

WORKSHOP: BASIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES; THE PROBLEM OF UNITY AND PLURALISM IN THE WORLD CHURCH

The workshop centered around the changes implicit in the shift in language and metaphor when one discusses theologically "world Church" and not the term "Church universal," which was used commonly before Vatican II.

The argument presented by the session leaders was threefold: (1) that world Church language implies a paradox, for the understanding of Church implied by it heightens awareness of the existence of and the radical pluralism in local churches; (2) that when one begins to take account of this pluralism, immediately one is driven to understand that the creation of true local churches is an "art" (*poiesis*) more than a technique which can follow a universal program (such as that found in any conceivable code of ecclesiastical law); and (3) that the experience of the Brazilian Catholic Church with basic Christian communities (*comunidades eclesiais de base*) provides an interesting and important test case for seeing what happens when priority is given to local communities.

When the primary focus of discussion and understanding of the Church was on the "Church universal" there is no question but that there was a single normative pattern understood as valid for any local Roman Catholic Church throughout the world. It might be changed in minor ways in accord with climatic conditions and culture, but the basic, western and Roman shape of the Church was understood as established by Christ and mandatory throughout the world. The shift in understanding today capsulized in the world Church terminology was brought to many people's attention first of all by the Second Vatican Council where non-Euro-Americans were prominently evident. Walbert Buhlmann's *The Coming of the Third Church*¹ has chronicled that development well. His book might well be termed a phenomenological study of this reality. More recently, Karl Rahner has offered a theological interpretation of this reality and made us aware of the far-reaching consequences of the emergence of the world Church.²

In the workshop it was suggested that Whitehead's observations on the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" were useful for illustrating the common fallacy in Church universal programs for imagining how international ecclesial life ought to be organized.³ Just as it is a mistake

¹ Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977.

² Rahner's "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council," *Theological Investigations XX* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) has become the locus classicus for the discussion of this question.

³ See A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 11.

to believe that abstractions are concretely real (for only "actual entities" can act), so it is important to realize that the Church universal has reality only as a communion of local churches, and can act only in and through them. Local churches together *are* the world Church. Concrete bonds on common faith, shared values, and feelings of unity are the glue that holds them together. But what is held together are very disparate groups of peoples. What constitutes their unity is not immediately apparent to those who have been trained to think of the Church as a universal body with a single head. World Church thinking brings with it, then, a whole train of consequences, chief among which is the need to reconstrue what it means to create a local church, which is the basic constituent in the reality called "world Church."

While Church universal language in ecclesiastical documents prior to the Second Vatican Council implied the value of uniformity throughout the world, world Church language implies the value of cultural relativity. Whereas the context was of accidental value in the earlier images of the Church, contextuality is considered an essential dimension of world Church thinking. Christology and ecclesiology were reciprocals in the traditional thinking, with the sacramental system delivering at the local level the fruits of Christ's universally relevant saving actions. Christology and ecclesiology are more problematic in the newer images, for there is an awareness implicit in world Church thinking that redemption in the concrete is essentially conditioned by the specific and culturally conditioned forms of evil which are overcome. The boundaries between immanent human agency and transcendent divine agency become blurred, and the theologian of the world Church becomes nervous about making universal statements. Liberation comes to be thought of less as the enjoyment of redemptive fruits after death and more as an activity in which God and humans cooperate to renew the earth. Ecclesial life in the world Church, in other words, wears a local, contextual face.

The second major task of the workshop was to explore whether the metaphor of art or *poiesis* were more apt than *praxis* to illuminate what local churches are and are about. This was the basic thesis, and it was suggested that not only is the creation of a local church itself a work of art, but also that the "work" of the community on its environment and in its social commitment was better construed as a production of a work of art than as "doing something."

The central part of the argument follows from the insight that the formation of communities is not something merely technical. There is a complex pattern of activity whereby human communities are the reflection of an inner spirit that expresses the genius and artistic creativity of a people. Just as works of art in forms such as sculpture and music are culturally normed, so the formation of communities is both art and culturally normed. Just as the Church recognizes that the music and Church architecture of one region are not appropriate in another, so too must community-building and finding of apt forms of fellowship for ecclesial life be understood as intrinsically normed by culture.

World Church ecclesiology, it was argued, would benefit from realizing that Church-building is an exercise in social aesthetics: the creation of a community centered on the dangerous memory of Jesus, living out life inspired by him and his creative spirit in ways appropriate in a given cultural milieu. Contrariwise, to imagine that central authority can dictate for other areas of the world, for example in areas such as styles of leadership (by determining the sex and marital status of the ordained) is to show that one considers Church-building to be a technical enterprise rather than an art form. Just as it would be inappropriate and not very effective for Julius II to have tried to direct Michelangelo's brush strokes in the Sistine Chapel, so it is neither very appropriate or effective for a contemporary pope to decide things for local communities in New Jersey or Papua New Guinea. Seeing that world Church implies a great deal of local autonomy has, therefore, real consequences. Understanding the creation of true local churches to be works of ecclesial artisans brings with it still more.

Important to the workshop was the example of the Brazilian church as a church which had worked hard at implementing basic Vatican II insights on the priority of the base community, and doing so in accord with a fundamental Brazilian feeling for nature and the organic character of life, human communities and social process.

Brazil's is the largest Catholic Church in the world, and also — along with that of the United States — one of the most heterogeneous churches within Catholicism. It was argued that Brazil's way of being Christian was one which recognized the priority of the *poiesis* of creating a community, which *also* acts, over the *praxis* of doing specific liberative things which come to be thought of as the Church's concrete program for establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Brazilian basic Christian communities inspire the Church's members not only to manifesting an historical identity and mission, but also to living creatively and peacefully in a pluralistic situation. They are little impressed by the grim-faced moral earnestness of single-issue ideologues, either ecclesial or political.

Brazil has always been more a mosaic than a melting pot, and this is so in the Church as well as in civil society. This has made it an enigma. People are often not sure where Brazil's Catholics are coming from and going to, perhaps because they are collectively coming from and going to just about everywhere. But it remains a fact that in the changes which have taken place in Brazil since the Second Vatican Council, the experience of pluralism has made Brazilians suspicious of single-issue attempts to define narrowly and definitively the nature and mission of the Church. Without wishing to fall into the sin of making false heroes of Brazil's bishops, it remains a fact that they have been successful at being men of the people and in their persons bringing unity to widely divergent communities within the Church.

Discussion at the workshop centered on the usefulness of *poiesis* as a metaphor which illustrates the priority of the spiritual without letting spirituality degenerate into ethereal emptiness. It was observed that an

acceptance of this basic understanding of both the creation of a Church and of the nature of its work in the world could well overcome many of the fruitless dichotomies that today make Church life so arid.

Recognizing the role of creativity in producing a "true" Church, where the canon of truth is seen to be more than mere conceptual or credal orthodoxy could be important. The problem of unity and pluralism in the world Church would then be formulated in a more useful manner: one which would respect the art forms reflected in a given local church. Unity would be seen in its more proper "religious" dress as well: as flowing from felt bonds of unity in heart, mind and spirit, not from coercive attempts to make everyone march to the same drummer's beat.

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