DIVERSITY, COMMUNION, AND CATHOLICITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Many Christians, even theologians, have an image of early Christianity as simple, joyous, homogeneous and unstructured. According to that view, the early church has little to offer us in understanding or solving modern problems of pluralism and inculturation. My purpose here is to direct our attention to the true state of affairs, and put our present concern with inculturation and catholicity into historical perspective.

First let me tell you a story about Abba Moses, one of the "desert fathers." Abba Moses was a black former slave, who had turned to God from a life as a robber.

> It was said of Abba Moses that he was ordained and the ephod placed upon him. The archbishop said to him, "See, Abba Moses, now you are entirely white." The old man said to him, "It is true of the outside, lord and father—if only also the inside." Wishing to test him, the archbishop said to the priests, "When Abba Moses comes into the sanctuary, drive him out, and go with him to hear what he says." So the old man came in and they covered him with abuse, and drove him out, saying, "Outside, black man!" Going out, he said to himself, "They have acted rightly concerning you, for your skin is as black as ashes. You are not a man, so why should you be allowed to meet men."[1]

In another similar saying, it is hard to tell whether Abba Moses was insulted as being black, or as being mistaken for an Ethiopian:

> Another day when a council was being held in Scetis, the fathers treated Moses with contempt in order to test him, saying, "Why does this Ethiopian come among us?" When he heard this he kept silence. When the council was dismissed, they said to him, "Abba, did that not grieve you at all?" He said to them, "I was grieved, but I kept silence."[2]

Whatever the insult was about, we can see that the early church was not monochrome, nor did it exist in some paradisal situation free from racial discrimination.

This paper has three theses: (1) The early church was not a single universe of discourse, but rather encompassed many subcultures, and this plurality was characterized by the same kinds of incomprehension, mistrust, and competition which are familiar to us from the modern world. (2) Unity was assured in this plurality,

---

[1]*The Desert Christian. Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (New York: Macmillan, 1980) 139. I have modified her translation, replacing "but what about Him who sees" with "if only also."

[2]Moses, ibid., 3. *Aithiops,* which Ward renders as "black man," I have translated as "Ethiopian."

not by doctrinal statements and not by legal canons, but by the personal decisions of bishops to be in communion with each other. (3) The ultimate basis of this communion was eschatological, the first-fruits of communion with the risen Jesus. I shall close by suggesting some implications for the church today.

The *Letter to Diognetus* of about the year 200, in a deservedly famous passage, forthrightly asserts the cultural variety of Christianity:

> For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life. . . . Yet, although they live in Greek and barbarian cities alike, as each man's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the country in clothing and food and other matters of daily living, at the same time they give proof of the remarkable and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth.[3]

Let us briefly survey the types of variety one encounters among the early Christians. Of course my own studies have been mainly among the Greek fathers, and a specialist in the Latins or in oriental languages would be able to give us a different perspective. Unfortunately also the documentary evidence almost never allows women or children to speak directly, and the worlds of men and women were far more separate in the Roman Empire than they are in our culture. Finally, our sources tend to reflect urban culture, which was very distinct from that of surrounding rural areas, villages and towns.[4] Therefore the range of cultural variety was greater, not less, than the following examples suggest.

A first and very significant area of difference was language. The predominance of Greek in our surviving documents from the first 150 years of Christianity masks a polyglot situation. There were probably Syriac-speaking Christians by the late first or early second century, in the kingdoms of Adiabene and Osrhoene.[5] We are poorly informed about that Syriac-speaking church, because our chief histor-

---

[3]*Diog.* 5:1-2, 4-5, trans. Eugene Fairweather, in Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 216-17.

[4]This is part of the thesis of Peter Brown, "Town, Village, and Holy Man: The Case of Syria," *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) 153-65 (= D. M. Pippidi, ed., *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien* [Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976] 213-20) esp. 155-56: "Normal contact with the village took the form of a strictly delimited infringement of its isolation in the interest of a double constraint: the collection of rent and of taxes. The villagers' side of the picture is less firmly documented; but we can deduce an equally coherent attitude—the town lay beyond the horizon of the village.

"This gap dwarfs those other elements of resistance to the classical culture associated by most scholars with the town. Barriers of language, of class, of non-participation in classical culture are peripheral to it. . . . That a villager spoke Syriac rather than Greek, that in the course of the sixth century he followed the orthodoxy of Severus of Antioch rather than the 'prevarication' of the Council of Chalcedon matters little compared with the value system in which he was encased. This value system, being the product of the day-to-day commitments of a lifetime, and not the issues which bulk large in our history textbooks, are what made the inhabitant of the village different from the townsman."

[5]A convenient brief account can be found in Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) 5-8.

ical source for the pre-Constantinian church, Eusebius of Caesarea, had no Syriac sources at his disposal or could not read them, or both.[6] Persia had numerous Christian communities by the third century.[7] In Gaul at the end of the second century, Irenaeus protests that he has to be trilingual in his congregation, where Greek, Latin, and Celtic are all in use.[8] While the beginnings of Christianity in Egypt have long been obscure to historians, there is good evidence for believing that it had spread from Alexandria into the Coptic-speaking hinterland by the mid-third century.[9] Our church histories place so much emphasis on the conversion of the Emperor Constantine that we easily forget that Armenia was the first officially Christian nation; the Armenians made do with Greek and Syriac Christian texts until they evolved a written form for their own language.[10] Ethiopia, India, and the kingdom of Georgia in the Caucasus mountains had Christian communities by the end of the fourth century, and Bishop Ulphilas had not only taken the gospel to the Goths but had translated much of the bible into Gothic.

Let us pause here to note two sidelights to our convention theme. First, Ulphilas and Frumentius, the men who are credited with evangelizing the Goths and Ethiopians, and Nina, the woman who converted the Georgians, did not come as conquerors or prestigious visitors; they lived as captives among those nations and acquired their language and ways from below. Second, most people today think of Christianity as a European religion. How did that impression arise, in view of the cultural diversity we have just described? First, communication between the Greco-Roman churches and the oriental churches was impaired by the divisive christological disputes which followed the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth and sixth centuries, and then the rise of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries surrounded Europe on the east and south with a political border and made the already tenuous contacts between Christians of differing cultures even harder to sustain.

---

[6]His dependence on translations shows in *h.e.* 1,13,5; 4,30,1. For further limitations on his perspective, see T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambride: Harvard University Press, 1981) 142-43.

[7]Eusebius, *praep. evang.* 6,10. I owe this reference to Metzger, *Early Versions*, 275.

[8]Irenaeus, *haer.* 1, praef.: "You will not expect from me, a resident among the Celts, and mostly accustomed to a barbarous language. . . . '' The polyglot character of that Gallic church is confirmed by the Acts of the Martyrs of Lyon and Vienne, in Eusebius, *h.e.* 5, 1-4, which is a letter in Greek sent by the martyr church back to their friends in Asia and Phrygia. The letter notes when martyrs replied to their interrogators or to the crowd in Latin, which makes one wonder whether part of the crowd's hostility may not have been based on hostility to immigrants.

[9]Colin H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979) 66-67. Roberts's investigation of second- and third-century papyri undermines the theory that gnostic Christianity preceded orthodoxy in Egypt, or at least among the Copts, which was proposed by Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 44-60, 170-72, and confidently summarized on 237: "In Egypt the environmental conditions for the new religion were such that its initial development basically took a form that appeared to the later church to be heresy." See now Birger A. Pearson, "Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations," *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 132-59.

[10]Metzger, *Early Versions*, 153-57.

Difficulties of language were felt clear to the top of the church. Anyone who reads the acta of the ecumenical councils can hardly help but be struck by how few Western bishops were present at them, and how even the legates of the bishop of Rome, despite their evident prestige, often seemed to stay on the fringe of the debates. This was sometimes due to the legates' inability or unwillingness to participate except through an interpreter. Ignorance of Greek in the Roman church probably also skewed the treatment of doctrinal issues in 430 when both Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria lobbied for Roman support in their dispute with each other; the canny Cyril gained an advantage by providing Rome with excerpts of Nestorian teaching translated into Latin, while the case made by Nestorius, who sent only Greek texts, went practically unheard.[11]

Differences of dialect and ethnicity within the Greco-Roman sphere also created rifts. Phrygians were widely despised, a phenomenon which was used against Montanism.[12] When the Emperor Zeno tried in vain to reunite the churches separated by the Council of Chalcedon, he was hindered by Constantinople's dislike of men from his homeland of Isauria.[13] Even Gregory Nazianzen, one of the great Greek stylists among the Fathers, was self-conscious about his accent when he preached in Constantinople.[14] In the West, the Donatist schism is thought by some to have reflected African resistance to Roman overlordship.[15] The Priscillianist movement in Spain, which led to the first execution of a Christian heretic by a Christian government, also had nationalistic aspects.[16]

Cultural differences did not end with matters of race, language, and nationalism. There were also diversities of liturgy and theology. In the second century the churches of Asia clung to the practice of celebrating Easter on the 14th Nisan, at the time of the Jewish Passover, even when it did not fall on a Sunday. The bishop of Rome, Victor, after polling the churches in the Roman Empire and Osrhoene to see when they celebrated the feast of Easter,

> attempted at one stroke to cut off from the common unity all the Asian dioceses, together with the neighbouring churches, on the ground of heterodoxy, and pilloried them in letters in which he announced the total excommunication of all his fellow-Christians there. But this was not to the taste of all the bishops: they replied

---

[11]Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2nd rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975) 1:467; see also 472: "Celestine and the Synod of Rome are unable to realize adequately the christological problems raised by Nestorius."

[12]P. de Labriolle, *La crise montaniste* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913) 4, gives many classical references. I owe this information to Dr. Sheila McGinn-Moorer.

[13]Pauline Allen, *Evagrius Scholasticus the Church Historian* (Leuven: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1981) 121-22.

[14]Gregory Nazianzen, *or.* 36,1.

[15]W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), gave an important impetus to the study of this question.

[16]José M. Blázquez, "Rechazo y asimilación de la cultura romana en Hispania (Siglos IV y V)," in D. M. Pippidi, ed., *Assimilation et résistance à la culture gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976) 83-84.

with a request that he would turn his mind to the things that make for peace and for unity and love towards his neighbours.[17]

In the third century we know of other disputes involving local traditions and cultures. When the churches of Africa and Rome divided on whether to baptize converted heretics, they both claimed time-honored local tradition as they put their case to other bishops as far away as Cappadocia and Egypt.[18] In Rome itself there was a dispute about whether the church could recognize free Roman women's marriages to slaves as legitimate, contrary to Roman civil law.[19]

In short, cultural uniformity never existed in the Christian movement. In every place to which the gospel spread, local language, culture, and problems gave rise to original expressions of Christian faith, and the differences in all these areas posed challenges to the unity of the church. But someone may want to distinguish between differences of doctrine and discipline and "mere" cultural differences. I would reply by asking, How does one distinguish between cultural differences and differences of doctrine and discipline?[20] Is not that precisely the kind of issue involved in inculturation? Transfer the question to the modern missionary era and the answer may be clearer. Faith issues and cultural variations seldom sort themselves out easily, and even where they do, the real reasons for conflict between faith and some element of a culture often turn out to be quite different from what people originally supposed. In the meantime, however, churches must make the practical decisions as to what are the boundaries of the legitimate expression of Christian faith, and whether the differences are tolerable or not.

The second part of this paper deals with how early Christians dealt with such challenges. The crucial element was not canon law or theology. Of course the settling of canonical questions was a regular requirement of church life, and many church councils, major as well as minor, devoted substantial time to canonical regulations. But when canonical struggles issued in a rupture of church unity, the decision that counted was the decision of the parties to maintain or break com-

---

[17]Eusebius of Caesarea, *h.e.* 5,23-25, in the translation by G. A. Williamson, *Eusebius. The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975). John Helgeland has made the plausible suggestion that the bishop of Rome's assumption of responsibility for the day when Easter would be celebrated may have had something to do with the fact that the feasts of the Roman religious calendar were centrally decreed for the entire Roman army; for background, see his "Time and Space: Christian and Roman," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 11,23,2 (New York: 1979) 1285-1304. Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985) 15-19, discusses various other ramifications of the Easter question.

[18]W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 354-57. Firmilian of Cappadocia's views are preserved among Cyprian's letters as *ep.* 75; Eusebius, *h.e.* 7,9 gives us the nuanced and touching response of Dionysius of Alexandria.

[19]For this interpretation of the charge of immorality which Hippolytus levied against bishop Callistus, see Henneke Gülzow, "Kallist von Rom," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentische Wissenschaft* 58 (1967): 119-21.

[20]See the classic article by A. H. M. Jones, "Were Ancient Heresies National or Social Movements in Disguise?" *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s 10 (1959): 280-97, republished as a pamphlet, *Were Ancient Heresies Disguised Social Movements?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

munion. I also do not mean to deny the significant role played by theologians and theological factors in church decisions concerning communion or schism. A striking example was discovered in 1941 in a papyrus document which contains the minutes of a discussion between Origen and a group of Arabian bishops. They had called in Origen as a theological expert to question one of the bishops, Heraclides, and determine whether or not he was a heretic. Origen gave Heraclides a clean bill of health; otherwise presumably the bishop would have been in trouble.[21] But doctrinal orthodoxy was no guarantee of communion, and communion could include bishops who had doctrinal differences with each other.

The fact that Christians are united in a common faith has led to the widespread and natural assumption that the basis of Christian unity is a common *creed*. In the casual shorthand of Christian conversation, in many different languages, "faith" and "creed" are interchangeable, even though more careful speech makes a distinction between the faith and the symbol of faith. There was no haste to produce a fixed formula in early Christianity. The "rule of faith" was known, and was often appealed to, but it was not a fixed formula.[22] As baptismal creeds took shape, strenuous efforts contrived to assign to each apostle a fragment of their contents,[23] and a sixth or seventh century Latin creed was propelled by this common assumption and desire into being called "the Apostles' Creed."[24] But the early church did not place an ultimate value upon verbal uniformity or precise verbal equivalencies,[25] and while doctrinal differences could cause the rupture of communion, with few exceptions creedal statements were ineffective in restoring it once it was broken.[26]

The councils of the fourth century, beginning with the First Council of Nicaea in 325, are good examples of the weakness of mere words. The emperors in the newly Christian Roman Empire called most of these councils, with the goal of overcoming disunity among Christians. The emperors pressed for a uniform creed, in the hope that uniformity of doctrine would bring about communion of the churches and harmony in the empire, but their hope was in vain. Nicaea achieved

---

[21]For an English translation of this *Dialogue with Heraclides,* see John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick, eds. and trs., *Alexandrian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 430-55. The part dealing with Heraclides is on 437-40.

[22]See the admirable exposition in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds,* 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972) 62-99.

[23]Kelly, *Creeds,* 1-4.

[24]Kelly, *Creeds,* 420.

[25]Examples are the variety of expressions of the "Rule of Faith" noted above, and even more the incommensurability of the terms of the creed of Constantinople (381) with that of Nicaea (325); see Kelly, *Creeds,* 296-331.

[26]The exceptions which come to mind are the alleged creed of Gregory Thaumaturgus, employed by Gregory of Nyssa to reconcile some dissidents in Pontus (see Luise Abramowski, "Das Bekenntnis des Gregor Thaumaturgus bei Gregor von Nyssa und das Problem seiner Echtheit," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 87 [1976]: 145-66), and the "Formula of Union" sent to Cyril of Alexandria by John of Antioch and the oriental hierarchy in 433. If Abramowski is correct, the former was a pious deception; and the union achieved through the latter was certainly helped by imperial pressure and by the diplomacy of the courier, Bishop Paul of Emesa.

the condemnation of Arius, but its doctrinal formulation, including the famous *homoousion,* achieved far less success. Few bishops were willing to teach in such terms, and in the ensuing controversies the words of Nicaea were less influential than a bishop's attitude toward Athanasius of Alexandria, who had been canonically deposed by the Synod of Tyre for excessive zeal in pursuing his enemies. From the death of Constantine until 360, the emperors tried repeatedly to heal the continuing breach by new councils and new creeds,[27] but in the 360s the new heretic, Eunomius, addressed a church still divided by mutual excommunication. When Theodosius became emperor in 380, he joined his fellow-emperors Gratian and Valentinian in restoring the churches to bishops who would profess the faith of Nicaea.[28] A year later the emperors defined this faith legally in terms more general than those employed at Nicaea or even at the recently held Council of Constantinople; the term "substance," focus of half a century of acrimonious debate, did not even appear in the law requiring conformity to the Nicene faith. The real test of Nicene orthodoxy was not assent to the *homoousion* but communion with prominent bishops whose orthodoxy was recognized.[29]

---

[27]The process is well described by Kelly, *Creeds,* 263-95. The church historian Socrates Scholasticus sums it up (*h.e.* 2,41):

> And now as we have at length wound our way through the labyrinth of all the various forms of faith, let us reckon the number of them. After that which was promulgated at Nicaea, two others were proposed at Antioch at the dedication of the church there. A third was presented to the Emperor Constans in Gaul by Narcissus and those who accompanied him. The fourth was sent by Eudoxius into Italy. There were three forms of the creed published at Sirmium, one of which having the consuls' names affixed was read at Ariminum. The Acacian party produced an eighth at Seleucia. The last [360] was that of Constantinople, containing the prohibitory clause respecting the mention of "substance" or "subsistence" in relation to God. (Trans. A. C. Zenos, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* 2nd ser., vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973] 71-72.)

Many scholars now would hesitate to agree with Kelly that the rejection of *ousia* represented a "triumph of Arianism" rather than disgust on the part of the bishops at the interminable wrangling over technical terminology.

[28]*Codex Theodosianus* 16,5,6 (January 10, 381). See *The Thodosian Code,* trans. Clyde Pharr (repr. New York: Greenwood Press, 1969) 450-51.

[29]*Codex Theodosianus* 16,1,3, dated July 30, 381, is the decree confirming the Council. All churches are to be handed over to bishops who "unius maiestatis adque virtutis patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum confitentur eiusdem gloriae, claritatis unius, nihil dissonum profana divisione facientes, sed trinitatis ordinem personarum adsertione et divinitatis unitate. . . . " How will these bishops be recognized? The law continues, "quos constabit *communione* [my emphasis]" with Nectarius of Constantinople or Timothy of Alexandria, or, in their particular regions, with Pelagius of Laodicea, Diodorus of Tarsus; Amphilochius of Iconium, Optimus of [Pisidian] Antioch; Helladius of Caesarea, Otreius of Melitene, Gregorius of Nyssa; Terennius of Scythia, or Marmarius of Martianopolis. The text is in *Theodosiani libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis,* ed. Th. Mommsen (Zürich: Weidman, 1971 = 1st ed., 1904) I:2, 834. *Cod.Theod.* 16,5,6 (see previous note) did mention "substance," but it was issued before the Council.

The boundaries of the catholic church were not defined at the canonist's desk or the theologian's lectern but at the altar. Communion[30] (*koinōnia*) was in the first place the sharing of the Holy Things, the body and blood of Jesus in the eucharist.[31] Why did the eucharistic Body of Jesus have such a paramount role? It was the spiritual substance of the risen Jesus by which he nourished his body "by transformation."[32] More was at stake here than a privilege, from which people might be barred or to which they might be admitted, depending on their status. The metaphor of the vine and the branches portrayed the situation clearly: participation in the consecrated bread and wine nourished the spiritual life of soul and body, the life Christians had from their second birth, the birth from God. It is this life which joined them sacramentally to the risen Christ, enabling them to pass through death to him.

This is the communion which held the early church together in diversity. It was not a law or a doctrine but a reality, a mystery. It existed where the Spirit was the active and vivifying principle of the church and priest with whom one communicated. It was recognized by a spiritual discernment which had legal and doctrinal elements in it, certainly, but the more profound concern was whether the Spirit and life of Jesus flowed through the other.

A new bishop would send the *fermentum* to his nearby colleagues (or a letter to those who were farther away) by his deacon, inviting them to participate in his eucharist. Imagine what it meant when a bishop sent out communion in this way to his neighbors, and they would not take it! This actually happened. Cyprian and the bishops of North Africa reacted that way to the deacon sent from Rome by Novatian at the end of the persecution of Decius; they wanted their own messengers to confirm the results of the election in Rome. Their caution was justified when word came that Cornelius, not Novatian, was the properly elected new bishop, and they entered into communion with Cornelius. Meanwhile Novatian's emissaries found a more favorable reception with Cyprian's own local opponents.

Novatian was a noteworthy theologian[33] and upheld a strict standard of conduct, particularly with regard to those who had fallen during the persecution of Decius in 250-251. No one accused him of holding any error of doctrine. Some

---

[30]The Latin term *communio* comes from *communis* (*cum-munis*) and has no etymological connection with *unio*; its opposite is *immunis*. L. M. Dewailly, "Communio/communicatio. Brèves notes sur l'histoire d'un sémantème," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 54 (1970): 46-64.

[31]This is the conclusion of Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1966). There is an extensive literature on the subject; see the article by W. Popkes in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, s.v. "Gemeinschaft."

[32]*Kata metabolēn*: Justin, *1 apol.* 66,2 a very important text on this issue. Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 20:2, "and break one loaf, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which wards off death but yields continuous life in union with Jesus Christ," is another famous text. The West knew this way of thinking also; see Hilary of Poitiers, *Trin.* 8,13-16, now used as the second reading in the Liturgy of the Hours for Wednesday of the fourth week of Easter.

[33]He is credited with a substantial treatise on the Trinity, which has survived and is still worth reading.

thought him excessively ambitious, though this was a commonplace charge, and others said he was trying to compensate for his own timidity in the persecution.[34] Maybe he was innocent of both charges, and would have made a better bishop than Cornelius![35] But Cornelius in a letter described the darker side of Novatian and vividly portrayed the paramount significance of communion:

> When [Novatian] has made the offerings and is distributing to each his share and handing it over, he compels the unfortunate worshippers to take an oath instead of praising God. He takes the hands of those who have received in both his own, and does not let go until they take this oath—I quote his own words: "Swear to me by the Blood and Body of the Lord Jesus Christ never to desert me and turn to Cornelius." And the wretched man does not taste unless he first calls down a curse on his own head, and instead of saying Amen as he receives that Bread, he says: "I will not go back to Cornelius."[36]

To "go back to Cornelius" would be to recognize Cornelius as true, and his eucharist, rather than Novatian's, as giving access to Jesus Christ. This, and not the canonical propriety of the election, was the issue.

This aspect of communion was much more important in the early church than is usually noticed. Most people probably think of excommunication in terms of the penitential, medicinal separation of an individual from communion. Whether it was imposed as a formal penance[37] or undertaken voluntarily, such a separation was evidently intended to restore the sharpness of conversion to a faith grown lukewarm.

The refusal to communicate with another bishop, however, was a refusal to receive his communion, not a refusal to give communion to him.[38] Novatian demanded that his communicant reject Cornelius's claim to be a genuine bearer of the Spirit of Christ. Cyprian and the African bishops passed the same kind of judgment on Novatian himself when they refused his communion. Communion, in the very concrete sense of the eucharist which nourishes the life of the Spirit in those born again in baptism, was the primary reality of Christian existence and inseparable from the genuine Christian church. When bishops had the Body and Blood

---

[34] For the former charge: Cyprian, *ep.* 55; for the latter: Cornelius of Rome, quoted in Eusebius, *h.e.* 6,43,16.

[35] This seems to be the view of Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 324.

[36] Quoted in Eusebius, *h.e.* 6,43,18-19.

[37] As in Tertullian, *apol.* 39, 3-4, conveniently translated in J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957) 174: "There is, besides, exhortation in our gatherings, rebuke, divine censure. For judgment is passed, and it carries great weight, as it must among men certain that God sees them; and it is a notable foretaste of judgement to come, if any man has so sinned as to be banished from all share in our prayer, our assembly, and all holy intercourse" [*ut a communicatione orationis et conventus et omnis sancti commercii relegetur*]. That this banishment was medicinal is shown not only by its characterization as a "foretaste of judgment to come"—see how little you like being shut out from the banquet of life—but also by the fact that it was lifted at the point of death. See *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, s.v. "Exkommunikation," B.III.

[38] Henry Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 6n.1.

of Jesus in common, they had everything in common; their differences, whatever they might be, were not erased but accepted.

This brings us to the third section of our study, the link between communion and catholicity. Avery Dulles has fairly summarized the views of scholars as to what the word meant in antiquity, giving the pride of place to the reasons given by fourth-century Cyril of Jerusalem for calling the church "catholic": "it extends to the ends of the earth; it teaches all the doctrine needed for salvation; it brings every sort of human being under obedience; it cures every kind of sin; and it possesses every form of virtue."[39] The early Christians were certainly conscious of the universality of the gospel, and its spread. Athanasius goes so far as to make the widespread teaching of the gospel an argument for Jesus' divinity.

> What man was ever able to journey so far as to reach the Scythians and Ethiopians, or Persians, or Armenians, or Goths, or those who are said to live beyond the Ocean, or those who are beyond Hyrcania, or even the Egyptians and Chaldaeans who practise magic and are unnaturally superstitious and wild in their behaviour—who did this and yet was able to preach about virtue and sobriety and against the worship of idols, as the Lord of all, the Power of God, our Lord Jesus Christ?[40]

Passages like this which stress the missionary expansion of Christianity tend to support the view that the church is called catholic because of its extension and comprehensiveness.

That well-established view may not catch the full flavor of the term as it was first used by Christians, and before it became synonymous with what scholars now often call the "Great Church," the *orbis terrarum* on whose secure judgment Augustine asked schismatics to rely. The key to understanding the original meaning of "catholic church" may lie in a passage from the first-century eucharistic prayer in the *Didache* 8:5:

> Remember, Lord, your Church, to save it from all evil and to make it perfect by your love. Make it perfect, 'and gather' it 'together from the four winds' into your Kingdom which you have made ready for it.[41]

---

[39]Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 14.

[40]*Inc.* 51, in the translation of Robert W. Thompson, *Athanasius, Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 153.

[41]Trans. Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 176. This text was singled out by J. D. Zizioulas, "The Eucharistic Community and the Catholicity of the Church," *One in Christ* 6 (1970): 314-37, republished with slight alterations as chap. 4 of *Being As Communion* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) 143-69, at p. 144: "Already in the book of the *Didache* in the later first or early second century the idea was clearly expressed that in the celebration of the eucharist the Church experiences that which is promised for the *Parousia,* namely the eschatological unity of all in Christ. . . . " The papers in that number of *One in Christ* 6,3 (1970) were also published in a French version, *Istina* 14,2 (1969), and a German version, *Katholizität und Apostolizität,* ed. Reinhard Groscurth (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971). Emmanuel Lanne, "Pluralism and Unity. The Possibility of a Variety of Typologies within the Same Ecclesial Allegiance," *One in Christ* 6 (1970): 430-51 = *Istina* 14 (1969): 171-90, is also relevant to our conference theme.

I first heard *Did.* 8:2 employed as a key by a young German scholar, Klaus Dieter Reichardt, in a paper (unfortunately still unpublished), "Zum Begriff *katholikos* in der christlichen Literatur des 2. und 3. Jahrhunderts," Eighth International Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford, September 4, 1979.

This prayer has a very strong eschatological flavor. It recalls the passage from the Marcan apocalypse, "And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven."[42] The definitive church will be there at the wedding banquet of the Lamb, when "many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. . . . "[43] That will be the full communion, communion with the risen Christ. That banquet will either confirm or condemn the validity of the eucharist we share here, and the only communion which counts in the long run is communion with the risen Christ.

When one takes this suggestion and looks again at the earliest uses of the term "catholic church" through eschatological eyes, one finds that the texts take on fresh meaning. Ignatius of Antioch writes, "Wherever the bishop appears let the congregation be present; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."[44] Where is the catholic church? Where Jesus Christ is. And where is Jesus Christ? He is risen. The next uses of the phrase "catholic church" occur in the Martyrdom of Polycarp, which is in the form of a letter addressed "to the Church of God which sojourns in Philomelium, and to all the sojournings of the Holy Catholic Church in every place." Polycarp is described as "an apostolic and prophetic teacher, bishop of the Catholic Church in Smyrna."[45] After his arrest he prayed, "remembering all who had ever even come his way, both small and great, high and low, and the whole Catholic Church throughout the world. . . . "[46] This is often taken as the first clear sign that "catholic" meant "universal," in terms of the present and not of the end of time. In a final appearance of the term in the Martyrdom, Polycarp is described as now

> glorifying God and the Almighty Father, rejoicing with the Apostles and all the righteous, and he is blessing the Lord Jesus the Saviour of our souls, and Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.[47]

The eschatological character of this text needs no emphasis. But let us look again at the recurring phrase, "the catholic church throughout the world (*kata tēn oikoumenēn*)," which appears here and in the description of Polycarp's prayer. Does "throughout the world" mean the same thing as "catholic"? Or does it specify the part of the catholic church which still needs shepherding, the part which is still in the world? If the latter is the case,[48] then perhaps we should see "catholic" in

---

[42]Mark 13:27, parallel Matt. 24:31. The passage has echoes of Isa. 27:12-13 ("the LORD will thresh out the grain, and you will be gathered one by one. . . . ") and Zech. 2:6-12.

[43]Matt. 8:11, parallel Luke 13:29.

[44]Smyrneans 8:2. This passage and the quotes from the Martyrdom of Polycarp which follow are in the very literal rendering by Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1912–1913).

[45]*M.Polyc.* 16:2. Granted, there is manuscript support also for "holy" instead of "catholic," but modern editors consider "catholic" the better-attested reading.

[46]Ibid. 8:1.

[47]*M.Polyc.* 19:2.

[48]Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 144n.3. For the same point: Wolfgang Beinert, *Um das dritte Kirchenattribut* (Essen: Ludgerus-Verlag Hubert Wingren, 1964) I:43.

the first place as an eschatological term, referring less to the church's present universality than to our hopeful continuity with the church gathered at the wedding banquet in the kingdom of God.[49]

What effect would such an eschatological connotation of "catholic" have on our discussion of inculturation and catholicity? Here I venture onto the terrain of ecclesiology, where the early church's experience is only one of the relevant considerations. Still, though the early church cannot dictate to us today, its experience of diversity, its focus on communion, and the eschatological aspect of its understanding of catholicity give pointers for our discussion.

We would be guided first of all by hope and hunger for the wedding banquet of the Lamb, when communion will be not in sacrament alone but in the full reality of all the good things God has promised. We would not talk about catholicity first of all as an empirical fact of this world, separated from the world to come,[50] but rather as first of all a sacramental act, an act done in hope, placing our spirits at the service and under the guidance of the Spirit of the risen Jesus. Our focus would shift from trying to figure out in theory how much cultural pluralism is "desirable" and how much is "too much," to trying to be Christian in communion with the others who are moved by the same Spirit.

It would become us to be more hopeful and less confident of ourselves. Let me give a small example. Before communion is the announcement, "This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper."[51] Like most beatitudes, this one looks forward: The supper of the Lamb! Happy are those who enter into God's rest, the ultimate communion! Some say, "Happy are *we* who are called to his supper," relieving the eschatological tension. But are we there yet? Is this sacrificial meal we share today *identical* with that supper? Is there nothing left to hope for? It is one thing to be present sacramentally at that supper, another to equate our communion prematurely with

---

[49]Further support for this interpretation can be found in Peter Stockmeier, "Zum Begriff der *katholikē ekklēsia* bei Ignatius von Antiochien," in *Ortskirche/Weltkirche*, Festschrift J. Döpfner, ed. Heinz Fleckenstein et al. (Würzburg: Echter, 1973) 63-74, although he tends to see things more in terms of transcendence than of eschatology, as does Hans-Joachim Schulz, "Sanctorum Communio: Glaubensausdruck einer Eucharistischen Ekklesiologie der Ökumene," *Die Einheit der Kirche,* Festschrift für Peter Meinhold, ed. Lorenz Hein (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977) 16-29. The eucharistic connection is also made by J. L. Witte, "Some Theses about the Sacramentality of the Church," *One in Christ* 6 (1970): 393-401. While there are sympathetic notions in Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Significance of Eschatology for the Understanding of the Apostolicity and Catholicity of the Church," *One in Christ* 6 (1970): 410-29, Pannenberg bypasses the concrete embodiment of this eschatological reality in the communion of bishops here and now. Like Stockmeier, Witte and Zizioulas, I insist on the connection.

[50]Stockmeier, "Zum Begriff," 70: "Darum kann das Attribut 'katholisch' primär nicht als Kennzeichen der irdischen Gemeinde bzw. ihrer Gesamtheit in Anspruch genommen werden; es ist vielmehr zu deuten von der überirdischen Wirklichkeit der Kirche her, die eben in Christus ihren Grund hat."

[51]The Latin text is "Beati qui ad cenam Agni vocati sunt."

Jesus' definitive word on the diversity which that supper will embrace.[52] Perhaps we should be less self-confident, and more hopeful.

This view of catholicity as founded on Jesus's ultimate communion underlines the spiritual responsibility of church leaders. They need to make their decisions on whom to include and whom to exclude, what to accept and what to refuse, according to the Spirit of the risen Jesus, so that their communion may be a true fore-shadowing of his. No book of law or theology can substitute for the living spiritual knowledge which alone can ground this spiritual judgment. However necessary learning is in understanding whether a difference in culture is also a difference in faith, in the end the decision is not made by books but by persons animated by faith.[53] Likewise it is the personal decision of the risen Jesus, not the application of a rule, which may admit us to the wedding banquet in the end.

Finally, this eschatological view of catholicity should lead theologians (and canonists) to exhibit modesty and respect with regard to those in authority in the church. Extrapolating from documents and decisions is a temptation to scholars, because it would give us the power, since we know the books. But it would lead to a closed, impersonal and disembodied—even dispirited—truth, not to the judgment of the Spirit of Jesus. Therefore as we speak to bishops, there is really no room in our language for "you have to" or "you may not," because those phrases suggest that theological or canonical considerations are adequate to settle whom or what to include or exclude, apart from spiritual judgment. But such considerations were not enough to assure the communion of the faithful in the diversity of the early church, and there is no reason to think they will be more successful now. What we can do is speak the truth in charity, throw the light of the gospel on the present situation, and lift the hearts of bishops and the rest of the faithful, calling them to their vocations.

To close, here is a last story involving Abba Moses, the black Egyptian desert father. It shows us the early Christians puzzling over the seeming conflicts in God's dealings with us. Like the apostle Peter's perplexity over the matter of unclean foods,[54] this puzzle is resolved by a vision:

> It was told of a brother who came to see Abba Arsenius at Scetis that, when he came to the church, he asked the clergy if he could visit Abba Arsenius. They said to him, "Brother, have a little refreshment and then go to see him." "I shall not eat anything," said he, "till I have met him." So, because Arsenius' cell was far away, they sent a brother with him. Having knocked on the door, they entered, greeted the old man, and sat down without saying anything. Then the brother from the church said, "I will leave you. Pray for me." Now the visiting brother, not feeling at ease with the old man, said, "I will come with you," and they went away

---

[52]Zizioulas, *Being As Communion,* 161: "The eucharistic community constitutes a sign of the fact that the *eschaton* can only *break through* history but never be identified with it."

[53]Compare the requirement to interpret scripture "ratione habita vivae totius Ecclesiae Traditionis et analogiae fidei" (*Dei Verbum* 12). It would be interesting to pursue the inquiry as to whether this "analogy of faith" might not be the best description of what happens in mutual faith-recognition across a spectrum of cultural differences.

[54]Acts 10:10-16.

together. Then the visitor asked, "Take me to Abba Moses, who used to be a rob-
ber." When they arrived the Abba welcomed them joyfully and then took leave of
them with delight. The brother who had brought the other one said to his compan-
ion, "See, I have taken you to the foreigner and to the Egyptian, which of the two
do you prefer?" "As for me," he replied, "I prefer the Egyptian." Now a Father
who heard this prayed to God, saying, "Lord, explain this matter to me: for Thy
name's sake the one flees from men, and the other, for Thy name's sake, receives
them with open arms." Then two large boats were shown to him on a river and he
saw Abba Arsenius and the Spirit of God sailing in the one, in perfect peace; and
in the other was Abba Moses with the angels of God, and they were all eating honey
cakes.[55]

MICHAEL SLUSSER
Duquesne University

---

[55]Arsenius #38, *The Desert Christian. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers,* trans. Be-
nedicta Ward (New York: Macmillan, 1980) 17-18.