

## POPE PAUL VI'S THEOLOGY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

From among the many documents issued by Pope Paul VI, one of the most important regarding the theology of the local church is *Evangelii nuntiandi*. It was issued on December 8, 1975, one year after the 1974 Bishop's Synod. One reason for the writing of this document was the fact that the Synod ended on a somewhat indecisive note regarding the theology of the local church mainly because the bishops of the various regions represented differing views on the local church. This document is important for a number of reasons, the most important being the fact that it contains an explicitly formulated papal statement on the theology of the local church. Though the primary theme of *Evangelii nuntiandi* is the call for evangelization, the pope deals specifically, in addition to other occasional references, with the local church when he discusses the agents of salvation and, though the pope does not use the term, the document indicates that for Paul VI, the local churches are the actualizations of the Church of Christ, here and now. With this definition in mind, we can now examine more closely Paul VI's theology of the local church, as seen in *Evangelii nuntiandi*.

### I. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF *EVANGELII NUNTIANDI*

Paul VI begins the section regarding the agents of evangelization by asserting that evangelization is always an ecclesial action, and he does so in a way that brings the local church to mind (60). This action is present in all the activities of the local Christian community and it is always the action of the entire Church. Therefore, in any specific action, the local and universal Church are linked in a central way. Paul VI stresses the universal aspect of the Church throughout his discussion of the local church. This emphasis may be the result of his desire to unify all the diverse elements in this document. Whatever the motivation, this emphasis is apparent throughout the section. Even in his description of the local church, Paul VI is careful to point out that the Church is not an "irregular federation of local churches which are essentially different from each other" (62), but are "the same Church that is universal in vocation and mission which acquires a varying outward appearance" (62).

### A. Terminology

It is interesting to note here that Paul VI does not use the terminology employed by Vatican II with regard to the local or particular church. At one point, he does state "particular churches, which comprise this or that part of the human race, speaking this or that language" (62), and we notice that the word "part" is used by him in reference to the human race, not the universal Church. We notice also that "particular churches" refers here to what Vatican II would properly call "local churches," that is, national, regional or culturally linked churches. The term most frequently used by Paul VI in this regard is "individual churches," and such terminology can be understood to mean many different things. Although we don't know why he has opted for this terminology, we can only assume that he chose it to avoid participation in the controversy regarding local and particular churches.

### B. What Is the Local Church?

In *Evangelii nuntiandi*, the pope seems to be sensitive to the differing aspects and needs of the local churches due to a variety in cultural, social and economic situations. By the term "local church" he seems to be addressing the church of a particular geographic area and nationality background, rather than using it to mean a diocese or a parish. While the local church is vital because "the Church spread throughout the world would become an abstraction if she did not derive embodiment and life from the local churches" (62), the local church, as was mentioned earlier, is only the particular manifestation of the universal Church among a certain group of people. As such, the characteristics of the local church will have to bear the imprint of the cultural milieu in which it serves the people, without, however, making these differences fundamental to its existence. It is on this point that we can grasp the significance of the local church within the context of *Evangelii nuntiandi*. The Church is basically universal in its character (62, 63, 64); however, in the process of evangelization, the Word must be preached to a variety of people in differing social and cultural settings. The local church, while remaining faithful to the unchanging content of the message, must translate it into a language that will effectively communicate it to that particular group of people. In stating this, Paul VI uses the term "language" to mean the cultural and anthropological dimensions of life, rather than the semantic and literary dimensions (63). While this translation must be undertaken seriously and cautiously, it is a necessary process if evangelization is to be successful.

This fairly positive summary of the role of the local church is followed by a series of warnings of what might result should the tie between the local and universal Church be insufficiently maintained, giving readers the impression that Paul VI is preoccupied with this relationship, resulting more in a statement of warnings than one of positive explanations of what local churches really mean. It is for this reason, in particular, that the document has been criticized by a number of commentators.

The remainder of this section is devoted to a listing and discussion of the various ecclesial roles that are enacted in the process of evangelization. This serves to give us another view of the local church and its relationship to the universal Church. The pope is given the pre-eminent position in the role of teaching and in union with him, the bishops. This would seem to identify the universal Church with doctrinal truth as well as with Rome. Priests and bishops perform the ministry of evangelization for the local church by their preaching, teaching, sacramental ministry and unifying task (68). It is presumably at this level that the "translation" for each local church would take place, while always stressing "that unity of which we are, at different levels, the active, vital instruments" (68). To help achieve this mutual relationship in a constructive manner, the pope discusses the various ministries performed by the laity, in the spirit of the early Church and demanding sufficient formation for the tasks (73). At this point, he ends his direct commentary on the question of the local church, which was basically a description of how the local church functions as an agent of evangelization.

## II. EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

What contribution does *Evangelii nuntiandi* make to an understanding of the local church? In many ways, the theme of the link between the local and the universal Church may be said to pervade the document. The value of this emphasis can be seen in Paul VI's effort to closely link the two, not only theologically but also pastorally, by exploring the role of both in the process of evangelization. Especially valuable is the pope's clear recognition and approval of the local "coloration" of churches, their need for an understanding of the faith in their own cultural "language." The shortcomings of this approach, however, are several.

### *A. Overemphasis of the Universal*

In his concern for unity, the pope often emphasizes the link without detailing the relationship. This causes some ambiguity in matters such as how exactly the local and universal Church may be

defined. Does local mean a cultural, national, diocesan community or all of these? Does universal mean the entire Church founded on the Gospel, the union of local churches, Rome or the hierarchical structure? Just as "evangelization" is used as an all-encompassing term in the document, so are the terms "local" and "universal."

### *B. Concepts in Need of Further Study and Reflection*

Once again, as the result of the pope's concern for unity, the warnings against local communities which may be too separatist tend to exaggerate their negative qualities and diminish the central role that Paul VI admits that they perform. The whole question of the local church seems to take on an air of rebuke. Are local churches meaningless in themselves, merely instruments of the universal dimensions of the Church? If they have so little power of their own, how can they hope to evangelize forcefully? All of the concerns raised by the 1974 Synod of Bishops emerged out of complex questions originally encountered in local situations; Paul VI's treatment in his reflections tends to subordinate these individual concerns to a global view. This overall view serves its unitive function and allows for inspiring phrases, but does it really answer the theological and pastoral questions raised by some local communities themselves, indicating a somewhat different claim in exercising their role than the pope seems to allow in this document? These issues are real and basic, and they should have been treated perhaps with deeper insights and greater dimensional richness.

To summarize, *Evangelii nuntiandi* is an important document for the theology of the local church in two fundamental ways:

1. It presents a basically positive firm link between the local and the universal Church.
2. It shows the importance that local community and personal witness within it have in the process of evangelization, both within the believing local community and its outside world.

The pope's reflections on the second point are perhaps of greater value ultimately for an understanding of the local church than the more thematic first point. The objections raised concerning some aspects of the pope's vision are valuable theological insights and call for further dialoguing and additional insights. Victor J. Pospishil has presented us with an interesting document in this regard, this being his book *Ex Occidente Lex—From the West The Law: The Eastern Catholic Churches Under the Tutelage of the Holy See of Rome* (Carteret, NJ: St. Mary's Religious Action Fund, 1979). This work deserves further study by all those interested in the study of the true nature of the local church.

Pospishil's theological concepts on the local church should be placed in this context and evaluated accordingly.

Pope Paul VI's intention in *Evangelii nuntiandi* was to present a picture of evangelization that is both stirring and unifying; and in this regard he has greatly succeeded. His exposition on the local church has the value of a meditation rather than the tight logic and application of a treatise, and by its appearance as a meditation on the unity of the Church, it establishes for itself an important place in ecclesiology as an issue to reckon with and as a primary means of evangelization.

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SABBAS J. KILIAN, O.F.M.  
*Fordham University*  
*Bronx, NY*