

## SEMINAR ON CHURCH AND SACRAMENTS: SUMMARY

The materials proposed for the discussions of this seminar were the articles in the December 1976 issue of *Theological Studies* under the general title, "Why the Church?"

Harry McSorley opened the first day's discussion with a presentation in which he sketched a plan for interpreting the axiom, "no salvation outside the Church." By distinguishing five meanings of the term salvation, he seeks to avoid a separation between Church and salvation. Salvation can be taken in an ultimate or eschatological sense belonging to the next world and is available to all human persons. A noetic element of salvation, a knowing of God in and through Christ belongs to this world as well, but is available only through the Church. Three other aspects of salvation depend upon this noetic element and are expressed in the life of the Church: a worshipping of God in spirit and truth, communal existence in Christ, and a future-oriented hope. Biblical materials identify the four latter elements with salvation and connect them with the work of Christ and his Church.

The discussion of this presentation and the material in the December 1976 issue of *Theological Studies* centered on four issues. The saving function of the Church for those who are its members seems to be different from this function in regard to those outside. McSorley's presentation and the work of Robert Sears in *TS* center on the meaning of salvation for Christians acting within the context of the Church. Roger Haight's work in *TS* concentrates on the salvation which Christians live by acting toward the non-Church. The analogous use of the term salvation can maintain a connection between Church and salvation for Christians, but the relation between ultimate salvation and the other forms of salvation which are dependent upon explicit recognition of Christ must be explored if the Church is to be an agent of salvation to the non-Christian. The presence of these noetic forms of salvation within the Church might influence the non-Church. Finally, McSorley's use of Scripture in developing the meanings of salvation was questioned. The distance between the apostolic communities and the contemporary Church cannot be easily bridged and the normative function of the various viewpoints within the biblical collection cannot be presumed.

Patout Burns began the second day's discussion by presenting the viewpoint out of which the articles in *Theological Studies* had

been developed. Four elements are foundational to the discussion: God, Christ, Church, and humanity which is to be saved. Both God and humanity are unlimited, though in different senses. In contrast, Christ and the Church are considered as subject to temporal and spatial limitations. Contemporary ecclesiology faces a problem in specifying the roles of Christ and the Church in mediating a salvation which God makes available to every human being. How can these particular, limited realities, function as mediators between God who is Father and Lord of all and the whole of humanity which needs his salvation? The tension of universal and particular was already evident in the New Testament and the patristic materials. In Matthew's account, Christ received a universal mission after his resurrection and so commissioned his disciples. Luke presents Christ as having had a universal mission from the beginning and the Church as having assumed this mission. Gregory of Nyssa recognized the Church as the sole agent of Christ's salvation in this world, but provided for a more general achievement of salvation through the agency of Christ after death. Augustine asserted God's intention to save only those who actually believed in Christ, but then recognized the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's desire to extend saving belief to all and bringing them into the Church.

Burns suggested that the problem can be analyzed by inquiring into the connections between each of the elements in the series, God—Christ—Church—saved humanity. Was Christ's particular human activity constitutive of God's saving action in the world, or did he indicate a universal divine operation through a normative revelation? Does the Church continue the mission and work of Christ, or has it a less significant role? Can the Church be considered constitutive or even normative of divine and Christic action which brings salvation to the non-churched? Can significantly different modes of operation be assigned to the Church in the process through which the Christian and the non-Christian attain salvation? Can the distinction between ultimate and inner-worldly salvation, such as McSorley presented, be employed to distinguish between Church and non-Church when God is considered Father of all and Christ Lord of human history?

The discussion centered on the function of Christ as the agent of God's saving action. His constitutive function was asserted and interpreted in various ways. The divine element in Christ, some explained, absolutizes and generalizes his human activity and thereby gives him a universal and absolute mediating role. Divine

energies within the Church give it a similar role. Participants of a more Eastern or Orthodox persuasion expressed dismay at the historical or empirical perspective and concentration on Christ to the neglect of the Holy Spirit. They advocated forms of pneumatic and monophysite analysis of the Church but did not indicate how these approaches advance the understanding of the mission of the Church to the world which remains non-Church.

The Church might also be analyzed in a forward-looking or eschatological perspective rather than by looking back to the work of Christ. This view would seem to interpret Christ through the mission of the Church rather than the reverse procedure which had been employed in the articles of *TS* and the seminar discussion. In conjunction with this, a plea was made for greater precision in the language of salvation and redemption. Participants in the discussion did not consistently distinguish salvation from redemption, and objective from subjective redemption.

Finally, it was suggested that the analysis of conversion which Bernard Lonergan had presented in his address to the Society might be followed and attention directed to the shift in perspective which brings Catholic theologians to consider less absolute and universal roles for the Church and even for Christ.

The discussion was constantly hampered by a difficulty which plagued the early work of the group which prepared the issue of *Theological Studies*. A common language must be developed if different perspectives are to interact fruitfully. Generally, the participants did not adopt the language of the materials which were proposed as the foundation of the seminar. This resulted in a significant failure to engage one another and a series of false starts in analysis of the question at issue.

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