

SEMINAR ON ECCLESIOLOGY

The two sessions of the Ecclesiology Seminar had a common overall title: "Reception and Current Developments." Thomas Rausch first offered some general facts and ideas about reception in theology and church history, and then Jeffrey Gros illustrated these points with some specific material on the reception of ecumenical documents, especially in the Roman Catholic Church.

In the first session, on Wednesday evening, 10 June (a session attended by 31 people), Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., of Loyola Marymount University of Los Angeles, spoke on "Reception, Authority and the Local Church." He noted as the basic meaning of reception as a theological concept that it is "the process through which an ecclesiastical community incorporates into its own life a particular decision, teaching or practice." Today there are two ways in which the term tends to be used. The "classical" or historical sense refers to the acceptance by local churches of some particular church decision, such as that of a council. A more contemporary use of the term, in ecumenical discussion, refers to the acceptance by one church of a theological consensus arrived at with another church, and ultimately the recognition of the other church's faith and ecclesial life as authentically Christian.

Believing that both the classical and the ecumenical concepts of reception have an ongoing validity, Rausch suggested that reception, as a process involving the faith of the whole believing community, cannot be reduced simply to a juridical determination by church authority. However, the ecclesial office-holders do have an essential role to play in the public articulation of the faith of the church.

The historical reality of reception in the ecclesiology of the first millennium, which understood the church catholic as a communion of churches, holds some lessons for present-day tensions between Rome and local churches. It would be helpful to recover a sense of the church in the United States as a regional church in a communion of churches.

Dwelling more on the ecumenical dimension, he said that reception should not be considered as simply a matter of doctrinal formulations, because it involves the recognition of a common faith and ecclesial life. Experience may show that another church's worship emerges from a really common faith sustained in that church's living tradition. But the true norm for receiving a practice or doctrinal formulation is not agreement with one's own ecclesial position but rather agreement with the authentic apostolic tradition.

The experience of Christians who have lived in ecumenical communities can be of special value, for they, including Roman Catholics, may find that they can recognize the Lord's presence in each other's Eucharists before the approbation of church office-holders. The latter should consider whether this may be not the

collapse of discipline but a part of a process of reception. The discussion period ranged rather widely over both the theological and the historical points made by Rausch.

In the second session on Friday, 12 June (a meeting attended by 29 persons), Jeffrey Gros, F.S.C., Director of the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches, gave a presentation entitled, "Reception of Ecumenical Documents and the Development of Roman Catholic Ecclesiology." He focused on three examples of Catholic response to events in the ecumenical movement, the latter two specifically concerning ecumenical documents.

He prefaced this by noting some indicators of "irreversible institutional commitments" by the Catholic Church since Vatican II "to the structures of ecumenical life." Ranging from things said in the revised Code of canon law to Catholic Church presence in 34 national and regional councils of churches, these show an ecumenical commitment that concerns every aspect of Roman Catholic ecclesiology.

Gros distinguished "reception," which he said was well defined by Thomas Rausch, from "response" and "reaction." "Response" is some juridical action of a church making public its judgment, as of a certain time, about an ecumenical document according to its own ecclesiological self-understanding. "Reaction" is less formal, and may be the view of individual theologians or groups, ecumenical agencies, or particular church authorities such as dioceses. All these reactions contribute to the response and ultimately the reception (or non-reception) of the ideas of the document in question.

Gros' first example of a response process was the Vatican's decision in 1972 not to take up membership in the World Council of Churches. Many think that this decision, excluding from consultation any such entities as the bishops' conferences and the Catholic Secretariat for Christian Unity, missed an opportunity for ecumenical education which such consultation and dialogue could have produced.

In a second example, when the ARCIC Final Report was nearing completion in 1982, the Vatican asked the bishops' conferences to prepare responses which the Vatican would assemble for publication in 1988. When ARCIC was issued, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) issued some comments of a rather negative nature. But this enabled the bishops' conferences to take account of these comments and make much more positive and more ecumenically-informed responses to the document. The spirit of dialogue, absent in the CDF statement, but engaged in by the conferences and the Unity Secretariat, actually produced some degree of "reception" of the document.

The third example, the World Council BEM statement of 1982, is still very much in process. Since it is a multilateral convergence text (contrast the "substantial agreement" of ARCIC) the process of response is more complex. Informal theological reactions have been important in informing and stimulating the churches' responses. The Vatican immediately sent the document to the bishops' conferences for responses, and indications are that there will be a more dialogue-informed response from the Roman Catholic Church this time.

Gros concluded by noting some ways in which the renewal in our ecclesiological thinking, still needed if we are to achieve the Christian growth inspired by

Vatican II, has been making some progress through these ecumenical endeavors. The U.S. Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA) has shown more leadership and produced more results than probably were envisioned by its cautious founders.

Among numerous items in the discussion period, Gros said that it is useful to note responses of official agencies such as the CDF because they provide reference points for discussion of Catholic Church positions. He answered questions on the differences of Catholic and Protestant ecumenical attitudes in various regions of the world, and dwelt on what he felt was the genuine significance of Cardinal Willebrand's recent statement about the phrase "subsists in" in *Lumen Gentium*.

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