

The Church Today

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In its early days, this century was celebrated by Christians in Europe and in America with great anticipation. Especially, the politically dominating role of Europe in the world was expected to help the Christian missionary efforts in completing the process of Christianization on a global scale. In looking back from the end of the century Christians should not dismiss such expectation too easily as triumphalism. Otherwise, the missionary zeal of the apostle Paul might perhaps be labelled triumphalistic, too. But certainly those high expectations among Christians did not take seriously enough the forces of secularism, and in particular of secular nationalism, which soon would hurl Europe into the abyss of World War I that was to destroy its dominating political control of their ancient settlements in Asia Minor. That attitude continued after World War II in the Cyprus affair and still contributes to bitterness between Eastern and Western Christians. This is but one example of how alienated Western power politics has become from any responsibility concerning the situation of Christianity and of Christians around the world. Certainly, the period of decolonization helped the Christian churches in the Third World to obtain or reaffirm their independence, and Christian missions in those cultures were not without their successes in the second half of this century, especially in Africa and in some regions of Eastern Asia. But, at the same time, a remarkable renaissance of non-Christian religions, especially the World religions, has taken place, and particularly the Islamic resurgence and missionary movement has become a close competitor of Christianity in its missionary efforts. Thus the situation of Christianity with relation to other World religions is significantly different now than it was at the turn of the century.

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At the same time, the powers of secularization in their alliance with economic affluence in the West made dramatic progress, even in the course of the last decades, in alienating the mind of the people, especially in the European nations, from the Christian origins of their cultural traditions. The Christian churches are rapidly becoming a minority in regions where they had their strongest roots in former centuries. In this situation, the most serious problem is that, to a large extent, the churches continue to adapt to the mentality of the secular culture in their preaching and teaching, in the life of their congregations and occasionally even in their liturgical life. The strategy of adaptation to the secularist world is followed as if in this way the churches would get attention and even a public hearing for the gospel and for their religious teaching. The contrary is true. Adaptation to the secular mentality is usually taken as indicating the weakness of the religious agencies, and in fact there is quite often a loss of confidence on the part of the churches and their ministers behind their craving for relevance to the secular world. This may very well be the main reason why mainline churches decline and conservative churches grow. Evangelicals and fundamentalists deliver the religious message more unabashedly as a challenge to the secular mentality and lifestyle. Unfortunately, a loss of openness to the human situation and to the unprejudiced search for truth is often the price paid for conservative growth. But there can be little doubt that, ironically, "relevance" in religious matters seems to be bound up in the secular world with the nerve to challenge the principles of secularism that are generally taken for granted in modern Western societies. If religion comprises much of what human life in these societies is lacking, which seems to be indicated by widespread feelings of dissatisfaction and indeterminate longings, then a religious message has to challenge the spirit of secularism rather than adapt to it.

Secularism can be opposed in different ways. Sometimes, such opposition erupts in irrational reactions to the system of secular society, but it can also become articulate in the form of considered criticism. It can occur in the form of fundamentalism that forecloses the minds of people against all critical probing of their own set of beliefs. But it can also display a more open, rational attitude in relation to the roots of modernity as well as to the content of the Christian tradition itself and even of the biblical writings.

A rational attitude always involves critical reflection, but such critical reflection should be applied not only to the content of the cultural tradition, but equally to its modern critics. If done in such a spirit, a critical reassessment of the biblical tradition as well as of the tradition of Christian doctrine need not be done under the spell of secular modernism. It may be done for the sake of the Christian message itself, in the service of a faithful reconstruction of its content together with a radical critique of basic assumptions of modern secular society and culture. It is this kind of critical rationality that continues the alliance of faith and reason which has been a distinctive mark in the history of Christian culture, notwithstanding occasional criticism of the abuse of reason and of the ways it sometimes lends itself to

abuse. The alliance of faith with reason began in the second century, if not earlier, on the assumption that there can be only one truth for all human persons as there is only one God, the creator of all, who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and only one world of creation that is shared by all human beings and saved by Jesus Christ. The early alliance of faith with reason lies at the roots of the dynamics of universal mission in early Christianity, and the confidence that each particular truth must finally be consonant with the one God and with His revelation continues to be a condition of the formative and transforming power of the Christian faith in the totality of our personal, social and cultural life.

The fact that the formative and transforming power of the Christian faith has been fading in recent Christian history may be largely due to the common assumption that reason and faith belong to different realms or represent different layers of the human reality, if they are not regarded as conflicting forces. While modern secular culture struggled for the emancipation of reason from faith, modern Christian theologians often found it convenient to make their peace with the separation of faith and reason. But it was not only the fault of modern Christian theology and subjectivistic piety that the rift between faith and reason deepened and broadened. The origin of that rift goes back to the breakup of the Western church in the sixteenth century in consequence of what I consider the failure of the Reformation movement. The continuing conflict between confessional churches and their theologies was not easily reconcilable to the assumption of a basic consonance of faith with reason, since rational truth can be only one, while Christianity presented itself to the emerging modern world in a disrupted state of conflicting alternatives. When the zeal of their antagonism waned, it could seem plausible that the one truth might be in neither of those confessional alternatives. Thus, the history of Christian division and of confessional warfare in early modern history may be at the root not only of the rise of a secular culture that increasingly emancipated itself from its religious past, but also of the dissolution of the old alliance between faith and reason and of the resulting loss of the transforming power of the Christian faith in shaping our individual, social and cultural life.

I hope that by now it is evident that I am talking about the Church today. The trend toward adapting the content of the Christian tradition to secular standards looks like a substitute for the lost consonance of faith and reason. But adaptation to secular standards is a poor and dangerous substitute, because it works only one way: by purging the contents of the Christian tradition of everything in tension with secular principles, while depriving thereby the Christian message of its challenging and transforming power. By contrast, reason in alliance with faith can serve not only to reassess critically the content of the tradition, but also to reconstruct its interpretation of reality at large in such a way as to produce viable alternatives to the secular interpretation of reality. Faith in alliance with reason can challenge even the principles of modern secular culture without violating or dis-

missing whatever truth they may contain.

The first thing the churches need, then, is confidence in the message they have to convey in distinction from the agenda of the world. It is the message of the kingdom of God as the indispensable condition of a meaningful human life in its social setting as well as in our individual way of life. The kingdom of God is not something that we could bring about by our human efforts, nor is it identical with the existence of the Church, but it stands as the criterion of our individual life, of our society and also of the Church itself which is called to exist as the sign of the kingdom. It is the content of our eschatological hope that is expected to transform our perishable lives into participation in God's eternal glory through the power of His spirit in the resurrection of the dead. And the pledge of this hope is the crucified and risen Christ. In communion with Him we shall overcome the shortcomings of this provisional form of existence and participate in the new life that has entered this world in His resurrection.

The Church is called to exist as sign and instrument of that eschatological hope. How this constitutes the nature of the Church was admirably described in the first chapter of the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the Church. This description of the nature of the Church was adopted in 1968 by the World Council of Churches, though without the notion of "instrument" and by emphasizing exclusively the function of the Church as "sign" of the kingdom. What the Church is called to signify by its existence as sign was expressed by the council in terms of unity with God and communion among human beings. In combining these two dimensions of unity, the council interpreted the Christian hope for the kingdom of God which means that people enjoy communion with God and thereby also a truly human communion among themselves. Of these, unity with God occupies the first place in our human destiny. Communion with our fellow men and women comes as a consequence of our common destiny to communion with God. During the years after the Second Vatican Council this emphasis has often been changed as if the unity of humankind were the aim in its own right regardless of what the basis of such unity might be. It was the time of what was called "secular ecumenism." The Church could then be taken as an agency that should serve the unity among human beings in terms of political or social peace. But the Vatican Council rightly emphasized the unity with God as basis of the communion among human persons. Only in this way is the social predicament of human existence part of the Christian vision and hope. In this way it also becomes manifest in the life of the Church in distinction from secular forms of community. For the Church is essentially a communion of those who share the same faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and are united in Him through the one baptism and through His eucharist.

It is precisely in its form as a liturgical, worshiping community, then, that the Church exists as a sign of the ultimate destiny of every human being and of humanity at large, because that ultimate destiny of all human

beings is to be united to God and thereby—thereby!—among themselves. Human beings can associate in many ways. Even a gang of criminals is a society of some form. But it is certainly not the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God human beings will be united by their communion with the one God, and the Church in its liturgical life exists as the image of destiny.

There is an important consequence from this basic structure of the nature of the Church: The historical churches live up to their nature and destiny as sign of the kingdom to the degree they incorporate in their existence the paradigm of their liturgical life as worshiping congregations—unity among the members on the basis of their unity with God in one faith, one baptism, one eucharist. If the regional and worldwide associations of Christians were structured according to that paradigm, they would exist as communions of communions, communions of local congregations that are gathered around the celebration of the liturgy. To some degree the churches, as they exist today, actually manifest that basic structure, but only to a degree; they are too easily mistaken for regional or even worldwide institutions like other social institutions, with a bureaucratic structure and discipline of their own. Furthermore, the separate existence of church organizations, even on a world level, gives the picture of a plurality of religious parties, sometimes in conflict and certainly presenting themselves as competing parties rather than a worldwide communion of local communions united through one faith and eucharistic fellowship as testimony to the human destiny of communion through unity with the one God.

The so-called *communio-ecclesiology* that has been developed in recent decades primarily by the efforts of orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians offers a model for reinterpreting and restructuring the life of the churches that should be basically acceptable to all confessional traditions. It corresponds to the emphasis in the Protestant churches upon the local congregations “where the pure gospel is preached and the sacraments are celebrated according to their institution,” to quote from the description of the Church in the Augsburg Confession of 1530. Thus, in principle, the *communio-ecclesiology* provides a common basis for an ecumenical doctrine of the Church. There are, of course, a number of problems that have to be solved on the way toward an ecumenical consensus on the nature of the Church. I shall confine myself to just two of these problems.

The first problem concerns the term “local church” as referring to the basic units of ecclesial life. The term “local church” seems to indicate the locality of the worshiping congregation, so that the worldwide Church could exist as a communion of local congregations. But in Roman Catholic ecclesiology the term “local church” means the dioceses of an episcopal see, and while in the ancient Church such a diocese was in fact a rather small geographical unit organized around a center of worship, later on dioceses tended to become larger and today usually represent regional rather than local church organizations. These regional organizations owe their unity to the jurisdiction of one bishop rather than to the unity of one place of wor-

ship. This issue is related to the image of the bishop as presiding at the celebration of the eucharist, where the communion among the members of the congregation through their communion in the one body of Christ is celebrated and enacted. Usually it is the priest, not the bishop, who is in fact presiding at the eucharistic celebration in a local liturgy, and this raises the question of how the ministries of priest or presbyter and bishop are related to each other. It is an issue of great ecumenical importance. If the episcopal dignity is rooted in presiding at the eucharistic celebration, it would be appropriate and would clarify the *communio*-structure of the church to emphasize the episcopal character of the ministry of the presbyter, wherever the bishop is not present. If, on the other hand, the episcopal ministry is conceived in terms of supervision of local churches, it must have its criterion in the eucharistic unity as it is celebrated locally.

The need for clarifying the concept of the *local* church is closely connected with the problem of hierarchical authorities in the church's life. This is the second problem that is to be addressed here. There certainly must exist some form of supervision of the local congregations in order to preserve their unity with each other in the one faith of the church, but also within each congregation the mutual communion of the members and their minister in that one faith. This need for supervision once exercised by the apostles themselves explains the emergence of hierarchical forms of ministry in the church, a ministry exercised by the migrating prophets of early Christianity, later on in the transformation of episcopacy into an office of regional authority, and furthermore in the formation of the metropolitan and patriarchal authorities.

However, the emergence of hierarchical forms of ministry does not have its only justification in the need for supervision of local congregations in order to preserve them in the unity of the one faith. In addition, the hierarchical minister fulfills a representative function: He represents to the people the unity of the apostolic faith; and in relation to others, especially to other local or regional churches, he represents the church of the particular region of his assignment. But, unfortunately, hierarchical authority entails the tendency toward developing forms of government that are not consonant with the nature of the Church according to Jesus' own word: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Matt 20:25f.). In the history of the Church, the behavior of its hierarchs was not always distinguishable from that of the rulers of the Gentiles. Each person who carries such an authority should at least be aware of the temptation of exercising power to the effect of molding the church according to his or her own ideas. To avoid this, it is not enough to call oneself a servant. In the history of the Church, the most important remedy in assisting the hierarchical authorities against the temptation of perverse exercise of power has been the development of conciliar structures on all levels of the church's life. Though this is not a perfectly safe remedy, it is

actually the only one, and it is necessary to reemphasize the accountability of hierarchical authorities to conciliar institutions on all levels of the church's life. This may help to make hierarchical ministries more representative of the constituency that is represented by the minister. The representative function of the Christian minister, of course, is twofold. He not only represents the constituency of a local or regional or even worldwide church, but also, and more importantly, the apostolic gospel and thus the authority of Jesus Christ Himself. The two aspects of representation do not always coincide, and that poses the most difficult problem in the exercise of authority within the Christian Church. The minister must not be content to represent the mind of his constituency, he sometimes has to oppose their opinions and moods for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But even in situations like that the minister should not enforce his judgment upon the constituency, but simply give testimony to the word of God as he perceives it in contrast to his people.

One of the functions of representative institutions of the Church is that of authoritative teaching. It belongs to the ministry on all its hierarchical levels as well as to the conciliar bodies of the Church. Such teaching is authoritative in that it is representative in both ways, in representing the authority of Christ on the one hand, but also the communion of the Church on some level, be it the local parish, the dioceses, the Christians of a province or nation, or finally the worldwide community of Christians. Authoritative teaching always represents the authority of Christ in concrete ways and therefore in a particular historical situation where the one body of Christ becomes manifest as represented by the teaching authority of the Church. Except on the local level, such teaching authority is little developed in most Protestant churches, although at the time of the Reformation certain approaches were made in the direction of that end. In the long run, however, most Protestant churches did not succeed in developing procedures and institutions necessary to secure within their confessional families a sufficient consensus on the continuation of representative teaching. Therefore, some Protestant churches, especially the Lutheran churches, have become quite traditionalist in elevating the authority of their confessional writings from the sixteenth century while showing themselves unable to adapt such teaching, representative of their confessional family, to changed circumstances and to scriptural insights of a later time. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, was considerably more successful in securing the continuing exercise of authoritative teaching, but with a rather rigid conception of authority. If the teaching of the Church is authoritative in being representative, it is always related to processes of reception in the Christian community. The claim to being representative is not sufficient in and of itself. The community of Christians addressed by the exercise of teaching authority will receive or not receive the teaching in the light of their faith in Jesus Christ and of the witness of the Scriptures to God's revelation in Christ. In the course of such a process of reception it will turn out in what sense the teaching so re-

ceived has in fact been representative. Furthermore, such teaching is always related to historical conditions of language and thought. They function as limitations of its form of expression. Thus the teaching may be representative of the church at a particular moment in history, but perhaps not of the entire church and not in such a way that it retains its importance in later periods of Church history. It may not be final in the form by which it expresses the intended truth. Thus, the teaching will be authoritative to the degree it actually turns out to be representative of the Christian community as well as of the word of God. But it is not exempt from critical examination by comparison with the gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed by the apostolic Scriptures. On the other hand, the teaching on behalf of the church on different levels of representative Christian ministry or council need not claim exemption from critical examination, as if in such a case it lost its authority. If its authority is based on its representative character, then there is a sufficient claim to authority connected with any teaching in the ecclesial community. Since the function of such teaching is to witness to the content of the revelation of God in Christ, its purpose can never be destroyed by subsequent examination and discussion in the light of the Scriptures, even if it may turn out that the form of the teaching has to be modified as a result of such examination. The continuing exercise of authoritative teaching is necessary in the Church in order to express on a representative level the one faith of the Church and thereby preserve the unity of the Church (the sense of being united by faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ). Therefore, it should be possible to reach agreement on this difficult issue ecumenically along the suggested lines. The more an undue rigidity of claims to incorrigible teaching authority can be avoided, the more a growing consensus on this issue can be expected. Historically, cases of undue rigidity in enforcing decisions of teaching authority sometimes entered a fatal combination with an abuse of ecclesial ministry under the impact of the arrogance of power. Therefore, the ecumenical discussion of this subject is particularly sensitive. But there is no reason why solutions should be impossible, since the community of Christians on all levels of its life needs the unifying effect of some continuing exercise of representative teaching authority.

The representative function of the ministry, but also of conciliar events, is of particular importance in the life of the Church, since the Church itself exists as a sign, i.e., an anticipatory representation of the destiny of all humankind. In its eucharistic liturgy, the Church represents in each local situation the ultimate destiny of humankind to communion with God and among human beings themselves. The Church is an instrument for salvation of individuals precisely by fulfilling this function as sign to all humanity. It must not allow the clarity of its nature as sign to be blurred or tarnished, and that clarity depends on its communion—in so many places—with the one Lord, and on its expression in the communion among the members of the Church, in the situation of a local congregation as well as in the solidarity of all the Christians in all places and through the centuries.

In historical actuality, however, the clarity of the sign is broken. It is marred wherever congregations and their members let themselves be seduced by the spirit of secularism so that the difference of the new life in Christ from the lifestyle of the secular world is no longer discernible. The clarity of the sign that the Church is called to be is stained particularly by the misbehavior of its ministers, since they represent the Church. Finally, and most painfully, the sign is broken by the divisions of the Church. Since in the contemporary situation of Christianity the churches are separated, in each particular church the fullness of the nature of the Church is impaired.

In the past, each of the separate churches declared itself to be the only true Church, and precisely from that pretension the conflict resulted that marred the credibility of each one of them. The situation has become even more difficult in the contemporary scene, since Christians of different confessional traditions recognize each other as Christians, even officially, but still remain separate and even continue the old condemnations that the churches threw at each other's faces when they separated. In the contemporary scene these separations are no longer plausible. This is rightly felt by most Christians across all confessional barriers. In this situation the continuing division of the churches destroys their credibility as sign of God's kingdom in a reconciled world. Each church's credibility is affected by this situation, and particularly so if it affirms itself to be the only true Church. Certainly each of the churches should try to be true to its vocation by the Lord, but this can never mean to be the only true Church, since He is the Lord of all who confess to His name, and communion among Christians and among their churches is mandatory as a consequence and as evidence of their communion with the one Lord. Thus, to be true to the nature of the Church, is irreconcilable to the claim of any particular church to be the only true Church. It is certainly correct that ecclesial communion presupposes unity of faith in dedication to one and the same Lord. But that need not mean complete unanimity in the understanding and interpretation of that one faith. There will always remain differences in our understanding of the faith, since—as the apostle assures us—our knowledge is imperfect and will remain so until the second coming of our Lord. Ecclesial communion requires the mutual trust that it is the same Lord whom we confess. Therefore, we confess our faith together. But even the common confession of our faith will always be connected with different interpretations. This need not impair ecclesial communion, but it is an inescapable element of our human and historical situation of plurality not only in our existence, but also in our understanding. Unity is necessary, since it is the one Lord who unites us. But as long as dedication to the one Lord is mutually recognizable, communion is mandatory, and it is an indispensable requirement of being the Church.

Therefore, in the present situation, the ecumenical issue is of paramount importance in the life of the churches. The recovering and resumption of ecclesial communion on the basis of the one faith in one and the same Lord is

the fundamental requirement for restoring the worldwide credibility of the Christian Church as sign of the kingdom in faithful obedience to her Lord. The different confessional traditions may continue to enrich the historical self-consciousness of all Christians. They may continue as resources for reformulating the faith of the Church, which has to be done again and again. But the different confessional traditions must no longer separate Christians from each other who recognize each other as Christians. With remarkable success, the ecumenical movement of this century specified and broadened the necessary basis for such mutual recognition, especially in the Lima document on baptism, eucharist and ministry and in the more recent common explication of the apostolic faith as summarized in the symbol of Nicea. If the leading authorities of the churches are duly aware of the fact that complete unanimity in these matters is neither possible, nor needed as a precondition of ecclesial community, and if they remember the mandatory character of communion between churches as resulting from the mandate of our Lord himself, they should now decide to enter into negotiations about the concrete conditions of resuming ecclesial communion. Since these conditions will be slightly different between different church bodies, it will be necessary to spell out their details in bilateral negotiations. What is most important in this process, however, and will determine decisions about what is necessary and sufficient, is the spirit of urgency that arises from the awareness that in our contemporary situation no church can be true to the mandate of the Lord and to its own nature as sign of His kingdom, unless it meets the ecumenical challenge.