

WORKSHOP: ECUMENICAL DIMENSIONS IN THE WORLD CHURCH

The term "world Church" has currency primarily among Roman Catholic theologians, especially the revered Karl Rahner, who interprets the primary theological significance of the Second Vatican Council as the Roman Catholic Church's "discovery and official realization of itself as a world-Church" (*Theol. Inv.* XX, 78). Rahner defines the character of this ecclesiological landmark in two ways. First, Vatican II gave evidence, even in a rudimentary form, of the transition from a Western Church to a world Church, i.e., a Church truly global in time and space in its teaching, episcopate, liturgy as well as its political consciousness of the world. Second, this sense of the world Church is always *in potentia* and its actualization inevitably involves "a long historical process of coming to be . . . an actualizing which is not completely finished even today."

What offers excitement and hope to this ecclesiological development is the fact that the same vision of the Church has motivated Protestants and Orthodox churches in the modern ecumenical movement. This twentieth century movement is a dynamic concern for the unity and renewal of the whole Church and all creation in Jesus Christ. It represents a transition from a church limited by national, confessional, and cultural boundaries to a Church whose universality is made real by its apostolicity and catholicity. This universality, expressed both in the ecumenical movement's vision and praxis, is experienced in inner wholeness of the Church's existence in Christ, in the common sharing of faith among Christians in all places and in every age, and a unity with diversity which is made known in our faith, worship, ministry, mission, and evangelical life.

Within the World Council of Churches, long recognized as a privileged instrument of the ecumenical movement, two dramatic signs of the world Church *in potentia* can be seen: the emergence of an unprecedented theological convergence as an expression of visible church unity and the reconceptualization of the Church's unity in the wider, cosmological context of the human community.

1. The world Church has recently been offered a theological convergence which could contribute toward the reconciliation of the ancient divisions and controversies which have long divided the churches. The most celebrated representation of the historic convergence is the World Council of Churches' text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), which after 55 years of official and responsible work was accepted by the theologians of the Faith and Order Commission in session at Lima, Peru, in January, 1982, and sent to the churches for their responses and eventual reception. This convergence text was celebrated by the so-called Lima

Liturgy at the WCC's Assembly at Vancouver. Two realities make BEM so promising.

First, it was debated, drafted, and shaped by theologians who officially represented Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic churches. In this sense Faith and Order constitutes what the Orthodox theologian Nikos Nissiotis calls "the most comprehensive theological and ecclesiastical forum in Christendom." Second, BEM, while highly touted and significant, witnesses to the same substantial theological convergence which is being claimed in other ecumenical frontiers, namely by various church union negotiations and by certain international bilateral dialogues. For example, the "emerging theological consensus" proposed in 1984 by the nine-church Consultation on Church Union is in primary agreement with BEM. So too the Anglican-Roman Catholic (ARCIC), the Lutheran-Roman Catholic, and the Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic international dialogues share the same images of the Church's ministry and sacramental life, although a number of unreconciled issues remain. The point is that despite differences of nuance these three ecumenical approaches (multilateral convergence, bilateral dialogue, church union negotiation) are witnessing to the same vision of the Church and each represents essentially the same consensus upon the apostolic faith. Such can only be interpreted as a sign of the world Church.

The crux of this global theological convergence, however, lies not only in agreements among theologians about baptism, the eucharist, and ministry. And certainly the anticipated shared life among Christians is not merely the product of a perfect theological text. The forthcoming primary spiritual discipline required is the "reception" of this or any ecumenically produced text. The WCC asks the churches, and this is its most radical request, to "receive" officially the BEM text and to use it as a carrier of communion. Reception in this sense means (1) recognizing in this text the apostolic faith of the Church down through the ages and (2) using this theological consensus to recognize the Lord's Body in those other churches which receive it. In the terms envisioned, reception is not tied only to a document and its juridical definition. It is a long-term process which involves the churches' worship, education, witness, service and communication. Reception in this manner also involves the whole people of God — bishops, clergy, and laity; men and women; those who represent all the diversities of the Church.

2. The second major development toward the world Church lies in the conceptualization of the unity of the Church in the context of the unity and renewal of human community. This paradigm locates the ecumenical problem not only in the context of divided churches but in the context of a divided society and world. Such a definition has implications for the way we understand our divisions as well as the nature of the unity we seek. The unity of the Church and the renewal of human community makes obvious that what divides God's people are not only the divisive theological issues of the past, e.g., baptism, the presence of Christ in the eucharist, episcopacy and papacy. Other issues which divide the Church and

divide the human community are nationalism, racism, sexism, institutionalism, *et al.* The Church's unity involves us in the overcoming of these forms of brokenness and in the pursuit of the unity in which those divisions are also transcended. In this sense the Church is a "sign and sacrament" to the world of its given unity made real in God's creation and in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC (1968) and Vatican II claimed this vision of the ecumenical task, which in reality is a new consciousness of the world Church.

What is critical to see is that the theological convergence and the understanding of the unity of the Church as a sign of the unity and renewal of humankind are powerfully interrelated in God's plan. These cannot be interpreted as separate aspects or visions of the ecumenical task. Certainly a divided and alienated world gives substance as well as context in which we receive the life-giving gifts of baptism, eucharist, and ministry; and our theological convergence on the sacraments and ministry speak of a sacramentally caring servanthood which defines the Church in the world. Through both developments we are called to be signs of healing for a redeemed, renewed and united human community.

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