

TOWARD AN ECUMENICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

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THE CONVERGING of most of the Christian churches does not need to be proved, but only illustrated and interpreted. Anyone who has even a modest knowledge of what has happened in the past two decades knows this. If during the *anno santo* of 1950, when Pope Pius XII announced the dogma of the bodily assumption into heaven of the Virgin Mary, a pious Dutch Catholic named Rip van Winkle had fallen into a twenty-year slumber, he would be utterly unable to believe what he saw and heard of the close relations of Christian churches. Whether he would welcome the new situation of ecumenical convergence would depend upon his disposition to agree with the course of theological change in these two decades. And if he were Professor van Winkle, whose soporific lectures had at last had the twenty-year effect upon himself, he would know upon awakening that he would have to test the value of the changes by the various criteria of ecclesiology, which is the understanding of the nature of the Church.

Some of the strongest causes of division in the past were the disagreements over the optimum form, order, ministry, worship, and purpose of the Church. Is it hierarchical control or local autonomy? Pope or council? Bishop or presbyter? Mass or Lord's Supper? Baptized infant or believer? Formal liturgy or free expression? National establishment or independence? Since these are the rocks and shoals over which ecclesial ships have foundered and broken in two, it is astonishing to see how the tides of agreement are rising and permitting safe passage.

It would be an illicit deception to pretend that unity and concord on the truth about the Church have already been achieved. We are describing the convergent trends, not the perfect coincidence of them. Without making unwarranted claims for unity, and fully cognizant of the continuing controversies over the issues of ecclesiology, we can point to trends which seem now to be undeviating. They are evident especially in four areas of inquiry: the Faith and Order conferences and studies, which began after 1920 and continue in the World Council of Churches and many national councils; the conversations and supporting studies which have been directed towards the uniting of Protestant churches; the theological preparation for the Second Vatican Council and the documents which were approved by it; and the great quantity of individual scholarship in the fields of Bible, history of doctrine, liturgy, canon law, sociology of religion, theology, and ecumenics. A

truly prodigious amount of mental energy has been invested in the research, conference dialogue, and publication required for this unprecedented overhauling of ecclesiology in Christian history. Only to stake out the dimensions of the enlarging field of common understanding about the Church, we can discuss six significant elements in an ecumenical concept of the Church for today and tomorrow.

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MANKIND

Primary and basic is the concern for all persons, considered both individually and in their social communities. The more we sense the reality of the oneness of the human race and express faith in it, the more passionately we question the divine purpose which impels us and awaits fulfilment. What is the meaning of man's historical existence? How does God's power operate within the course of that common history? Why is there such a continuing community as the Church, which is constituted by a distinct faith rather than by the natural affinities of race, tongue, or nationality? Does the existence of the Church have something to do with the destiny of all mankind, and not only with that of its own professed members?

In order to suggest some tentative, partially satisfying answers to these profound and ultimately insoluble questions, it has been necessary to discard some obsolete notions as well as to examine with caution some modern surrogates for them. A timeworn and now worn-out belief has been that the Church, like the floating zoo of Noah, was launched by God on the surly, insidious sea of history in order to be the lifeboat of the lucky few. The powerful imagery of the storm, shipwreck, and safe harbor has usually suggested that the Master of wind and waves had already decided arbitrarily which of the passengers and crew would be spared oblivion in the waters of chaos. So salvation, meaning eternal rescue, was equated with Church membership, and outside the Church there was no salvation.

A tempting substitute for this obsolete belief is the relativistic view that the Church of Jesus Christ does indeed embrace a minority of the race, but that it represents just one alongside of several religions held by the majority, any one of which is equally suitable as a means of salvation—whatever *that* may mean.

Does the Church have a monopoly on the shipping lanes leading to salvation? Or is it just one of the strong competitors in the maritime market? Neither of these metaphors can satisfy the mind of a Christian, unless he be one who is either blind to the realities of history or wholly determined in thought by historical relativism. Between these polar-

ized positions is the area where an ecumenical convergence is taking place.

The general theory which dominates and informs this trend is the one derived from biblical theology: saving history, or the history of salvation. Probably the most notable Protestant protagonist of this motif is Oscar Cullmann of Basel. The foremost Catholic interpreter of it was the Second Vatican Council. It is not astonishing to one who compares the books of Cullmann with the texts of the Constitution on the Church and the two Decrees on Ecumenism and Mission when he learns of the special honor accorded to the Basel professor by Pope Paul VI and the theologians of the Council.¹

Saving history has become widely known through discussions of it in countless writings of this century. It is commended as the biblical alternative to three main types of historical theory: the cyclical view of eternal return or endless repetition; the optimistic idea of constant progress by human achievement; and the nihilistic notion that history is aimless and meaningless. Of the Marxist theory it is often said that this is a secularized distortion of the biblical saving history.

History seems self-evidently to consist of perennial instances of men's use of political and economic power for exploitation, blindness to the plight of the distressed and oppressed, abuses of natural and human resources, hostile conflicts and deadly wars, and the rising and falling of nations and empires. Or a more cheerful analysis exposes the history of man's artistic expression, advances in technological skills, and the spread of religious and cultural institutions. All these are the ingredients of history. What sense do they make?

There is indeed a development of mankind, according to the concept of saving history. It is not explicable, however, in terms of any natural evolutionary process. It is chiefly a moral struggle among men, rather than a struggle against nature. In this drama of history God is not to be conceived as a kind of *deus ex machina*, plummeting from heaven to the human stage just in the nick of time to avert catastrophe. Rather, He is the God who is continually with man in joy and triumph as well as in deepest distress. Having given man the perilous blessing of freedom in creation, God does not abrogate man's use of it in order to prevent him from making drastic mistakes. Through the very events and conditions which are brought about by man's use of free choice and deliberate action, whether these be tragically destructive of life or happily beneficial, God enables him to learn the consequences of sin and to know the ways of righteousness which God requires.

¹Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York, 1967). See *Ecumenical Experiences*, ed. Luis V. Romeu (London, 1965) p. 36.

How does this knowledge through history's significant events come to man? To all nations and peoples universally? To one people in particular? Or through the particularity of one people for the instruction of all of mankind? It is the third answer which the Bible's implicit idea of saving history provides.

Just as the concept of peoplehood is being emphasized today by the Jews with new vigor, so it has been the presupposition of biblical faith since the exodus from bondage in Egypt. Yahweh was known to be a very particular God, inexplicably picking this remarkable tribe in the Eastern Mediterranean region to be His point of contact with the human race. He is the Creator and Lord of all people. So to gain communication and establish personal relationship with the universal race of man, winning their faith by stimulating them to make a free choice, God chose to open the secrets of His will to Israel in particular. The consistent themes of the Old Testament show that His self-exposure was perceived by the prophets, priests, and historians of Israel. Insofar as they remained faithful to the covenant, the people of Israel were the corporate embodiment of the law of God as well as the bearers of promise and hope for mankind. Their vocation was not to conquer and rule, but to serve as the medium of God's Word to the nations and to prepare for the coming day of the Lord's righteousness. For believing and sensitive Jews this vocation remains intact and the expectation is undiminished.

Christianity appropriated saving history, however, as a matter of its own identity. It is primarily faith in Jesus, the savior of Israel itself and of all men. Christian faith still asserts that He was the anointed one, the Messiah, whom Israel expected as the fulfilment of its hopes, and thus as the light of God to the nations. If the insights of Israel were correct, then salvation meant accepting the way of faithfulness to God, submission to His will and laws, acceptance of suffering and the humiliating effects of evil, expression of love and the extension of forgiveness to offenders, and using the gifts of creation for the glory of God and the life of peace, *shālōm*, among men. All these were taught, exemplified, embodied, and illuminated by Jesus Christ. Christian faith was posited and remains grounded upon the faith that Jesus fulfilled what Israel hoped for. Therefore He became the medium and mediator of God's saving truth and action to all mankind, precisely as the representative man of Israel.

The relation of Jesus Christ to human history is not, however, just that of a man to the race. Even as Yahweh relates to mankind through the people Israel, so God through Jesus relates Himself to mankind through a people, the *ekklēsia*, Church. The very being and person of

Jesus, the nature of His ministry and life, the fact of His death, and the witness to His resurrection from death were not simply remembered by the Church as the virtues and deeds of the venerated founder. They were the collective elements of the event which, in place of any human contriving or long-range planning, brought the Church into existence. In the symbolic event of Pentecost it was infused by God's Spirit with enduring power. Through the experience of men and women, as brilliantly interpreted in the letters of Paul, the meaning and hope of human existence were now known in virtue of knowing the risen Christ, whose instrument of death became the sign of victory. In carrying this message from Jerusalem outward through the Empire to Jews, Greeks, Romans, and barbarians, the early missionaries were letting themselves be used as the bearers of the meaning of history, namely, peace with God and among men.

With respect to this great process by which God in Christ is renewing man, Paul could honestly declare: "All this is from God" (2 Cor 5:18). It is the work of divine knowledge, power, and grace, not a great leap forward by human effort. The reconciliation and peace with God, and the consequent harmony with other men, come neither to individuals nor to peoples as the instantaneous consequences of God's gift. As Paul knew very well, and as countless large and small evidences of history have shown, there are long and exceedingly rough detours on the road of salvation. For the apostles, as the paradigms of Christian living, this meant "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger" (2 Cor 6:4-6). These heroic words are not chosen for melodramatic effect; and it is hypocritical for Christians who seek comfort and security to flaunt them in order to make an impression on others. But such words and their cognates, when transposed from personal experience to the collective struggles, trials, and agonies of groups, peoples, and nations, are descriptive of the course of human life, into which the message of reconciliation and peace is brought by the Church.

The goal of saving history is not a tolerably just and peaceful social condition on earth; this is a penultimate goal, highly to be prized, of course. Neither is the purpose contained in the struggle as such: the efforts of the Church to discipline itself into obedience to God; its service and witness to human society; the contestation between the social forces seeking liberty and justice for all and those contending for the power and privilege of a particular group, class, race, or nation. The movement of saving history points beyond both the inherent moral value of the struggle and the tolerably just order of society to the ultimate goal. This is the reign of God, that much-disputed biblical

belief which is the undisputed focal point of Jesus' life and message. He came proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, or reign, of God among men. It is near, at hand, in your midst, and yet always coming, being sought, and ultimately to be received and entered. The temptation of Christians has always been to say: Lo, it is here, or there! To identify, capture, domesticate, and manipulate for their own purposes so profound and elusive a mystery as the kingdom of God has invariably meant to convert it into a self-sufficient ecclesiastical structure or to trade it off for a particular ordering of economics and politics in the secular realm. But to despair of any human realization of the kingdom within the bounds of time and space has meant to relegate it to the transcendent dimension called heaven, of which the mortal mind can scarcely hold a conception.

Because they cannot contain or control the reign of God as a social order, Christians are faithless or of poor power of discernment when they despair of ever knowing it in history. If they have known Jesus Christ personally as fact and in faith, and if they have experienced worship and service in the Church at its best, they surely have clues to the meaning of this divine rule. In contrast, however, they do not have warrant to claim that the Church and the reign of God are coterminous and the same, so that history has little better to show than the Church itself. Fortunately, this latter disposition of Roman Catholic thought has been abruptly altered in the recent reform. In the convergence of Christian understanding, the Church participates now in the state of God's righteous reign, even while it is enmeshed in historical circumstances which are contrary to His will. And it continues in history as a community of hope, sincerely expecting that God will continue to lead both the Church and all peoples towards the realization of that kind of life which was seen in Jesus Christ. This one man prefigures both the nature and shape of the Church as well as the ultimate destiny of humanity.

THE CORPORATE AND POPULAR COMMUNITY

There is ecclesiological convergence, secondly, in the growing recognition of Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants that the Church is both corporate and popular. These two adjectives should be taken in their literal sense. The word "corporate" means that the Church is a body, the *corpus Christi*, or body of Christ. And the word "popular" means that it is *populus*, a people of distinct character, "God's own people." The prominent mark of thinking about the Church in these two ways is the realism attached to the corporate and popular character. It is easy enough to say that the Christian community, the whole Church, is

like a biological body, wherein all members have an appointed and necessary place. It is also evident that the Church is *comparable* to a people with a common identity, that identity being the Christian religion for the Church and a certain tribal history, language, culture, or nationality for the people. But injustice is done to the biblical intention for these two words if today we think of them just as convenient and appropriate comparisons. The biblical language is still understood today in a realistic sense: the Church *is* the body of Christ even as it is the people of God. Those who have argued the case for a "merely metaphorical" interpretation of the body of Christ in Paul's letters have some evidence to cite in the text, but not enough to convince most writers on the subject.² Those who interpret on behalf of the churches of the World Council of Churches as well as the scholars of the Roman Catholic Church use these two concepts with great frequency and realism.

It is a bit ironical that within the ecumenical discussions of the World Council there has been a tendency to set these two concepts against each other: either the body of Christ or the people of God is the appropriate way to designate the Church, so take your choice. Behind this tendency is a long history of distorted usage, stemming from the Reformation. The Christians of the "catholic" style (Roman, Anglican, and others) gave primary attention to the organic nature of the Church, as a living unity, a body. They saw the Church as a continuing, comprehensive community, into which infants were born and baptized, within which members were regularly and frequently nourished by Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist, and over which the bishops and priests as representatives of Christ and the apostles ruled with a pastoral and priestly power. Distinct from these were the Christians of "protestant" style, who thought of the Church as the people of God, called together for His service, and freely responding in the confession of faith and acceptance of the covenant. Their prophetic interpretations of the Word of God led them often into conflicts with society and governments, thus strengthening the sense of voluntarism in membership. The two sacraments were indeed used faithfully, but with less of a sacramental aura about them. And the priestly role of the minister was subordinated to his preaching and teaching function, which was directed mainly to the purpose of instructing and inspiring the pilgrim people on their struggling march through history.

² Among numerous influential studies of these figures, apart from Roman Catholic works, see J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London, 1951); Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, 1960); and Ernest Best, *One Body in Christ* (London, 1955).

These two categorical concepts of the Church, the "catholic" and "protestant," were rather formally recognized by the report of the Amsterdam 1948 assembly of the World Council. And some delegates of the churches with congregational polity argued in addition for a third type, a still freer and more democratic form of the people of God than the churches of Continental Protestantism.³ The line between body of Christ and people of God seemed sharply drawn.

Only four years later, at the Third World Conference on Faith and Order at Lund (1952), the two concepts were given almost equal emphasis. Likewise, the distinction between "catholic" and "protestant" ecclesiology began to be blurred, alarming the staunchest defenders of both traditions. But Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Baptists were speaking positively and realistically of the body of Christ, while Anglicans and some Orthodox, without abandoning the body concept, gave prominence to the people of God. Bringing Christ and the Christians together in historic conjunction, then, the Church could fittingly be called Christ's embodied people.

It remained for the Second Vatican Council to give the most explicit expression to this conjunction. Following in large measure the ecclesiological writings of Yves M.-J. Congar, the Constitution on the Church presents both concepts in parallel but interpenetrating chapters. If anything, it gives the greater emphasis to the people of God, which for modern Catholicism generally is a rather novel idea. Catholic reasoning about the Church's nature had long been dominated by the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, especially since the Encyclical *Mystici corporis* (1943). This doctrine was heavily laden with hierarchical-sacramental beliefs which had been built up during centuries of developing practice. The relatively simple insight of the New Testament, that the body of Christ meant the communion of faithful people in whose midst the risen Christ dwells, had been altered according to the institutional growth of the Roman Catholic Church. Papacy, curia, episcopacy, priesthood—these, in effect, were the loci of Christ's presence and the essential shape of His body, the Church. But what of the people who constitute the membership of the body? In this passing, obsolescent view, the people of God were the laity, and thus very distinctly separated in both office and in theological definition from the hierarchy.⁴ It is really no wonder that the conservative bishops and theologians at the Second Vatican Council wanted to have, first, a chapter on the hierarchy and then one on the people of God, as they

³ *First Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (London, 1949) pp. 51-63.

⁴ See Jerome Hamer, *The Church Is a Communion* (New York, 1964).

prepared the schema *De ecclesia*. The final draft, however, is the most vivid demonstration of the way converging ecumenical ecclesiological thought affected the Council. The final and proper order of the first four chapters, of course, was: the mystery of Christ's body, the Church; the people of God as fully inclusive; the hierarchy, with attention to episcopacy; and the laity. The validity of this order has been vindicated many times during the postconciliar years, as the laity have applied pressure to the parish priests, and the priests have put pressure on the bishops, and the bishops have pressed their representatives to the synod in the Vatican to press the pope, for the purpose of enabling all kinds of members of the Church to enjoy a more responsible participation in the affairs of the whole body.

There is no exact counterpart to *Lumen gentium* in non-Roman churches or the World Council of Churches. However, clear similarities of thought are found in the major reports of the world conferences on Faith and Order held at Lund in 1952 and Montreal in 1963. There is frequent juxtaposition of the body-of-Christ and people-of-God motifs, with emphasis upon both the living presence of Christ and the priesthood of all the members, including the ordained ministry. These are not empty or abstract speculations of theologians, for it is the concrete, historical Church which is meant. The conventional notion that the Protestants regard the true Church to be "invisible," while the "visible" Church is of dubious authenticity, is now wholly indefensible. The delegates to Lund declared: "We are agreed that there are not two Churches, one visible and the other invisible, but one Church which must find visible expression on earth."⁵ By an unusual coincidence, the Vatican Council fathers were moved to say precisely the same thing in paragraph 8 of *Lumen gentium*. The theological understanding behind both documents was the same: the one Church is like the one Jesus Christ, having a single reality (or person) and yet both the invisibly divine and the visibly human natures.

Furthermore, the ecclesiology of both Vatican II and the World Council reports is firmly based upon belief in what is called the "Christological analogy." This means that the Church on earth shares an identity with Jesus Christ, even while not wholly identical with Him. In the language of Karl Barth, the Church is "the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ."⁶ His body is the Church, as organic community, of which He remains the living head. Or the Church is God's called and commissioned people in history, but Christ remains

⁵ *Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order* (London, 1953) p. 21.

⁶ *Church Dogmatics* 4/2 (Edinburgh, 1958) p. 633.

the Lord of both Church and world. Since the relation is one of analogy rather than of univocal identity, theologians say that the proper form, style, life, action, and witness of the Church must be determined by analogy to the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, as known to us in the Gospels. This is summed up in the monosyllabic expression of 1 Jn 4:17: "... as He is so are we in the world." Thus *Lumen gentium* borrows the traditional scheme of the threefold office of Christ—Prophet, Priest, King—of which John Calvin had made much use, and shows how the Church's ministry is likewise prophetic, priestly, and regal or magisterial.⁷

This analogical consideration of the Church's being and task leads to very specific indications of its inescapable vocation. To play a variation on the familiar formula of Ignatius of Antioch, "Where Christ is, there is the catholic Church" means "As Jesus Christ was and did, so is and does the Church." Was He indeed the Son of God in the form of a slave? Then the Church must keep accepting the role of servant in society. Was He, in the words made popular by Bonhoeffer, the man for others? Then the Church must live for others rather than itself. As Jesus preached the gospel of love and embodied it by attitude and action, so the Church has the same mission in all times and places. As He spoke the prophetic words of judgment upon man's personal and social evils and injustices, so must the Church, in constant reference to Him as the authority, be a prophetic community. Jesus was often in prayer to the Father; so must be the Church. And even as He submitted to humiliation and death by crucifixion, only to be raised by God's creative power, so the Church should be ready to accept humiliation and the death of its forms and institutions, as obedience to God requires, in faith that God will always maintain His people by giving newness of life.

Truth is concrete. These true Christological patterns for the Church and its many parts are concrete and specific; for those who prefer comfort and ease, they are too readily translatable into programs of inner reform and outward service. It is often and rightly said that the current period of ferment and reform in the churches has been provoked by the circumstances of the whole human society, which means by secular conditions, events, ideas, and movements. But the more profound and basic reason why it is possible for churches to experience reform in the direction of an appropriate response to the world's needs is precisely because of the intimate relation of Jesus Christ to the Church and the Christological analogy which is built upon this. As He is so is the

⁷ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2, 15.

Church in the world: and what the Christ of the Gospels is *not* is complacent, introverted, craven, haughty, detached, wealthy, schizoid, or domineering.

In the converging ecclesiology, then, the Church is both Christocentric and Christomorphic: constantly deriving its life from Christ the center of its being, and always—except when deterred by sin—seeking ways of assuming the shape and style of His earthly life and ministry.

MINISTRY: DIFFERENCES MAKING LESS DIFFERENCE

In nearly all religions there is some concept and office of ministry: priest, shaman, guru, rabbi, mufti, mullah, elder, pastor, bishop, and many more. In the various Christian churches the patterns of ministry have developed from a common New Testament source into a wide diversity. Members of the different communions have for generations become accustomed to their particular kinds of special or ordained ministers; and they have their distinctive expectations of ministers. These offices have been conditioned not only by varieties of theological and sacramental understanding, but also by the pressures of cultures and nations. An Ethiopian abuna, a Swedish Lutheran *kyrkoherde*, an Anglican country vicar, an Italian archbishop or curial *monsignore*, an Appalachian revivalist, a Russian archimandrite are all known generically as Christian ministers. But what irreconcilable differences of self-identity and function! No wonder that progress towards the unity of churches always seems to be hindered most gravely by the multiplicity of ministries. Even where there is a strong will to circumvent or transcend the barrier of the ministry, the discussions or negotiations often come to a deadlock.

There is encouragement, nevertheless, to be found in the clear evidence of ferment and change within the several church traditions. These changing ideas about the nature of the ministry are tending in the same direction. Instead of remaining as insurmountable walls of separation, the structures of ministry are actually becoming means of unitive convergence.

When the Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church is compared to such ecumenical statements about the ministry as the report of the Montreal Conference or the principles of the Consultation on Church Union, it would appear that any attribution of convergence is an expression of insupportable optimism. The significant chapters on the hierarchical structure (with special attention to the episcopate) and on the laity seem far removed from any kind of Protestant understanding. The contrast with the Montreal report is manifest.

The Montreal ecumenical report accepts a ministerial sequence like

this: Christ's ministry—the apostles—the whole membership as a royal priesthood—the specialized and ordained ministries. Adhering to Catholic tradition, *Lumen gentium* treats the progression as follows: Christ's ministry—Peter(=papacy)—the apostles(=bishops)—priests—deacons—(religious—) laity. While the divergence is still great, the affinities are not without significance, especially because these affinities are being strengthened by much of the scholarly writing as well as the practical exercise having to do with ministry.

First among these is the recognition that the primacy of the ministry is not found in any particular officer of the Church (such as a primate!), but in Jesus Christ Himself. The service of the entire Church membership, as well as the function and authority of the ordained ministry, are derived from Christ. The ministry of the Church in the world, then, from the greatest saint or power figure to the least impressive and effective member, is actually the ministry of Christ. Great and small, and the Church over-all, are instruments of His ministry. This is an indispensable element of our belief that Jesus Christ as the risen Lord and Head of the body still lives. Because of Easter, He still exercises by the communicative power of the Holy Spirit His redeeming ministry; and he does it particularly, if perhaps not exclusively, through the members of His body, the Church. This means service in two dimensions: the mutual care of those identified with the community, and the sympathy, helpfulness, and sacrifice on behalf of anyone who stands in such need. This primacy of Christ's ministry is by no means a novel insight or belief; it is clearly derived from the *NT*. But for many Christians it has been obscured by the ascendant clericalism in the history of virtually all churches. The conventional distinction between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches as being priest-ridden and hierarchically dominated, on the one hand, and the Protestant churches exercising the priesthood of every faithful member, on the other, has had less and less validity in modern times. The former are not abandoning a hierarchical structure, of course. And most Protestant churches are still in fact controlled by clergymen, whether as pastors, bishops, or executive secretaries. The most powerful means for propelling the movement of declericalization, though, is just the sober reflection on the most appropriate means by which the living Christ's ministry can be mediated to mankind. Surely the answer is the whole people of God, in all their diversity of ability and locality.

But a second indication of convergence is notable in contemporary thinking about ministry. It is the unique place of the apostle. Simply in the examination of the process by which Christian faith becomes

possible for any person, there is an irrefutable logic of historical sequence. How can we know anything at all about Jesus Christ? Through the witness of others in the Church, or through the New Testament, or books based upon the scriptural and historical records of faith. But the books and the personal faith are derived from knowledge of Christ in the New Testament. And how was this formed, if not by writing of the oral tradition of the earliest generation of Christians? And the source of their knowledge was the testimony of the ones who had experienced the risen Lord and known Him in the flesh: the apostles. If this seems too self-evident to be interesting, let us be reminded that apostleship as a theological as well as historical category has long been ignored by many Protestants. Either they have honored the memory of the apostles as first missionaries and also authors of the Gospels and letters, or else they have minimized the apostles in their polemical thinking against the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession. Now it is becoming more evident that apostolicity means more than succession or even mission, both of which are included in the term. It means primarily the congruity of the Church in every generation with the faith, vocation, and worship of the apostolic community, and *through* this to the time of the event of Incarnation, to Jesus Christ.⁸

The apostles are thus in large measure acknowledged as the secondary basis of all ministry, as Christ is primary. In the ecumenical convergence it is being seen that an expanding agreement on the meaning of apostleship and apostolicity can assist the churches in coming to proximate agreements on the essential ministry.

Of course, this is where Roman Catholics and the "Catholic-minded" Protestants stand in opposition to Protestant thought in the World Council of Churches and elsewhere. *Lumen gentium's* preoccupation with the episcopal hierarchy as derived immediately from the first apostles, and its subordination of priests and deacons to bishops, and further subordination of all the laity to the clergy constitute a dogmatic position which is neither congenial nor attractive to non-Catholics. On the other hand, as will soon be shown, there is now developing among many nonepiscopal churches a new appreciation for the office of bishop and for the principles of pastoral oversight, historic continuity, and manifest unity which are usually claimed for episcopacy.

Public attention since the Second Vatican Council has often been

⁸ See the definition of apostolicity agreed upon by the joint study commission of the World Council of Churches and the Vatican, published in *One in Christ* 4 (1970) 458. An interpretation of apostolicity for American Protestant churches is found in the author's *Criterion for the Church* (New York, 1963).

drawn to the new emphasis upon the comprehensive meaning of the people of God, as a designation of the Church, and also upon the newly heightened prerogative of the laity. No one can seriously dispute the value of these new perspectives in Catholic ecclesiology. Still, it is not unfair or untrue to observe that the publicity has been rather exaggerated. In the first place, it is difficult to accept at face value the Council's description of the Church as the people of God on pilgrimage, struggling to hold forth the Christomorphic life and the light of the gospel in a hostile world. The imagery is excellent; and in some times and places the Church has shown itself to be such a people of sojourners and strangers. For the most part, however, in lands of religious pluralism as well as in the lands of Catholic monopoly, it would require an unrestrained and generous imagination to conceive the Roman Catholic Church as such a pilgrim people. Its accommodations to political and economic institutions and to general cultural patterns are well known. So the possibilities of an effective ministry, especially a prophetic ministry, within the situation of cultural domestication are less available to a ministering laity than should be hoped.

The Vatican Council, moreover, has not emancipated the laity to the degree which the publicity of the issue seems to imply. *Lumen gentium*, having defined the laity as all those not in holy orders or a religious order, declares of their ministry: "They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ" (no. 31). Many good things are said in the chapter about the apostolate of the laity in the world of labor, business, recreation, technology, and education. And it stresses an important point, shared throughout the ecumenical movement by those who are trying to define the role of the laity, namely, that in virtue of "their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself" (no. 33). Even so, the subordination of laity to clergy is rigorously maintained by the Constitution. In a manner which seems grossly condescending, it is admitted that laymen who have "knowledge, competence, and outstanding ability" may be "permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinions on those things that concern the good of the Church" (no. 37). To the laity of today, who are rather well aware of their own knowledge, competence, and outstanding ability, this grudging acknowledgment of their usefulness in the Church must seem egregiously irritating or dismaying. In the same paragraph this secondary status of the laymen is succinctly indicated in the admonition that they "promptly accept in Christian obedience the decisions of their pastors, since they are representatives of Christ as well as teachers and rulers in the Church."

Catholic theologians are by no means deficient in their estimate of the "royal priesthood" of all church members for the inner life and the external mission of the Church. Hans Küng is not typical of all, but is representative of the progressivists who recognize the need and the opportunities for freeing and developing the whole people of God for service in the world. Indeed, no more convincing description and rationale for the idea of the "priesthood of all believers," that hallmark of the Reformation, has been written lately than the section in Küng's book.⁹ Movements for the enhancing of this concept, for the education and practical preparation of laymen, and the alteration of lay-clergy relationships at all levels of church life are underway in the Catholic Church, in parts of Orthodoxy, and many Protestant churches. Their potentiality for instilling new vigor in the churches and also for furthering the process of ecumenical convergence becomes increasingly apparent.

This prior and proper emphasis upon the priesthood of all the people eliminates, in the minds of a relatively few Protestants, the need for an ordained, or special, ministry. This is the most radical consequence of a prevailing confusion about the distinct meaning of ordination; but its effect is limited to individuals. It has not influenced the policy of Protestant church bodies as such. On the contrary, it can be said of most of these that the ecumenical discussions on ministry, and in particular the negotiations for church union, have produced a deepening sense of seriousness about the reality of ordination to the ministry of Word and sacrament. The blunt requirement of any fairly comprehensive union of denominations for a common ministry which is accepted by all concerned, and acknowledged as widely as possible throughout Christianity, compels the churches to revise their understanding of orders in the light of the contrary claims, or of biblical, historical, and theological investigations. None has stood still and immutable. In the reaches of the Anglican Communion, and especially in the counsels of the decennial Lambeth Conference of bishops, there has been a clear move towards more recognition of nonepiscopal ministries as truly used by the Holy Spirit to do in the churches what ministries are intended to do. This drift of thought and policy has even opened the way for the concelebration of the Eucharist by Anglican priests and ministers of those churches with which Anglicans are still negotiating for union.¹⁰

Even more remarkable is the trend of thought, real albeit unofficial, in Catholic theological circles respecting the orders of other churches.

⁹ Hans Küng, *Structures of the Church* (New York, 1964) chap. 5; also *The Church* (London, 1967) pp. 363-70.

¹⁰ See *The Lambeth Conference 1968: Resolutions and Reports* (London, 1968) p. 128.

It is based upon the decision of the Vatican Council in its Decree on Ecumenism to refer to non-Catholic bodies as churches and ecclesial communities, rather than employing the previously familiar terms of avoidance, such as sect or society. Now, if a particular Methodist or Lutheran church is regarded by Vatican II as a church or ecclesial community—and the conciliar theologians draw no sharp distinction—then the ordained ministry of that church must have a certain validity in Catholic appraisal. Otherwise it would appear that the decision to acknowledge that church's ecclesial character was insincere or deceptive. The old epithet "absolutely null, utterly void" which was applied to Anglican orders^{10a} has not been formally repealed. But in actuality the movement of ecumenical discourse on church and ministry has already rendered the epithet itself virtually null and void. What this kind of thinking will eventually lead to, and whether it will cause the formal modification of canon law respecting the recognition of non-Catholic orders, is still a matter of conjecture.

Finally, there is a notable trend which is not for conjecture but is well established. It pertains to those official efforts to achieve union among several denominations, including the Anglican or Episcopal churches. Already accomplished in South India in 1947, these conversations and negotiations are in various stages of fruition in North India, Ceylon, Pakistan, New Zealand, Ghana, Nigeria, England, Canada, and the United States. For the most part, the other churches which may contract for union are the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational. These have in virtually every case acceded to the plan of continuing the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter (priest), and deacon in the united church.¹¹ Clearly this is a major change of ministerial concept and order for some of them. Already there is a twofold process of reconception discernible here. First, we note in some of the Protestant churches which have managed to survive for centuries without the benefit of bishops, and indeed have often fought against episcopacy, a growing appreciation for the office of a spiritual superintendent or pastoral overseer. While some decry this as a capitulation to Anglicanism or Catholicism, many see it as an honest recognition of the inherent value of such a minister in the spiritual life and temporal economy of the Church. Second, as though intending to remove the cause for legitimate attacks on episcopal prelacy and autocracy, some of

^{10a} By Leo XIII in *Apostolicae curae* (1896).

¹¹ Consummation of the church unions in Pakistan and North India have been set for November 1970. For definition of the threefold ordained ministry, as well as the whole corporate ministry, of the proposed united church in the United States, see *A Plan of Union* (Princeton, 1970) chap. 7.

the Episcopal churches are agreeing that a different kind of bishop is needed today, different from either the Renaissance prelate, the aristocratic Lord Bishop, or the contemporary general manager of church affairs. Again and again it is asserted that the bishop must be primarily a liturgical and pastoral leader, a teacher of the faith, a leader in the cause of Christian unity, and a spokesman and active contender for social justice and human welfare. These characterizations of the style, role, and responsibility of the bishop do not necessarily influence the theological doctrine of the historic episcopate or apostolic succession. But the nonepiscopal churches are at least ready to accept the historic episcopate within defined constitutional limits of power, and with at least as much latitude of doctrinal interpretation as now obtains within the Anglican communion itself. Thus there is a bending inward which foretells some future agreement on the reconception of the office of bishop in those churches which already have the episcopal order and in those which are disposed to accept it.

Of course, many Protestants are less than enthusiastic about the adoption of episcopacy in a united church of which they may become a part, because they are persuaded of its benefits by neither theological nor historical nor pastoral arguments. They look upon it as a nonnegotiable demand laid down by Anglicans, rather than an offer to share something which is either indispensable, or at least of much value, for the Church's realization of its best nature. For such Protestants, the commending of episcopacy as belonging either to the *esse*, the *bene esse*, or the *plene esse* is of little effect. Some hold an intransigently negative view of bishops because of a corporate memory of past abuses and conflicts, especially in Great Britain. Many who believe that church order should be determined strictly by the pattern of the New Testament church are convinced that the titles of bishop (*episkopos*) and elder (*presbyteros*) were interchangeable, and that neither corresponded in conception or function to the office of bishop as it later developed and is known today. And a good many Protestants resist episcopacy simply because they see it as an infringement upon the freedom in Christ and the rights of conscience of both individuals and congregations. So the convergence towards accord on episcopacy in Protestant church union plans, while manifestly genuine to a degree, is not without strong contestation.

Three observations about the present place of episcopacy in the Roman Catholic Church indicate that it too participates in the converging movement. First it must be noted that the Second Vatican Council continued to give strong emphasis to the doctrine of the apostolic succession in the Constitution on the Church as well as the Decree

on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church. There was no retreating from the traditional doctrine. However, secondly, the descriptions in both documents of the proper function, attitude, and responsibility of Catholic bishops is quite congenial with expectations of Protestants for their bishops, superintendents, church presidents, or whatever title they have. The Council admonishes bishops to follow in the triple office of Jesus Christ: prophet (teacher), priest, and king (shepherd, pastor), the same rubric which applies to the entire ministry of the Church. So the bishop is called to safeguard the unity of faith, instruct the faithful in love, care for the poor and sorrowing, preach untiringly the gospel, and fulfil his liturgical role as a priest. In brief, the full description of the episcopal office (*Lumen gentium*, nos. 23-27) is peculiarly Roman only in the way it is related by subordination to the papacy. Meanwhile, thirdly, the actual compliance with these conciliar recommendations is being effected by many progressive bishops in such ways that a revised image of the office is emerging. The credibility of the Vatican Council's depiction of episcopacy is obviously dependent upon the degree of success which bishops can have in the practical implementation of the theories of the doctrine. This means becoming detached and disassociated from the pattern of bishop as known in recent history, and adopting the new style: the style which is devoid of pretensions and pomposity, pastoral in both administration and personal relations, and courageous in the face of the numerous dehumanizing forces which modern societies have engendered.

Everyone knows that there are troops of other issues and problems affecting the Christian concept and practice of ministry today. It is a critical time of much contention and disaffection. But for that very reason it may prove to be a time of fruitful reappraisal and reconception. We have considered superficially only four aspects: Christ's enduring ministry, apostleship, the laity, and the episcopacy. In each we not only see some indications of the converging towards greater agreement among churches, with more mutual acknowledgment and acceptance of diverse ministries, but we also discern the emergence of patterns and styles of ministry which are suitable for the rapidly changing and emerging structures of human society in which the ministry or service of the Church must be exercised.

ALL BAPTIZED INTO ONE BODY

An intensified seriousness about the doctrine of holy baptism is most evident in the ecumenical conference reports and the publications of scholars. This is consequent upon at least three challenges: the fresh concern with biblical theology, the drive for Christian unity, and the

dismay or near panic caused by the crumbling of long-established "Christian societies" in Europe and the Americas. We know full well that the practice of baptizing in Christ's name has become either so conventional in some lands or so pointless in others that baptism is dismissed by serious thinkers as nugatory. At the same time as this fall into apparent irrelevancy, however, baptism is extolled by some leading ecumenical thinkers, most notably the late Augustin Cardinal Bea, as the firm common ground of a vital Christian unity. It is the ostensible purpose of present inquiries and discussions both to enable the churches to build their unitive structures upon this one ground, and also to reprimarize baptism as a strong factor in the renewing of the communal life, the worship, and the mission of the churches.¹²

However little many Christians today may think of baptism or disregard its importance, there can be no doubt that it was assumed by the New Testament church as a decisive mark of admission to the Christian fellowship and thus to the Spirit-empowered new life in Christ. In the earliest recorded preaching of the apostles, the expected reaction of persons to the hearing of the gospel of Christ was to repent of sins, confess faith, and be baptized (Acts 2:38). When addressing the first Christians in various cities, Paul kept reminding them of what their baptism meant: they were new persons, who had died and risen with Christ, and had been invested by Christ for a new life of love and service (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12, 3:3; Eph 5:26). Even when contemporary Christians are obviously living in social situations which are entirely different from those of the first century, and when there are cultural and psychological factors which separate them from the first Christian generation, there is no good reason why baptism cannot have the same decisive meaning for the present generation as for the first—if, that is, its primary meaning is recognized as such, and the secondary meanings are given subordinate place. The primary reference for each believer and for the community is simply the belonging to Jesus Christ. Baptism is the event by which we are made to know and to testify that, above all else in life, we belong to Christ and are His disciples. And since belonging to Christ means identifying with His people, His body, the Church, baptism is literally the incorporation into Christ, being embodied in Him.

In the current ecumenical dialogue there is an astonishing wideness of agreement on this primary Christological meaning of baptism. With increasing clarity it is being seen that baptism in the New Testament was much more than an adoption with slight variations of the Jewish

¹² An excellent comprehensive study is Dale Moody's *Baptism: Foundation for Christian Unity* (Philadelphia, 1967).

proselyte baptism, or the washing rituals of pagan religions. The external cultic relations are certainly evident. But the internal meaning for faith is determined by the whole saving mission of Jesus Christ in life and death. The baptism of Jesus at the hands of John has for many Christians been a cause for perplexity. If John called people to repent because the judgment of God in the kingdom was coming, how could Jesus submit to the rite in the Jordan, since Jesus is regarded to have been without sin? Matthew's Gospel recognizes this difficulty for faith, and so in its account of this opening scene in Jesus' ministry the rugged prophet from the wilderness attempted to prevent Jesus from coming to him. But Jesus replied with the enigmatic words "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" (Mt 3:13-17). Many commentators now agree that this answer was the indication of Jesus' assumption of the role of man's savior which had been predicated for Him. In the imagery and words of the Servant of God passages of Second Isaiah, it is the righteousness of the one vicarious servant which would bring "the many" of mankind to righteousness before God. Since John's baptism was a universal call to repentance, Jesus consciously responded, identifying Himself with sinful humanity as its representative. But this was the beginning, not the whole, of His baptism. Baptism for Jesus was His life and death of self-giving, from the River Jordan to the Jerusalem dump heap named Golgotha. This is clearly attested in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus answered the awkward question of James and John, His disciples. They asked for a place of privilege in the kingdom of heaven; but the reply they heard was a summons to suffering: "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (10:38). This was no talk of the ritual in water, but rather of the coming ordeal on the cross.

To be baptized, then, to be one with Jesus Christ, means to have a share in His suffering, even as He assumed the suffering for all mankind. This is what the symbolic words of John the Baptist pointed to, concerning the one coming after him who would baptize, not with water, but with Spirit and fire. By the Holy Spirit one is led in faith to know Christ and to be at one with Him; by the fire he becomes a witness for Christ and accepts the ordeals which may come on account of his faithfulness in a hostile world. Thus Spirit and fire are the marks of the baptism of the apostolic Church on Pentecost.

It is easy to see why baptism can be regarded as the bond or ground of unity of Christians, despite church divisions, when it is understood in this Christological and Christomorphic manner. Baptism is thus virtually the identifying mark of being a Christian. And the common

faith which surrounds it is such as to provide for the mutual recognition of Christians who in other ways are not merely different but separated by doctrines and church structures.

If Christ, as the primary meaning, unites in baptism, there are secondary meanings which divide. Is baptism a sacrament, as the Eucharist is, or an ordinance or action of men? While the majority of churches presuppose the sacramental character of baptism, as a uniting of the Word of God with water and the Spirit-engendered faith, the Baptist churches and some others refuse to consider it as such. Neither did Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the Reformed tradition since John Calvin. In the last of his numerous and ponderous books, Barth took his stand against a sacramental interpretation of baptism, and divided the baptism by Spirit from the baptism by water, only the former of the two being the work of God.¹³ For this reason, Barth felt compelled to espouse the conviction of the Baptists: no baptizing of infants or uncomprehending children; baptism of professing believers only. There is consistency and cogency in Barth's theological argument. In obviating the need for a theological interpretation and defense of infant baptism, which has always been a notoriously difficult mental task, he has brought the baptismal rite with water, the work of the Spirit, and the conscious confession of faith into unambiguous unity. This interpretation is also practical, as well as intelligible, for those concerned about the Church in the "post-Constantinian era" of Western civilization, when it can no longer be assumed that infants are automatically gathered into the bosom of Mother Church. Moreover, it resolves the vexed theological question of the proper meaning of confirmation, as the complement to baptism in the process of Christian initiation. The crisis of confirmation for churches which still regard themselves as living within the Constantinian era is no less acute than that of baptism. One way to resolve the problem is the historic usage of the Greek Orthodox Church, whereby baptism of the infant and confirmation (chrismation) are brought immediately together, and then the wine of the Eucharist is administered to the little child. While resolving the one issue of confirmation as a complementary sacrament, however, this merely raises other problems concerning nurture, decision, and profession in the Church.

The ecumenical dialogue and the practices of the churches with regard to baptism, then, are now in much ferment. It is reported from time to time that some Anglican and Roman Catholic priests as well as Lutheran pastors have decided against the baptizing of infants, for

¹³ *Church Dogmatics* 4/4 (fragment; Edinburgh, 1969).

reasons suggested above. At the same time, some of the churches which traditionally baptize believers only, and which are now engaged in church-union discussions with paedobaptist churches, are agreeing to a dual practice in the united church. In this way, while recognizing the primacy of identifying with Jesus Christ through the grace of God and the act of the Holy Spirit, they would admit for reasons of conscience either the baptism of infants or of believers. But they would not regard this as cause for a breach in the one church, even though they knowingly run the risk of tensions over strong disagreement.

EUCHARIST: TOWARD A REAL, NOT MERELY FORMAL, FELLOWSHIP

These days one seldom hears the old expression "fencing the table." It summons up immediately the vivid and melancholy image of an altar or Communion table in the chancel of a church; surrounding it is a high fence of steel wire. At the single gate stands a minister, checking the tickets of those who seek admission to the Sacrament; while these enter to have a part in the Church's highest act of worship, those who were rejected stand outside, fingers clutching the wires, as they peer wistfully at the spectacle of Christ's broken body, and sensing that they *are* His broken body.

Apart from its undue sentimentality, this sad vision of the fenced table fails to be realistic for two reasons. First, in spite of canon laws and rubrics about who may properly be admitted to the Eucharist (call it Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Mass, liturgy, etc.), priests and ministers do not stand guard against illicit intruders. Secondly, there just are not many Christians, when considered in proportion to the whole membership, who feel the anguish of those excluded ones outside the fence. Only the few sensitive folk have a feeling of dismay or pain because of the much-deplored scandal of divisions at the altar. Most Christians can live with it alright. Nevertheless, the hypersensitive few are right. Eucharistic schism *is* a scandal. Not only does it outrage the common belief in the unity of the body of Christ as a theological proposition, but it perpetuates a grave hindrance to the common and effective service and witness of the churches in the world.

Just as the sacramental apartheid should not be minimized, neither should the immediate and practical consequences of a unity of Communion between two or more denominations be accorded too much expectation. Consider, for instance, the two familiar denominations in America, the Presbyterian and Methodist. Between them exists a tacit and unchallenged state of intercommunion: members and ministers are welcome at each other's Communions. It is the relationship towards

which many Catholics, Anglicans, and other so-called high-church ecumenists aspire. Undoubtedly it is a worthy and important aspiration. But to be utterly honest, it must be said that the Eucharistic openness of the Methodist and Presbyterian churches has hardly any bearing upon their relationships in the local area or the national scene. If they maintained dogmatic barriers to such fellowship in the Eucharist, it is dubious whether their co-operation and intimacy would be greater or less than at present. Why is this? For the plain reason that the Sacrament does not play a central role in the life of these two denominations. Despite the traditional teaching of each, respectively from Calvin and Wesley who both had the highest estimate for a regular celebration of Communion, these denominations, like some others, have without deliberate intention relegated the Sacrament to a peripheral position. This is the more obvious when comparison is drawn to the Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and Lutheran churches.

Holy Communion as an ecumenical concern thus has two dimensions. One is the need for drawing the churches into unrestricted fellowship so that they can celebrate the fulness of their unity in Christ. The other is to provide such interpretation of Eucharistic doctrine and to discover such new meaning in common that the centrality of the Sacrament will be truly efficacious for all the churches.

The convergence of which we speak has still left many members unmoved and uninterested; but for a significant number, and especially for those consciously involved in the ecumenical movement, it amounts to a virtual revolution. Indeed, there is, so to speak, a double convergence. One is in Eucharistic theology, the other in church practice as well as the practice of voluntary groups. The one is increasingly apparent in the formal conciliar studies and the scholarly reassessments of biblical and historical theology; the latter makes stories for the secular press as well as the religious. Liturgies are being revised, rubrics made more flexible, the sacred preciousness of the ritual is being modified for more relevance to people's secular concerns, and unprecedented statements of agreement are being registered among churches divided by centuries.

To begin a brief scanning of the points of agreement on the graph of convergence, the close connection of baptism and Eucharist should be pondered. Not only do these have the character of sacraments, according to the doctrines of the majority of churches, but for Catholicism and Orthodoxy they are pre-eminent among the sacraments, and for Protestantism they are the only two. There is persuasive and illuminative power in the currently popular interpretation of Christ Himself as the sacrament par excellence, the Church as the primordial sacrament

of grace, and the two dominical sacraments of baptism and Eucharist derived from Christ and perpetuated in the Church. The power lies in the consistent emphasis of the reality of Christ in His community and through these particularly dramatic and universally symbolic means of grace. The implications of this scheme of connections are that Christ is the controlling principle in the individual's personal relation to God the Father, that He gives the Church the identity of a community of grace, and that baptism and Eucharist both convey His power to create and sustain new life for man.

Those who know the serenity, consolation, encouragement, love, and hope which come from Christ through faith can understand, as others cannot, why the Holy Communion is called Eucharist. It means simply thanksgiving. It is the rendering of gratitude to God for all He creates and for the redemption He grants to men and women. In this sense it is the offering of thanks not only through words of prayer, but through the giving of bread and wine. Jesus at the Last Supper identified these products of man's making as His body and blood, or by implication as Himself. Thus they are offered with prayer to God as emblematic of ourselves too. Our individual lives and the common life of the Church are sacrifices, even as the life of Jesus was a sacrifice offered to God on behalf of all. In the Sacrament our small sacrifices are conjoined with His great, unique, and once-for-all sacrifice. The intent is not to appease God—for He needs no appeasement—but to please Him by this ultimate act of thanksgiving and self-giving. On this first point, ancient as it is and forgotten by many as it has been, there is now a more general agreement than heretofore in modern Church history. To be sure, this interpretation of sacrifice is considered insufficient or unacceptable to those who believe confidently that the Eucharist is an objective and propitiatory sacrificial action wrought upon the altar by the priest as agent.

The second nexus of growing consensus is the understanding of the word "memorial." "Do this in remembrance of me" is one of the best known words of Jesus in His momentous experience with the disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, even though it is regarded by scholars as a marginal addition to the text of Lk 22:20. Is the idea simply that Christians make a mental effort to remember Jesus as they worship? In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer the ritual, which is expressive of the Western liturgical tradition, includes a prayer of the priest in which he tells God that "the memorial which thy Son hath commanded us to make" has been made by the congregation. Does not this sound like the "mere memorialism" attributed to Huldreich Zwingli of Zurich's reformation, and continued in the "nonsacramentarian" churches of the left-

wing Protestantism? During four centuries there have been heated arguments over the issue of whether the Eucharist involves just a corporate memory of Jesus, or whether in some sense Jesus Christ is truly present. This raises the related question of an alleged repetition of His atoning death in the Catholic celebration of the Mass. Considering the almost universal sense of reverence for the Eucharist's purpose of promoting reconciliation and peace, we recoil from the dreary and offensive spectacle of Christians fighting one another over its meaning. While some of this belligerency has been due to mean prejudice, however, it must be admitted that many Christians have contended against what they regarded as false interpretations precisely for the reason that they felt constrained to defend the Eucharist from either rationalistic or superstitious perversions of its sacramental character.

A fortunate escape from this past bitterness has been made possible by recent ecumenical studies of the Greek word *anamnēsis* (= memorial). The emerging consensus resolves some ancient issues of dispute. The concept of time has been revised in the light of its biblical meaning. In Eucharistic memorial the past and the future meet in the present moment, and the moment is always on the move. It means that the historical event of the life and death of Jesus Christ is recalled in such a way as to make it an experienced reality in the present. But also, the future fulfilment of personal life and of man's history is anticipated in faith, so that during the Eucharist—and constantly in the attitude of faith—we are already being encouraged and directed by the reign of God which is to come. So the Eucharist encourages no brooding about what is past, nor preoccupation with the present moment and its problems, nor flight of fancy and imagination into the refuge of the unknown future. The three dimensions of the experience of time and history converge in the awareness and recognition that God's love in Jesus Christ applies in all times and all circumstances of man's existence.

Only with such a concept of time, and only by faith in the resurrection of Christ and the continuing effect of the Holy Spirit, can there be meaningful discourse about the much-disputed "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharistic action. Just here the lines of Christian interpretation are coming together with astonishing rapidity. Negatively, it is agreed by thinkers of diverse Catholic and Protestant traditions that it is fruitless to press a distinction between the "material" and the "spiritual" presence of Christ. Likewise, it is clear that opposition to belief in the "real" presence must, if consistent, be based upon the tacit idea of an "unreal" presence; but this really means no presence at all. Opponents of "real" presence thus find themselves in the awkward position of affirming the presence of Christ in one's faith, prayer,

loving service, and in preaching and teaching the gospel—but *not* in the Holy Communion! Moreover, since the presence of Christ is more generally being conceived in terms of personal relation between the faithful and the living Christ, the localization of His presence in the elements of bread and wine, consecrated through ritual action, is receiving less and less emphasis even among Catholic theologians.

“Transsignification” is the term suggested by some as preferable to “transubstantiation.” Whereas the latter word has served Catholic theology for centuries, it belongs to a philosophical view of matter and spirit which is virtually obsolete. The former term expresses an insight more agreeable to a modern understanding of human existence in the world, which is being rapidly described and explained in scientific terms. Hence, the interpretation of the meeting of divine and human in the Eucharistic celebration—even after admitting freely the sheer mystery of the ultimate meaning—gains credibility in so far as it can be communicated to minds which think in existential, personal, and phenomenological categories. The idea of transsignification may sound new, but actually it is resonant of a biblical view of God’s use of matter and of human spirit for the communication of grace. It accounts for the way by which something’s nature or identity is determined more by its appointed use than by its physical make-up. For example, the nature of a national flag cannot be explained by the threads of its fabric or the dyes in the coloring, or even by the human inventiveness of its designer. It has a character of its own because of its use as a rallying center for patriotic feeling and action. And the intensity of its power to communicate or stimulate a feeling or idea is further dependent upon the time and circumstance in which it is used. Rolled and left in a closet, it is inert. Flying from a staff, but little noticed, it has moderate meaning. But carried into battle to the sound of bugle and gunfire, its significance is profoundly increased. By such an analogy, the use of bread and wine as the media for conveying the reality of Christ’s presence, always within the limitations of human perception and understanding, may be transsignified by the requisite conditions: the gathering of the community, large or small; the attitude of faith on their part; the offering of prayer; the preaching of the gospel; and the consecration by the minister on behalf of the Church, followed by the solemn yet joyful eating and drinking together.¹⁴

¹⁴ This view of transsignification as well as the analogy of the symbolic reality of the flag are developed by E. Schillebeeckx, *Die eucharistische Gegenwart* (Düsseldorf, 1968; translated from the Dutch original, *Christus’ tegenwoordigheid in de Eucharistie* [Bilthoven]). He cites fellow Catholic theologians I. de Baciocchi and P. Schoonenberg as well as Reformed theologians F. J. Leenhardt and M. Thurian in support of this view (pp. 70–81).

These clues to Eucharistic meaning which emanate from the full concept of the word "remembrance" (*anamnēsis*) are complemented and made effective through the Church's prayer to the Holy Spirit. The familiar Greek word is *epiklēsis*, the "calling upon" the Spirit to make effective and real for the gathered people the presence of Jesus Christ, and thus to sanctify the communion of the people with Him. This is an aspect of the ritual which in some churches has been neglected. In the current ecumenical discussions it is stressed with particular vigor by the Eastern Orthodox; with good reason they contend for the importance of invoking the Spirit of God in the midst of this dramatic action by human beings. Without the Spirit it would be merely a drama.

Another aspect of the Eucharist on which almost universal ecumenical concord is being registered is its inherent power to knit people into personal *communion*. Of course, this is why it bears that alternate name to Eucharist: communion is the translation of the Greek *koinōnia*, meaning "mutual sharing" by all concerned. This sense of shared fellowship has long been emphasized by the Orthodox, on the one hand, with their doctrine of *sobornost*, and by such freely constituted churches as the Church of the Brethren and the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), on the other. But in some others the meaning and experience of communion have been lost for one of two seemingly opposite reasons. Either the excessive subjectivism has caused people to consider the Eucharist an occasion for sublime but individualistic experiences of pious devotion, or else the excessive objectivism has turned it into an operation performed by the priest, in relation to which the laymen can serve only as spectators. The correction of these differing distortions of the Sacrament is coming about, not by some radically new insight, but by recapturing the truth of the event which has belonged to it from the beginning. "The bread which we break," said St. Paul, "is it not a participation (*koinōnia*) in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16). Obviously this recovery is important not only for the sake of a common understanding among the churches. Just as significant, in this age of increasing social forces which dehumanize and atomize people, is the Church's opportunity to provide for people a social situation in which the mutual expression of personal care is the reflection of the love of God which Christ makes manifest to any who will receive it.

Therefore, lastly, there is an expanding recognition of the power of the Eucharist for *mission*. Many still regard the Sacrament as an arcane ritual which the Church provides for the benefit of the relatively small number of faithful members. This is quite wrong. If the Christian doctrine of the Eucharist is so richly beneficial as it is claimed to be, then there is need to share the same faith in Christ with other persons, to

the end that they also become participants in this dimension of life. The intentions, prayers, and preached words have to do with the needs of all men and women, just as the ministry and self-giving of Jesus Christ were for all. Holy Communion is not a sectarian event. It is literally ecumenical and secular, that is, for the whole world. This is one reason why there is much concern for the overcoming of barriers to communion among the various churches, so that the reality of reconciliation in Christ may be made manifest. The realization of intercommunion, and beyond that of full communion, is not sought for the sole purpose of vindicating theological notions about unity of the Church, but to advance the mission of the gospel to mankind.

A FAIR AND REPRESENTATIVE WAY OF GOVERNING

The quest for a more equitable system of consultation and government in the Roman Catholic Church is one of the most prominent consequences of the Second Vatican Council. The Council promised to reform the bureaucracy of the Roman Curia, rewrite canon law, and press the pope to accept a collegial relation to the bishops. The synod of bishops held in 1967 seemed to be an artful dodging of the Council's proposals; but in 1969, led by certain eminent cardinals of progressive outlook and strong courage, the likelihood of these reforms was secured. Collegiality, as the alternative to absolute papal monarchy, is nothing new to most Orthodox and Protestant churches. They simply use different names for the same kinds of instrument of polity: assemblies, conferences, synods, conventions, houses, etc. In all cases it is more and more agreed that the Church, made up of "priestly people," needs to have a governmental system in which, as they meet corporately, they may determine what actions and policies are most in keeping with the mind of Christ. Most Protestants would regard these instruments and forms of collegial government as the practical expedients which have developed through the centuries of church history. But the Roman Catholics in their search for an understanding and implementation of collegiality are guided by motives and expectations which are more than pragmatic. They seek an order which is truly integral to the being of the Body of Christ on earth, that is, a form of collegiality which is genuinely expressive of the *koinōnia* belonging to the nature and life of the Church. This same expectation is not wanting among Protestants, but they have no consistency of belief about it.

With regard to polity, it has been long established in the Faith and Order discussions about unity that the elements of three types of church structure must be maintained. These are the episcopal, the presbyteral, and the congregational. In essence these three connote,

first, a concentration of power in the bishop's office; second, a centering of power in the group of elders from churches in a limited area, and third, the autonomy and perhaps independence of each local congregation. Convergence has already broken down the demarcations among these three. A genuinely collegial government, bringing together both freedom of representative expression and the recognized and constituted authority of church officers, requires the blending of all three. The value of this has been demonstrated already in the Church of South India, united in 1947, and it is well expected in current efforts to achieve union.

There has developed a different form of collegiality in recent years. It was unprecedented before the twentieth century, but now has become the distinctive form of church relationship and consultation in this time. It is the council of churches. Adequately to do the work which God's known will requires of His people in modern civilization, it has been necessary to bypass the continuing divisions of the denominations and various ecclesial families. Interconfessional committees, national Christian councils, co-operative working groups, and the councils of churches: these are the provisional, insufficient, but indispensable means of expressing the unity of the one Church. They are the temporary expedients rather than the permanent forms of unity. They deserve a more careful consideration of their nature and functions than is possible here.

An attempt has been made in this essay to show, in barely more than an outline, how the current ecumenical era has witnessed the converging of Christian thought on a wide variety of major doctrines, and in particular on elements of ecclesiology. On these fundamental matters the many churches are no longer in parallel.

Next comes the large question: Must the analogy of geometry be consistently sustained? That is, must the converging lines of Christian doctrine and practice eventually intersect or coincide? Is the union, or reunion, of all the churches inevitable? Desirable? Feasible?

One of the first influential Catholic ecumenists in America, Gustave Weigel, was already writing on the subject of convergence before the Second Vatican Council assembled. He wrote in 1961: "We are pursuing converging lines of thought, not identical, but converging. When will they meet? I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. I refuse to answer the question."¹⁶ Was he wise in refusing to venture an answer? Lacking in faith? Or did he really desire the unknown form of the Church of the future, toward which all the present convergence is pointing?

¹⁶ "Ecclesiology and Ecumenics," in *Problems before Unity* (Baltimore, 1962) p. 43.

Certainly there are many Christians today who are becoming nervous and afraid of the future implications of the present converging. They want to slow down the process, to withdraw support, to return if possible to the familiar, more comfortable ways which they and their parents have known.

Some argue that converging so madly towards unity is endangering Christian liberty. They fear a so-called monolithic, totalitarian, uniform church, in which the unsolicited promptings of the Holy Spirit and the exercise of His diverse gifts would be stifled and stagnated by the weight of the homogeneous institution.

Others declare that the ultimate aim of convergence is insidious, because it will finally destroy the motivating power of the Church to accomplish their tasks. Using the quaint term of Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism in a distorted sense, they urge a "fraternal rivalry" as meaning denominational competition. They think of the world as a vast market, or even a sports stadium, in which the rival churches sustain their vitality by striving to outstrip each other in mission, conversion, service, and institutional growth.

Still others, especially many younger persons who are quickly becoming the majority of both Church and mankind, are declaring that neither unity nor division of the Church is important enough to worry about anymore, since the Church itself is so unimportant for the well-being of mankind in coming years. So they could not care less for the ecumenical convergence, conferences and councils, common worship and co-ordinated committees.

All four of these objections—the longing to turn back, the concern for liberty and diversity, the estimate of fair competition, and the disdain for institutional churches—require serious attention. They can be either allayed or rejected in debate, where time permits. But not in this context.

Instead, we conclude optimistically with a testimony of hope for the future of the Church. The main issues on which Christians are coming to agree are essential for the people of God. It is not, however, for the Church's interior health only, but for the renewed sense of diaconal mission to mankind on behalf of Jesus Christ, that this unitive movement is to be furthered and prized.

Is it justifiable, then, to believe that the convergence of doctrine, theology, and polity will lead to an eventual union? Yes! Never to a perfect, all-inclusive union, of course. There will surely be continuing parties, sects, and divisions. But the unity of the body of Christ in history is an element of faith, precisely because this visible unity is in the order of God's revealed purpose for mankind, namely, the reconciliation of all people in peace.