

UNITY AND DIVERSITY: A MEDITATION

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IN PONDERING the manifold problems of unity and diversity within the christian community, and the vast complexity of the issues which they raise, it seems to me that what is first required is meditative study. Properly speaking, such a meditation will seek not so much conceptual clarification as greater sensitivity: a deeper awareness, that is, of the need to uphold unity and to respect diversity. If it is to be well-grounded, such sensitivity demands a fundamental understanding, and a return to that simplicity out of which the true complexities flow.

Unity and diversity are facts

If it were given to anyone to be lifted up from among common mortals so that he could see the face of our planet, and on it the gatherings of Christians in so many places on the earth, he would notice how different one group is from another. Not only are they of different languages, races, and colours, but they worship in different ways and follow different patterns in their organizations. Closer observation would also reveal that the diverse groups put varying emphases on the different aspects of christian life, displaying a great multiplicity in the way in which they understand and live out their religious commitment. Eastern Christians do not worship in the same way as do their Western brethren. The Africans organize their gatherings differently from the Europeans. The churches of Latin America have other doctrinal preoccupations than their sister churches in Poland. Yet, beyond all such diversity, the observer could not fail to notice a close bond, making the many into one and holding them together. Their prayers are addressed to the same God, and spring from the same belief in his mighty deeds in human history. Moreover, in one way or another, all groups are bound

together through a living chain of communions in which the Church of Rome occupies a pre-eminent place. Different as those communities are, they are also united among themselves.

If it were given to anyone to be lifted out of the narrow frame of time, and granted the capacity to survey the history of christian communities, he would notice an even greater diversity in their lives from one age to another. He would see that, in the beginning of the christian era, some of them were no more than fervent gatherings within the existing social and religious structures of Judaism; whilst others started out as autonomous groups formed by converts from paganism. The link among the local gatherings may not have been more than a travelling apostle, whose arrival could never be calculated with certainty. Yet they all believed with one heart that Jesus was risen from the dead and was Lord forever. Their worship was simple. It centred around the remembrance, in the form of an evening meal, of the coming, ministry, death, and resurrection of their Lord. Out of such modest beginnings, highly structured communities developed and were eventually organized into the complex, visible pattern that we can see today. Yet in spite of all the diversity that successive christian generations display, there is an organic unity in their history. This continuity has been foretold by the One whom they always professed to be their teacher, in his parable of the mustard seed: small and insignificant as this is, it has the capacity to grow into a large tree. Small groups have grown into a large Church. No matter how much diversity each of them has displayed in the course of history, they have evolved into a remarkable unity.

Diversity and unity is a fact in the Christian Church. This fact is the starting point of our reflections.

Seeking understanding

Ordinary mortal humans as we are, we cannot be lifted beyond the borders of space and the confines of time. In spite of these constraints, we can become aware of the fact of unity and diversity in the christian community, a reality in which some perceive a reassuring harmony, whilst others see only a distressing calamity. But even if we accept that there should be both diversity and unity bonded into living harmony, the question still remains: how much diversity is healthy for the body, or how much unity is life-giving for the members? Wisdom clearly consists in finding the right balance between the two. But how do we find that vital equilibrium? To answer such a question is of importance, because it is in the present

that we must judge the movements of life in the Church; we must set limits to one or reinforce another as necessity and wisdom demand.

Moreover, we must plan for the future. We ought to decide how that right balance should be brought about. For instance, as is well known, canon law is being revised; that is, by implication, the whole organizational structure of the Church is being reformed. What, then, is the prudent way of constructing a legal system that helps the communities to open up to life and does not tie them into uniform immobility?

There is an even greater issue, relevant for all ages: how should different theologies be handled? How far can anyone go in teaching differently about the word of God without breaking down the internal cohesion of the community?

Such questions are all legitimate. Through them, faith seeks understanding. Out of sound knowledge, right action should follow. However, there is no way of answering them all in a brief essay. But there is a way of bringing *some* understanding to bear on the issue of unity and diversity, even in a short article. This is our intention: to concentrate on the encounter between God's revelation and our capacity to perceive and understand it. The source of unity is there: in God's action. A source of diversity is all around: in the different responses of human persons. Let us shun theory, at least for the time being, and focus our attention again, but in a more determined way now, on two examples.

Unity and diversity in christian history

If we re-read a document such as the Nicene Creed we discover, without extensive reflection, that much of the text is nothing else than a narration of what God has done for his people. God made heaven and earth. The Son of God came down from heaven; by the work of the Holy Spirit, he took flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was made man. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He died and was buried. On the third day, he was raised from the dead and went up to heaven. And so forth. What God did once lives in the memory of Christians.

There is something absolute about such deeds of God. There cannot be any kind of unity-and-diversity about their happening. Either the uncreated Son of God was born from a woman within the confines of our history, or he was not. Either he died and was risen from the dead, or he was not. Such facts are unique. They stand in their uniqueness forever. Not even God can change them.

Further, the interventions of God in human history are not restricted to past events. We Christians believe that the Spirit of Christ sustains the Church in the present and is active in it, especially through the sacraments. He gives life. He nourishes the living. He heals the sick. He supports and strengthens the community in many ways. There is an absoluteness about such actions of the Spirit, too. They stand in their uniqueness. Once they have happened, not even God can change them.

Now all the acts of God, past or present, were or are taking place among men. 'He came for our sake and salvation'. He is expecting a response from human beings. Many are reached by him, and they are marvelling at his mighty deeds. It is there precisely, in their responses, that we find a source of diversity: the acts of God are perceived by many; the story of his activity is told by many, and in different ways.

Because no person has the capacity to penetrate with one glance the depths of these mysterious happenings, there will be many ways of perceiving them, understanding them, and reporting them. Thus, the life-event of Jesus was one, but the evangelists were four; and each told the story in a different way. There was unity and diversity right at the start of christian history. The source of knowledge was one, but the ways of absorbing it were many; just as the source of light in the sun is one, but its rays are reflected in a myriad of different ways by the objects they reach.

This is the aspect on which we concentrate our attention, the thesis we put forward: genuine diversity in the Church emerges from the response of human beings to God's revelation. We know that this is not the only explanation of the issue, far from it. Yet it is an important aspect of it. Besides, it can be handled reasonably well within the limits of this essay.

Unity and diversity in the present-day Church

Probably no more striking example of unity and diversity in the present-day Church can be found than the one that exists between the Eastern Church and the Western Church in their approaches to christian mysteries. The Eastern Church's way of reflecting on them is a continuation of the patristic approach of the early centuries. Their new insights spring more from sustained contemplation of the mysteries, or from mystical inspiration, than from enlightenment with the help of recently acquired philosophical categories.

The Western Church went through a deep transformation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Theologians discovered Aristotle and began to use his system, applicable to all beings, to explain the mysteries of christian revelation. Thus, while the East continued to speak in rich poetic terms about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the West came to a refined and precise conceptual understanding of grace, of infused and acquired virtues, of meritorious acts, and so forth. Clearly, the Spirit and his presence was not different from East to West; equally clearly, the ways of explaining it were many.

The same difference in approach between the two Churches comes to light when they speak of the celebration of the Eucharist. For the easterners, the liturgical action is organically one and should not be broken into parts, not even conceptually. For them, the consecration of the gifts is completed only after the *epiklesis*, the invocation of the Holy Spirit. For the westerners, the same liturgy is subject to scientific analysis. Thus, they define the form and the matter of the sacrament. They see the words of consecration as operating over the bread and wine separately, indicating some kind of completion while the action is still essentially incomplete. They do not see the invocation of the Spirit as belonging to the essence of the sacrament. For the Orientals, such an approach is a fragmented vision; for the Occidentals, it satisfies the exigencies of scientific theology. Clearly, again, the Spirit who sanctifies the gifts is one; the interpretation of the believers is manifold.

Return to the issue of understanding

We have seen examples of unity and diversity in the past history of the christian community as well as in its present life. The fact of these complex events cannot be denied, but the task of explaining them still remains. We turn our attention to it now. Our aim is really to find out some, though not all, of those intrinsic laws that govern the constitution of good balances in the community. How shall we go about finding them?

We propose a kind of historical scenario. There will be the *dramatis personae*: first, there is God who enters into human history, becomes active in it, and speaks to human beings; next, there are human persons all around, occupying the face of the earth, shaping and being shaped by the flow of history, who see and hear the signs through which God communicates himself to them; finally, there is the Spirit of God, indwelling in human persons and holding together their communities, never quite visible to human eyes, never quite

speaking human words, and yet giving understanding and strength to christian persons and their communities.

In seeking understanding then, we follow a somewhat unusual method. Instead of dealing with abstract concepts and impersonal statements, we invite the reader to perceive the whole issue in terms of personal relationships. Thus, we find God on the scene of human history; thus, we see human persons responding to him; thus, we perceive something of the hidden presence of the Spirit. An immense scene, to be sure! But by looking at it we may well learn more than we would through strictly logical procedure.

God enters into the scene of human history

Jews and Christians believe that God has entered into the scene of human history in some way. 'The One Who Is' is not a solitary being, detached from his creation, but rather Someone who is supremely interested in the life of his children. In the jewish tradition, though, he remains forever distinct from what is limited and created. When he communicates with human beings, he is hidden in the distance of his glory. In the christian tradition, however, he does not cling to his divinity; he takes on our lowly state and becomes man. To this latter tradition we belong. We see the incarnation and all that follows from it — Jesus's birth, ministry, death, and resurrection — as God's deeds in human history. True, with the Jews we believe that he has spoken through the prophets. But we hold, also, that he has spoken through his Son who told his disciples about the mysteries of the kingdom and the way into it.

God has acted and spoken in human history. There we have something unique and absolute which can never be abolished. There is the obvious source of all unity. A distinction should be made, however, between God-who-acts and God-who-speaks. His actions, such as his incarnation, his death and resurrection, are not bound to human language. They are there, one, indivisible, unchangeable, no matter how any language tries to express them. At the same time, when God spoke either through his prophets or through his Son, his speech became part of that somewhat relative world of human language, where every term, every sentence, is uttered in a cultural and historically-conditioned context.

Christians of all generations will continue to return to God's deeds, to contemplate what happened, and to God's words, to listen to what was spoken.

Human persons respond

There is no revelation unless there are persons who perceive it. Indeed, there are human persons on the scene of history, touched by the mighty deeds of God and reached by his speech. But human beings are complex creatures, and here we touch on the roots of diversity. Human persons have a divine spark in them. They long for knowledge that comprehends all. They desire to possess whatever is good. But they live in a structured world which is circumscribed by various limits, and they must remain within their restricted domain. As they marvel at God's action, they have to discover it through messages that come to them through their senses. As they hear the speech of God, they must search to understand its meaning. It takes time for them to articulate with a measure of clarity what has been happening, what has been communicated. Such a struggle is usually preliminary to an act of surrender to the mysterious person who is communicating himself by external events and human speech. This surrender becomes total only when human persons decide to respond with the deeds of their lives; nothing less.

But all human responses are gradual, and are marked by their limitations. They cannot penetrate the deeds and words of the immense God all at once. What is One in its source will be mirrored in many ways by inquiring minds.

Besides, human persons do not live in isolation; they form communities. Thus, their answer to God's revelation comes also through a common perception and determination. From the very beginning, therefore, we find differences and variations in the understandings and practices of various christian groups. Each responded in its own way. Given the nature of man, only such diverse answers to God's intervention were possible. As we understand ourselves better, we come also to a better understanding of the origin of differences in the Church.

The Spirit of God as agent of fidelity

Ever since human beings appeared on the face of the earth, and as long as they continue to be there, the Spirit of God has been, and will be, with them. But only through Christ did we learn about his presence. We learned also, gradually, how the Spirit shapes and forms a people for God, people grounded in truth newly learned and in strength newly given.

The right balance between unity and diversity in the christian community is preserved, ultimately, by the fidelity of the Spirit. We

use the term 'fidelity' with set purpose. It explains that abiding presence from the time of the first Christian Pentecost: one which will remain with the community until the end of time.

The Spirit works both in individual persons and in the whole group: one Person holding many persons together. To each and to all, the Spirit gives the initial capacity to recognize God's mighty deeds in visible and tangible signs, and to surrender to the message that comes through them. Here is the One who gives the understanding to find the meaning in the speech of God as it comes to us. The Spirit is the dynamic force in the whole community, keeping it focused on events and words that have their ultimate origin in God. So it is that Christians are being led gradually into an increasingly better and deeper perception of truth, and helped to articulate it for the benefit of all mankind. Were the Spirit not there, individuals and communities could go astray, becoming so different from each other that their diversity would destroy their fundamental unity. Thus, the gathering of Christians is not simply a human community. It is a union of persons bonded by the force of the Spirit.

With the help of the Spirit, all of them together as pilgrim people can progress in the discovery of God's mighty deeds and in the understanding of his speech. But they still could go astray, especially in times of crisis when the community is divided, unless, beyond the internal action of the Spirit, there were someone to help them to find the truth, to do what is right.

More practically than theoretically, Christians have understood that the Spirit manifests his fidelity through human agents. Initially, the agents were the apostles, witnesses to the resurrection. In later times, ecumenical councils were regarded as organs through which the Spirit helped the Church to overcome a crisis in belief. The ancient formula used by Councils expresses this faith: *placuit Spiritui sancto et nobis*, 'it pleased the Holy Spirit and us'. Through a long and complex process of development, the traditional power of discernment seen in Councils was understood to be present in the college of bishops, presided over by the pope, whether they are gathered in council or dispersed in their particular churches. They are assisted by the Spirit in order that through their proclamation the whole people can remain faithful to the truth, and to the source of all truth — God. The ultimate answer then, to the question of how the right balance between unity and diversity is reached cannot come from any human source. It is the presence and action of the Spirit which brings it about.

Someone may well ask if this is what we mean by infallibility. The term 'infallibility' is a negative one. It means that the Church cannot err when it solemnly pronounces on the content of divine revelation. But such a gift or charism must obviously be contained in something positive. This positive foundation is the fidelity of the Spirit to God's people. He cannot let them go astray.

Thus our scenario is completed. The answer to the issue of unity and diversity in one way appears all too simple: it is due, at least partially, to the richness of God's self-revelation and to the incapacity of our nature to penetrate it all at once. Hence, persons and communities perceive it in truth, but piecemeal.

Thus far we have achieved some understanding. If its effect is that, in our own lives, we are more faithful to the source from which all unity springs, and more tolerant and compassionate to human beings who progress slowly towards grasping the whole truth, our reflections on the issue have not been in vain.

But before we conclude, let us touch on two more points. They both concern human persons in their historical reality, as they receive God's revelation. Ideas evolve, and they themselves develop.

Ideas in evolution

It is not simply enough to say that the life-event of Jesus was one, and the four evangelists reported it in four different ways. It should be added that an evolution has taken place from the ideas expressed in Mark to the insights present in John. Nor has that process of evolution yet come to an end. Each christian generation, through its thinkers and writers, contemplated the original information, and found new depths in it. The initial proclamation never stood still. Indeed, it did appear as a small seed growing into a large tree. This statement should not be taken as implying that there was a uniform progress into truth with no hesitations, no stagnation: just one triumphant intellectual march forward. This was never the case. The christian community has always been human; hence it has always had to contend with all the weaknesses that our nature brings. The progress in knowledge, because progress it was, did not come effortlessly, nor without set-backs. Still and all, as the ever-present wonder produced questions, as the ongoing inquiry gave birth to answers, through quiet contemplations and fierce fights, the community moved closer to the heart of the mystery.

We must understand ourselves as participants in this long process. We know, yet we do not know, the mysteries of God. We

are in possession of truth, yet we must move towards a fuller understanding of it. Few generations in christian history have been privileged as we are to witness ideas in evolution. We should take this for what it is: an exuberant display of life — even if, here and there, some pruning is necessary.

Developing persons

The source of evolving ideas is in developing persons.

It is enough to recall how the mind of man has opened up to new fields of knowledge — from the extremities of the vast universe to the hidden depths of his own psyche. Our horizons have enlarged to include hitherto unknown territories. Our categories have grown refined beyond telling. Let us hope that our hearts are opening up to the needs of our neighbours — all nations and peoples.

Again, this development should not be perceived as a continually progressive smooth and upward movement. There have been hesitations and set-backs. But the overall progress cannot be denied. Today, God's revelation is received in minds of broader vision; it is explained with terms of greater sophistication. We are reaping the benefits of such transformation in biblical exegesis. More has happened there than the discovery of old tablets and new ideas. Persons who approach the ancient texts do so with enriched minds; they are able to interpret them in a broader context and with the help of more sophisticated mental equipment.

Developing human persons, and of course their communities, are equally a source of diversity. Let us remember that we are such developing persons, and so are all others around us. No wonder christian revelation appears in so many colours today.

The issue of unity and diversity will never be solved as a mathematical problem can be solved. It was present at the very beginning of christian history, and it will remain so until the end of time. The impact of God's revelation on human persons will produce manifold responses, yet the Spirit will watch and make sure that the community as a whole will not fail in fidelity.

Of course, we have to do our level best. We should hold firmly that new ideas must grow organically from ancient traditions. We should assert, equally firmly, that new generations may come to surprising insights in which the community may eventually, through the ordinary process of reflection and debate and the discerning power of the episcopal college presided over by the pope, recognize the authentic truth of God.