

## SEMINAR ON ECCLESIOLOGY

The theme of the seminar in 1984 was "Pluralism in the Church." The seminar first met on Thursday, June 14 to discuss "Pluralism in Church Polity" with Peter Chirico as moderator. This session began with a short paper by David Stagaman. Stagaman found three features common among the articles<sup>1</sup> which the group was asked to read in preparation for this session. First, all three authors agreed that the Church was actually a twofold reality: it was an *idée directrice*, a shared set of common values; it was also a number of shared practices which give rise to organization. Secondly, church polity is in need of extensive restructuring; here the controlling image should be the pilgrim church. Finally, ecumenical concerns were paramount for all three authors; and, in this respect, Roman Catholics bear a peculiar burden: the claims and practices of the church of Rome. The principle of subsidiarity needs to be applied in Roman practice.

The discussion began by noting that bishops and theologians have to face reality. They are deemed increasingly irrelevant by many of the laity, who often do not care what the clergy think and have decided to act according to the dictates of their own consciences. The burden of proof is now on teachers in the Church to prove that they speak in the name of the Spirit. Increasing numbers of people today believe selectively in the reality of the Church.

In the past year the exercise of the long arm of Rome (especially in the matter of the removal of *imprimaturs*) has become an ever greater concern. Outside the Roman Catholic Church, Rome is perceived as arbitrary. Inside, Rome is seen as ignoring and overriding the local church, even undermining the authority of the local ordinary. One wonders whether the mentality of Roman officials has been at all altered by Vatican II. Only conservative groups and newspapers seem to be granted a hearing there. Roman officials appear to be overly protective (trying to ward off all vagaries in the area of faith) rather than open-ended (hoping to deepen the appropriation of the faith by the people). Dissent which was taken for granted at Vatican II now is termed disloyal; only subservience is deemed acceptable. All of this makes one wonder whether the change which has been extensive in many areas of church life is only a veneer when it comes to church polity.

<sup>1</sup> The readings for the first session were: James Coriden, "Authority and Freedom in the Coming Ecumenical Church," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12 (1975), 315-334; Michael Fahey, "Continuity in the Church and Structural Changes," *Theological Studies* 35 (1974), 415-440; Patrick Granfield, "The Church as Institution: A Reformulated Model," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16 (1979), 425-447.

The group did suggest some remedies to the present situation. First, we need to use what opportunities are afforded us by present structures lest we surrender power in the Church to the wrong people. We lose any chance at influence if we dissociate ourselves. It is important to be non-adversarial and to try to understand how *they* see things. Secondly, it is necessary to propound alternative visions of church polity and to recover or create church structures which bring better balance and embody the visions of post-Vatican II ecclesiologies. Especially, we have to develop processes for dealing with conflict situations at the level of the local church. Thirdly, there was much sentiment for the CTSA to take a corporate stand to protect teachers of theology lest, in the future, only professors at secular universities are able to survive. Finally, it was noted that reform in the Church takes time and requires patience. In this process, the instinct for domination in the Church needs to be studied and desacralized.

Throughout the discussion, it was reiterated that we have to keep the spiritual dimension of the Church before us. We are aiming at a spiritual transformation of people, not just a change in power relationships. Talk of power risks losing sight of this dimension. We need to remember that the Church is a community of faith, hope, and charity. We ought to ask ourselves continually: where is Christ acting now in the Church? What is the mission that Christ is entrusting to us at the present moment?

The second session of Friday, June 15 was devoted to "*Communio Ecclesiarum: The Reunion of the Separated Churches.*" The session was moderated by Roger McGrath, and it began with a short paper by Peter Chirico.<sup>2</sup> The principal portion of Chirico's paper concerned a proposed heuristic structure for dealing with pluralism and unity. First of all, faith always occurs as a concrete reality; it takes place in historical, changing conditions, and hence is only a partial growing towards fullness in Christ. It is inevitably pluralist. Pluralism arises in the Church because (1) local communities have different customs, make use of different symbols, and face different challenges; and (2) communities over time develop in differing ways and at differing speeds. The result is separate understandings of the faith and diverse structures. Only constant dialogue and persistent crossing over into the faith experiences of others enables us to discern what is universal and normative for our common faith, and what is error. Pluralism degenerates into separation when such dialogue and cross-over fail. The one Church of the future will be a group of pluralistic churches committed to contemporizing and structuring the one faith in their own unique circumstances and permitting that one faith and its expressions to challenge and be challenged by the other churches. There

<sup>2</sup> The readings for the second session were: Peter Chirico, "Dogmatic Definitions as Ecumenical Obstacles," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 14 (1977), 51-65; Joseph Komonchak, "The Church Universal as the Communion of Local Churches," *Where Does the Church Stand? (Concilium 146; New York: Seabury, 1981), 30-35; Karl Rahner, "The One Church and Many Churches," and "Is Church Union Dogmatically Possible?" *Theological Investigations XVII (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 183-196 and 197-214.**

will always be "ragged edges," and perfect unity will never come to be. In this situation, the role of the papacy will be to orchestrate the ceaseless efforts of the churches to come together.

At the outset of the discussion, two issues were raised. First of all, the Rahner articles seem bound to the ecumenical context in Germany where there are, for all purposes, only two churches to be considered. The context in the U.S. is much more complex, and this complexity needs to be taken seriously. Secondly, not all the discussants agreed with Chirico that pluralism was inevitable. Some doubted whether it was willed by God, and felt it was more likely the result of human sinfulness and blindness.

The reconciliation of the churches is more than a matter of mutual recognition of ministries; that is too clerical a view of reunion. Communion in faith must be primary. And we need to take account how that faith is expressed in worship and ethical practices. In the latter case, there may be more obstacles to reunion than Rahner envisages, e.g. on the issue of abortion. In ecumenical discussion, we constantly have to determine what do we mean by communion and what is legitimate diversity. Here our separated brethren express a desire for guarantees that diversity will not be abrogated in the ecumenical Church; they are genuinely afraid of being swallowed up by the Roman Catholic Church. Here we might look to the unity with pluralism which we already have in the Catholic Church as a clue to how diversity might exist in the great ecumenical Church. What are the basis for and generative principles of our communion with other Catholics from whom we differ greatly? What are the priorities whereby we are able to live with and be patient of certain problems, yet are enraged by others? If we attend more closely to this communion and these priorities, we might better be able to articulate the bonds of unity of a universal Church which is a communion of local churches.

It was noted that the reunion of churches is not just an affair of intellectual consensus; it will also involve practices. And practices always lead to an analysis of the relationship between faith and culture. Here Roman Catholicism has to acknowledge how much of its practice is the product of a patriarchal culture. As a result, we are prevented from living a communion ecclesiology. Only in a culture and a church where men and women are equal will we overcome this obstacle.

Once we realize that the Roman Catholic Church is already a communion where people differ, we can envision how close we might be to union with the Anglican and Lutheran communions. Here we would agree with Rahner that the reasons for separation are not theological. In fact shared worship has already created a sense of an ecumenical Church. We may need to remember here that catholicity admits of degrees such that apostolic succession in another church might approximate the ideal in a manner different from our own. Finally, ecumenical dialogue should teach us a thing or two, e.g., on divorce and remarriage.

Ecumenical dialogue with the Pentecostal and fundamentalist churches

is more problematic. We need to remember that we have a penchant for **talking to people with whom it is easy for us to converse.** The difficulties we have with Christians outside the mainline Protestant churches might very well serve to make us more conscious of another facet of our catholic experience: we may be more willing to engage in dialogue with our separated brethren in mainline churches than with the extremes in our own church. Dialogue with those extremes might be more important to our hope for eventual reunion of the churches than we normally think.

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