

THEOLOGY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

As the introduction to this seminar here is a list of the topics which we shall discuss in detail.

1. In the New Testament the term "church" is used variously. In the Acts and Pauline Epistles it is applied to local, regional, even house (*ecclesia domestica*) "churches," as well as to "the Church" *simpliciter*. In Matthew 16 the usage is clearly universal; in chapter 18 it is more properly local.

2. The question is whether the term is thus polyvalent or merely ambiguous (polyguous) if not downright equivocal. It can be urged, however, that the distinction between universal and local church is not primarily theological, but rather a sociological observation which theology must then clarify.

3. Mutual Primacies. (a) The universal Church has primacy insofar as the Church is really ultimately the will of God to save all men (2 Tim 2:4) and the new creation consequent upon that saving will (Rom 5:12-21). (b) The local church (which must not be restricted to either the liturgical Eucharistic synaxis or the Ignatian bishop church) has primacy insofar as the Church is the concrete actualization of the peoplehood of God's election. The creature must be someplace, the Eucharist must be celebrated someplace. Hence the advantage of the local church is its here and now definiteness, its diversity and its unavoidable demand to make a decision. The advantage of the universal Church is its anti-sectarian and world-wide dimension. Conflict between them is not in their ecclesial ontology nor is it theoretically a desideratum. This does not mean that conflict is neither possible nor practically undesirable.

4. Reconciliation between the universal and local Church is to be sought in the understanding that "being" is "being-with," that "substance" is "relationship" (according to the ontology implicit in the doctrines of Trinity and Christology). Hence the relation between the universal and local Church is best described by the term "perichoresis." Hence the local church is not a merely jurisdictional administrative unit nor does the universal Church grow "federally" as if by the annexation

of already existing local "churches." Hence only that is not in the local church which the local church precisely by its localness cannot sustain: (a) world-wideness; (b) papacy as focus of unity of world-wide Church; (c) indefectibility in faith-being and infallibility in faith-thinking against the self-asserted universal Kingdom of Death (cf. Mt 16:18). Otherwise all is present: Headship of Christ, Spirit as Paraclete, grace, revelation, sacraments, charisms, and the rest.

5. Terminological Clarification. (a) Divine universal Church: the universal Church should be/is really (related to) the divine salvific will to save all men. (b) Local church: basically man's (a being in time and space) response to this saving will of God. (c) Papal universal Church: mediates between the divine universal Church and the local church (-es) because mankind is both local and universal. Neither papal universal nor local church alone or apart from each other is the adequate sacramental presence of God's saving will in the world, as Vatican II has described the Church (LG 1; Sc 5). Hence the perichoresis of the local and universal Church evokes as its proper life-style "collegiality."

6. Conclusion. Since the many churches "be" only one Church, this one Church is perhaps best described as a *communio*: it is the People of God which eats the sacramental body and blood of Christ and through this one Eucharist becomes the one "sacramental" (*mysterion*) Body of Christ.

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