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THE CORRELATION BETWEEN ECCLESIAL COMMUNION AND THE RECOGNITION OF MINISTRY

Susan K. Wood*

Recognition of an imperfect communion between churches, the recognition of ecclesial communities as churches, and the mutual recognition of ministry are treated as separate and discrete topics in ecumenical conversations. Nevertheless, an ecclesiology of communion suggests that ecclesial recognition and recognition of ministry within a relationship of imperfect communion should be correlated with each other in such a way that an imperfect ecclesial communion contributes to an incremental recognition of ministry in ecumenical relationships. This essay explores this question with specific references to the concept of communion in Chapter II, part D and E of the World Council of Churches document, The Church: Towards a Common Vision (2013).

Too often, the recognition of an imperfect communion between churches, the recognition of ecclesial communities as churches, and the mutual recognition of ministry are treated as separate and discrete topics in ecumenical conversations. Nevertheless, an ecclesiology of communion suggests that ecclesial recognition and recognition of ministry within a relationship of imperfect communion should be correlated with each other in such a way that an imperfect ecclesial communion contributes to an incremental recognition of ministry in ecumenical relationships. This essay explores this question with

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specific references to the concept of communion in Chapter II, part D and E of the World Council of Churches document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), hereafter referred to as *Towards a Common Vision*. Obviously, such a proposal exceeds the intent of the WCC document. The suggestion here is that such a correlation within the ecclesiology of communion that forms the basis of the document would offer a breakthrough in ecumenical relationships. Hence, this proposal constitutes an exploration of implications of the document in addition to commentary on what the document says about the identity of the local church, communion, and ministry. This proposal is not without its ecumenical challenges, which will also be outlined in what follows.

Identity of the Local Church

The criteria for recognizing a local church is given in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 31: ‘the local church is “a community of baptized believers in which the word of God is preached, the apostolic faith confessed, the sacraments are celebrated, the redemptive work of Christ for the world is witnessed to, and a ministry of *episkopé* exercised by bishops or other ministers in serving the community”.’ This definition comes from a report of the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, entitled ‘The Church: Local and Universal’.¹ More briefly stated, the criteria are: word, apostolic faith, sacraments, witness, and *episkopé*, a particular kind of ministry.

The expression ‘local church’ is sometimes used to refer to regional configuration of churches within a synodal structure under the presidency of a minister. *Towards a Common Vision* notes the lack of agreement ‘about how local, regional and universal levels of ecclesial order relate to one another’ (32). *Towards A Common Vision* develops its statement of the local church saying, ‘each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church. It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church. Thus, the local church should not be seen in isolation from but in dynamic relation with the other local churches’ (31). The universal church is identified as ‘the communion of all local churches united in faith and worship around the world’ (31). It

¹ See the report of the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, ‘The Church: Local and Universal’, 15.

has no substantive existence apart from this communion of local churches.

The Exercise of *Episkopé* and Apostolicity in the Local Church

Within the World Council of Churches, the necessity of a bishop for the exercise of *episkopé* poses a problem. Paragraph 32 acknowledges that some churches do not define a church in reference to a bishop, but simply say it is ‘the congregation of believers gathered in one place to hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments’. The document notes that churches differ regarding whether the historic episcopate or the apostolic succession of ordained ministry more generally is something intended by Christ (47). Nevertheless, *Towards a Common Vision* asks whether the churches can achieve a consensus on the threefold ministry as part of God’s will for the church on the basis of the signs of growing agreement about the place of ordained ministry in the church. In this, *Towards a Common Vision* is in continuity with the Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* (1982), paragraph 25, which asked ‘whether the threefold pattern as developed does not have a powerful claim to be accepted by churches that do not have it.’¹ While some churches have moved to incorporate the episcopacy, the call to consensus on this point remains problematic for others twenty-five years after the Lima document.

Significantly, *Towards a Common Vision* does not state that ministers must be in continuous apostolic succession or that the ministry of *episkopé* must be exercised by a bishop. This definition consequently leaves open the possibility that the community itself is an important bearer of apostolicity and that there may be a variety of ministers and ecclesial structures for the exercise of *episkopé*.

With respect to apostolicity, the section of the document devoted to ministry within the church lists several means for maintaining the church’s apostolicity, including the scriptural canon, dogma, and liturgical order, noting that ‘ordained ministry has played an important role’ (46). It adds, ‘succession in ministry is meant to serve the apostolic continuity of the Church’ (46). Appropriately, any language suggesting that succession in ministry ‘guarantees’

¹ *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, (the ‘Lima Text’), (Geneva: WCC, 15 January 1982).

apostolicity is absent. While one sometimes encounters language of 'guarantee' in ecclesiastical and ecumenical documents, it is inappropriate insofar as individual bishops are subject to apostasy, in which case they no longer function as a guarantee of apostolicity even though the episcopal office itself is charged with overseeing the apostolicity of the church. It is necessary to distinguish between the office charged with safeguarding apostolicity with the person exercising that office, all the while recognizing that other ecclesial elements in addition to ministry transmit, sustain, and bear witness to apostolicity. *Dei Verbum* explains, "what has been handed down from the apostles" includes everything that helps the people of God to live a holy life and to grow in faith' (8). It then says, 'the church, in its teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that it is and all that it believes.' Too often the apostolicity of a community has been judged by the apostolic succession of its ministers with little attempt given to gauging the apostolicity of its life, prayer, and witness. Even though Catholics hold the episcopacy to be essential to the structure of the church, this office belonging not only to the *bene esse*, but also to the *esse* of the church *de jure divino*, they can nevertheless agree with *Towards a Common Vision* that a variety of ministers and ecclesial structures may contribute to a church's apostolicity.

Towards a Common Vision describes the authority of the exercise of the ministry of oversight with respect to 'the proclamation of the Gospel, in the celebration of the sacraments, particularly the eucharist, and in the pastoral guidance of believers' (48). This ministry also nourishes and builds up 'the *koinonia* of the Church in faith, life and witness' (49). It further describes the tasks of *episkopé* as 'maintaining continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life ... preaching the Word and celebrating the Sacraments ... to safeguard and hand on revealed truth, to hold the local congregations in communion, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the Gospel' (52). This describes the tasks of serving the communion *within* a local church, but does not describe the task of the ministry of oversight as serving or overseeing the communion *among* the local churches.

This represents a missed opportunity for correlating the document's vision of the church as a communion of local churches with its theology of ministry. While the document describes the church as a communion of local churches, it does not develop in any detail the

basis of that communion or the structures or ministry that serve that communion. The document, in its initial description of the church of the Triune God as *koinonia* situates this communion in relation to the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, describes the *koinonia* effected by sharing in the Lord's Supper, and speaks of the church as centered and grounded in the Gospel (13-14). This can and should be said of the *koinonia* of each individual local church. It does not yet, however, address the communion of local churches with each other. One looks in vain for a statement that says that ministers, especially the ministry of oversight, must have solicitude for other local churches and the relations among them. Given the strong attention given to an ecclesiology of communion, this is a serious lacuna in the document.

Correlations of Church and Ministry Beginning with 'Ministry'

In Catholic theology, reflection on the church often follows upon reflection on ministry. When a reflection on the church follows upon reflection on ministry, a theology of the church universal follows from a consideration of universal primacy as exercised by the Bishop of Rome. Reflections on both were a notable achievement of Vatican I, where the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war prevented a corresponding consideration of the episcopacy. The Constitution entitled 'First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ' has four chapters: Chapter 1, 'On The Institution of the Apostolic Primacy in Blessed Peter;' Chapter 2, 'On the Permanence of the Primacy of Blessed Peter in the Roman Pontiffs;' Chapter 3, 'On the Power and Character of the Primacy of the Roman Pontiff;' Chapter 4, 'On the Infallible Teaching Authority of the Roman Pontiff.' In other words, in the Constitution on the Church all the chapters are about primacy, Peter, and the Pope, which is to say ministry, rather than about the church as such.

Lumen gentium took up the unfinished task of Vatican I and developed a theology of the particular churches through a theology of the episcopacy. While the Constitution begins with the chapter on the mystery of the church followed by a chapter on the people of God before treating the hierarchical Constitution of the church and, in particular, the episcopate in chapter 3, the discussion of the particular churches and their relationship to the one Catholic Church is

presented with respect to the collegial unity in the mutual relations of individual bishops with particular churches and with the universal church (23). A theology of the local church follows from the theology of the episcopacy.

Within this paradigm, mutual recognition of a community as church has followed upon the recognition of its ministry as apostolic. In current Catholic theology, the presence of what would be considered to be a valid ministry is the fundamental criteria for determining whether a community is truly a church or is designated as an ecclesial community. While *Unitatis Redintegratio* distinguishes between churches and ecclesial communities, Hermann Otto Pesch, among other theologians who were at the second Vatican Council, argued that the phrase 'ecclesial community' was meant to be inclusive of those communities who do not self designate as a church, such as the Salvation Army, rather than exclusive of those communities who do not have apostolic episcopal succession.¹ It may be more accurate to conclude that the Council itself left open the theological question of which of the separated Churches of the West could claim the name 'church' in order to avoid a purely juridical concept of 'church' based solely on institutional criteria when large numbers of separated Christians are led to a living faith in God and his presence in Jesus Christ and to community in the Holy Spirit, even though they lack some of the institutional means 'fully' present in the Catholic Church.² Pope Paul VI did not distinguish between churches and ecclesial communities when he addressed the representatives of the separated churches with the cry: '*O Ecclesiae*.'³ Exploration of the intention of the Council is not my present subject, but the history of conciliar

¹ Otto Hermann Pesch, *The Second Vatican Council: Prehistory-Event-Results-Posthistory*, trans. Deirdre Dempsey (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014), 212-3.

² Ibid. In this respect see the intervention of the Italian Bishop Andrea Pangrazio, cited by Pesch on page 213, who identified Christ as the bond and center of the *elementa* of the church present in separated communities.

³ Paul VI, Discorso di Paolo VI per l'inaugurazione della Terza Sessione del Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II, Festività della Esaltazione della Santa Croce, Lunedì, 14 settembre 1964:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/la/speeches/1964/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19640914_III-sessione-conc.html

interpretation illustrates how designation of churches 'in the proper sense' has followed upon recognition of ministry.

This correlation privileging ministry as the starting point for reflection on the church is most evident in the declaration from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (2000), which states that 'the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense; however, those who are baptized in these communities are, by Baptism, incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the church' (DI 17). To be noted here is, first, that the status of 'church in the proper sense' is based on the character of ministry, and second, that in this text, individuals are in an imperfect communion with the Catholic Church, not necessarily their ecclesial communities. This latter point raises the ecumenical problem of ascertaining the communion of ecclesial communities as a whole, and not just their members. Pope John Paul II extended the imperfect communion of Christians to the imperfect communion of their communities in his comment on the proselytizing activities of sects in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*:

This must be borne in mind especially with regard to the sisters and brothers of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities separated from the Catholic Church, long-established in some regions. The bonds of true though imperfect communion which, according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, these communities already have with the Catholic Church must enlighten the attitudes of the Church and her members towards them.¹

Here John Paul II speaks of the bonds of true though imperfect communion of communities, not merely individuals. Similarly, in *Ut Unum Sint*, he speaks of 'brothers and sisters living in Communities not in full communion with one another'.²

The documents *Dominus Iesus* and *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* have hardened the distinction in *Unitatis Redintegratio* between ecclesial

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, 22 January 1999, 73.

² John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, 35.

communities and churches.¹ Furthermore, recognition of ministry has up to the present been in terms of 'all or nothing.' Ministry is recognized as either valid or invalid. The present official line of the church is that valid ministry confers the identity of 'church' on an ecclesial body. In its absence, one is left with an 'ecclesial community'.

The ecumenical question of the mutual recognition of ministry raises the question whether recognition of ministry should in some measure follow upon recognition of churches rather than precede it. Ecumenically, this would mean that the recognition of ministry would depend on the recognition of the churchly character of that ministry's community and not vice versa. There would, no doubt, be additional criteria for the recognition of ministry in terms of understanding its function with respect to proclamation of the Gospel, to its role in the sacraments, and to its service to the apostolicity of the church. Nevertheless, the recognition of the churchly character of the community would play a much larger role in the recognition of ministry than it presently does.

Towards a Common Vision does not correlate its discussion of ministry with its discussion of the communion of the church aside from its observation that ordained ministry is personal, collegial, and communal insofar as a college of ordained ministers shares in the common task of representing the concerns of the community and is rooted in the life of the community and requires the community's effective participation (52). Thus, one critique of the document is its insufficient correlation of the topic of 'church' and 'ministry,' even while acknowledging that such a correlation is not common. While beginning with ministry can at times place an emphasis on the apostolic character of ministry to the neglect of the role of the church in transmitting apostolicity, not to correlate ministry with the nature of the church risks reducing ministry to a function to the neglect of its symbolic role in the church.

Ministers, while performing tasks of preaching, administering the sacraments, and pastoral leadership, also function representationally. In Catholic theology, for example, the college of bishops represents

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, 'On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,' 6 August 2000, 17, and *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*, 29 June 2007, Fifth Question.

the communion of churches, the collegial relationship of bishops mirroring the bonds between the relationships of the churches they serve. Ordained priests and pastors, while individually reciting the eucharistic prayer, use the collective pronoun 'we' with the exception of the recitation of the institutional narrative. In ministering to the sick and to sinners, they pray for healing and forgiveness in the name of Christ, but also bring reconciliation and comfort in the name of the church. This symbolic function of ministry can and should be applied to how ministry serves the communion of churches with the minister representing his/her local church in inter-ecclesial relations.

Correlations of Church and Ministry Beginning with 'Church'

The recent Lutheran-Catholic document, *Declaration on the Way* (2015), proposes an alternative approach to considering mutual recognition of ministry and mutual recognition of churches independently one from the other, suggesting that

Newly identified theological frameworks offer perspectives allowing for nuanced, graduated, and differentiated evaluations that provide an alternative to sharp either/or assessments of ministry. The correlations of ecumenical progress made on the church issues of ministry is an especially urgent task, since such a correlation could support a qualified but immediate mutual recognition of ministry in such a way that a partial recognition of ministry would correlate with the real but imperfect communion of churches.¹

Essentially, this requires correlating the church conceived of as a communion of local churches with the collegial notion of ministry as a corporate body intrinsically related to the communion of churches. In Catholicism, the bishop represents this particular church in the episcopal College following the adage of Cyprian, 'The bishop is in the church as the churches are in the bishop'. Within a model of the church as communion where each church is united to the bishop, who in turn is in a relationship of communion with the Bishop of Rome and the college of bishops by virtue of his ordination, ministry

¹ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry, and Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 92.

becomes a sign or a sort of sacrament of the church insofar as it signifies the church. This means that the bishops in communion with the college of bishops are the visible sign and representation of the communion of particular churches. Membership in and union with the college of bishops is an essential element within episcopal consecration and arguably represents the ‘fullness of orders,’ which sets the episcopacy apart from the presbyterate and the diaconate.¹ The latter do not have a representational function within their order as do the bishops.

Following this, an imperfect communion of particular churches (presupposing that these include churches from different denominations not in communion with each other) leads to the recognition of the imperfect communion of the ministers of these churches, particularly those ministers exercising *episkopé*. The question arises, though, of whether or not there can be an incremental recognition of ministry in contrast to full recognition. That is, whether mutual recognition need be full recognition or no recognition, all or nothing.

Round X of the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue cites a letter written by the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger to the German Lutheran bishop, Johannes Hanselmann: ‘I count among the most important results of the ecumenical dialogues the insight that the issue of the Eucharist cannot be narrowed to the problem of “validity”. Even a theology oriented to the concept of succession, such as that which holds in the Catholic and in the Orthodox Church, should in no way deny the saving presence of the Lord (*Heilschaffende Gegenwart des Herrn*) in a Lutheran (*evangelische*) Lord’s Supper.’² Certainly, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, without affirming or denying the real presence

¹ See Susan K. Wood, ‘The Sacramentality of Episcopal Consecration,’ *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 479-96; also *Sacramental Orders* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 64-85.

² ‘Briefwechsel von Landesbischof Johannes Hanselmann und Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger über das Communion-Schreiben der Römischen Glaubens-kongregation,’ *Una Sancta* 48 (1993), 348; quoted in *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation*, para. 107. Translation here from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith. The Church as Communion*, eds. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 248. The full text of the 1993 letters of Bishop Hanselmann and the then Cardinal Ratzinger are given on pp. 242-52.

of the Lord in the liturgical celebration of separated Christians, stated that 'many sacred actions ... most certainly can truly engender a life of grace in ways that vary according to the condition of each church or community, and must be held capable of giving access to that communion in which is salvation' (UR 3).

The ecumenical problems associated with the proposal of this essay, namely that there be recognized ecumenically a correlation between the communion of churches and the mutual recognition of ministry, are many. They are particularly difficult for a multilateral document such as *Towards a Common Vision* on account of the variety of church structures and ministerial practices represented within the World Council of Churches. Let me briefly enumerate some of them:

1. Many Catholic documents speak of the communion of Christians, not of the communion of ecclesial communities or churches. Thus, it is common to speak of a soteriological communion achieved in baptism and in grace. Consequently, the first ecumenical and theological task is to address the communion of communities.
2. Even where an Episcopal order is retained, many ecclesial communities—and here I'm thinking primarily of Lutherans, although this also applies to others—have yet to develop a robust communal theology of the episcopacy as a body. Ministry is conceived of individually rather than as an order in the church in the traditional sense.
3. Many traditions do not have a symbolic or representational theology of ministry as representing the church.
4. This model is difficult to apply to those church traditions that exercise *episkopé* through structures other than a bishop.
5. Many Catholics would have a difficult time thinking of ministry in terms other than validity. One is a minister with the power to confect the real substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist, or not. There is no in-between status. Much work remains to be done to move beyond the category of validity and the traditional criteria for it. Certainly, the development of criteria for a churchly community and the role of ministry within that community would be part of an expanded theology of ministry with respect to the Eucharist.

The challenge is great, but what makes these difficulties even seem possible is the basis of the vision of the church in *Towards a Common*

Vision, namely the identification of the church as a communion of churches. Agreement on what constitutes the church is an important beginning. Nevertheless, even though the document presents a common vision of the church, it does not present a vision of how those churches can exist in ecumenical communion with each other or how this might affect an evaluation of ministry. Much ecumenical work still lies ahead.

'Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.' Romans 4:18

This sentence, hoping against hope, has from the beginning been a kind of watchword in the camp and city of the Great King; a sentence inscribed, as one may say, upon the wayside crosses which are set as marks here and there on either hand of the road to the heavenly Jerusalem. It is, in a certain sense, more than faith; for faith, simply taken, only goes beyond what we see; but this hope against it goes also. Hope, such as Abraham had, such as St. Paul here describes, is an actual throwing off and mastering the impression of importunate present evils. It lifts and buoys up the whole man towards the good which faith only discerns. It not only realises, but appropriates the unseen good. It is, therefore, both a more immediate spring of action, and, as recognising God's unchangeable goodness, more intimately tied to love, the end of the commandment and the bond of all perfectness.

From John Keble's sermon on *The Duty of Hoping against Hope* preached in the chapel of Harrow Weald, Middlesex, on Wednesday 1 July 1846, on laying the foundation of a new church, and opening a new school.