

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

INTERCOMMUNION II

Ecclesial Communion

THE FIRST article in this series indicated that three main areas of theological discussion are raised by the problem of intercommunion (that is, mutual admission to the Eucharist by Churches not in full communion with each other). Of these, ecclesial communion is the most central issue. The question posed is that of the relation of eucharistic to ecclesial communion. Churches are in full communion with each other when they accept each other fully as Churches, accept each other's official creeds or confessions, accept each other's ministry and sacraments as mutually available and interchangeable: for example, the Churches of the Orthodox or Anglican Communion, or of the Lutheran World Federation. The Roman Catholic Church is not in full communion with any other Church. On the other hand, recent Vatican statements have moved in the direction of regarding the Roman Catholic Church as itself a communion of local or regional Churches (that is, areas covered by a conference of bishops) in full communion with each other in virtue of the full communion of each with the See of Rome.

I. ECCLESIOLOGY SINCE VATICAN II

Ecclesiologies

The theology of the Church, as distinct from constitutional theory of the Church, is a comparatively recent study. Before Vatican II it was generally assumed that there was one sound theology of the Church, and thinking centred on the idea of the mystical body of Christ. In the *Constitution on the Church* of the Council there was a variety of images of the Church, with the result that there was a veering away from the mystical body model, which tends to identify the earthly Church over much with the Kingdom of Christ. The concept of membership of the mystical body, much analysed in the years before the Council, was quietly dropped. What is significant about the Council is that, so far from propounding a single understanding of the Church that might end discussion, it opened up a debate that has gone on ever since.

There are no doubt several ways in which ecclesiologies could be classified, but in his deservedly famous book, *Models of the Church*, Fr Avery Dulles distinguishes the following ecclesiologies as present to a greater or lesser extent in the thinking of the Council and in subsequent Catholic theology.

(a) *Substantialist*. This approach, ultimately based on hellenic and scholastic philosophy, seeks to define the Church in terms of its essence. From the nature

of the case it proposes a timeless and non-historical model. There is the *exclusive* version, according to which the Church exists solely in the Roman Catholic Church: a single idea of the Church's nature is proposed, whether 'mystical body' or 'communion', or apostolic society, and it is argued that the Catholic Church alone fulfils the definition. And there is the *inclusive* version, which would see the Church existing fully in the Roman Catholic Church, but only to a greater or lesser degree in other communions. The exclusive view is characteristic of pre-conciliar Catholic thinking or assumptions, which spoke of the Catholic Church as the 'true Church', a phrase not used by the Council: other Christians are 'outside' the Church; there cannot be schism in the Church, only from it. It is a view ruled out by the *Constitution on the Church* and the *Decree on Ecumenism*, but persists deep in the consciousness of perhaps the majority of middle-aged Catholics.

(b) A *dualist* view of the Church sees the 'real' Church as those who truly respond to the grace of Christ and are in sanctifying grace (a number known only to God), as opposed to those who are merely externally attached to the institutions. There is a truth in this approach which bothered Augustine and found full expression in Calvin. On a dualist view, one would say that the Church is invisibly united by Christ himself, yet visibly divided by sinful men.

(c) An *actualist* approach sees the Church as an event rather than as an institution. This would be characteristic of the Baptist and other independency traditions, which would regard the Church as coming into being when the community is gathered, and when the word of God is preached and responded to in faith. Hence for Baptists there is no Baptist Church, only a Union of (local) Baptist Churches. But there is a truth here, an insight into the Church, for all christian traditions. Maybe the Church has to be institution: but the Kingdom of Christ comes to embodied reality in the live situations in which Christians experience and share the power of the Spirit among them. A prayer group, for instance, whatever communions they may belong to, will experience that they *are* the (united) Church; a Catholic community assembled for Mass will know that the Church realizes itself most fully in the Eucharist.

(d) The *secular* model of the Church is in some ways similar to the actualist, but is more extrovert. The Church, it asserts, was not founded by Christ to provide cosy and insulated salvation or experience for believers: it was founded to preach the Gospel to the world. The Church realizes itself in evangelization and in the service of others, by word and example: by witnessing to the world. The sheep are divided from the goats on the grounds of what they did, not on grounds of orthodoxy or of religiosity.

(e) The *eschatological* model of the Church was clearly set out by Vatican II. The Church is a pilgrim Church. It never *is*, in any absolute sense, what it is called to be, what its inner dynamism (the transforming activity of the Spirit) drives it to become. It is not in any perfect sense one, and never has been. It can never say it is holy, or catholic or apostolic. It exists in promise

and in hope rather than (or as well as) in fulfilment: it is not the Kingdom of Christ, but the sign of and the struggle for the Kingdom. The true christian notion of eschatology is neither that all is already realized, nor that all exists solely in promise. It is a paradox of 'already' and 'not yet'. Eternal life is both a present possession and a future goal and hope. The Catholic tradition stresses the 'already'; the Protestant tradition stresses the 'not yet'.

There are two salient points to note about these diverse models of the Church. The first is that Catholic thinking has yet to get used to, and to start to live with, the idea that different 'models' all express different truths, and that they cannot be reduced to or resolved into one model. Catholics are so used to having one clear doctrine, that they hope the present 'confusion' will soon go away. Please God, it will not. The Church is a mystery, not simply in the rather jejune sense that it lies beyond our power to subject it to our comprehension, and so to our control, but in the theological sense that it is the embodiment of the presence and activity of God in our midst. And therefore no number of models will exhaust its reality. We need to start living with legitimate pluralism.

The second point is more simply stated. According to which model of the Church you use, you will get different answers to questions about inter-communion.

Ecclesial reality of other Churches

A momentous step was taken by Vatican II when it changed the draft statement that 'the one Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church' to 'the one Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church' (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). No explanation of 'subsists in' was given. But the act of changing the earlier statement shows without doubt that the two realities are not to be identified, as they had been in the 'exclusive substantialist' thinking before the Council. And secondly, two realities are indicated in the statement: a pattern of thinking which was exactly followed by the *Decree on Ecumenism*. Thirdly, the implication clearly is that the Church of Christ exists, even if not fully, in other Churches or communions. One way in which the Decree takes up this thinking is by using a theology of 'elements': elements constitutive of the Church as Church are said to exist in other communions.

The Council consistently speaks of the Eastern *Churches* and, in speaking of Western Christians, uses the phrase 'the Churches and ecclesial communions' separated from us, which carries the same implications. It is a belated recognition that other Christians are incorporated into Christ by and through their own communions and not in spite of them, and a rejection of the theological opinion that all infants are baptized into the Roman Catholic Church and separate themselves from it only by subsequent adherence to another christian body: one of those abstract theological opinions which was blind to the plain historical facts. It is not clear which western communions are to be regarded as 'Churches': possibly only those, such as the Old

Catholics, considered to have valid orders. But the point is that some are. The phrase 'ecclesial communions' may have been used because some christian bodies, such as The Friends, do not call themselves Churches; but in any case, 'ecclesial' is the adjective of 'Church', and bears out the point that the Church of Christ exists in some measure in bodies separated from the Roman Catholic Church.

Conversely, the phrase 'subsists in' upholds the traditional conviction that the Roman Catholic Church is central to God's plan for the Church, or that the See of Rome is in God's design the centre of the communion of the Churches. It stands for the never relinquished idea of the *catholica*. It resists any mere 'branch theory', any idea that all Churches may equally be designated denominations, any idea that the Churches are simply parts which, added together, make up the Church of Christ.

The idea that some Churches are more Church than others is not in itself a peculiarly Catholic idea. Any of the main christian bodies, as they look across the world at the proliferation (well into four figures) of independent christian groups, must surely think that some of these have a great deal more of what goes to make up the Church than others, and that some can only be called sects. It is a way of thinking that relies on a substantialist model of the Church.

With these phrases and their implications must be compared what the Council says about incorporation into Christ, a phrase which implies the 'mystical body' model. Baptism validly administered incorporates a person into Christ: nowhere is there any suggestion that other Christians are not fully incorporated into (the body of) Christ; but they are not fully incorporated into the Roman Catholic Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 14). The implication is unavoidable that the body of Christ is larger than, is not co-extensive with, the Roman Catholic Church: and this is in direct contradiction with Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*. This coheres exactly with the statement that 'the one Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church': in saying *Church*, the Council is not designating the heavenly reality of the Risen Christ, but his embodiment in the human believing community on earth.

Churches are in partial communion

'Communion' is a New Testament word (*koinōnia*) of which much use is made by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission in its agreed statements. It designates the christian community or fellowship as not only an experienced reality of inter-personal relationships (it is that), but precisely as created by God the Father in sending the Spirit of his Son to draw men into the life of God. 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship (communion) of the Holy Spirit' (2 Cor 13, 14) is a phrase which amounts to three ways of saying the same thing.

If two christian communities that are geographically and or culturally separated from each other are in full communion, this means that, though

they are not able to experience the fulness of inter-personal relationships with each other to the extent that they are able to do so internally, they nevertheless accept each other wholly as christian communities, and are willing to share everything as fully as possible with each other's members.

From full incorporation into Christ and from the ecclesial reality of all christian communities, it follows that Christians and their communities are not simply out of communion with or wholly separated from each other. Our task is not to create christian unity out of nothing, but to give fuller expression to the deep unity that already exists: the deep unity that Christ himself gives and that human limitations and sinfulness can never destroy. Moreover, it is not the case that the Church is invisibly united but visibly divided — a sheerly dualist ecclesiology. The one Church of Christ is visibly united (as follows from the phrase 'one Church') in our midst, as well as visibly divided: and this is where the metaphor of 'schism' breaks down. It is visibly united, first and foremost, by baptism, which constitutes a sacramental (that is, a visible) bond between Christians (cf *Unitatis redintegratio*, 22), often by marriage, by the same scriptures, creeds, forms of worship, etc. (*ibid.* 3).

Hence Vatican II can say explicitly that other communities, 'though separated from full communion with the Catholic Church', are by baptism and other factors 'brought into a certain though imperfect communion with it' (*ibid.*).

Sacramental understanding of the Church

Though no one model of the Church can incorporate all the valid insights of ecclesiology, the sacramental model perhaps serves best to synthesize those we have been considering. It carries particular force in the Church today in that sacramental theology itself, rejuvenated by the work of Fr Schillebeeckx, has come to see that, behind sacraments in the plural there lies the Church itself as the basic sacrament: the Church is the primary embodiment of the Kingdom of Christ in history (see the opening sentences of *Lumen Gentium*), which not only manifests but conveys his saving grace; sacraments in the plural are particular ways in which the Church manifests and effects what she herself is and does.

One can use the sacramental model in a simple or two-tier form to clarify the anomaly of separated Churches. All Churches are sacraments of Christ's Kingdom, embodying in history his union with the Father and his gathering of his People into that union. In Roman Catholic conviction, the Catholic Church is the fullest embodiment of the Kingdom, the fullest sacramental sign. That is not to say that it is a perfect sacramental sign; nor is it to say that the Catholic Church is a more effective sign in each of its members than other Churches, less full as signs, are in theirs. But it is to say that other christian communities are true embodiments in human history and culture of the Kingdom of Christ. And it is to say that other christian traditions may exhibit some of what is lacking to the Roman Catholic Church as a sign of

the Kingdom. (Those versed in the traditional terminology of *sacramentum tantum*, *sacramentum et res*, *res tantum*, will easily be able to translate these sentences into that language.)

But in order to spell out a conceptual pattern that fully accommodates the ecclesiological insights of Vatican II, one needs a more complex, or three-tier, version of the sacramental model. We have seen how the One Church of Christ is distinguishable from, though it subsists in, the Roman Catholic Church. Hence one needs to insert the 'One Church of Christ' between the heavenly or eschatological and invisible reality of the Kingdom, where Christ reigns with Mary and the saints in triumph, and the divided Churches. The One Church of Christ, the middle term, is in history; it is not some hazy conceptual reality hovering uncertainly between heaven and earth: in other words, it is *Church*. The Church is visibly united in our midst as well as visibly divided. It is visibly united prior (theologically) to being divided. Its existing visible unity is the fullest sacramental sign of the Kingdom. But that visible unity does not exist as a separate community or communion: it subsists in the Roman Catholic Church; it exists in other communions.

2. INTERCOMMUNION AS EXPRESSING PARTIAL COMMUNION

The argument against

The argument against mutual admission to eucharistic communion of Churches that are in partial or imperfect communion rests on the indissoluble connection between Church and Eucharist.¹ The Church *is* eucharistic communion. It is the body of Christ nourished by the body of Christ (1 Cor 10, 17). The more eucharistic one's ecclesiology, as with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Churches, the more intercommunion (of Churches not in full communion) is an impossibility. The Eucharist is the celebration of existing communion (see the Unity Secretariat's Instruction on admission to Communion). To put it another way: inter-communion is a nonsense, because an agreement between Churches to share in the Eucharist *is* full communion. There cannot be an intermediary stage. If you share the Eucharist, you are in the very act of doing so wholly united, you share everything. It would be sacrilegious to return from eucharistic sharing into ecclesial division.

The argument for

In the first article of this series, it was suggested that the arguments for and against intercommunion are good arguments.² Those on one side do not make those on the other cease to exist. It may be well to recall that at this point.

¹ Cf Part I of this survey, in *The Way*, vol 18 (October 1978), pp 300-02.

² *Ibid.*, p 300.

The argument for intercommunion (between Churches not in full communion) is that Christ instituted the Eucharist, not to express a perfect communion or unity among Christians, but to express a given communion or unity, the gift of Christ's Spirit, and to lead it to greater perfection. Even in the same Church there is no perfect or absolute communion or union — that belongs to the Kingdom. The Eucharist exists to deepen a given unity. It is not only legitimate to use the Eucharist as a means to bring about the (fuller) unity of (partially) divided Churches: it is imperative, it is the will of Christ, to do so.

Granted that intercommunion is an anomaly, so is the sharing in the Eucharist by members of the same Church who are in fact at loggerheads with each other. But Christ instituted the Eucharist to overcome these anomalies. The greater anomaly is precisely the division of the Churches; and it is right, it is imperative, to allow the lesser anomaly in order to overcome the greater.

An eschatological understanding of the Church and of the Eucharist throws light on this argument. In the lived tension of christian eschatology, the Church is already but also not yet one, holy, catholic, apostolic. In its whole life, but crucially in the Eucharist which is the banquet of the Kingdom, the power of the future Kingdom breaks in upon the historical present to transform it into and to impel it towards its future. In intercommunion, the force of the future consummated union is brought to bear on the present disunion in order to overcome it.

The majority report of the (Church of England) Archbishops' Commission on Intercommunion accepted these arguments.³ Sensitive, however, to the dangers to christian unity itself of over-facile intercommunion, the report recommended that eucharistic sharing should be used as a means to bring about union only between specific Churches who were formally committed to union with each other.

3. ADMISSION TO COMMUNION OF INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS

Nothing brings out more clearly than the previous paragraphs that we need to make a clear and careful distinction between intercommunion as a *formal relationship between Churches* — the lesser anomaly in order to overcome the greater — and intercommunion as an *actual event*, or as an approved practice in the case of individuals or groups. Does the latter necessarily, or in any way, imply the former?

The argument that sharing in the Eucharist implies and is based on ecclesial communion, and is not to be separated from it, applies with considerable force to intercommunion as a formal relationship between Churches. It is not at all clear that it has the same force when one is considering individual cases or situations. As noted in our first article, the Council and the *Instruction* of 1972 made fairly wide provision in the case of the Orthodox, and narrower

³ *Intercommunion Today* (May 1968).

provision for other western Christians, to be admitted in certain individual cases to Catholic Communion: so there is certainly no absolute ban on such admission, nor on Catholics receiving Communion from validly ordained ministers of other Churches. There seems no reason why the practice should not be extended, if it serves the cause of christian unity, and if the basic principle of the unbreakable bond between ecclesial and eucharistic communion is not obscured.

The obvious cases that present themselves are the inter-church family and the ecumenical group or occasion. In both cases one is concerned with practising Christians who are committed both to their own Churches and to the cause of christian unity: it is not a matter of casual behaviour or of weak faith. One is thinking of groups of people from different Churches who have prayed and studied together, or worked together in social action, or made a retreat together, and whose personal realization of the unity given them by Christ has grown and deepened as a result. Or there are the special and exceptional occasions such as a Unity Service carefully planned by a local Council of Churches. It is hard to see how the particular convictions of the Catholic Church are in any way obscured if in such situations it shows itself a loving and welcoming community, admitting others to share in its Eucharist. Indeed, the ecumenical movement itself remains 'un-catholic' if Catholics hold aloof, and do not allow others to share their own tradition of sacramental life.

Once again, different ecclesiologies can be invoked. To assert in a 'blanket' generalization that Catholics are in full communion with each other, and others are not, is to take a simply 'substantialist' or institutional view of the Church. It is perhaps necessary to distinguish the deep reality of union given in Christ, and its sacramental and institutional or structural expression in membership of the Church, which is the experience of this spiritual union. Members of the same Church may in many ways be widely divided from each other, as we have all experienced in recent years: their 'communion' is then almost reduced to the structural and the external, lacking the reality of experience. Members of different Churches may experience very deeply the union that Christ gives us, and this is expressed in baptism, even if they are institutionally separated. An 'actualist' ecclesiology would assert the need and right of the latter to share the Eucharist together. An 'eschatologist' ecclesiology would see the event of intercommunion as a necessary and proper part of the growth towards unity. It would see, in a growth 'from below' of eucharistic sharing, the breaking-in on our present of the future unity towards which we ask God to lead us. It would assert that it is neither practical possibility nor theological sense to urge Christians to grow together as closely as possible in prayer and in every form of co-operation; and yet to exclude eucharistic sharing until the goal of full ecclesial communion is reached.

Of all individual cases, the inter-church couple and family have the strongest claim. Man and wife are bound together, not only by the bond of baptism, but by the lived sacramental bond of marriage. They are bound

together in a solemn commitment for life, which intertwines their lives wholly at all points, not least at the deepest point of their christian faith. As they grow in human and christian union, they will discover an increasing need to receive Communion together — not simply at special moments such as the wedding, or baptisms, or First Communions, but as a constant need of their christian lives. And when their children reach the age for Holy Communion, then all will need to communicate together as a family. Vatican II called the christian family 'the domestic Church'. They are in communion with each other at all three levels: in the reality of the body of Christ, in the structure of the domestic Church, and in their daily lived experience.

Some ten years ago there was an international conference of catholic theologians in Chicago on the question of intercommunion. One of those present described the proceedings as a struggle by theologians to open the stable door after the horse had bolted. Ten years ago, intercommunion was something one heard of in Britain as breaking out among disoriented Americans, or way-out elements in Holland. It didn't happen here. Today on the english scene, for some of us, not only admission to Communion but intercommunion is so constant a factor of experience as hardly to call for comment. It is, of course, a middle-class or educated class phenomenon: that is, it occurs among people who have thought a lot about their faith, but have also gone out of their way to become involved with other Christians. The main suggestion of this article is that different ecclesiologies are a help in evaluating this phenomenon. It is not going to go away. It is far too serious and too widespread, and far too likely to increase, to be ignored or to be treated as deviance or as a fringe occurrence. Those who are inclined to hold to 'the rules' in the form of official instructions will be simply antagonized if one suggests that the Spirit is at work among the faithful, pressing ahead of the rules in a growth towards unity, and that the *sensus fidelium* must be regarded. (After all, ninety per cent of the faithful, the weekly Mass congregation, are quite untouched by any such experience.) May it not rather be that the Spirit is at work on both 'sides', among those who emphasize the catholic image and tradition and the need of authority, and among those who are increasingly convinced that, responsibly and in living situations, they share with other Christians an encounter with Christ giving himself in 'the sacrament of the unity of the Church'? It is a tension to be lived rather than to be resolved. It is the tension of christian eschatology, in which the goal is both 'already' and 'not yet'.