

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR TAVARD—II

Professor Tavard begins his reflections by a brief review of the history of ecclesiology with which I find myself in fundamental agreement. His evaluation of Reformation ecclesiology is nuanced, praising the confessional orientation "away from structures of government towards the inner consistence of the Church in the graciousness of God," yet regretting the subsequent prevalence of an "increasingly atomistic view of community," by which he seems to mean the failure to develop how the Church is both a communion and also a social body in the larger human society. Similarly, he recalls the broad and deep ecclesiology of the *Roman Catechism*, yet deplores the movement that ended by collapsing ecclesiology into "a matter of laws and customs, of powers and jurisdiction," into "hierarchology."

With Vatican II, Professor Tavard's views become more controversial. To say that "chapters 4 (the laity) and 6 (the religious) reflect the cultural mood of our times, concerned with the status of individuals in society," is somewhat abusive. The "cultural mood" here is one which has a good deal to teach the Church and, among other things, it can recall to mind ages in which the status and rights of individuals in the Church were of much greater concern to churchmen and to ecclesiologists than they have been in recent centuries. It is then even possible to find basic principles of classic church law and government which were important factors in the long social and political development in the West, which resulted in some of the more "democratic" features of our present "cultural mood."¹

Professor Tavard outlines five characteristics of a "catholic" ecclesiology. It knows its own role to be secondary and, ideally, superfluous. It centers upon the *mysterium* (orthodoxy) rather than upon "government or peoplehood" (orthopraxis). It is profoundly eschatological. It

¹See, for examples, two of the recent symposia sponsored by the Canon Law Society of America and edited by James Coriden, *We, the People of God . . . A Study of Constitutional Government for the Church* (Huntington, Indiana, 1968) and *Who Decides for the Church? Studies in Co-Responsibility* (Hartford, Connecticut, 1971).

is essentially part of God's descent into the world. And, finally, it is "unreservedly Catholic," sees the Church as "the religious dimension of the universe," and therefore concerns itself with other Christians and Christian communities, and with the wider ecumenism of the other great religions.

Now, if it is possible to reduce Professor Tavad's suggested marks of ecclesiology to a single principle, that might be found in the insistence that in the phrase "the Church of God" the emphasis should fall upon "of God," the God and Father of the Lord Jesus. It is communion with God which is central, not government or peoplehood, a communion which, fulfilling promises, awaits its own fulfillment, a communion which God has initiated and man cannot break, a communion with the breadth of God's own love of man.

It would be difficult to disagree with this approach. The word "church" after all is a neutral term; *ecclesia* simply means an assembly or gathering and needs specification by distinguishing predicates such as "of the saints," "of the wicked," "of God." And this ties in nicely with the sociologist's recognition that social relations are constituted by meaning, and that communities are constituted by common meaning. There is, therefore, nothing to talk about if there is no community of meaning, and that common meaning, in the case of the Church, is the fruit of God's gift of his grace and of the message of Christ. As Professor Tavad remarks, the Church "stands or falls with the value of its proclamation about Jesus."

But, I confess that I have some difficulty in bringing Professor Tavad's ecclesiology down to earth. For him, the Church is "the communion of God with men"; "the Church does not come into being by the initiative of its membership, but solely by the will and power of the head of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ"; "the Church is God's created Wisdom, imprinted upon creation from the beginning." Professor Tavad distinguishes between "the Church and its members" in such fashion that "the Church transcends all and each of its members." It is not "a part or a level or a stage in the cosmos, but the cosmos itself." It is the "religious dimension of the universe, or the universe in its religious dimension"; "the Church is God's Church whatever we do and do not do. But we, the members, become the Church only to the extent that we share its hopes and carry out its tasks."

The last of these statements brings to light an ambiguity latent throughout the paper, which appears especially when such grand claims are compared to other statements which suggest that the Church can fail in its proclamation about Jesus, or which speak of the Church's "temporary inadequacy to the task of being the Church." How are these to be reconciled with talk about the "indefectible fidelity" of the Church, God's created *pleroma*, to the uncreated *Pleroma* of the Word?

Professor Tavad's ability to make these diverse statements seems to rest on his distinction between "the Church and its members." These are related, he suggests, as the two natures in the one Christ are related; in fact, this analogy is even used to explain how the Church of Christ "subsists in" the Roman Catholic Church. Presumably, this latter is also the "empirical Church" of which Professor Tavad writes.

Professor Tavad's trans-empirical Church seems to me to be an abstraction, a hypostasization, as even the identification with God's created Wisdom suggests. There are some warrants for this view in the tradition, as, for example, the *ecclesia ab Abel* theme, not to mention early, quasi-Gnostic notions of a pre-existent *ekklesia*. But it seems to me that such language about the Church is either prescriptive (stating what the Church should be) or eschatological (stating what it will be, the *numerus praedestinatorum*). The Church thus described, then, either describes an ideal towards which the "empirical Church" approximates or refers to a group known only to God. If one of these is the referent of the word "Church" then it is more understandable why Professor Tavad does not like recent suggestions that the *simul justus et peccator* formula be applied to the Church.

The problem raised by all this is a real one. Augustine, for example, used the word "Church" to refer to three different but related groups: the *communio sacramentorum*, symbolized by Noah's Ark, and containing both just and unjust; the *societas sanctorum*, symbolized by the Dove, and including only the just; and the *numerus praedestinatorum*, known only to God and including some now outside the Church and excluding some now in the Church in either of the first two senses.²

²See Yves M.-J. Congar, "Introduction générale," in *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, vol. 28: *Traité Anti-Donatistes* (Paris, 1963), pp. 9-133, esp. pp. 95-115; and also D. Faul, "Sinners in the Holy Church. A Problem in the Ecclesiology of St. Augustine," *Studia Patristica*, vol. 9 [Texte und Untersuchungen, 94] (Berlin, 1966), pp. 404-15.

Some such distinctions are necessary for an integral ecclesiology, but Professor Tavad's statements nearly always refer to the last of Augustine's three referents. That is, perhaps, why he passes so quickly from the Church's witness to the Church's mystical absorption in its Lord, the "mystical" Church. Perhaps also, this explains why Professor Tavad thinks it possible to describe the "orthodoxy" of the Church before considering its "orthopraxis." But to prefer this Church, it seems, is to anticipate the eschaton.

Meanwhile, however, we struggle to carry on here. And I do not find Professor Tavad's paper helpful in illumining the pilgrim existence of the Church of this age. He does not like reflection on either "government" or "peoplehood" to be central to ecclesiology, whether old or new. He fears that such an approach will result in what I might call "orthopractical reductionism," neglecting the prior "orthodoxy" which knows the Church to be essentially communion with God. But such is his insistence on the mystery that (1) he earns for himself the criticism he directed against Reformation ecclesiology, and (2) he falls into what James Gustafson has called "theological reductionism" in ecclesiology.³

Gustafson uses that phrase to refer to "the exclusive use of biblical and doctrinal language in the interpretation of the Church," "the explicit or tacit assumption that the Church is so absolutely unique in character that it can be understood only in its own private language." Professor Tavad's concern to preserve the *specificum* of the Church appears to me to have led him down this road. The major importance of such terms as "*mysterium*" "God's created Wisdom," "*pleroma*," "the holy typology," etc., and their use in abstract terms of a trans-empirical Church, distinct if not separate from its members, causes some impatience. One finds oneself asking, "to what Church is he referring?" "How well does this relate to the average Christian's or the average congregation's experience?"

Theological reductionism is not peculiar to Professor Tavad. I find it largely present in most ecclesiological models proposed to replace the "institutional" model, such as "sacrament," "mystical communion," "herald," and even "servant," to use Dulles' list.⁴ All of these, in vary-

³See his *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (New York, 1961), p. 100.

⁴Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York, 1974).

ing degrees, propose a fundamental model drawn from biblical or strictly theological language; and I believe they will remain finally inadequate or, perhaps better, simply too elusive, so long as they do not draw upon social theory for the fundamental categories which will relate the Church to more general experiences of human life in community. Let me explain.

The Church is not unique in being a community of language, interpretation, memory and understanding, belief and action. All communities are this to some extent. A group of people becomes a community when they share some common field of experience, which they interpret in common or complementary ways, and which leads them to common values, goals and commitments. This is the stuff of human community, without which a group is just a group.⁵ The Church is a community in this sense, also. Its members share a common experience in the Spirit and in the constitutive memory of Jesus Christ; it is constituted by the beliefs in which it interprets both experiences and by the love and hope with which it seeks to live out their implications. The Church, then, is constituted by faith and love, the redemptive meaning and value by which it is, first, a community, and, secondly, a distinctive community. Where the Spirit is no longer experienced and where the memory and hope of Christ are lost, the Church has ceased to exist, no matter what other aspects may still be present, be they institutions or dogmas, rites or roles, buildings or hierarchs.

Classically, Roman Catholic ecclesiology has tried to respect these elements in the familiar "institutional" model of the Church. The problem with that model is not that it employed "social categories" to describe the Church, but that it failed to move beyond the social theory which a very creative period of canonical thought was able to devise, and especially that it cut itself off from the developing social and political theories of the modern era. In the end, the model became totalitarian in its claim to exhaust the reality of the Church and issued in a sort of "supernatural sociology," in which the existence of parallels between structures and offices in the Church and those in other social bodies was resisted. I offer as an example the manuals' distinction between the *magisterium authenticum*, peculiar to the Church, and the

⁵I borrow the analysis from Bernard Lonergan, who has stated it most recently in his *Method in Theology* (New York, 1972).

magisterium mere scientificum, which characterizes, it seems, all other instances of teaching, in any other social body.

One does not have to reduce the Church to just another social group to acknowledge the fact that God's grace meets us where we are, both as individuals and as communities. And as his transcendent favor does not make angels out of men, but functions in manners at least analogous to those which the Middle Ages explored in metaphysical and our contemporaries in personalist terms, so also the transcendent origin of his grace and Word, by which the Church is the Church, does not create a Church distinct from its members, abstracted from history, but rather a fellowship of sinners, brought together by the Spirit, whose common life, activities, bonds and purposes do not escape all comparison with those of other social bodies and movements.

Finally, working out an ecclesiology with a base in contemporary social theory would also enable greater justice to be done to the social mission of the Church than Professor Tvard attempts. For such an ecclesiology would begin from a full consciousness of the social dialectic by which, if society is a human product, man is a social product.⁶ The real root of social relationships in commonly shared meaning and value would be appreciated, as would also the degree to which reality is socially defined. The Church, itself constituted by redemptive meaning and value, would thus appear also as the concrete social and historical possibility of men and women understanding and appreciating their lives (defining reality) in the light of Jesus Christ. Where society is understood as both the product and shaper of man's consciousness, there would be no temptation to exempt the social order and structures from gospel judgment nor any danger of ignoring the social and historical embodiments of sin or of reducing the redemptive mission of the Church to the individual's salvation, here or in the next life. I do not think that Professor Tvard has ignored these requirements, but he has given no indication how he would develop them from the ecclesiology he has outlined, and he is too abrupt in dismissing recent efforts in that direction.

The remarks I have offered pertain to the substance of the question "Is there a Catholic ecclesiology?" For one thing, they repudiate sec-

⁶See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, 1967), p. 61.

tarian tendencies, as the very word "catholic" did originally. Secondly, they pivot around the central Catholic conviction that God and man are co-constructors of the world and not rival and incompatible agents. And finally, they lead directly into what I think is the most important contribution Pope Paul VI has made to practical ecclesiology, the enlistment of the Church, as a gospel imperative, in the effort to bring about a just and free world society.

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