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The Legacies of the Reformation for Christian Unity: The Church One and Universal

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The Legacies of the Reformation for Christian Unity: the Church One and Universal

By Emmanuel Orobator, S.J.

Introduction

Our African elders say: Whoever picks up quarrel with the past will lose the future. In reflecting upon the Reformation of the Sixteenth century, I do not intend to quarrel with the past.

My approach is simple. It is based on the insight that, instead of considering the Reformation as an unfortunate smear on the history of Christianity, it should be treated as an urgent contemporary invitation to commit ourselves to the quest for that Christian unity which has eluded us till now.

The thesis which I defend in this paper is that we can draw from the ecclesiologies of the Reformation period some elements which are relevant to contemporary ecumenical discussion.

In using the term "Reformation" to refer to this period, I would like to use it independently of any ideological overtones, simply highlighting, instead, some of the religious dimensions of the period. And, unless otherwise specified, I will limit my reflection to the events and theologies which are associated with Protestant continental, Reformation.

1. Background of Reformation Ecclesiology

An undeniable component in the motivations of the reformers was the extraordinary thirst for an *im*-mediate experience of God. What is remarkable about all the actors who are tagged "reformers" is the unshakeable conviction that each one had of a divine call to live a more authentic Christianity grounded on the Gospel; the conviction that he was acting within the confines of the church, the *true* church of Jesus Christ. Hence I turn my reflection to the various ecclesiologies of the major reformers, in search for elements that can help us overcome the separation and division within Christianity.

The conception of the church which Reformation theology inherited from the still-dominant medieval synthesis was that of a church construed as a *perfect society*, with its own sets of rules, and a visible hierarchical authority.

Arguably, against the background of this medieval synthesis, the first direct consequence of the Reformation was a different conception of the church as an *interior reality* not to be confused with any humanly contrived entity, monopolized by a few individuals or groups of the upper classes of the ecclesiastical aristocracy.

2. Luther's Position

In the case of Luther, his doctrine of church was based on the insight that the church was the work of the Holy Spirit. As he himself professes:

I believe that there is only one holy common Christian Church on

earth – This is nothing else than the community or gathering of the saints and the godly, believing men on earth which the Holy Spirit gathers, preserves and rules.

Luther's inclusive profession has the merit of carefully blending the notion of the church conceived as a visible gathering of Christians with the idea of the church as the invisible effect of God's gracious and gratuitous initiative. For him, membership in this "assembly" is not to be determined by mere confessional adherence. That is why, on the basis of this criterion, "the Church is *sola fide perceptibilis*" (perceptible only by faith).

3. Zwingli's Position

With Zwingli we must mention the alliance which he fostered between the church as a Christian community and the existing civil-political entity. His approach gave to the Magistrates of the community an important role in shaping and directing the Christian's life. For this reason, he and his followers are tagged "Magisterial Reformers".

Without further elaboration, I would simply like to draw attention to "the sense of community" which marked the Reformation in Strasbourg, Basel and Zurich.

But it is the conception of the church among the so-called Radical Reformers that merits a more detailed consideration.

4. The Radical Reformation

Despite the diversity of orientations among the Radical Reformers, we can also speak of a conception of church which they held in common, and which presents an ecclesiology with its own distinctive ecumenical features.

The Radical Reformers preached a reform which advocated a change in the ecclesiological basis of the community. The practical effect of this reformed ecclesiology was the elimination of what they judged to be encumbering church structures, and the emergence of simple, home-based churches or Bible study groups. Today we might think of such parallels in the emphasis given to prayer groups, or Small Christian Communities, or the local church.

There are some elements in the spirituality of those Radical Reformers known as Anabaptists, which clearly point in the direction of a broad-based ecclesiology, with the decisive implication of a salvation available to all. In various forms, their conception of salvation holds that even though infant baptism is unscriptural, and thus to be discouraged, God reaches out to save *all* children without discrimination. In addition, some Radicals showed remarkable appreciation for the positive religious values inherent in Islam and Judaism.

To this positive appraisal of God's universal salvific action, and of the openness of the Radical Reformers to the values of other religions, are to be added two more points: First, how the violent persecution of the Radical Reformers served as a strong impetus to their zealous assumption of the missionary command contained in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), which enabled them to recover the original meaning of "ecumenical". Their missionary vision included an enlarged household of God, that is, the whole inhabited world.

Secondly, and perhaps more central to present-day discussion of ecumenism and inter-faith relationship, is the remarkable attitude of universal religious toleration advocated by the Radical Reformers, based on the belief that faith is not coercive. For them, faith was a direct consequence of the immediate relationship between the soul and God.

5. Calvin's Position

In theory, Calvin's conception of the church provides the most compelling elements for an ecclesiology that embraces without qualification the entire body of believers. I would characterize his ecclesiology as a 'maternal ecclesiology', since, for him, the church is universal mother to all believers under the common fatherhood of God. As he affirms in his *Institutes of Christian Religion*:

The Church is Catholic or Universal... All the elect of God are so joined together in Christ, that as they depend on one head, so they are as it were compacted into one body, being knit together like its different members; made truly one by living together under the same Spirit of God in one faith, hope, and charity.

In line with other Reformers, Calvin makes a distinction between the invisible church, "as it really is before God," and the visible church, "the body of mankind," all believers in God through Christ. The 'marks' of the latter being the proclamation of the pure word of God, and the administration of the sacraments.

6. Conception of Church: A New Perspective for Christian Unity

What, then, are we to make of this data obtained from various Reformation ecclesiologies? It is my contention that this data furnishes fresh material for new approaches to Christian unity.

Let us begin with at least one serious objection that could be brought against my elaboration of Reformation ecclesiologies. This may be articulated as the dichotomy between the theoretical conception of the church, together with all its theological underpinnings, and the practical application of this doctrine. In other words, there exists an inconsistency between belief and practice in the positions of those who formulated the aforementioned conceptions of the church. The charge has been brought against them that they simply did not practice what they preached. Examples could be multiplied, but that of Calvin will suffice.

In many instances Calvin holds resolutely to the inexcusability of any break with the church, not even when defects are spotted. If he took such an uncompromising stand on the question of church unity, why did he himself break with the church? The answer is not far-fetched. 'Church' meant what Calvin defined it to be, and this on the basis of his own doctrines and understanding of Christianity. Before falling to the temptation to treat this matter along polemical lines, I recall my proverb: Whoever picks up quarrel with the past will lose the future.

But it is to the credit of the Reformation that divergences in the area of ecclesiology are minimal when compared with those which mushroomed in the domain of doctrine. In fact, one of the very positive legacies of the Reformation is the rather

widely-held conception of the church as universal (or Catholic). In general, the different formulations of Reformation ecclesiology, as we have seen, are unanimous in pointing out the *catholicity* of the church based on faith in God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The tenets of this faith may be interpreted differently, but, ultimately, its most important characteristic is the membership in Christian fellowship which it furnishes to all believers under the common and universal parenthood of God.

The line of thought implied in the foregoing finds echoes in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which conceives the church as the communion of all the people of God brought into unity by the mystery of the trinitarian communion; a sacramental sign and instrument of this communion with God and the unity of all men and women.

In this same line of reasoning, Reformation ecclesiologies grasped the insight that the church is not to be identified with and defined solely by structures and authorities. Today, we readily affirm that there is an element of mystery in the conception, constitution and experience of the church which underlies its structural elements. Thus the church is an unfathomable expression of the mystery of God's will for his people. This awareness ought to mitigate the tenor of contemporary controversies over matters of structure and authority which have ceaselessly hindered the unity of Christian churches. What emerges here is the need to focus our attention on the essentials of religion which unite, rather than on non-essentials which divide. Such was the ideal of Calvin, when he made a distinction between the primary matters of religion and the secondary ones, even though he reserved to himself the prerogative of defining what belonged to each of these categories.

The attitude of universal religious tolerance promoted by the Radical Reformers deserves special mention. In stark contrast to the contentious position of some of the major reformers, some key figures of the Radical Reformation opted for a religious tolerance which extended beyond Christianity to the followers of Judaism and Islam. The legacy of this virtue is a lesson for Christians.

One last point needs to be considered. It concerns the centrality of the Word of God. That it is vital for Christian unity is not in doubt. In all the divergent streams of the Reformation, the importance accorded to the Word of God stands out as an unmistakable element of unity. The Reformation's emphasis on the pure Word of God as a prerequisite for the emergence and sustenance of any authentic Christian community is in accord with contemporary emphasis.

The significance of this insight for Christian unity is immense, because, as one commentator holds:

The true unity of the Christian Church lies in its divine source – Word and Gospel – rather than uniformity of liturgy and polity.¹

¹Benjamin Drewery, "Martin Luther," in Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, ed., *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia, 1980), p.347.

Conclusion

My position at the end of this brief survey remains the same as at the outset. I formulate it as follows: The various conceptions of the church in Reformation ecclesiology allow for or, rather, facilitate Christian unity instead of remaining a perpetual block to it. Many reasons which I have advanced in this paper commend this kind of optimistic conclusion.

I do not, however, subscribe to a naïve expectation that the elements treated here suffice to achieve automatically the hitherto difficult Christian unity. Ecclesiology is but one dimension of the total panorama, the theological implications of which are more complex than might be grasped from this paper. But the central point of my position is the need to work towards a more ecumenical examination of Sixteenth century theology as a whole. It as a contribution to this task, I submit, that this position paper derives its significance.

(Emmanuel Orobator is a Nigerian Jesuit in his third year of studies at Hekima College)

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