

The Universal Church as a Communion of Particular Churches

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Terminology

The title you have given me reflects Lumen Gentium 23 where the universal church is said to exist “in” and “out of” the particular churches which are entrusted to the pastoral care of bishops.

The term “particular church” is used in various senses by the Second Vatican Council..... (see Thomas Green, *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, Paulist Press 1985, p.316). Canon 368 defines the term as meaning “first of all dioceses, to which.... are likened” various other territorial groupings. I shall prefer to use the term “*local*” churches, which includes dioceses but also other localisations of the church, for reasons that will become apparent in the theological argument of this paper.

Introduction - before and after Vatican II

It was a commonplace before the Second Vatican Council for local churches to be thought of rather as administrative subdivisions of the universal church. Consistent with this, it was also a commonplace to think of bishops somewhat as delegates of the pope. Even if this way of thinking did not represent what was ultimate or best in the church’s self-understanding, it nevertheless existed as a popular impression in the minds of many, and even in the praxis of bishops and of Rome.

The Second Vatican Council quite explicitly corrects both these popular misunderstandings. Its ecclesiology, reflecting a more ancient understanding of the church is explicit in, for example, LG 23, 26; CD 11, AG 19, UR 15, etc. The 1983 Code of Canon Law in its turn substantially reflects this corrected ecclesiology, and c.368 consciously uses the language of LG when speaking of “particular churches in which and from which exists the one and unique Catholic Church.”

The Council’s corresponding teaching on the episcopal office is given in, for example, LG 21; CD 2, 8, etc. This too is reflected in the Code (cf c.87/1).

I shall return later to discuss the relationship between the Code and the Council, and to elaborate on why I said the Code “substantially” reflects the ecclesiology and sacramental theology of Vatican II. Before that, though, let us turn to the heart of the matter - to what it means to say that the local churches and the universal church (i.e. “the one and unique Catholic Church”) are in some sense one and the same reality. Here we are at the heart of Catholic ecclesiology.

The fact that there are still unresolved juridical and practical problems arising from the relationship between local churches and the universal church is one further reason why we need to start with the theological basis for our claim that local churches and the universal church are ontologically one and the same reality.

Local churches and universal Church, the same reality

Our theological starting point is what scripture calls the *mystery* or *hidden plan* of God, now revealed; cf Eph. 1:3-14. The understanding of church which comes out of this perspective is precisely the basis on which we can recognise an ontological unity between local churches and the universal church. God's eternal plan, progressively revealed in salvation history, is to bring us into a communion of life with God and with each other that will be forever. This plan is accomplished in Christ, who so identifies with us that we become sons and daughters of the Father and heirs with Christ to everlasting life with God. Our union with Christ is accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. As the liturgy for the twenty-third Sunday of the year puts it we are "drawn into the circle of God's own life", and this was God's purpose in sending the Son and sending the Holy Spirit. This plan has its origins in God's free choice and is accomplished by his power at work in us; (cf Col. 1:25-27).

Even though this divine mercy is intended for all, not all know it. The community which on earth knows of this "plan" because God has revealed it, the community which nurtures and celebrates this sharing of God's own life, and reaches out to share it with others, is called the church. Since the essence of this "mystery" is God's life shared with us, it is the same wherever it is actualised, i.e. in every community which celebrates this life, enters more deeply into it, and shares it with others.

(I am thinking here primarily and directly of the Roman Catholic Church,..... But, of course, the Council's historic description of the body of Christ as "subsisting in" the Roman Catholic Church was intended to allow for the fact that "ecclesial" reality exists also outside the Roman Catholic Church's boundaries (cf LG 8, UR 1,3.)

Another key New Testament term for describing the same reality is *koinonia*, which means our *participation* in the life of the risen Christ, and resulting from it, our union with each other "in Christ". If Christ's life in us is the heart and soul of the church, how could the community not be ontologically the same in every one of its local manifestations, i.e. in every local church?

Some theologians come to the same point from the premise that the church is, in some sense, an *event*. It is that which results from the word of God being proclaimed and received in faith. What results is the Qahal Yahweh, the gathering of God's people. And this gathering is necessarily a local event:

The Church as a whole, where she really becomes an event in the full sense of the term, is necessarily a local church. In the local church the whole church becomes tangible. (Rahner K, *The Episcopate and the Primacy*. Quaest. Disp. Herder & Herder, p.23)

Of course, the word itself is supremely effective at that point where there is no gap at all between what is proclaimed and what is affected, viz. in the sacraments and above all the Eucharist.....

...The Eucharistic gathering, therefore, is the local church, and presupposing that it is celebrated in communion with the local bishop and the bishop of Rome, that local gathering, or event, *lacks in its life nothing* that the universal church has. The local church is the universal church's manifestation in a particular locality, and this is what is most intensely actualised in the liturgy.

This is the ecclesiology that underlies c.369 which says of a diocese that gathered by its pastor "in the Holy Spirit through the gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church of Christ is truly present and operative."

So much, then, for establishing that the universal church is ontologically the same reality as that which is actualised in the local churches.

A Social Reality, in need of pastoral government

The Eucharist effects a real union with Christ (1 Cor. 10:16) and with each other (10:17), and it is this new and unique reality that produces a new kind of community between people across every kind of boundary - race, sex, economic circumstances, etc. (cf Gal. 3:28). But precisely because this *koininia* is made manifest in the life of human beings, it will necessarily be shaped differently according to social, cultural and historical circumstances. This brings us to those dimensions of church life which need to be regulated, in order to safeguard both the unity and the proper diversity of the local churches; cf LG 13. Even the idealisation of church life that is drawn in Acts 2:42-47 needed and presupposed pastoral government.

The 1917 Code, to a larger extent than the 1983 Code, regulated the life of the church on the model of the "complete society" (*societas perfecta*). This organisational model was not unique to the church. Indeed it was borrowed directly from secular society, and it developed "out of the church's two-fold confrontation with the Reformation and with the modern state"; (Pötz, R. *The Concept and Development of Law According to the 1983 CIC*, Concilium June 1986, p. 16).

The model most closely related to the theology I have outlined above is that of "communio". The Second Vatican Council espoused a variety of images and "models" of church, and some of these are reflected in the 1983 Code. It has been observed that "there are unresolved competing ecclesiologies at Vatican II which appear often in the same document. The same lack of consensus marks the ecclesiologies in the new Code." (Provost, J, *Church Law - Church Reality*, Concilium June 1986 p xi).

....This seems to be the appropriate point at which to treat the other subject pertinent to the relationship between local churches and the universal church, namely, the relationship between the episcopate and the bishop of Rome.

The tendency towards excessive centralisation has deep historical roots, which have touched, it seems, the very psyche of the Catholic community. The real meaning of the petrine ministry is something every Catholic can be proud to own. But, for a variety of reasons, this ministry took on an image bigger than its own self:

....in the west he who is known as the Roman Pontiff possesses three distinct primacies. As bishop of Rome...he holds a “regional” primacy, a patriarchal primacy (as patriarch of the west) and an “apostolic” primacy, special and unique in the heart of the universal episcopal college. Little by little these three primacies, each by nature very different from the others, have come to be embraced as one....

Acting sometimes under the pressure of circumstances, sometimes profiting from favourable situations, the church of Rome was to combine into a single embrace the regional primacy, the patriarchal primacy and her distinct “apostolic” responsibility in the communion of churches. (Tillard, J.M., The Bishop of Rome, Michael Glazier, inc., 1983 pp 49, 51)

It can be shown that the Roman claim to an “apostolic” primacy is not based on that See’s social or political importance. It is related to the role of Peter among the twelve. The distinctive position given to Peter somehow mattered even after he was dead. Some of the most important scriptural references to Peter - relating to his role - were written after his death: Mat. 16:17-18; Luke 22:32; Jn. 21:15-17. His role was seen as somehow continuing. In continuity with that belief, the Catholic Church has always recognised the Bishop of Rome as having the same role among the other bishops of the Church as Peter had among the apostles. In him, the role given to Peter lived on and his voice was regarded as, so to speak, the voice of Peter.

But it can also be said that many of the functions that came to be exercised by the bishop of Rome belong more to the special claim of patriarchal Sees based on administrative, political and geographical factors, as those Sees developed after Constantine, than they do to the Petrine ministry as such.....

It is hardly surprising that the church’s theology was affected by its praxis:

In the model of the church as a “perfect society” this picture is predominantly based on the papal “fullness of power”..... In the episcopal ministry a distinction is made between the power of ordination and the power of government. The bishop receives the first in his own sacramental ordination, whereby he obtains “power” to perform the “sacred” actions of ordaining priests and bishops and administering confirmation. His power of government he receives through the *missio canonica* on his appointment by the pope.

This idea was the result of centuries of development that diverged more and more strongly from an original tradition that itself lasted for centuries. In the first centuries bishops were elected by their own ecclesial communities, clergy and people together, and afterwards ordained by bishops of neighbouring churches. In the name of the Lord

and his spirit they were appointed to the one indivisible office as presidents of the liturgy, proclaimers of the gospel and administrators of their own ecclesial community. It was only from the late middle ages onwards, that gradually in the Latin Church the appointment of bishops was reserved more and more to the Popes and finally became their exclusive right; with the result that the separation between administrative appointment and *missio canonica*, on the one hand, and, on the other, sacramental ordination led to the idea of the two “powers” in the episcopal ministry. (Huizing, P, *The Central Legal System and Autonomous Churches*, Concilium, June 1986 pp 25, 26.)

The Second Vatican Council’s distinctive contribution is described by Tillard as follows:

It concerns the movement from an ecclesiology starting with the idea of the universal church divided into portions called dioceses, to an ecclesiology which understands the church as the communion of all the local churches: the universal church arises from the communion of churches....

The ecclesiology of the church as a communion of local churches entrusted to the episkope of bishops in communion with each other should be considered in close connection with another major theme of *Lumen Gentium*: the fact that episcopal authority and its juridical institution is founded on a sacrament - the episcopate. The full weight of this assertion from *Lumen Gentium* needs to bear on the theology of the papacy. For it is clear that whatever is founded upon a sacrament must have priority within the church of God. The church comes about by faith and sacraments and all its essential marks are to be found in the osmosis of faith and sacraments. (Tillard, op. cit. pp 37, 38)

Precisely because bishops are vicars of Christ in their own dioceses and share collegial responsibility for the universal church, it is incumbent on them, as a responsibility resulting from their ordination, to help restore a proper balance between central authority and local autonomy.

Further reform

Correcting tendencies which have deep historical roots does not come easily. One thing is the orthodoxy of the church’s teaching; another is its practice. The shift of emphasis intended by Vatican II does not mean an abandonment of the teaching of Vatican I, but it does mean a more wholesome and more ancient context in which to interpret Vatican I. Although the revised Code of Canon Law is, on the whole, faithful to this more nuanced ecclesiology, it would be fair to say that the Roman Catholic Church is still working its way towards the practical differences which this ecclesiology ultimately requires. In spite of assurances by Pope Paul IV and John Paul II to the Anglican and Orthodox churches concerning appropriate local autonomy, etc, centralist tendencies and interventionist excesses on the part of the Roman curia have not yet disappeared.

Vatican II’s Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the church says: bishops... enjoy as of right in the diocese assigned to them all ordinary, special and immediate power which is necessary for the exercise of their pastoral office, but always without prejudice to the power which the Roman pontiff possesses, *by virtue of his office*, of

reserving certain matters to himself or to some other authority". (CD 8) This power is indeed given to them by the sacrament of episcopal ordination itself, and so by the Holy Spirit. Yet the actual practice seems to be carried out in the spirit of *the Motu Proprio "Pastorale Munus"* of 3 December 1963. According to this document the Roman pontiff *concedes* to the bishops and episcopal conferences the powers and privileges (which they already have through the sacrament). And some of the rights "granted" by the sacrament are as it were, "withdrawn" by virtue of the Roman pontiff's power to do so *intuitu boni Ecclesiae*. The sacramental is thus restricted in favour of the canonical. Once again it is thought better for safety's sake or for fear of "a certain disorder" for the Roman pontiff to have the privilege over against his brother bishops of "conceding" juridically at his pleasure (in fact restoring to them) that which they certainly need to remain true bishops, but bishops now in complete dependence. Once more, for all the grace of sacramental episcopacy, the ineradicable ultramontane attitude has meant another fall into the temptation of making the pope "more than a pope" - and the bishops correspondingly less than bishops. (Tillard, op. cit. pp 46, 47)

How does the Code itself measure up to the ecclesiology of Vatican II? Earlier I suggested that it reflects the teaching of Vatican II "substantially", but not as fully as many would wish, cf Thomas Green, *The Revised Code of Canon Law: Some Theological Issues*, Theological Studies, 47 (1986), pp 640, 641.

Perhaps these deficiencies in the new Code were inevitable in view of the fact that further clarification is still needed on how to conceptualise the concurrence of two jurisdictions in the local churches, - that of the pope and that of the local bishop - both of which are immediate, ordinary and episcopal, and neither of which can be validly used to the detriment of the other.

It can be expected that as the church gradually and increasingly bases its actual practice on the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the Code itself will be brought into line with that practice. Such continuing revision of the 1983 Code is explicitly anticipated in the Preface to the Code itself, and Pope John II in promulgating the Code made it clear that the Code is to be seen as an "effective instrument which the church can use to perfect itself according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council."

Consistent with this important statement by Pope John Paul II, I wrote, in preparation for the extraordinary synod in 1984, that it was

.....important to ensure that post-conciliar events are measured against the main thrusts of the Council. Popular ultramonism can create the impression that official pronouncements, decrees of Roman Congregations, and the new Code of Canon Law may be intended to supersede, or even correct, directions taken by the Council.As an expression of church life and of church authority, the Council stands above all such decrees, interventions, etc. They must be measured by the Council, not vice versa.

This is not a denial of the pope's supreme authority, but a statement of historical fact, attested by the pope himself, that none of the church's post-conciliar decrees, including the Code, have been intended to supersede or correct the Council, but must themselves be interpreted in the light of the Council. I went on to claim that not all post-conciliar documents interpret the Council with equal accuracy or appropriateness.

The implications of subsidiarity and inculturation

One of the guiding principles in formulating the 1983 Code was, of course, the principle of subsidiarity. As the implementation of the principle gradually becomes a reality, it can be expected that the church will move from the “policy of concessions” of which Tillard speaks to a policy more in line with the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* and *Christus Dominus*.

Subsidiarity is not a mere principle of organisational expediency. It has its roots in the dignity of persons, and as we could expect, it concurs with the ecclesiology of *communio*. However, its implementation involves our not yet fully redeemed human nature. Those who serve as part of the church’s centralised bureaucracy need to remember that a church which continually comes into being through the activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit cannot be entirely contained within the status quo of existing regulations. Even pastoral evaluations which are made in the name of the common good must reflect this fact. Similarly, those who represent local churches need, even for the accuracy of their own discernment and the prudence of their judgements, a perspective wider than just the single local churches. Acceptance of wider perspectives and of change and organic growth is a necessary part of accepting the church’s own nature as a communion of local churches having its origin in God’s involvement in our still unfolding human history.

Subsidiarity means that central authority *does not do* what can appropriately be done as local level, and that central authority *does do* what cannot be adequately done by local churches on their own. Failure on either count violates the church’s catholicity.

In virtue of this catholicity each part contributes its own gifts to other parts and to the whole church so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to attain the fullness of unity..... Holding a rightful place in the communion of the church there are also particular churches that retain their own traditions, without prejudice to the Chair of Peter which presides over the whole assembly of charity, and protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not hinder unity, but rather contribute to it. (LG 13)

For these same reasons, an ecclesiology based on the “mystery” (cf Eph. above) will not fear but will welcome that diversity between the local churches which is rooted in diversity of cultures. The church seems poised for a new era of more authentic catholicity resulting from a more world-wide inculturation. It was suggested some years ago by Karl Rahner that this contemporary development in the church’s history is comparable only to that earlier step of inculturation which was the church’s breaking out of its narrow Jewish matrix into the world of Rome and Greece, which became the world of Europe. It was a difficult process then, leading to very real tensions in the early Christian church. But, together with all its risks, it was recognised as a requirement of the Holy Spirit. Now the church is poised to break out of the limited culture and experience of “Europe” and find new expression in all the other cultures of the world. This will also involve tensions, but is clearly where the spirit is leading “the churches” (cf Rahner, K. *Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II*, Theological Studies, 1979, p.721).

Now, as then, failure to take this step would constitute unfaithfulness to the church’s own mission. Failure to inculturate is failure properly to evangelize, as Pope Paul VI has

explained in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. And not to inculturate is not to take seriously the church's nature as a communion of local churches.

The implementation of both subsidiarity and inculturation will intensify the church's catholicity. This enhancement of the life of the local churches is by that very fact an enhancement of the life of the universal church.