

SEMINAR ON ECCLESIOLOGY

Why was the union of the German-speaking Evangelical United Brethren with the English-speaking United Methodists so difficult to achieve? And what light does this difficulty shed on the obstacles to ecumenical unity? With these questions R. Justin Hennessey, O.P. (Mount St. Mary's Seminary) introduced his reflections on "Nontheological Factors in Ecumenism" to nineteen seminar members on 7 June. Hennessey's thesis was that cultural differences can hinder Christian unity. Further, he called for a distinction between culture and doctrine to understand "that cultural pluralism need not be opposed to doctrinal unity."

In addition to language, ethnic background exemplifies cultural diversity, Hennessey said. Irish, Hispanic, and Polish people are usually Catholic; Scandinavians and Scots are usually Protestant. H. R. Niebuhr viewed this diversity in 1929 as "the accommodation of religion to the caste system" and "the moral failure of Christianity." Hennessey suggested that Roman Catholicism's emphasis in recent centuries on uniformity in liturgy and other areas of church life would seem to accord with Niebuhr's thesis.

But in the post-Vatican II period, said Hennessey, Catholics have renewed their respect for diversity. This is due to the insight that the one Christian doctrine expresses itself in a multitude of ways. Secularization helps us distinguish between cultural and doctrinal factors, Hennessey concluded. In a secularized society, culture is not identified with any particular religious group. That fact enables one to say which values among believers are dictated of the gospel and which are from other sources.

A much different understanding of secularization was offered by Hennessey's respondent, Carol J. Voisin (Pacific School of Religion). Rather than viewing secularization as the removal of religious institutions from the dominance of culture, she argued for an understanding of it in Bonhoeffer's terms as the Christianization of the world. The secular movement is not opposed to Christian faith, she said, but a product of it. The movement enables people to put aside those Christian symbols which hinder efforts "to live responsibly to the world and for it."

To Hennessey's examples of ethnicity and language as cultural factors, Voisin added class, economy, and gender diversity. But she questioned the extent to which these can be called nontheological, for they all have an ethical dimension. Voisin also looked skeptically at the value today of Niebuhr's fifty-year-old interpretation of denominationalism and at the portrayal of Catholicism as the unqualified champion of diversity.

Ecclesiology seminar steering committee member Frederick M. Jelly, O.P., chaired the discussion that followed. Comments included those by Thomas Rausch, who noted that financial considerations spur the union of small and struggling Protestant denominations. Such considerations apparently do not affect Roman

Catholicism, he said, which feels no need to be ecumenical. Mary Kay Nealan, drawing upon her experience of the rural poor in Brazil and the urban nonpoor who theologize about them, suggested that geography is another "nontheological factor" in ecumenism. Thomas Potvin commented that Protestant cultures express themselves through the concept of "nationhood." Catholic cultures express themselves through a pseudo-Dionysian "divine hierarchy."

The 8 June session was chaired by seminar steering committee member Anneliese Sinnott, O.P. (Marygrove College). It featured a presentation by a former president of the CTSA, Kenan B. Osborne, O.F.M. (Franciscan School of Theology). Osborne spoke to some fifty participants on "Post-Conciliar Ecclesiology: The Lay Person and the Small Community." He began by noting the "fragmented ecclesiological thought" of Vatican II. On the one hand, *Dignitatis humanae* proclaims the freedom of conscience, *Gaudium et spes* acknowledges the contribution of other Christian churches, and *Lumen gentium* defines the church in terms of the people of God. But, on the other hand, the council documents fail to treat the doctrine of justification or the role of women. And they fail to distance themselves from the "regent ecclesiology" in which the lay person is a mere participant in the apostolate of the hierarchy. Today there are competing ecclesiologies, Osborne said, and no one dominates.

These reflections paved the way to Osborne's second topic, the small Christian community. He began with a thumbnail sketch of the role of the lay person in church history. According to this portrayal, the lay person has been largely overshadowed by the clergy and the religious. Only in the postconciliar period has the church sought to clarify the lay person's role in terms of baptism and eucharist.

Osborne offered a number of "principles" underlying the phenomenon of small, lay-led Christian communities. Chief among these is the centrality of the eucharist—not merely the reception of it, but the celebration of it. A full acknowledgment of this will have consequences for eucharistic community leadership by women and by the married, he said, consequences more extensive than the recommendations of the 1988 "Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of Priests."

Osborne concluded by saying that, in the absence of a single, dominant ecclesiology, the term "local church" will shift in meaning. Although it now usually refers to a diocesan or national church, it will increasingly come to mean the small, Christian—and eucharistic—community.

The formal response to Osborne by Bishop John S. Cummins (Diocese of Oakland) was both a reflection and a critique. The bishop reflected on his diocese's efforts to promote small Christian communities and on the official church's support of them. The Oakland diocese, after extensive consultation, defined the SCC as an essential feature of parish life, said the bishop. This insight finds support in official church publications, such as *Evangelii nuntiandi* and *Christifidelis laici*. As lay-led SCCs become more widespread, there will be an increasing need to train their leaders, cautioned the bishop. Nevertheless growth of the SCC movement is a sign of hope, he said, that SCCs will overcome the alienation some feel in large parishes and help them respond to God in society and church.

Bishop Cummins criticized Osborne's paper for not distinguishing among competing ecclesiologies. The Vatican II emphasis on religious liberty, the insistence in canon law on the faithful's right to share in the mission of the church and

to initiate their own apostolic activity, and the centrality of the concept of the people of God—all of these, said the bishop, reflect the church's concern for the dignity of the person. Ecclesiologies which underemphasize that dignity merit less attention than those for which that dignity is central.

Before each of the two sessions, participants reviewed a list of the Ecclesiology Seminar topics since 1985. They were then asked to indicate which kinds of topics are of greatest importance to the 1991 convention theme, "Towards a More Vital Theology as an Intellectual Inquiry." The top three topics are:

1. Experience of the church at the local level.
2. Governance of the universal church.
3. Consensus in the church.

The seminar steering committee (M. F. Fischer, J. Gros, F. M. Jelly, and A. Sinnott) will take this into account in selecting presentations for next year's sessions.

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