

## RENAISSANCE/MODERN THEOLOGY

Topic: Johann Adam Möhler's Communion Ecclesiology  
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Presenter: Michael Himes, Boston College

How are we to understand Johann Adam Möhler's communion ecclesiology in light of the 1992 statement by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion?" This was the question posed by Michael Himes.

Himes delineated the overarching structure of the Vatican document and identified the two errors that impelled its promulgation. The first error consists in not integrating an understanding of the church as communion with the images of the people of God or the body of Christ, and not establishing the relationship between the church as communion and the church as sacrament. A second error is that the relationship between the local church and the universal church is not properly understood; too much authority is being given to the local churches and as a result the unity of the visible and institutional church is being undermined. The document claims that the universal church is prior to the local church both ontologically and temporally and that, alongside of the Eucharist, the episcopacy and the Roman pontiff provide the source and foundation of ecclesial communion.

Bishop Walter Kasper has avowed that in communion ecclesiologies there are two extremes to be avoided: the federalist position wherein the church universal is viewed as the union of local churches, and the centralist position which gives undue weight to the Roman hierarchy as the source of the church's communion.

Is Möhler's ecclesiology susceptible to the criticisms of federalism or centralism, or does he offer the means to fight against these extremes? Himes's argument in favor of the latter view is based on an analysis of two main works by Möhler: *Unity of the Church or the Principle of Catholicism* (1825) and *Symbolism* (1832 and revised editions). The earlier work begins with the inner unity of the church created by the Spirit of God. This new life generates external structures initially sketched by Jesus Christ. The external unity of the body of the Christ is expressed in the bishop, in the metropolitan union of local churches, in episcopal unity, and in the unity of the primate. This formulation may seem closer to the federalist view of the church, but cannot be identified with it.

*Symbolism* has the subtitle *Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences Between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by their Symbolical Writings*. Himes recalled the stir created by its publication, the numerous responses it received, and Möhler's subsequent revisions. No longer beginning with the embodied life of the Spirit that draws Christians together, Möhler spoke of the ongoing incarnation of Christ in the church and the enduring apostolic ministry established by Christ as the means of ecclesial unity. The offices of bishop and the papacy were divinely inspired by Christ to provide necessary, reliable communicators. Möhler discerned a valuable tension between the regional episcopacy and the papacy, for which there is no theoretical basis of adjudication, but only a need for a practical balance that will require readjustment in accordance with the ongoing life of the community. All the structures of the church are at the service of its mission: to communicate the inner life principle of Christianity and the teachings of Christ.

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