

THE CREATIVE TENSION BETWEEN THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

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Abstract:

The universal dimension of the Church does not always go hand in hand with the fact that it has to manifest itself in a local community, that is to say, a local Church presided by a bishop. History has witnessed that sometimes there were tensions between the two. The solutions offered are oftentimes one-sided. One may become either a staunch defender of universality or a radical proponent of the local Church. However, neither of these two positions are fruitful for the growth of the Church worldwide among the faithful: while holding one dimension, one can easily overlook the other. Ecclesiology might have to explore different approaches that can relate these positions, bearing in mind the needs of the local Church and the faithful. What is needed in dealing with the tension is creativity. The tension may never be resolved without being creative in exploring new ways of constructing local theologies.

Keywords:

Catholicity • creative tension • creativity • the Church • universal and local church • local theologies

Introduction

As an Indonesian priest of the Roman Catholic Church studying dogmatic theology, I must find a profound theological insight concerning the relationship between the universal and the local church. It is from my standpoint that this essay is composed to explore the relationship between them, especially within the scope of the Roman Catholic Church.

I would begin by describing the universal character of the church,¹ starting from the catholicity and some magisterial documents on the universal character of the church. Next, how that very universal church concretely manifests herself in particular places will be delineated. Thus, it is clear that the universal church also has a local dimension. However, the two dimensions do not always get on well, as the tensions between the two are quite obvious. I would attempt to perceive them in terms of creativity and not as a menace to both “parties”. Creativity is the key to harmonize the two dimensions and it is from such creativity that an endeavor to construct local theologies arises.

The research on the works of some writers such as Francis A. Sullivan, H. Legrand, Joseph Ratzinger, Arturo Cattaneo, Joseph A. Komonchak, and some magisterial documents enabled me to present the idea of the local church. The writings of Robert Schreiter are the tools to make creativity fruitful, that is, by constructing local theologies.

The Universal Church

It goes without saying that the church is catholic. Etymologically speaking, *kath'holou* means “according to the whole” or “universal”, and generally, the Greek philosophers used it to express ideas like “goodness” and “beauty” as distinguished from particular good or beautiful things.² This universality has to do with a set of essential things that exist in any particularity.

St. Ignatius of Antioch distinguished between “the local Eucharistic assembly” and “the church as a whole, in its entirety”³ and it is from this distinction that we are able to note a difference between the local manifestation of the church and the universality characterizing the entire church. Later on, in around the 160s, in the account of the martyrdom of

St. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, the use of the word “catholic” for the adjective of the church, not only referred to the geographical sense but contained further ideas of oneness and uniqueness so that there was an insinuation toward one church throughout the world.⁴ Gradually, the term catholic referred to the true church of Christ as opposed to the heretical and schismatic groups, and, as such, the catholicity pointed also to the guarantee of authenticity, the plenitude and the wholeness.⁵

At the foundation of this catholicity, we have the catholicity of Christ, which Sullivan succinctly puts as follows:

By the catholicity of Christ I mean his role as the “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5f). Or as Peter put it, “There is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).” His catholicity is his universal role as the one mediator, one redeemer, one hope of salvation for all of humanity.⁶

The role of Jesus Christ for the salvation of all is the very base of the catholicity. He is the only true mediator between God and men. He is the only ransom to men’s sinfulness and his role in the universal salvific will of God is universal. Thus, the church as the embodiment of the whole economy of salvation has this universal character.

Right from the opening, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), as the dogmatic constitution, expresses the catholicity of the church that brings about the universal character. “Christ is the Light of nations (LG 1)”⁷ is the opening sentence, reminding all that the light of the church is the reflection of the Light of Christ just as He is the true sun and the church the moon.⁸ As Christ is the Light for all, LG continues to express its intention which is “to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission (LG 1).” This universality in mission is given to the church as God wills “to bring men together as one people, a people that acknowledges him in truth and serves him in holiness (LG 9)” and this will is for all (cf. LG 13).

The universality is not merely an indelible character of the church. It moves the church in her mission by making herself “fully present to all men and peoples in order to lead them to the faith, freedom, and peace of Christ (*Ad Gentes* 5)” because she is “sent by Christ to reveal

and communicate the love of God to all men and to all peoples (AG 13).” The church’s presence is nothing but her mission since the task of communicating the love of God, the living God who reveals himself to men (*Dei Verbum* 2), is always an integral part of her being.

Consequently, with this universal character entailing the universal mission, the church must be concrete. Had she been merely an abstract entity with strong theological bases, she could never have been a sign of salvation and charity among human beings reflecting the oneness and the love of the Trinitarian love⁹.

The Local Church

Temporality to Locality

Since the universal salvific will of God embraces human concrete temporality, the church must carry out her mission in human concrete temporality, as Rahner states:

The Church is neither an idea, nor a principle, nor a postulate. Nor is she simply or merely identical with that which she believes as having been promised to her by God and, moreover, ever destined in its essence to be kept alive by the power of God’s predestinating grace, such that in its essentials the content of her belief will never simply cease to be a concrete reality. She is a ‘visible’ Church, the ‘people of God’ in the concrete, a social entity, a formal group, an institution in the world with all that that entails, and that too not merely in virtue of her ‘nature’ as instituted by God, but also in virtue of all that is in her and pertaining to her.¹⁰

The faith and the identity of the church should be alive. The vital sign of this aliveness is, of course, a concrete reality: the church, the people of God that is visible and concrete. This concreteness is then defined in three elements. She has a *social entity*, which consists of human beings doing “churchly things”. Instead of being amorphous, this social entity takes a *formal group*, which is an *institution*. In turn, the church will always be *localized* in a certain space. So, notwithstanding her universal character, she realizes herself in a certain place.¹¹

The Magisterium

Although there is no systematic exposition on the local church in the Vatican II¹², what is stated in *Christus Dominus* (CD), the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, might serve as a depiction of what local church is.

A diocese is a section of the People of God entrusted to a bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy so that, loyal to its pastor and formed by him into one community in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes one particular church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active (CD 11).

That is the correct and proper definition of the local church¹³ with its essential elements. Cattaneo distinguishes those elements as follows. The Gospel, the Eucharist and the Holy Spirits are the genetic factors. The substantial elements are a section of the People of God wherein the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active. Then, the bishop as the pastor of that People of God and his clergy are the ministerial elements.

As an evangelized and evangelizing community (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 13) the local church has the Gospel as its basis because faith is only possible from the dynamics of evangelization, viz., *fides ex auditu* (Rome 10:7). First of all, she needs to evangelize herself before evangelizing others. With the faith that is grown from the word of God, the local church then celebrates her faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist as the fountain and source of Christian life (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 2). The Holy Spirit is the paraclete that accompanies the church in her journey.

The People of God is substantial since “all those, who in faith look toward Jesus, the author of salvation and the principle of unity and peace, God has gathered together and established as the Church (LG 10).” Here the locality becomes important. The People of God is always in a certain place. The CD states that the People of God is a *portio* that signifies not only a section as is used in the English translation, but it has the connotation of fullness, as it comes from the word *proportio* as the translation of the Greek word *analogia*.¹⁴ The local church is, as it were, not merely a part of a bigger structure, nor is she a branch, nor a franchised affiliate of a big

international organization. She has the fullness of being church in herself. She is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ.

The bishop guarantees that in the portion of the People of God entrusted to him, the totality of the mystery of the church in its wholeness is present and it has the unity with all other local churches.¹⁵ Those with the ministerial priesthood are to serve the People of God especially as they affect the Eucharistic sacrifice and offer it to God in the name of all the people (cf. LG 10).

Between The Two

A Breaking Dawn

As the universal church is realized in and through the variety of local church(es),¹⁶ the concrete situations in which a local church exists matter significantly. Historically speaking, Komonchak describes that, as the sociological and cultural form of the Catholic Church assumed in the Counter-Reformation, Roman Catholicism, especially since the French Revolution and in response to the challenge of modernity, once constituted a culture.¹⁷ At this point in history, the church became the one and only standard measure of many things. Once the church existed, she determined all values to be followed exactly by those who wished to join her, regardless of the values of the local cultures. The missionaries would come to any part of the world to convert all to be catholic, to be the member of the one, holy, catholic church with Rome as her center. The turning point of this is Vatican II that has changed many things in the church with its simultaneous *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement*.¹⁸

The years since the Council has seen a shift from the perspective in which the churches of the southern hemisphere were seen as missionary territories and dependencies of the European and North American churches. They are now regarded as equal members of the universal Church, with their own contribution to make to a church that, precisely because it is catholic, cannot be centered upon Europe.¹⁹

This shift of perspective gives more opportunity for the local church to develop. The use of the plural forms, the local churches, implies that

diversity has been fully acknowledged. Despite that diversity, all local churches enjoy equality in their relation to one another. It is enough to ponder upon what Cardinal Malulu stated in the 1976 synod to sense the tension between the universal and local dimension of church: “Yesterday foreign missionaries Christianized Africa. Today, the Christians of Africa are called to Africanize Christianity.”²⁰ This is a very strong statement, indeed!

The Tensions

Along with the births of many local churches, challenges arise. The local church does not come out of the blue. Long before Christianity arrived in any particular place where a local church was to be built, the people in the area already had their own culture that had been in existence long before they were born. All their life they have been living in the only culture they know; whereas, Christianity – through the missionaries – transfers their way of understanding things, which, for better or worse, has its own way of life; thus, its own culture. To put it more simply, Christianity emphasizes the universal dimension of the Church and the community of believers in that certain place will give birth to a local church with a flavor of the indigenous culture.

Pope Paul VI, in his *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN 25), tries to grapple with this issue but the tensions between the two remain.

It is easy enough to say, as did Pope Paul VI, that there are «many secondary elements» in the Church’s message, which may change, and an «essential content, a living substance, which cannot be modified or ignored». But the real problem is in knowing how to separate that substance from culturally conditioned elements. There is not now, nor has there ever been, a Catholicism that represents some pure, transcultural quintessence of Christianity. Catholicism is what Catholicism has become throughout its history; moreover, the power that it possesses is not felt only in its institution but in the hold over minds and hearts that familiarity and habit produce.²¹

Theologically as well as theoretically speaking, I would say that the distinction is possible. Yet, since the so-called universal church, stated above as Catholicism, is not merely a set of doctrines but also a way of life

down to many technical and daily things, the indigenous flavour of local church might create tension with the universal church, especially when it comes to the magisterium.

Looking at the fact that the tensions between the universal and local church are real and concrete, it is important that we identify precisely what is going on between the two.

First of all, it is crystal clear that cultural diversity is a fact.²² On the other hand, the church –without any distinction between the universal and the local- has to maintain the unity: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all (Ephesians 4:5).” Maintaining the unity despite the diversity is a real challenge.

Second, there is always the possibility of syncretism from the cultural diversity that usually has already had its own religious system.²³ The case of syncretism might not be as complicated as a theological issue, but it could be a matter of the die-hard old habits. Just imagine how someone who for many years of his life has already had a certain way of understanding relation to the divine beings is converted into Christianity with its theology on the Trinity. Then, it is understandable that there is a possibility of understanding the Holy Trinity as the many divinities as what he has already had in the previous religion.

Third, there is the risk of discontinuity between the universal and the local church when countering this syncretism by completely severing the cultural elements that could influence the faith.²⁴ The third age²⁵ of the church has in fact given birth to many local churches with many cultural diversities. It is indeed a challenge to sustain the continuity of the universal church with the long history (and tradition and magisterium) of what is developed in the local churches.

And finally, as cultures have their own ways of expressing inner beliefs, so too the local church might have brought about their cultural expression to express their faith in Jesus Christ.²⁶ Subsequently, questions would emerge of which expressions are permitted and which are not, of who should make decisions as well as how decisions should be made, and all this could lead to a persistent tension.

Creativity

As yet, tensions between the universal and local church are not a threat. They are the impetuses to creativity as the local church could be a *locus theologicus* for contextual theologies that began in the 1970s as attempts

...to articulate a different way of doing theology...to present a reflection that was universal in its scope, mirroring the universal message of the Gospel which was the subject of its investigation...take up issues that were the most pressing in many local circumstances.²⁷

As we know it, the local church is dealing with many local and particular issues. In my own diocese, for example, there are at least three different cultures: the urban culture at the center of the diocese, Bandung; the Sundanese culture in the southeast part of the diocese; and the coastal-Javanese culture in the northeast part of the diocese. Each has its own characteristic and, together, they form the interlocutors of being church in Bandung diocese. The diocese as one local church covering those areas has to be a church, that is one, holy, Catholic, apostolic Church in that context. And so are other local churches.

Against that background, local theologies are badly needed. Certainly, they are not new theologies. They are ventures to incarnate concretely the universal message of the Gospel into the context in which the local church exists. Constructing a contextual theology, nevertheless, can never be the same as reducing theology to a crude contextualism for, then, it is likely to lose its critical edge as it becomes simply a product of its surroundings.²⁸ A crude contextualism will lead to a narrow and shortsighted theology, that is a theology that loses the connection to the whole tradition of theology. In this sense, the universal message of the Gospel itself is reduced to merely an answer to the local needs. While a local theology must

also have a universalizing function, by which is meant an ability to speak beyond its own context, and an openness to hear voices from beyond its boundaries... Theology cannot restrict itself only to its own and immediate context; if the message of what God has done in Christ is indeed Good News for all peoples, then the occurrence of grace in any setting has relevance for the rest of humanity.²⁹

God's self-revelation that is reflected in contextual theologies is God that has universal salvific will. As such, the theological reflection cannot leave this universal dimension. The locality as the *locus theologicus* is the best vantage point to reflect more profoundly, yet concretely, the significance of the Good News for all men, more importantly for those living in that locality.

Conclusion

The reflections upon the local church are flourishing after the Vatican II. Although the Vatican II itself did not have a systematic theological reflection on the local church, in various documents it touched the issue of local church. The local church is always characterized by local culture with all its elements and by the particular problems happening in the area. Meanwhile, the universal church acts like a bulwark: protecting the unity of the church by putting emphasis on the universal dimension of the church. It is true that the relationship between the two is marked by some tensions. To come to terms with these tensions, creativity is needed: constructing local theologies without falling into the futility of contextualism. It is the task of all who do theology today. The locality is not to be ignored. The local church is the *locus theologicus*.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Here I do not make any distinction like Sullivan does, cf. F. A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) 84. I write “church” in small letters, but I maintain “Church” when quoting the texts from books that write that way. As for the pronoun, “she” is used when referring to the church in the universal, catholic sense, and “it” when referring to certain particular and local church.
- 2 Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, *ibid.*, 84.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 7 I put the references in brackets instead of in footnotes because I constantly refer to magisterial documents.
- 8 Cf. H. de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (Shannon: Ecclesia Press, 1969) 16-17.
- 9 Cf. R. Latourelle & R. Fisichella (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994) 144.
- 10 K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. XII (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974) 218.
- 11 Cf. H. Legrand, “La chiesa si realizza in un luogo”, in B. Laurent & F. Refoulé, *Iniziazione alla pratica della teologia* vol. 3 (Brescia: Queriniana, 1986) 149-185.
- 12 J. A. Komonchak, “The Local Realization of the Church” in G. Alberigo, JP. Jossua, J. Komonchak (eds.), *The Reception of Vatican II* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987) 77.
- 13 Cf. A. Cattaneo, *Unità e varietà nella comunione della chiesa locale: Riflessioni ecclesiologicalhe e canonistiche* (Venezia: Marcianum Press, 2006) 22.
- 14 Cf. *ibid.*, 31.
- 15 Cf. *ibid.*, 35, also Benedetto XVI-J. Ratzinger, *La chiesa, una comunità sempre in cammino* (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni Paoline, 1991) 55-74.
- 16 Komonchak, “The Local Realization of the Church”, *art. cit.*, 77.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 79-80. It is interesting to note that although the idea of local church has been in existence since the era of the ancient church, it is relatively new as a theological discourse.
- 18 Cf. G. O’Collins SJ, “Ressourcement and Vatican II”, in G. Flynn, P. D. Murray – P. Kelly (Eds.), *Ressourcement, A Movement for Renewal in the Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 372-391.
- 19 Komonchak, *art. cit.*, 81.
- 20 Quoted from Komonchak, *ibid.*, 83.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 22 R. J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 116.
- 23 R. J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 117.
- 24 Cf. R.J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 117.
- 25 K. Rahner says: “First, the short period of Jewish Christianity. Second, the period of the Church in a distinct cultural region, namely, that of Hellenism and of

European culture and civilization. Third, the period in which the sphere of the Church's life is in fact the entire world", see K. Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Reflection of Vatican II," in *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), 721, cf. also J. A. Komonchak, "The Local Realization of the Church", in G. Alberigo, J.P. Jossua, J. Komonchak (eds.), *The Reception of Vatican II*, 81.

- 26 Cf. R. J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985) 118.
- 27 R. J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity, Theology between the Global and the Local* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 1.
- 28 Cf. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, *op. cit.*, 3-4.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 4.