



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY

V. PARTICULAR CHURCHES AND THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL

V.1. Some Necessary Distinctions Following the dominant use at the Second Vatican Council, a use reflected in the new Code of Canon Law, in what follows we propose to distinguish between “particular church” and “local church”. The “peculiar” or “particular church” is in the first place the diocese (cf. canon 368), “loyal to its pastor and formed by him ... in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist” (CD 11). Here the criterion invoked is essentially theological. The expression “local church” (*ecclesia localis*), on the other hand, represents a usage dropped by the Code. The “local church” can refer to a more-or-less homogeneous grouping of particular churches, whose formation results in most cases from the givens of geography, history, language, or culture. Under the guidance of Providence, these churches have developed (in the past, as, for example, with the “ancient patriarchal churches”) or are developing (in our own day) a patrimony of their own at once theological, juridical, liturgical, and spiritual. Here the criterion invoked is principally of a sociocultural kind.

We also wish to distinguish between the essential structure of the Church and its concrete, changing form (or organization). The “essential structure” comprises everything in the Church that derives from divine institution (*jure divino*), by means of its foundation through Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This structure can only be a single structure, and it is destined to endure throughout time. However, this essential, permanent structure is always clothed in a concrete expression and organization (*jure ecclesiastico*), the result of contingent and changing factors, historical, cultural, geographic, and political. Indeed, the Church’s concrete form is normally subject to evolution. It is the locus where legitimate and even necessary differences are manifest. The diversity of organization does not contradict, however, the unity of structure.

This distinction between essential structure and concrete form or organization should not be taken to imply a separation. The essential structure is always implicated in a concrete form, and without this form it cannot truly exist. This is why the concrete form is not just neutral in terms of the essential structure: it has the power to express that structure faithfully and efficaciously in a given situation. In certain respects to identify what is proper to the structure and what to the form or organization may require a delicate act of discernment.

The particular church, bound as it is to its bishop and shepherd, belongs by its very nature to the Church's essential structure. And yet in the course of the centuries, this same structure has been figured forth in various ways. The mode of functioning embraced by a particular church as well as different kinds of grouping of a number of particular churches together belong to the side of concrete form and organization. And this is of course the case with "local churches", localized as they are by their origins and traditions.

V.2. Unity and Diversity

These distinctions being clear, we must nevertheless underline the fact that for Catholic theology the unity and diversity of the Church share a common originating reference: both refer to the Triune God where the differentiated Triad of Persons exists in the unity of a single Godhead. The real distinction of Persons in no way divides the single nature. Trinitarian theology shows us that true differences can only exist in unity. What has no unity cannot support difference, as J. A. Moehler pointed out. We can apply these reflections analogically to the theology of the Church.

The Church of the Trinity (cf. *LG* 4), whose diversity is manifold, receives her unity from the gift of the Holy Spirit who is himself the unity of the Father and the Son.

Catholic universalism must therefore be distinguished from those falsifying accounts of universality that one finds in totalitarian doctrines, in materialistic systems, in the false ideologies of scientism and the cult of technology, and indeed in imperialistic strategies of every kind. No more should Catholic universalism be confused with a uniformity that would destroy legitimate particularities. Again, one ought not try to assimilate that universalism to a systematic postulation of the uniquely singular, subversive as that would be of essential unity.

The Code of Canon Law (canon 368) has adopted a formula of *Lumen gentium* (23), which states that “it is in these (particular churches) and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists”. Between the particular churches and the universal Church there exists a mutual inferiority, a kind of osmosis. The universal Church finds its concrete existence in each church where it is present. Reciprocally, each particular church is “formed after the model of the universal Church” (LG 23) and lives in intense communion with that Church.

V.3. The Service of Unity

At the heart of the universal network of particular churches of which the single Church of God is made up, there is a unique center and reference point: the particular Church of Rome. That Church, with which, as Saint Irenaeus wrote, “every other church must be in accord”, presides in charity over the universal communion (cf. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Rom., Proem.*). Indeed, Christ Jesus, the eternal Shepherd, “in order that the episcopate itself ... might be one and undivided ... put Peter at the head of the other apostles, and in him he set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and of communion” (*LG* 18). Successor of the apostle Peter, the Roman Pontiff is Christ’s Vicar and the visible head of the whole Church over which he exercises “full, supreme, and universal power” (*LG* 22).

Lumen gentium wished to associate its reiteration of the doctrines of the primacy and teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff with its “doctrine concerning bishops, successors of the apostles” (LG 18). The college of bishops, which stands in succession to the college of the apostles, shows forth at one and the same time the diversity, universality, and unity of the people of God. For the “bishops, successors of the apostles ... together with Peter’s successor, the Vicar of Christ and the visible head of the whole Church, direct the house of the living God” (LG 18). And that house is the Church. It follows that the episcopal college, “together with their head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him ... have supreme and full authority over the universal Church” (LG 22). Each bishop, in his particular church, “enjoys a solidarity with the entire episcopal body to whom has been entrusted, in succession to the apostolic college, the task of watching over the Church’s credal purity and unity” (Paul VI, apostolic letter *Quinque jam anni*, 8 December 1970). Thus he is “bound to have such care and solicitude for the whole Church, which, though it be not exercised by any act of jurisdiction, does for all that redound in an eminent degree to the advantage of the universal Church” (LG 23). In the same way, the bishop will govern his diocese bearing in mind that it is “constituted after the model of the universal Church” (LG 23; cf. CD 11).

The “collegial feeling” (*affectus collegialis*) that the Council has aroused among the bishops has, since its meeting, found concrete expression in the important role played by *episcopal conferences* (cf. *LG* 23). Through this means, the bishops of a given nation or territory exercise “together” or “jointly” certain of their apostolic and pastoral responsibilities (cf. *CD* 38; *Codex Iuris Canonici*, 447).

It may also be noted here that these episcopal conferences not infrequently develop mutual relations of good neighborliness, collaboration, and solidarity, especially on a continental level. Continental episcopal assemblies gather together delegates of various conferences on the basis of earth's great geographic units. Thus one finds, for instance, the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE). To our age of massive geopolitical unification and organization, such assemblies offer a concrete expression of the Church's unity in the diversity of human cultures and situations.

It is impossible to deny the usefulness, and even the pastoral necessity, of both episcopal conferences and their continental federations. But does this mean that one should see in them, as is sometimes done on account of the cooperative character of their work, specifically “collegial” institutions, understood in the strict sense of *Lumen gentium* (22, 23) and *Christus Dominus* (4, 5, 6)? These texts do not allow of any rigorous ascription to episcopal conferences or their continental federations of the adjective “collegial”. (We refer here to the adjective “collegial” since the noun “collegiality” nowhere exists in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.) That episcopal collegiality that stands in succession to apostolic collegiality is *universal* and can only be understood, by reference to the *whole* Church, in terms of the *totality* of the episcopal body in union with the Pope. These conditions are realized in the case of the ecumenical Council, and may be realized in the united action of the bishops dispersed around the world, for the reasons set forth in *Christus Dominus* 4. In a certain sense, they may also be realized in the Synod of Bishops, which may give a true, if partial, expression to universal collegiality, because, “as it will be representative of the whole Catholic episcopate”, it will “be as testimony to the participation of all the bishops in hierarchical communion in the care of the universal Church” (*CD* 5; cf. *LG* 23). By contrast, institutions like episcopal conferences (and their continental federations) have to do with the concrete organization or form of the Church (*jure ecclesiastico*). To describe them by such terms as “college”, “collegiality”, and “collegial” is to use language in an analogical and theologically “improper” way.

But to say this in no way lessens the importance of the practical role that episcopal conferences and their continental federations must play in the future, notably in what concerns the relations between particular churches, “local” churches, and the universal Church. The results already attained allow one to feel in this regard a well-founded confidence.

It is nonetheless true that in that condition of wayfarers that is ours difficulties may well emerge in the relations between particular churches as well as in their own relationship with the See of Rome, charged as that is with the ministry of universal unity and communion. The sinful tendency of man makes him turn differences into oppositions. This is why we must never abandon the search for the best means of expressing Catholic universality, which will also be the best means of enabling the most diverse human elements to compenetrates one another in the unity of the Faith. All this must be done in communion with the See of Rome and under her authority.