples of Jesus like? Did Jesus intend to form a church? When was the church born? How was ministry ordered in those early communities? Was there one church or many churches? Biblical studies throw light on these questions of Christian origins and their implications for present day ecclesiology.<sup>6</sup>

The writings of the various New Testament authors reflect different experiences of church and different ecclesiologies. There was no one church which divided into a number of churches, nor were there a number of churches which came together into one church. Rather there were communities of disciples of Jesus, guided by his Spirit, who responded in faith to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. These communities were united in their common witness to Jesus Christ and in their fidelity to the apostolic teaching. A critical study of the New Testament reveals the pluralism and developmental character of early Christianity.

It is generally acknowledged that Jesus did not leave particular structures but his Spirit. The early Christian communities felt confident in applying the teaching of Jesus to new situations and in organizing their communities according to what seemed best for their particular community. Thus we find within the churches of the New Testament different kinds of church order. Raymond Brown has indicated the ecumenical significance of this pluralism, urging that we ought not to be less ecumenical than the church of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> If the churches in the first century freely adapted to new situations, ought not twentieth-century churches be encouraged to do the same? This question is being raised particularly by the 'new voices'.<sup>8</sup>

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*, provides 'new lenses' for seeing what often has been overlooked, the place of women at the centre of the Jesus movement and of the early Christian missionary movement.<sup>9</sup> It uses

women's experience of struggling for liberation from patriarchy as its starting point for reflection on the history of the early church.<sup>10</sup> By means of a hermeneutic of suspicion Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to uncover the place of women within the early communities of disciples in order to provide meaning for contemporary women who are struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression. The work is one of advocacy for women, but it also throws light on the nature of the church.

In a convincing way Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the early Jesus movement was a renewal movement within Judaism. This movement was based on Jesus's vision of the *basileia* or reign of God, a vision which called for inclusivity, and in which women and men are equally called to discipleship. The early Christian missionary movement which developed during the twenty years after Jesus's death, remains 'shrouded in historical darkness' but Schüssler Fiorenza uses the hints which are available in the New Testament writings to reconstruct the beginnings of this movement. She discovers a prominent place for women in the churches which were established by missionaries, both women and men, including Paul. These churches often met in the homes of prominent women, and it was evident that the Spirit had been poured out upon women as well as men. All the baptized, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, woman and man, were baptized into 'an ecclesiological oneness or unity in Christ Jesus'.<sup>11</sup> But this vision of equality proved too 'counter cultural' for the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Out of concern for the Christian mission, Paul modified the teaching of Gal 3,28. In the face of slander and persecution subsequent New Testament writings advocated the adoption of Greco-Roman patriarchal order, not only in the family, but in the life of the church as the household of God. Most of the post-Pauline and post-Petrine writers sought to limit women's leadership roles in the Christian communities to roles that were culturally and religiously acceptable. Even so, the Gospels of Mark and John, appealing to Jesus himself as one who provided an alternative vision, remember the discipleship and apostolic leadership of women.

Studies of Christian origins by scholars such as Schüssler Fiorenza and Raymond Brown, as well as reflection on the church as it is enfolded in new situations, call for a revisioning of the church and a new ecclesiology.

#### *Toward a world-church*

Many of the voices being heard in ecclesiology today are neither European nor North American. Karl Rahner, that great 'ecclesial Christian' who was so significant in developing the ecclesiology of Vatican II continues to inspire and challenge us to take seriously the global implications of that ecclesiology. Among the countless works that form Rahner's legacy to us, his volume, *Concern for the Church*, includes some of his most inspiring essays on the church and its future.<sup>12</sup> His essays on 'Basic

theological interpretation of the second Vatican Council' and 'The abiding significance of Vatican II' develop the thesis that the world-church first began to exist at Vatican II although only in a rudimentary way. Rahner considers that Vatican II has given to the church the task of becoming a world-church rather than a European or a North American export. He argues that theology can no longer be exclusively western; rather it must develop within different cultures and deal with the question of particular cultural groups.<sup>13</sup> For Rahner the transition from a western church to a world-church is comparable to that first great transition from Jewish Christianity to Gentile Christianity. The same kind of letting-go is required at the present time if the Church is to become truly catholic. The implications of this profound change demand imagination and courage in order that the church may be faithful to the vision of Vatican II.<sup>14</sup>

The change from a Eurocentric church to a 'world-church' is occurring as various peoples experience themselves as church in their own unique culture. A larger number of bishops from geographical areas other than Europe and North America participated in the 1985 and 1987 synods than in Vatican II. Commenting on this change, Alberigo wrote: 'it is becoming increasingly clear that the *growing cultural and social importance of these newly evangelised or recently autonomous churches* does not come from a transposition of existing models, but is based above all on their capacity to insert themselves in the Christian tradition in a creative fashion through a dynamic symbiosis with their respective cultures, just as Vatican II suggested and encouraged them to do'.<sup>15</sup>

The same changes may be observed in the composition of the World Council of Churches. At the Sixth Assembly in Vancouver, Christians from all parts of the world gathered together, united by a common faith in Jesus Christ, but expressing this faith in different languages and cultures. For those who were present church could no longer be envisioned as exclusively western but as a rich and diverse global reality.<sup>16</sup>

#### *A church of the poor*

The Synod of 1985 noted, 'Since Vatican II the Church has become more conscious of its mission to be at the service of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a shift may be observed from a church at the service of the poor, to a church of poor people. As the church becomes more truly a world-church, it will also become a church of the poor since the most densely populated areas of the world are also the poorest. This transformation from a middle-class church which helps the poor to a church of poor people is already happening in many communities, especially among the basic ecclesial communities in Latin America but also among poor people in urban centres and among native people in other areas. In these situations there is often a high level of

involvement of persons in the life of the community. Where there is an openness to the weakest of the brothers and sisters, many are discovering God's presence in a new way.

*Basic ecclesial communities*

Christians in many parts of the world are learning what it means to be church through their involvement in small ecclesial communities.<sup>18</sup> Leonardo Boff, in his works, *Church: charism and power* and *EcclesioGenesis: the base communities reinvent the Church*, reflects upon the new experience of church of thousands of Brazilians.<sup>19</sup> He sees these communities growing beyond current church structures, but he also sees them as the genesis of a church that is being born of the faith of a people. These communities do not merely reflect ecclesial elements but 'they are indeed authentic universal church become reality at the grassroots'.<sup>20</sup> Boff also sees them as a ferment for renewal for the whole church. The Latin American Episcopal Conference at Medellín and Puebla, which applied the principles of Vatican II to the Latin American reality, also recognized in these communities a call to conversion for the whole church.

The basic ecclesial communities, which are predominately lay, need a ministry of unity. This service is provided by the 'monitor' of the basic community, the pastor of the parish, the bishop of the diocese, and the pope. However, such persons are seen within the context of the community rather than above or removed from the community.

The whole church can learn much concerning the nature and mission of the church from the experience of ecclesial communities in Brazil and in other parts of the world.

*Church as the discipleship of equals*

In an article on future developments in ecclesiology, Bernard Cooke predicted: 'Not only will half of the Christian community gradually have a new experience of equality and dignity and ministerial activity, but for the first time since the apostolic age the unvoiced experience of that half of the church will begin to contribute to ecclesiological reflection'.<sup>21</sup> Reflection on this unvoiced experience has already begun.

Women today are recognizing that Christianity, while it has been oppressive for women, has also been a source of liberation. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that women belong at the centre of the church. She and others raise a prophetic voice in challenging the present church to fidelity to the inclusive vision of Jesus reflected in his teaching on the *basileia*, God's reign which is for all, especially the poor. A growing number of women cannot wait for the church to be converted from its sexism. Some give up on Christianity, while others gather as WomanChurch, claiming that they are church.<sup>22</sup> These women see themselves not as exiles from the church, but as involved in an exodus from patriarchy. Their voices

need to be heard, as they challenge the church to become a discipleship of equals.

*An ecclesiology of communion*

The ecclesial experiences of persons from a wide variety of cultures and of economic situations, particularly those who are poor, the experiences of the basic ecclesial communities of Latin America as well as other parts of the world, and the experience of women gathering together as church ought to inform our ecclesiology. These may be prophetic voices that show us how the Spirit is forming the church in our day.

An ecclesiology of communion or of *koinonia* seems to be able to embrace these different realities.<sup>23</sup> Communion includes our relationship to God who as Trinity is a community of persons, to one another in our particular ecclesial community, and to other communities throughout the world. Vatican II described the church as 'a community of faith, hope, and love' and as 'a community of life, love, and truth'.<sup>24</sup> The 1985 synod reaffirmed the view of the church as communion, preferring this description to the image of church as people of God.<sup>25</sup>

The image of church as communion is both biblical and patristic, and is influenced by the eastern ecclesiology of the eucharistic community.<sup>26</sup> The defensive ecclesiology which developed during the second millennium lost the sense of church as *koinonia* and stressed the institutional and juridical aspects of church. The recovery of an ecclesiology of communion was one of the great achievements of Vatican II. Rather than seeing themselves as administrative units, communities are experiencing themselves as church or as becoming church. 'What is emerging strongly is a conscious acceptance of the variety of fruitful legitimacy of each community, as of their limits and the vital need for a *symphonic integration in communion*.'<sup>27</sup> This is a Spirit-filled experience for the whole church.

The problems in ecclesiology within the Roman Catholic Church seem to lie in the concrete structural implications of this ecclesial communion. These were not worked out either at Vatican II or in the intervening years.<sup>28</sup> How does a highly centralized church become a participatory church, a communion of communities? Episcopal collegiality is one means by which this can take place. However, the concept of collegiality needs to be broadened to include the whole church.<sup>29</sup> All Christians share in responsibility for the church and its mission. Many communities are discovering their ecclesial identity as the baptized assume their rightful place as adult members of God's family. This includes persons of many different cultures, persons who have been oppressed, persons who have been previously invisible. Such groups desire to have leaders from within their own community. If the church is a communion, can their legitimate desire to be church be refused? Can they be church if they are dependent for their priests on other communities?<sup>30</sup> An ecclesiology of communion

demands structures which provide for the maximum participation of people in the life and mission of the church.

Each community is the church of God; the communion of these communities forms the universal church. It is here that the Petrine ministry provides an important service to the church. As Congar points out, 'The role of the Roman See is best viewed in context of the needs of this communion. While not the *source* of ecclesiality, that See has the mission (and so the charism and power) to guarantee communion by maintaining tradition and confession of faith, by organizing ecumenical life, by judging conflicts'.<sup>31</sup> The reports of some of the ecumenical dialogues indicate that some churches which are presently not in 'full communion' with Rome would be willing to consider the Petrine ministry in such a light. The *Final Report* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission stated: 'The purpose of the universal primate's jurisdiction is to enable him to further catholicity as well as unity and to foster and draw together the riches of the diverse traditions of the churches'.<sup>32</sup>

This article has indicated some of the shifts in consciousness that are occurring which in turn are shaping our ecclesiology. New voices are speaking which need to be heard. Vatican II gave us the image of the church as the pilgrim people of God. Church is no longer seen as something already made that we fit into but as an unfinished task which has been entrusted to each generation, and to each ecclesial community by God. The building up of church from the roots is not an easy task. As Tillard points out, 'This *koinonia* is not an assembly of friends. It is the coming together in Christ of men and women reconciled'.<sup>33</sup> It is not some super-organization that we join but a community of brothers and sisters united by the same Spirit. All of us share in its mission of service to one another and to those who are not part of our community.

Each local church, and even each eucharistic community is truly church, but no local church nor eucharistic community is self-sufficient. The bonds of a common faith bind us to one another and to all who share our faith. It is our work, but it is also the work of God.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Avery Dulles in 'Catholic ecclesiology since Vatican II', *Synod 1985: an evaluation, Concilium* 188, eds. G. Alberigo and J. Provost (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) lists eight of these areas which were left open for further probing: the nature of the church; the relationship of church, world and kingdom; ecumenism and mission; unity and inner diversity; primacy

and collegiality; magisterium and dissent; ministries; and the hermeneutics of the Council itself.

<sup>2</sup> A useful bibliographical tool for the study of ecclesiology has been provided by Avery Dulles and Patrick Granfield, *The Church: a bibliography* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> For an example see David Power, 'Households of faith in the coming church', *Worship* 57 (1983), pp 237-52.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Komonchak, 'The Church universal as the communion of local churches', in *Where does the Church stand? Concilium* 146, eds. G. Alberigo and G. Gutierrez (Edinburgh: T. T. Clark; New York: Seabury Press, 1981), p 32. *Lumen gentium* 26 recognizes the church of Christ in 'all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament'.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Dawe explores two biblical images for pluralism, the tower of Babel and the vine, in an article 'A pluralistic Church: collapsing tower or growing vine?' *Christian century* 99, (1982), pp 567-71.

<sup>6</sup> The work of Raymond Brown has been valuable in this regard. See *The churches the apostles left behind* (New York: Paulist, 1984); *The community of the beloved disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979; London: G. Chapman, 1979); *Priest and bishop: biblical reflections* (New York: Paulist, 1970); with John Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983; London: G. Chapman, 1983). See also James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977; London: SCM, 1981). These studies reveal the pluralism that was characteristic of early Christianity.

<sup>7</sup> *Priest and bishop*, p 86.

<sup>8</sup> Leonardo Boff in *EcclesioGenesis: the base communities reinvent the church* (New York: Orbis Press, 1986) poses this question. See especially his chapter, 'Did the historical Jesus will only one institutional form for the church?', pp 45-60.

<sup>9</sup> (New York: Crossroad, 1983). See also her work *Bread not stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza uses 'patriarchy' in its classical Aristotelian sense of a male pyramid of graded subordinations and exploitations which specifies women's oppression in terms of the class, race, country, or religion of the men to whom the women 'belong'.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 214.

<sup>12</sup> This work is *Theological investigations* 20, translated by Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> As Dawe observes, 'Churches in the Third World are no longer waiting patiently for us to translate our theology books, liturgies and organizational charts into their languages.' *Op. cit.*, p 567.

<sup>14</sup> Rahner, *op. cit.*, p 100. The Catholic Theological Society of America took the theme of World Church for its 1984 convention. See *CTSA Proceedings* 39 (1984).

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Alberigo, 'New balances in the church since the Synod,' in *Synod 1985—an evaluation, Concilium* 188, p 141; emphasis his.

<sup>16</sup> For an interesting work which explores how the experience of local communities is affecting the concept of church, see Robert Schreiter's *Constructing local theologies* (New York: Orbis, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Jacques Gaillot, 'Opting for the poor', in *Synod 1985—an evaluation, Concilium* 188, p 124.

<sup>18</sup> Basic ecclesial communities have been growing in many parts of the world. Thomas Bissonnette reflects on the experience in the United States in 'Comunidades eclesiales de base: some contemporary attempts to build ecclesial koinonia', in *Jurist* 36 (1976), pp 24-58. See also Rahner, 'Basic communities', *Theological investigations* 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Marcello de c. Azevedo, 'Basic communities: a meeting point of ecclesiologies', *Theological studies* 46 (1985), pp 601-20.

<sup>19</sup> The first work which appeared in Portuguese in 1981 was published in English by Crossroad in 1985. *EcclesioGenesis* was published in Portuguese in 1977 and in English by

Orbis in 1986. See also Alvaro Barreiro, *Basic ecclesial communities: the evangelization of the poor* (New York: Orbis, 1984) and Miguel D'Escoto, 'Thoughts on the church based on the Nicaraguan experience', in *Church and peace, Concilium* 164, eds. Virgil Elizondo and Norbert Greinacher (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> *Ecclesiogenesis*, p 22.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Cooke, 'The Church: Catholic and ecumenical', *Theology today* 36 (1979), p 365.

<sup>22</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza develops her ideas on the *Ekklesia of women* in the epilogue of *In memory of her*, pp 343-351. Rosemary Radford Ruether has also written on WomanChurch. See *Women-Church: theology and practice of feminist liturgical communities* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985). WomanChurch gatherings have taken place, including a meeting in Cincinnati, October 1987.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Marie Tillard develops a theology of *koinonia* in his article 'What is the Church of God?' in *Mid-Stream* 23 (1984), pp 363-80.

<sup>24</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Komonchak in 'The theological debate', *Concilium* 188, pp 53-63, discusses the two notions of church at the synod, 'mystery' and 'communion', and its suspicion of the notion of church as people of God.

<sup>26</sup> In 1976 the Canon Law Society of America selected the model of 'Church as a communion of divine life with humanity, lived in faith and expressed in community', as the particular model most apt at this moment of ecclesial development. See *Jurist* 36 (1976) for papers, especially James Provost, 'The church as communion: introduction', and Michael Fahey, 'Ecclesial community as communion', pp 4-23.

<sup>27</sup> Alberigo, *Concilium* 188, p 143.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Komonchak discusses this in 'The theological debate', *Synod 1985: an evaluation, Concilium* 188, p 53. See also Michael Fahey, 'Continuity in the church and structural changes', *Theological studies* 35 (1974), pp 415-40; Gregory Baum, 'The church against itself: conflicting ecclesiologies', *Grail* 3 (1987), pp 39-52.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence O'Connell in 'Collegiality: theology and practice for the 80s' in *Theology digest* 29 (1981), pp 319-28 suggests that collegiality is the key characteristic of Vatican II. See also Charles Murphy, 'Collegiality: an essay toward better understanding', *Theological studies* 46 (1985), pp 38-49, which discusses the relationship between church as communion and collegiality.

<sup>30</sup> This issue was addressed in *The right of a community to a priest, Concilium* 133, eds. E. Schillebeeckx and J. B. Metz (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980). See especially John Komonchak, "'Non-ordained'" and "'Ordained'" ministers in the local church', pp 44-50; Schillebeeckx, 'The Christian community and its office-bearers', pp 95-133; also Edward Schillebeeckx, *The church with a human face: a new and expanded theology of ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Yves Congar, 'Local autonomy and central power', in *Theology digest* 29 (1981), pp 228.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *The final report*, Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, Windsor, 1981, 'Authority in the Church II', 21. See also *Papal primacy and the universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in dialogue* 5, ed. P. Empie and T. A. Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974).

<sup>33</sup> Tillard, 'What is the church of God?' *Mid-Stream* 23 (1984), p 367.