

## SEMINAR PAPER

### THE LOCAL CHURCH AS A CENTER OF COMMUNICATION AND CONTROL

Vatican II generated great interest in the theology of the local Church and since the Council much has been written on this subject.<sup>1</sup> According to Aloys Grillmeier, "One of the achievements of the Council was the re-discovery of the universal Church as the sum and communion of the local churches, understood fully as themselves, and the re-discovery of the universal Church in the local church."<sup>2</sup> My intention here is to discuss one important element in the local Church—its system of communication. I shall attempt to show that communication is essential to the life of the local church and that it has significant practical ramifications.

#### I. THE LOCAL CHURCH DEFINED

There is no unanimity either in official church documents or in the theological literature in regard to the term used to denote the local Christian community in contradistinction to the universal Church. Indeed, there is semantic confusion. Vatican II, for example, for the most part spoke of the "particular church" but it also used "local church"

<sup>1</sup>A. Amato, ed., *La chiesa locale* (Rome: L.A.S., 1976); A. Antón, "La Iglesia Universal-Iglesias particulares," *Estudios eclesiacos* 47 (1972), 409-35; W. Beinert, "Die Una Catholica und die Particularkirchen," *Theologie und Philosophie* 42 (1967), 1-21, and "Die Kirche Christi als Lokalkirche. Die Entwicklung in den ersten fünf Jahrhunderten," *Una Sancta* 32 (1977), 114-29; J. Cunnane, "The Local Church," in D. Flanagan, ed., *The Meaning of the Church* (Dublin: Gill, 1966), pp. 72-88; H. de Lubac, *Les églises particulières dans l'Église universelle* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971); M. Dortelet-Claudot, *Églises locales, Église universelle: Comment se gouverne le Peuple de Dieu?* (Lyon: Chalet, 1973); J. Guerra, "Las iglesias locales como signo de la Iglesia Universal en su proyección misionaria," *Misiones extranjeras* 14 (1967), 181-94; R. J. Handy, "Toward a Theology of the Local Church," *Foundations* 15 (1972), 42-52; K. Hemmerle, "Zwischen Bistum und Gesamtkirche; ekklesiologische Vorbemerkungen zu Fragen kirchlicher Strukturen," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift (Communio)* 3 (1974), 22-41; H.-M. Legrand, "The Reevaluation of Local Churches: Some Theological Implications," in E. Schillebeeckx, ed., *The Unifying Role of the Bishop, Concilium*, Vol. 71 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 53-64; B. Neunheuser, "Église universelle et Église locale," G. Baraúna, ed., *L'Église de Vatican II*, Vol. II (Paris: Cerf, 1967), pp. 607-38; J. Pinard, "L'Église locale comme lieu de divinisation," *Esprit et vie* 81 (1971), 385-94; G. Phillips, "Utrum ecclesiae particulares sint iuris divini annon," *Periodica de re morali, canonica, liturgica* 58 (1969), 143-54; X. Seumois, "Die Teilkirchen," in J. Schütte, ed., *Mission nach dem Konzil* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1967), 245-67; A. Tessarolo, ed., *La chiesa locale* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1970); R. Trisco, "The Catholic Theology of the Local Church," *Foundations* 15 (1972), 53-71; J. G. Watelet, "Église et églises," *Bible et vie chrétienne* 92 (1969), 62-67.

<sup>2</sup>In H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. I (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 167.

and other variants.<sup>3</sup> As the following representative list of citations reveals, there is no consistency in the Vatican documents. Unless otherwise noted, the term used in these references is to the particular church, *Ecclesia particularis*. *Sacrosanctum concilium* 13 and 11; *Lumen gentium* 13, 23(3x), 23 (*Ecclesiae localium*, e.g., patriarchal churches), 26 (*legitima fidelium congregatio localis*=diocese), 27, 28 (*legitima fidelium congregatio* and *communitas localis*=parish); *Orientalium ecclesiarum* 2 (*Ecclesiae particulares seu ritus*), 3, 4(2x), 10 (*Ecclesia particularis seu ritus*), 16, 17, 19(2x); *Unitatis redintegratio* 14 (*Ecclesiae particulares seu locales*, e.g., patriarchal churches); *Christus Dominus*, Chapter 2 entitled *De Episcopis, quoad Ecclesias Particulares seu Dioceses* 11, 23, 28, 36; *Ad gentes*: Chapter 3 entitled *De Ecclesiis Particularibus* 6, 19 (*congregationes fidelium, vivae communitates*, and *Ecclesia localis*=dioceses), 20(2x), 22, 27 (*Ecclesia localis*=diocese), 32 (*Ecclesia localis*=diocese).

The terminological inconsistency of Vatican II is reflected in the translations of the documents, in the commentaries and in current theological literature. At times the terms "particular" and "local" are used interchangeably but, at other times, attempts are made to differentiate them. Yet two tendencies are apparent in contemporary theology. First, the term "particular church," despite its conciliar usage, has not gained widespread acceptance. Second, most authors prefer to speak of the "local church" in reference to the diocese.

I would like to suggest another way of describing the local church which may bring some clarity to the issue and still preserve the values of Vatican II. Thus, the term "local church" can be used in two ways. In the *strict* sense, the local church, in which the Church of Christ is truly present, is that community of Christians called by the Holy Spirit and, under the leadership of the bishop, priests and other ministers, proclaims the Word, celebrates the Eucharist and other sacraments, and continues the redemptive work of Christ in the world. The local church, then, is primarily the diocese but it could also refer to several dioceses in the same region or nation (e.g., the French Church) or several churches in the same rite (e.g., the Maronite Church). The two critical elements in this definition of the local church are the bishop<sup>4</sup> and the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>In Vatican II the term "particular church" meant most often the diocese (e.g., *Christus Dominus* 11) but it was also used to refer to churches in the same region or culture (e.g., *Ad gentes* 22) and to autonomous churches of the same rite (e.g., *Orientalium ecclesiarum* 2).

<sup>4</sup>B. Bazatole, "L'évêque et la vie chrétienne au sein de l'Église locale," in Y. Congar and B.-D. Dupuy, eds., *L'épiscopat et l'Église universelle* (Paris: Cerf, 1962), pp. 329-60; E. Corredo, "The Bishop as Head of the Local Church and Its Discipline," in N. Edelby, T. Jiménez-Urresti, and P. Huizing, eds., *The Sacraments in Theology and Canon Law, Concilium*, Vol. 38 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. 88-104; H. Roux, "Le ministère d'unité dans l'église local et l'épiscopat en perspective réformée," *Études théologiques et religieuses* 51 (1976), 39-57.

<sup>5</sup>S. S. Harakas, "Local Church: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 29 (1977), 141-53; E. Lodi, "La chiesa locale come assemblea eucharistica," in A. Tessarolo, *La chiesa locale, op. cit.*, pp. 82-96; J. D. Zizoulas, "The Eucharistic Community and the Catholicity of the Church," *One in Christ* 6 (1970), 314-37. Orthodox

Vatican II called the bishops "the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches" (*Lumen gentium* 23) and said that the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen gentium* 11). In the broad sense, the local church may also designate the parish (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 42), the domestic church or family (*Lumen gentium* 11 and *Gaudium et spes* 48), and other Christian groupings (e.g., religious communities, basic Christian communities, etc.).<sup>6</sup> These smaller groups are not complete in themselves but are related and ordered to the local church in the full sense and are in communion with it.

In both the strict and the broad sense, these faith assemblies are not simply administrative units of the universal Church but are specific realizations, admittedly in varying degrees, of the entire mystery of the Body of Christ which is one. The local church manifests the presence of Christ among his people. The local church is the Church because in it Christ is wholly present. In the words of Louis Bouyer, "The Church does not exist all at once as a vast, universal system; on the contrary, it proceeds from essentially local communities and, strictly speaking, has no real existence outside these."<sup>7</sup>

## II. THE LOCAL CHURCH AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

"A local church is wholly the Church but it is not the whole Church."<sup>8</sup> The local church manifests the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church but it does not exhaust that reality. This idea can be best understood in the context of *communio*. The universal or great Church is a *communio* or fellowship of various local churches united in faith and the Holy Spirit. "All the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit" (*Lumen*

theologians frequently speak of a eucharistic ecclesiology. Yet, as Michael A. Fahey correctly notes, this can easily lead to a kind of "exaggerated episcopalism" and "does not sufficiently take into consideration the possibility that an individual local church can become isolated from other churches and hence be deficient in *koinonia*" ("Orthodox Ecumenism and Theology: 1970-78," *Theological Studies* 39 [1978], 478). Fahey also provides valuable bibliographical references.

<sup>6</sup>Emmanuel Lanne discusses what he calls "an extreme case" and asks whether two or three Christians can be said to form a local church. He concludes that "in the meeting together of two or three Christians to pray for unity, there is a certain manifestation of communion, a kind of local church—embryonic and unstable, if you like, but real" ("The Local Church: Its Catholicity and Apostolicity," *One in Christ* 6 [1970], 311).

<sup>7</sup>*L'Église de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), pp. 336-37. According to *Lumen gentium* 26: "The Church of Christ is really present (*vere adest*) in all legitimately organized groups of the faithful, which, insofar as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called churches in the New Testament." Karl Rahner, writing before the Council, makes a similar point. He says that "the Church herself becomes in the fullest sense an event only in the local celebration of the Eucharist. . . . The local church is not only an agency of the universal Church, subsequently founded, and with which she could easily dispense with, but is the 'event' itself of this universal Church" (*the Episcopate and the Primary* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1962], pp. 26-27). See also his article "Peaceful Reflections on the Parochial Principle," in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. II (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), pp. 283-318.

<sup>8</sup>J. J. Von Allmen, "L'Église locale parmi les autres Églises locales," *Irénikon* 43 (1970), 512.

gentium 13). The local Church contributes to the enrichment of other local churches and to the universal Church. In this communion of churches, the church of Rome is considered by Catholic Christians to be the *prima sedes*. It has a unique function: to bring together the local churches into a visible, sacramental, worshipping community. The pope, then, as an instrument of the Spirit, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (*Lumen gentium* 23). The relationship between the local churches and the church of Rome should not be conceived of primarily in terms of juridical subordination. Rather, the ideal of collegial association should predominate.<sup>9</sup> The term "local church," then, is relational; its full understanding and validity depend on its connection with other local churches and with the *prima sedes*. The full catholicity of the Church is possible only when there is a mutual communion between the local churches and the universal Church. Thus, Pope John Paul II notes: "The perfect identity of the local churches is to be found in complete openness to the universal Church."<sup>10</sup>

### III. THE LOCAL CHURCH AND COMMUNICATION

One helpful way to grasp the uniqueness of the local church in the unity of the universal Church is to use communication theory or, more specifically, cybernetics, the science of communication and control.

Cybernetics as a science was originally derived from technology (computers) but it is now applied to social organizations<sup>11</sup> and to the Church.<sup>12</sup> According to Karl W. Deutsch, cybernetics is "a new science about an old subject" which shows that "every organization is held together by communication."<sup>13</sup> Cybernetics is of itself neutral; it can be applied to the Mafia, the United States Government, the YMCA or the Church. It simply attempts to analyze systematically what is already happening in an organization. From cybernetics it is possible to construct a model in the sense described by Avery Dulles: "an image employed reflectively and critically to deepen one's understanding of a reality."<sup>14</sup> The cybernetic model is both explanatory and exploratory; it is a tool which helps us to synthesize a complex reality and to discover new insights. Cybernetics deals with goal-oriented behavior in open

<sup>9</sup>I have developed this theme in *The Papacy in Transition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980).

<sup>10</sup>Address to Bishops of Papua, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (*L'osservatore romano*, November 5, 1979, p. 13).

<sup>11</sup>G. A. Almond and G. B. Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966); F. K. Berrien, *General and Social Systems* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968); D. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: John Wiley, 1965); J. D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974).

<sup>12</sup>P. Granfield, *Ecclesial Cybernetics: A Study of Democracy in the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); M. V. Orna, *Cybernetics, Society and the Church* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum, 1969); W. W. Everett, *Body-Thinking in Ecclesiology and Cybernetics* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard, 1970).

<sup>13</sup>*The Nerves of Government* (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 76-77.

<sup>14</sup>*Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), p. 21.

systems and considers information—whatever causes change in another—as a critical element in any social unit. One of its principal tenets is that communication—the exchange of units of information—welds the interdependent and interacting parts of a system into a unity. There is a continual flow of information involving inputs (supports and demands), output (extractions, regulations, distributions and symbols), and feedback (response).

Cybernetics can be applied to the local church to the extent that it is a social organization. Yet this application is always analogous because the Church is a unique social reality. It is not simply a spiritual counterpart of civil society but a special assembly of persons who are called by the Spirit and united through their faith in the Lordship of Jesus. It differs in essentials from civil society. The cybernetic model is useful in analyzing the local church but it is not the only way; it is not self-sufficient. Obviously, a total ecclesiological vision of the local church must take into account, among many other things, the witness of Scripture and Tradition, the role of religious experience, and the promised but often unpredictable guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The local church is a subsystem within the universal Church and it has many component parts: the bishop, diocesan offices, laity, priests, religious, parishes, schools, hospitals. It functions as an information-processing unit which provides for its own needs and responds to the information received from its members, its leaders and its environment. When there is little or no communication between these various elements, stagnation results. The local church, through the exchange of information within itself and with other local churches, is to some extent self-regulating. As a specific concretization of the Body of Christ, it controls to a large degree its own destiny. But the local church remains a relational reality, only partially autonomous and always in contact with the shared faith of the universal Church. The local church, then, is a center of communication and control but it is not *the* center. It is not a totally independent reality.

A cybernetic analysis of the local church focuses on the flow of information between its diverse parts, the continuing dialogue between members and leaders, and the participation of all in the life of the community. The aim of an ordered communication system within the local church is to promote growth and development and also to foster solidarity, freedom and responsible autonomy.

Three principles based on a cybernetic theory of communication have theological significance for the local church. First, the principle of legitimate diversity which allows for a variety of thought patterns, ecclesial structures, liturgical practices and customs to exist within a community as long as they are in accord with the unity of faith. Second, the principle of collegiality or shared responsibility which provides for the participation of all levels of church membership in ecclesial life. Third, the principle of subsidiarity which encourages local churches to govern themselves as far as possible without interference from higher authorities.

## IV. SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The theory of communication that we have outlined above and the principles we have derived from it can be applied to concrete situations in the local church. The theory is more than an ideal; it has real implications. The six following examples are representative.

*Conflict Resolution.* It is inevitable that in the local church, as in any social organization, there will be conflicts. Although there is no simple solution to their resolution, one prerequisite is that the parties involved must be able to communicate their views to each other. Without dialogue, intransigence often results. The greater the number and variety of channels of information, the greater the possibility that the information will be recognized by those in leadership roles. In local churches where the principle of collegiality is operative, there are fewer unresolved conflicts.<sup>15</sup>

*Conciliar Participation.* Councils are organs of communication and control, channels of constructive input and centers of creative planning within the local church. The official Church has urged that dioceses establish diocesan pastoral councils; parish councils; liturgical, ecumenical and catechetical commissions; and priests' and sisters' senates. Conciliar assemblies encourage the participation of all members of the local church: hierarchical and non-hierarchical, ordained and non-ordained, men and women. Such groups foster the idea of communion and co-responsibility and help reduce conflicts.<sup>16</sup>

*Episcopal Selections.* Input from members of the local church should be a necessary element in the process of selecting bishops. On the basis of the common dignity and true equality shared by the People of God, the clergy and laity might well have a greater role in selecting the bishop of a local church. The observation of Pope Leo I is still valid: "He who is in charge of all, should be chosen by all." The active participation of the faithful in such a procedure is theologically sound and has ample historical justification. It would contribute to the sense of accountability and communion.<sup>17</sup>

*Doctrinal Orthodoxy.* The doctrinal elements in the ecclesial system are rooted in Scripture and Tradition but they are always open to

<sup>15</sup>P. Kittlaus and S. Leas, *Church Fights: Managing Conflicts in the Local Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978); J. M. Miller, *The Contentious Community: Constructive Conflict in the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978); L. McKenzie, *Decision Making in Your Parish: Effective Ways to Consult the Local Church* (West Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1980); L. E. Schaller, *The Decision-Makers: How to Improve the Quality of Decision-Making in the Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974).

<sup>16</sup>Three American bishops have written excellent pastoral letters on the use of collegiality in the local church. Archbishop William Borders (Baltimore), "Collegiality in the Local Church," *Origins* 9, 32 (January 24, 1980), 511-13; Bishop Howard Hubbard (Albany), "Shared Responsibility in the Local Church," *Origins* 8, 39 (March 15, 1979), 615-24; Bishop James Niederges (Nashville), "Governing the Local Church," *Origins* 9, 4 (March 20, 1980), 637-41.

<sup>17</sup>J.-L. Harouel, *Les désignations épiscopales dans le droit contemporain* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1977), and J. J. O'Rourke, "The Office of Bishop and Its Relationship to the Particular Churches and to the United Church," *Studia Canonica* 5 (1971), 227-44.

re-interpretation and development. Yet who decides questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the Church? Traditionally, popes and bishops have handled this delicate task of discernment. At times the advice of Gamaliel (Acts 5:38-39) will be adequate, but, at other times, more direct and formal action may be needed. In doctrinal crises, the first formal move toward clarification and perhaps adjudication should be taken by the local church—the bishop with appropriate theological experts. If the doctrinal issue remains unresolved, then the matter may be taken to the episcopal conference and eventually to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In other words, Roman or papal intervention should be a last and not an initial step. Any mechanisms designed for inquiry into the orthodoxy of theologians should always include adequate provision for due process.<sup>18</sup>

*Cultural Adaptation.* Communication within the local church is affected by cultural differences. According to Vatican II, "The Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community" (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 37) but "takes to herself, insofar as they are good, the ability, resources, and customs of each people" (*Lumen gentium* 13). The issue of legitimate diversity is critical not only in mission countries (e.g., recent papal visit to Africa) but also in the United States (e.g., Black and Hispanic cultures). To what extent can the local church reflect its own cultural experience?<sup>19</sup>

*Ecumenical Action.* In the present divided state of Christianity there is clearly a communication breakdown based on conflicting interpretations of the Christian message. The local church has a vast potential in the quest for reunion. It is through the communication between local Christian churches that the particularity and universality of the Church of Christ are manifested. The local church, by cooperation in faith and service with other churches, helps develop a greater unity within the People of God. Ecumenical workshops and conferences, shared prayer and common efforts in social justice all foster the movement toward a united Church. Local or grass-roots ecumenism manifests concretely the Christian experience.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, communication is an essential element in the life of the local church. The open and ordered exchange of information between the bishop, the clergy, the laity and the religious contributes to the

<sup>18</sup>Several interesting articles on heresy today appeared in *America*, March 1, 1980. The authors are A. Dulles, C. E. Curran, J. M. Cameron, R. A. McCormick, and R. P. McBrien.

<sup>19</sup>H.-W. Gensichen, "Evangelium und Kultur: Neue Variationen über ein altes Thema," *Zeitschrift für Mission* 4 (1978), 197-214, and C. A. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).

<sup>20</sup>E. Lanne, "Pluralism and Unity: The Possibility of a Variety of Typologies Within the Same Ecclesial Allegiance," *One in Christ* 6 (1970), 430-51; D. Popescu, "Local Church and Conciliar Fellowship," *Ecumenical Review* 29 (1977), 265-72; Segretariato Attività Ecumeniche, *Comunità locale ed ecumenismo, Collana Saggi*, No. 15 (Rome: A.V.E., 1973); K. G. Stofft, "The Local Church and the Ecumenical Commission," *Ecumenical Trends* 7 (1978), 152-54; World Council of Churches, *In Each Place: Towards a Fellowship of Local Churches Truly United* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977).

vitality and stability of the Christian community. Moreover, it helps the local church to preach the gospel and to make decisions that best respond to the needs of all. Yet, there remains the problem of determining the precise relationship between the local church and the universal Church. Josef Ernst notes that in the past several patterns have developed that have not preserved this balance. He writes: "Either the universal Church has indulged in absolutism, reducing the self-value of the individual communities, or the local churches have understood the N.T. based pluralism as legitimating a church-dividing isolationism, which rejected all ecclesial overrule as dangerous and improper centralism."<sup>21</sup> In the last several hundred years the Catholic Christian Church has been characterized more by the former than by the latter. A heavily monarchical ecclesiology since Trent did not encourage the development of a theology of the local church. A new approach was evident in Vatican II with its emphasis on the local church, collegiality and pluralism. A sound theory of communication, wisely implemented, can help avoid the twin dangers of absolutism and individualism. It would allow the local church to become, in Cyprian's words, "a people made one in the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> "From the Local Community to the Great Church: Illustrated from the Church Patterns of Philipians and Ephesians," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 6 (1976), 237.

<sup>22</sup> *De dominica oratione* 23 (CSEL, Hartel, III, 1, 285).