

THE CHURCH AS *KOINONIA*: A CENTRAL THEME OF VATICAN II

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RECIPROCITY—*COMMUNIO*—is a basic human need. No-one can live in insecurity, without the support which human mutuality provides, without partners who listen to them and speak to them, and with whom they share their successes and disappointments—partners who have similar standards for judging good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness.

When the Church describes itself in terms of *koinonia*, of *communio*, it too seems to be taking up this line of thought. In patristic times, the idea of the Church as reciprocity, as *communio*, was widespread; it was also, in the judgment of Walter Kasper, ‘one of the central themes of Vatican II’s ecclesiology, perhaps even *the* central theme of the Council’.¹ At the same time, the Council did not draw up a rigorously systematic ecclesiology of *communio*. Even its terminology was unstable. The Council was struggling towards an understanding, towards a vision of the Church. It remained the task of theology to sort through the historical data lying behind the idea proposed, and to clarify it through systematic reflection.

I Theological roots

In the New Testament, the term *koinonia* appears mainly in Paul’s writings.² What strikes one there is that the word does not, in the first place, denote the relationships Christians have with each other. It does not represent an attempt to describe the Church in terms of the life which believers lead in common, and thus to portray the Church as answering the human yearning for security. The biblical understanding of *communio* has, initially, nothing whatever to do with the horizontal level: rather, it concerns relationships with God. *Koinonia* denotes reciprocity with God, with Christ, with the Spirit: in particular, that special *communio* which God founds with human beings through the Word and through

the Lord's Supper. It is not primarily a matter of human care for one another, of solidarity, or of the mutual security which comes from a community of kindred spirits, but rather of reciprocity with God. If the Church's nature is to be reciprocity, this must be understood in terms of who God is and what God is like. The Church is reciprocity, because, for Christians, God's own being is also reciprocity.

One must take a strictly theological approach, therefore, if one is properly to understand and appreciate what it means to talk about the Church as reciprocity or *koinonia*. The Council in this context argues directly from trinitarian theological ideas. It describes the Church as 'the people made one from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit'.³ Thus the Church's reciprocity is grounded in that of the Divine Persons, and its unity must be thought of as an analogue of the reciprocity lived by the triune God. Thus the Council's ecumenism decree:

This is the sacred mystery of the unity of the Church, in Christ and through Christ, with the Holy Spirit at work in the variety of gifts. The highest model and ground of this mystery is the unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of the one God, Father and Son in the Holy Spirit.⁴

Just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are directed towards each other, and exist in their relations to each other, so likewise are believers with their individual gifts of grace, and so too the partner Churches in the one Church.⁵ Trinitarian doctrine tells us how each of the Divine Persons exists and has being precisely through self-transcendence, through being related to the other Divine Persons. The reality of the Divine Persons consists in this orientation they have to each other, in this relationship, in this openness. This is the reality denoted by the term 'person': a person is that which exists in relation to a 'thou'.

In Vatican II, this trinitarian teaching became a model for the doctrine of the Church. The Church is the image of the triune God, and, as such, is to be characterized in terms of its relationships: relationships so constructed that each individual is focussed towards the others. Only in this relatedness do individuals become who they are, and acquire their own identity. Relatedness and dialogue are thus fundamental to the nature of the Church. What constitutes the Church is that each member is conscious of being in relationship

with the others, living through them and for them. No one is there just as themselves; no one believes just as themselves. Faith is only possible within the Church's reciprocity. *Ein Christ ist kein Christ*—one cannot be a Christian on one's own.

It follows that dialogue is not merely a principle of organization or an approach to problems. Dialogue is not, for example, just another way of getting difficult ideas or problematic convictions across to people, or a way of making Church law an effective reality. Dialogue is part and parcel of what it is to be Church, not simply a means of spreading the Christian message. The Church is essentially a reciprocity shaped by dialogue. Just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in relatedness to each other, and thereby one, so it must be *communio* that establishes the unity of the Church.

Thus the unity of the Church, which we legitimately strive to create and preserve, must not be understood as inflexible, lumpen uniformity, dependent on centralization. Such a view would run fundamentally counter to the Trinitarian understanding of God which should ground any model of the Church. The unity for which we strive is a dynamic, living reciprocity, a relationship between different individuals who are in dialogue with each other and thus bring this reciprocity into being. The papalism of Catholic theology in the period following the sixteenth century was largely influenced by a model of unity based more on a subchristian monotheism than on the Christian understanding of God. This model followed the slogan, 'One God, one empire, one ruler'. According to the Christian view, God is precisely not the unmoved mover, but rather dynamic, throbbing life: a life which can only be conceived as multiplicity, as exchange, as dialogue and reciprocity. A model of the Church which begins from a static understanding of unity, and which seeks to establish a monarchical system of government in place of a dialogical one, is now simply outdated. To say this is not to reduce the Church to a democracy in our modern constitutional sense, in which all power derives from the people, and where a majority outvotes a minority. But nor is it right for the Church to be governed in a monarchical, even absolutist, way.

This understanding of unity as reciprocity has a wealth of implications for the public face of the Church. In what follows, I shall illustrate this point by reflecting on a number of themes: the relationships between local Church and universal Church, between

theology and the Church's teaching authority, between priests and lay people, and the problems of ecumenism.

II. Local Church and universal Church

a) The very fact of the Council

The fact that Vatican II occurred at all was itself highly significant: the very summoning of a Council implied a new understanding of the relationship between pope and bishops. Following Vatican I, some were of the opinion that a Council, in the Roman Catholic Church, no longer had any juridical power. Every possible competence belonged to the pope, and was exercised by him alone. Thus, when John XXIII called the Council, the strict curialists were bewildered. What was the point of having a Council? Sebastian Tromp, the Dutch theologian, thought that a Council was incompetent to do anything other than accept what Vatican officials laid before it, say 'thank you very much', and pass the directives on to the dioceses. Surely it would be much easier to use papal encyclicals to propagate the truth as known by the pope, rather than go through the complicated mechanism of a Council? Surely it was wrong to keep the bishops away from their dioceses for so long? They had better things to do than give advice on matters which were, after all, the exclusive responsibility of the pope, not theirs.

As is well known, Vatican II turned out rather differently from what the curialists anticipated. In no way did the bishops simply applaud and accept prepared Vatican documents. Especially in the opening phase of the Council, the disputes between curial officials and bishops were heated, and disagreement—*non placet*—dominated. The bishops had to fight hard to win themselves space for a properly conciliar deliberation—and succeeded in doing so. They saw themselves as bishops, as fully competent witnesses for the faith of their Churches, and in no way merely as the means, subordinated to the curia, through which the pope executed his policy. The very fact that the Council took place, and that it did not simply receive edicts from on high, probably itself constituted the most significant corrective to Vatican I's onesidedness, and to that Council's concentration of all competence in the pope's hands alone. The Church as represented by Vatican II was not a monarchically ruled Church, but rather a Church as reciprocity, as *communio* of its bishops.

b) *The Church as local Church*

After Vatican I, the Church was seen, almost exclusively, as a worldwide Church, the pope as the world's bishop, and dioceses as districts of a Roman Church. The latter were simply administrative units, governed as if they were subsidiaries of the universal Church. Vatican II overcame this oneness in its predecessor. The word 'Church' was applied primarily to local Churches, or partner Churches: these were Churches, not a branch of the Church. In these the Church as such is real: local Churches are something more than a regional subsidiary of the worldwide Church. When the Council uses the word 'Church', it means the local Church—not exclusively so, admittedly, but this usage certainly seems to predominate. In this local Church, the Church of Jesus Christ is truly present. So *Lumen gentium*:

This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of believers, which, united with their pastors, are themselves called Churches in the New Testament. For in their own locality these are the new people called by God . . . (n 26).

'In and from' such individual Churches, 'there exists the one and only Catholic Church' (n 23). Everything which makes the Church the Church is present in the local Church: the celebration of word and sacrament, the episcopal office, and the links with other local Churches. The local Church is true Church.

If the local Churches are Church, this itself implies that they are not isolated from other Churches, but rather open out beyond their geographical, historical and cultural boundaries. Through this openness, the Church is drawn into a network of Churches, which together constitute the worldwide Church. The Church's life is reciprocity, a *koinonia* of Churches. Consciously taking up patristic models, Vatican II conceived the Church as a reciprocity of local Churches, whose unity arose from their hearing the word and celebrating the Eucharist together. Joseph Ratzinger expressed this sacramental understanding of the Church, rooted in *communio*, as follows: 'to be Catholic means . . . to be in cross-reference'.⁶

In this network of cross-references, the reality which is Church becomes universal. Because each local Church goes beyond itself in word and Sacrament, and opens out into the universal dimension, the worldwide Church is always an effective reality in each local Church. The worldwide Church becomes a reality through

local Churches opening out towards each other and referring across to each other—not through the local Churches being subordinated to a centre. Universal Church is a reciprocity, a *communio* of Churches. From this it follows that ‘the equiparation of Rome, of papal teaching and directives, with the “worldwide Church” ’ is ‘a claim that is quite unjustified’.⁷ The worldwide Church is not a Church monarchically ruled, and organized round one centre, but a Church in which the multiple and intrinsically pluriform local Churches are in contact, take responsibility for each other, and thus constitute a unity. It is in this context that all local Churches are in reciprocity with the Church of Rome, and *vice versa*.

c) The bishops and the pope

Just as the local Churches are Churches in the fundamental sense of the word, so the bishops are the fundamental witnesses of faith, and representatives of Christian tradition. So *Lumen gentium*:

Bishops lead the partner Churches entrusted to them as substitutes and ambassadors for Christ This power, which they personally exercise in Christ’s name, is their own, legitimate and unmediated . . . (n 27).

The bishops, then, have their power from Christ, not from the pope. They are bishops, not papal delegates.

The pastoral office, i.e. the normal daily care of their sheep, is entrusted to them completely. They are not to be understood as substitutes for the Bishop of Rome, because they hold a power which is proper to them, and they are quite correctly called *Antistites*—those who stand before the people they lead. Consequently, their power is not eliminated by the supreme, universal power, but on the contrary confirmed, strengthened, and upheld (*ibid.*).

The Council’s statements regarding the collegiality of bishops are ‘the institutional, outer correlative, as it were, of the sacramental unity in *communio*’;⁸ they apply the *koinonia* vision of the Church more concretely. It follows that the bishop has his office as a member of the college of bishops: it is in this college that he is a successor of the apostles. Thus the bishops have a common responsibility for the Church as a whole. It is the college of bishops, not just the pope, which is responsible for the Church as a whole.

According to this teaching of Vatican II, the pope does not have his authority independent of, or above, the college of bishops; but within it, in the Council. So *Lumen gentium*:

The order of bishops, however, is the successor to the college of apostles in the teaching office and in pastoral government; indeed, in this order the apostolic body remains continually. Together with its head, the Roman Pontiff, and never without this head, it is the bearer also of supreme and full power over the whole Church (n 22).

The bishop of Rome is a member of this body, and this in such a way that the college would not be the college of bishops without him or over against him. But the pope belongs to the college of bishops, and, through the college, to the Council: he is not an independent agent. No longer does he appear, then, as solitary ruler of the Church, as the monarch from whom all competence derives. Rather, he takes his place within a network of Churches which are in *communio* with one another. Within this reciprocity of Churches, the Church of Rome is one particular local Church acting as a reference point, to which all the other local Churches in their reciprocity should look. But Rome remains one local Church within the *communio* of Churches. The pope is a local bishop within the college of bishops. It is wrong to imagine the world as his diocese.

III The dialogue between magisterium and theologians

Vatican II's *communio* vision of the Church could be used to ease the often tense relationship between the Church's teaching office and theologians. The tradition of theology shaped by Vatican I seemed to work from its own counterpart of the Reformation principle: not 'scripture alone' but '*magisterium* alone'.⁹ The underlying assumption was that the pope and the bishops alone determined what Church teaching is. Theology had the subsequent task of producing proofs to show the correctness of what the *magisterium* had said. The *magisterium* set the agenda for theologians, in that the pope and the bishops delegated specific commissions to certain people. These latter thus had the role of providing help and input for the teaching office. This understanding clearly ruled out any suggestion that theology and theologians have an independent commission and responsibility. The division of labour was clear:

the *magisterium* established what Church teaching was, and the theologians were then meant to provide proofs showing its validity.

On such a model of delegation, state university theology faculties, working with a large measure of independence and autonomy, obviously appear suspect. By contrast, if one understands the Church as a *koinonia*, then it becomes possible to see the *magisterium* and theology as standing in a dialogue relationship. Even Pope John Paul II himself has made a highly authoritative plea for this dialogue. During his first visit to Germany in 1980, he spoke as follows:

The Church desires a theological research which is independent, distinct from the Church's teaching office, but conscious of being under obligation to that office in a joint service to the truth of faith and to the people of God. . . . Academic, and indeed theological knowledge demands the courage to take risks, as well as time to mature. It has its own rules, and it may not let external pressures impose themselves. If theological research is to be among the genuine riches of your country, the incorporation of theology into state universities is a step that will facilitate that end. Despite some conflicts, the model of academic theology as both free and in allegiance to the Church . . . has proved itself over and over again.

Regarding the freedom of theology, the Pope said:

. . . the theologian teaches in the name and under the commission of the ecclesial community of faith. He should, indeed must, make new suggestions towards the understanding of the Faith, but these are only an offer to the whole Church. Much must be corrected and developed through fraternal conversation before the whole Church can accept it. Theology is, at root, a service of great selflessness to the community of faith. Thus substantive argument, fraternal conversation, and readiness to change one's mind are essential parts of the enterprise. . . . The *magisterium* and theology each have different tasks. They cannot be reduced to each other, yet they serve the one all-encompassing goal. In this structurally complex relationship, you must stay constantly in contact with each other.¹⁰

In these papal statements, the old model of delegation and subordination has been simply abandoned. Only through dialogue, through 'fraternal conversation', can the Church's message be properly

formulated and proclaimed. The Church originates in *communio*, not in a monarchical, even absolutist, possessor of every competence. Only reciprocity in dialogue can guarantee unity.

IV Priests and laity

To understand the Church as reciprocity might also ease the relationship between the hierarchy and the laity. Traditionally, the role of the laity was simply to listen, obediently accepting and practising whatever the pope, the bishops, and, in certain cases, the priests told them. At the same time, even in the nineteenth century, there was a widespread breakthrough on the part of the Roman Catholic laity. There were Roman Catholic groups, initiatives and organizations initiated and led by laity, which were loyal to the Church, but did not allow the clergy, the pope, or the bishops to interfere in how they were run. Rome was very sceptical in its judgments regarding these spontaneous movements 'from below', in that they were emancipated from official Church control, and wanted to be Roman Catholic without submitting themselves to hierarchical leadership in the strict sense. There were examples of such independent Roman Catholic lay movements in Germany, France, Italy and the USA—as also of the suspicion with which the official Church regarded such new departures.¹¹

The papal response was 'Catholic Action'. This was meant to be 'an instrument in the hierarchy's hand, the extension of its arm, as it were'.¹² Lay collaboration was thus desired and urgently encouraged by the popes of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth—but always in these terms of the laity as the extension of the hierarchy's arm. Lay people fulfilled their role wherever the hierarchy and the priests had only restricted access: civil society, politics, economics, scholarship, and, to a large extent, the family. Wherever the pastor's influence was limited, the laity were commissioned to carry out the ecclesial apostolate. But they could only do this in strict dependence on the hierarchy, in subordination—as the image of the extended arm made clear. Here also, then, the model was that of delegation. All power and competence was primarily in the hands of the pope or the bishops. The Church was organized on strictly monarchic lines. The discovery of truth, the taking of decisions—all this originated in the pope alone, and was passed on from him to the bishops, the priests, and the laity.

Vatican II simply broke with this image of the laity as the hierarchy's extended arm. In *Lumen gentium* and in the decree on the lay apostolate, it is emphasized over and over again that lay people carry out their commissions in the Church and the world by virtue of their being called by the Lord *himself*. They are entrusted with this charge at Baptism and Confirmation. They share in the Church's mission insofar as they are members of God's people baptized and confirmed—not because they have been given a job by the hierarchy, or received authority from the bishop:

The lay apostolate is a participation in the saving mission of the Church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord himself (n 33).

Decisive here are the stresses: lay people participate in the apostolate of the Church *itself*: they are called to this by Christ *himself*. With this, the idea of 'Catholic Action', whereby the laity merely shared the hierarchy's apostolate as its delegates, is simply discarded. Thus the *communio* understanding of the Church provided a theoretical background which enabled the Council to sketch out the reciprocity and mutual dependence between office-holders and lay people. They should be in dialogue with each other, a dialogue which builds up the Church.

However, the specific texts in which the Council seeks to describe the relationship between priests and laity in practice seem almost pious and perfunctory velleities. *Lumen gentium* encourages priests to

recognize and promote the dignity and the responsibility of lay people in the Church. They should willingly make use of lay people's prudent advice, confidently pass on to them tasks in the service of the Church, allow them freedom and scope for action, and, furthermore, encourage them to undertake tasks on their own initiative also.

For their part, the laity are urged to carry out their tasks in the Church and the world together with the bishops and priests:

With Christian obedience, lay people . . . should readily accept whatever their sacred pastors, as Christ's representatives, decree in their capacity as teachers and governors in the Church (n 27).

What sounds here like a conventional, almost sweet, appeal is fundamentally the attempt to translate the *communio* vision of the Church into the realities of ecclesiastical practice. Unfortunately, the Council, and the canonical reflection which took place afterwards, did not succeed in taking the further step of legally establishing and safeguarding this *communio* vision of the Church. Thus these indications regarding dialogue and friendly interchange are in danger, ultimately, of simply remaining conventionalized appeals lacking any binding force. In this area, Church practice limps far behind theoretical insight. This is one of the main sources of contemporary tensions within the Church.

V *Ecumenical relevance*

The idea of the Church as *communio*, as a reciprocity of Churches, is of notable significance ecumenically. It can help us to overcome the divisions we have inherited and forestall threatened schisms. It cannot be the goal of ecumenism to arrive at a uniform Church, ruled from one centre, in which pluriformity is abolished. The goal of ecumenical efforts is not a universal Church organization, but for Churches to recognize each other as such: Churches which become one Church and yet remain Churches—not a universal Church organization. One must struggle so that the Churches become able to acknowledge and relate to each other as partner Churches, just as local Churches constitute and bring about the one universal Church, or as the various Rites have equal status as partner Churches belonging to the one Church. Ecumenism, therefore, cannot mean organizing a super-Church, or encouraging a return to Rome, or widening further the scope of a centralized Church government. Rather, the legitimate aim is that the separated denominations and confessions of today should become partner Churches in the reciprocity of the one Church. Church unity is thus not a matter of bringing people into line, but rather of pluriformity and mutual enrichment.

If the ecumenical goal is a reciprocity of Churches, this means that only a Church of dialogue can practise ecumenism. If a Church fails to practise internal dialogue and to live accordingly, by the same token it can no longer be ecumenical. Perhaps it is for this reason that the ecumenical process seems today to have stagnated. But if Rome acknowledges the dioceses as partner Churches with their own fully developed identity, then we have a basis for other Churches also to embark on a closer reciprocity with the pope.

Only a Church of dialogue can be a Church of ecumenism. Conversely, loud protestations of ecumenical good will are useless if dialogue within the Church is forbidden, and if the *communio* understanding remains merely an idea on paper, repressed in practice by styles of leadership running clean counter to it.

At any rate, the *communio* vision of the Church gives us at least a possible basis for overcoming the splits in the Church that are part of our heritage, and for avoiding the schisms that may loom in the future. There is one condition: all concerned must be ready to meet each other on the basis of this *communio* vision of the Church—a vision going back to patristic times, and which Vatican II has rediscovered.

NOTES

Translated from the original German by Philip Endean S.J.

¹ Kasper, W.: 'Kirche als *communio*: überlegungen zur ekklesiologischen Leitidee des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils', in *Die bleibende Bedeutung des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils*, ed F. König (Düsseldorf, 1986), pp 62-84, at 64.

² Hainz, J.: *Koinonia: 'Kirche' als Gemeinschaft bei Paulus* (Regensburg, 1982).

³ *Lumen gentium*, n 4; *de unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti plebs adunata*—a quotation from Cyprian of Carthage, supported by references to Augustine and John Damascene. It is thus clear that Vatican II wanted here to take up ideas from the early Church.

Tr—Translations of conciliar documents are taken directly from the Latin originals, though with particular reference to those given in *The documents of Vatican II*, ed Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York, 1966), and to the standard German translation. Occasionally, as here, where the Council's Latin is more than usually elastic, originals are quoted in the endnote.

⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n 4: *Hoc est unitatis Ecclesiae sacrum mysterium, in Christo et per Christum, Spiritu Sancto munus varietate operante. Huius mysterii supremum exemplum et principium est in Trinitate Personarum unitas unius Dei Patris et Filii in Spiritu Sancto.*

⁵ For an overview of how the theology of the local Church has developed, see Beinert, W.: 'Dogmenhistorische Anmerkungen zum Begriff "Partikularkirche"', *Theologie und philosophie* vol 50 (1975), pp 38-69.

Tr—'Partner Churches' translates the German *Teilkirchen*, which is itself a translation of the Council's *ecclesia particularis*. The latter is elsewhere rendered, more literally and less richly, 'particular Church'.

⁶ *Katholisch sein heißt . . . in Querverbindungen stehen*. Ratzinger, J.: *Das neue Volk Gottes: Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf, 1969), p 215.

⁷ Wiederkehr, D.: 'Von der Theorie der bischöflichen Kollegialität zur Praxis der Ortskirche', in *Les études théologiques de Chambésy*, vol 1 (Geneva, 1981), pp 249-266, at 259.

⁸ Kasper, p 74.

⁹ See Seckler, M.: 'Kirchliches Lehramt und theologische Wissenschaft', in *Die schiefen Wände des Lehrhauses* (Freiburg, 1988), pp 105-135.

¹⁰ *Predigten und Ansprachen von Papst Johannes Paul II bei seinem Pastoralbesuch in Deutschland*, ed German Bishops' Conference Secretariat, (Bonn, 1980), pp 33, 167-171.

¹¹ See further Neuner, P.: *Der Laie und das Gottesvolk* (Frankfurt, 1988), pp 100-108.

¹² Cited in Neuner, p 111.