

The Church as Institution

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The Foreword to the original edition of Hans Küng's *Strukturen der Kirche* is dated May 1962; the new Foreword to the English translation is dated March 1965.¹ Apart from a Preface by Cardinal Cushing and some paragraphs from Pope Paul's striking speech at the opening of the second session of Vatican II, no changes seem to have been made for this English edition. One might have expected that a book written on the structures of the Church before the Council had met at all would date painfully after three sessions of the Council and the enormous upheaval in the life of the Church which has accompanied them; and this might seem especially likely for an author whose writings are always 'conversational' (or should one say 'dialogical'), contributions to a continuing debate, or even sometimes publicist, more concerned to change other people's ideas than to explore ideas in depth.² Indeed Küng's own writings, including this book, have played a considerable part in the upheaval, and no future history of Vatican II will be able to ignore the impact of *The Council and Reunion*, especially on the English-speaking world.

It must then clearly be said that *Structures of the Church* retains real value and interest even today. This is not to say that a good deal of the rather longwinded book (358 pages in English) has not now outlived its immediate interest, the first part in particular. The general thesis of the book, for instance, that the ecumenical council by human convocation is the representation of the Church as ecumenical council by divine convocation, should by now be familiar to Küng's more popular presentation of the thesis in *The Living Church*; the semantics of 'con-cilium' remain just as unimpressive. Or again the long debate with German Evangelical theologians on 'office' in the

¹*Structures of the Church*, by Hans Küng. Translated by Salvator Attanasio. Burns and Oates; 42s. The American edition of this translation was published last year; I understand that the delay in producing a British edition has been due to the need to revise the translation. With real regret I feel bound to say that the revision could have and should have been far more extensive. It might have been possible to tolerate the abundance of misprints, the clumsiness of style and a general cloudiness of rendering which fails to do justice to Küng's exceptionally lucid German; but there remains an intolerably large number of errors pure and simple. One howler I shall treasure is 'apostolic paradox' (p. 140) for 'apostolic paradosis'. That illiteracies of this kind are still possible in the Anglo-Saxon world – the *Catholic* part of it – is surely some indication of the quality of theological communication there. The present review is based on the German text; page references are to the English text.

²The generalization in its restrictive sense applies least to his first book, on Barth (discussed in *Blackfriars*, June 1960, pp. 223-7); the present book is his most theologically 'serious' publication since that work.

Church may now seem even more remote to English readers who have no way of judging how much has gone on in that debate since the first appearance of the book (I have been unable to trace a single reference to it in the periodical *Kerygma und Dogma* which Schlink helps to edit). Küng's debating-partners are so predominantly Lutheran (much less often Calvinist, rarely Anglican or Orthodox) that one frequently has the impression of listening in on a conversation which is continuously lively and interesting but not immediately relevant. That the conversation continues to be interesting – that it is really relevant – is because the Catholic partner is so engagingly versatile: because Küng himself in response brings out for inspection so much that has been swept under the carpet in that familiar version of Catholicism which is still ours and which as it seems to fit us less and less we are tempted to cast off entirely or contort ourselves to retain. For some part at least of what has been held below the level of Catholic consciousness is really deep resource and life-giving; some of it *may* be, though it is not easy to see how. What is undoubtedly important is not too readily to exclude in advance the possibility that what at first sight seems merely marginal might not after all turn out to be intrinsically and illuminatingly central; not by way of displacement, certainly, but by accumulation and consolidation. Instances of this rediscovery of forgotten truths outside the chosen scope of this book are too numerous now to mention; the personal dimension of the sacraments is an obvious example. That one forgotten truth about the Church was its character as *mystery* has now been so widely acknowledged (solemnly in Pius XII's *Mystici Corporis*) that there has been some danger that its character as *institution* might itself become forgotten; it is surely the basic task of ecclesiology today, in the World Council of Churches as well as in the Catholic Church, so to revalue the institution as to let it appear as the plausible organ of the Church as mystery.

It is to this task that Küng's book may be said to address itself. Very little in it, any unsuspecting reader should perhaps be warned, has to do with the Church as mystery: the communion of men in Christ as the real expression in the historical, categorical order, of God's transcendental self-communication to man in three Persons. It is the *expression* with which Küng is concerned and its 'plausibility'. *Glaubwürdig*, as the translator notes (p. 26), is not adequately rendered by 'credible'; but it is not better rendered by 'authentic' either – complaints were made about this in French translations of Küng. Something fails to be authentic when it is not in reality what it professes to be: but what is here in question for Catholics is not the reality of the Church but the way in which it displays that reality: a discordance not between profession and reality but between one part of the profession and other parts in the total manifestation of the mysterious reality of the Church. The profession must not be 'implausible' in such a way that the claim to represent the mystery is not

borne out by the whole of the Church's manifest life. What then Küng is urging upon us is a review of the manifest and manifesting structures of the Church as institution, in the light of non-Catholic (primarily Lutheran) difficulties about Catholic claims, not so much because they are untrue or incredible but because they are implausible. Barth's remark in conversation with Küng, 'I cannot hear the voice of the Good Shepherd from this "Chair of Peter",' makes the point sharply.³

While most Catholics, even in 1962, would have been prepared to accept this implausibility of the Church's claims as regards its holiness (it was one of John XXIII's favourite themes) and even to some extent as regards its unity-in-catholicity, it was still not so easy to recognize the implausibility of the Church's claim to apostolicity. It still seemed then, and perhaps still seems today, that there was no clearer manifestation of apostolicity than that provided by the 'Apostolic See'; that (setting aside a few difficulties of a historically contingent kind) the Papacy was in a unique way the manifest token of continuity in the Dominical commission to the Apostles. Where this claim was not acknowledged one had simply to regret the incompleteness of Christian faith. What Catholics may now recognize more readily is that this claim (which of course Catholics still accept in faith) suffered from implausibility; that Christians who were not of the Roman communion found it implausible, in genuinely Christian terms, that the apostolicity of Christ's Church should be so narrowly concentrated in a single succession as the Roman Church seemed to claim. For while it was always possible for Catholics who knew of them to point to authoritative texts in which the apostolicity of bishops in the Roman Catholic Church was duly acknowledged (even in the constitution *Pastor Aeternus* of Vatican I), it can hardly be said that in 1962 the Dominical origin of the Roman Catholic episcopate was very prominent in Catholic consciousness. One would like to think that the constitution *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II has changed all that; but it takes time even for highly publicized conciliar statements really to sink into general consciousness.

I should like to illustrate this point topically – perhaps too topically – by referring to the situation in my own archdiocese of Birmingham; the illustration will allow me to touch on another of Küng's themes, the role of the laity in the structure of the Church. It is now (August) six months since the death of Archbishop Grimshaw. No doubt 'processes of consultation' with a view to the provision of a successor are going on somewhere; meanwhile business goes on quite as usual. Not even experienced priests of my acquaintance have any clear idea of what procedures of consultation are actually followed. Presumably the English Hierarchy (a term which

³p. 326. The English version quaintly has 'in the dialogue once and for all' instead of 'in conversation once'.

even at Trent referred to *all* the grades of the sacred ministry) has had its say, perhaps even Her Majesty's Government has ever so discreetly been sounded. Priests of the archdiocese have been obliged for months to recite the prescribed *oratio imperata* at Mass three times a week (not on Sundays); with the introduction on August 15 of the bidding prayers it is now possible for the assembled People of God to pray together that a new Archbishop may be granted them. Other participation of Christ's People in the provision of a successor to the see of Birmingham there is, as far as I know, absolutely none – except that by private initiative, so I understand, a number of priests in the archdiocese have urged upon the Apostolic Delegate the claims of a candidate of their choice. It seems that apart from sacristy gossip the only role of clergy and laity alike is to await the descent of an Archbishop from above. Does this *episcopus ex machina* theory and practice make *plausible* the claim of the Roman Catholic Church to be anything more than a papal state, in which the bishops are merely the Pope's officials and lower clergy and laity merely the passive object of the 'Church's' (i.e. the Pope's) arbitrary, paternalistic government?

The weakness here is precisely a weakness of *structure*, not in the structure instituted by the will of Jesus Christ but the structure which is the product of evolution in the human history of the Church. As the illustration offered makes clear, there is a pressing need for the establishment of new *institutions*, in this case institutions of consultation. Even the Tory Party has succeeded in institutionalizing its 'processes of consultation' in such a way as to make more plausible its claim to be a democratic political party. I am not of course suggesting that the God-given structure of the Church is a democratic one, the bishops merely agents of the delegated authority of the Christian people, nor am I suggesting that this God-given structure should be modified in a democratic sense. What is being urged is that *practical* provision should be made for the exercise of the traditional right of the People of God to have a voice in a matter which deeply concerns them: the *person* of their pastor, *who* is to be the bearer of Christ's commission in this particular place.⁴ There could be no difficulty in consulting the clergy, parochial or religious. The laity could be consulted through institutions already in existence (e.g. the Newman Association) or through institutions specially established for the purpose. Until some such changes are made in the purely human, ecclesiastical structures of the Church, even the conciliar declarations will remain implausible, professions unsupported by concrete social institutions.

Following Congar,⁵ Küng comments on the striking text of the

⁴Cf. Y. Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, pp. 230 f.

⁵The excellent essay which Küng analyses at some length, originally published in the Karrer Festschrift *Begegnung der Christen*, is now available in Congar's collection *Chrétiens en Dialogue*, Paris 1964, pp. 409-36.

Codex Iuris Canonici (c. 100, §1): 'Catholica Ecclesia et Apostolica Sedes moralis personae rationem habent ex ipsa ordinatione divina,'⁶ in terms of the metaphor of 'poles'. For Congar, the tradition of Roman ecclesiology is centred on the pole 'Primacy'. For Küng, the metaphor seems to be applied not to the orientations of ecclesiological interest but to the realities to which that interest is directed. Thus his language (even in the German) tends in fact to support that misunderstanding of the canon just quoted against which he himself puts us on our guard (p. 280): that 'Pope' and 'Church', as 'moral persons', stand over against each other, that the Pope is not Pope *in* the Church but *over* it. In connexion with the canon, Congar, and Küng after him, cite the only two texts (Mt 16:18; 18:17) in which the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament is used by Jesus himself. In the first, the *ekklesia* is to be built upon the *petra*-Petros, the rock-Rockman; in the second, the case of the obstinate sinner is to be brought before the *ekklesia*.⁷ In the first text, foundation and ecclesial congregations are distinguished though not divided; in the second the ecclesial congregation is the whole actually assembled, not excluding its leaders. Pope and Church are moral persons, not contradistinguished against each other, but the first distinguished within the second.

It is perhaps the impetus of Küng's argument in his valuable examination of the Council of Constance⁸ and its continuing dogmatic significance for ecclesiology that has led him to imprecision here. Elsewhere, when countering Protestant difficulties about papal infallibility for instance, he shows his usual clarity. At any rate, even if my criticism of his displacement of Congar's emphasis is unjustified, the point remains that any attempt to re-establish a proper equilibrium in ecclesiology (as indeed anywhere else than in physics) has constantly to be on its guard against an over-simplified form of restoring balance by mere counterpoise. The balance in Catholic ecclesiology is only to be restored by replacing (theoretically *and* practically) the Pope *in* the Church, *in* the episcopal college – and not by simple absorption either; and this task, even theoretically, has not been finally mastered at Vatican II, as the famous *Nota explicativa* to the constitution on the Church plainly shows.

There is a sort of baffling complexity about these questions which is usually a sign that the ultimate vantage-point from which to survey them has not yet been reached. Or to shift the metaphor from height to depth, our consciousness of the Church is still too

⁶The earliest source for the whole paragraph cited in the apparatus of the Codex is Pius IX, in his allocution 'Singulari quadam' of 9.12.1854.

⁷What ever may be thought of Mt 18:18, at least verse 17 cannot be confined to the inner circle of disciples, the Apostles.

⁸Küng should not be reproached for relying so heavily here and elsewhere in his book on the results of specialists, de Vooght, Tierney and others; the sheer mass of evidence to be mastered in any synoptic approach to ecclesiology makes any other course impracticable. And there are real advantages in having some of these specialist studies conveniently summarized.

superficial to allow us to let the world of the Church well up through us and open up before us in its God-given perspective. The upheaval in our awareness of the Church has not yet settled enough to allow us to live the Church with a sort of new instinctive vital tact. It is surely in the order of images, symbols and types that this new awareness will need first to be constellated before we can hope to rediscover the simple, pregnant word. Vatican II began with the constitution on the liturgy; and in the constitution on the Church the first chapter directs our attention to many images of the Church and the last chapter to the Blessed Virgin and Mother as type of the Church. In an important book, recently translated into French with a long introduction by Congar,⁹ the author begins his examination of the theme of the maternity of the Church – a maternity of the whole local *ekklesia*, laity and clergy together – with a discussion of ‘knowledge by way of the image’. Articulate thought and action need to be orientated by controlling images. In fact they always are; what we have to learn, under the Spirit, is to let the authentic, the deep, the consecrated images rise up and come to birth in us. This is a demand for contemplation and silence, for quality of Christian life, for a common vision, itself inwardly ecclesial, of the mystery of the *ekklesia*. The Church has to take shape in us before we give shape and human structure to the Church.

⁹Karl Delahaye, *Ecclesia Mater chez les Pères des trois premiers siècles. Pour un renouvellement de la Pastorale d’aujourd’hui*, Paris 1964. Cf. also P. S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Philadelphia 1960; Hugo Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche*, Salzburg 1964.