

Ecclesiological Contours : the Vatican Perspective

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Throughout the Catholic world there has been extensive discussion of the differences in tone, emphasis and sympathy between the two documents on the theology of liberation issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—the cautionary *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* of 1984, which was primarily concerned with drawing attention to ‘deviations and risks of deviation damaging to the faith’¹, and the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* of 1986. The concern of this article is not so much with the contents themselves of these two documents as with the different ecclesiologies which appear to have shaped those contents. The prime object is to discern what the differences between them have to say to us about the place of ecclesiology in the Church’s mission today.

The cautionary ecclesiology

The ecclesiology of the first Vatican Instruction is present more by inference than direct reference. The danger points in contemporary ecclesiology are identified as a dismissal of the hierarchical nature of the Church as the People of God, and an ecclesiology that has become too immanentist. The document admits that it is not really interested in giving a positive theology—it leaves that task to the later document. Nevertheless one can discern an emerging ecclesiology underlying the text.

At about the same time that the Instruction was released, the text of an interview given by Cardinal Ratzinger, the Prefect of the Congregation, was also published. Many of the ideas in the Instruction are the same as those in the interview. This interview is a valuable asset because it helps fill out the ecclesiology that is only hinted at in the Instruction.

The question of structure and authority in the Church is a major concern of the Instruction. The fear is that the Marxist idea of class struggle is invading ecclesiology to the extent that it even applies itself to Church structures. The Instruction rejects any critique of the structures of the Church. Such a critique, it says, ‘has to do with a challenge to the sacramental and hierarchical structure of the Church which was willed by the Lord himself’ (IX. 13). The interview given by Cardinal Ratzinger spells this out more clearly:

If the Church, in fact, is *our* Church, if *we alone* are the Church,

if her structures are not willed by Christ, then it is no longer possible to conceive of a hierarchy as a service to the baptised established by the Lord himself... But the Church of Christ is not a party, not an association, not a club. Her deep and permanent structure is not *democratic* but *sacramental*, consequently hierarchical. For the hierarchy based on the apostolic succession is the indispensable condition to arrive at the strength, the reality of the sacrament.²

Here one sees the ecclesiology that Ratzinger is invoking, namely the Church as sacrament. As a piece of theology it is very rich, with its double emphasis on Jesus as the primary sacrament: on the one hand, the sacrament of the self-communication of God, and, on the other hand, the sacrament of the faithful response of God's people. The Church is sacrament in that in the mystery of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom and the ultimate inauguration of the Kingdom through his death and resurrection is a living reality for his disciples in all times and places. The Church is truly sacrament as it lives in its own life and, indeed, in its structures, that mystery of Jesus and the Kingdom. Cardinal Ratzinger's linking of sacramental with hierarchical seems to be pushing the theology of sacrament in a direction that cannot be substantiated with the scriptural evidence. The quote above highlights the weak spot in this ecclesiology when it begins by talking of structures willed by Christ. A careful reading of the Gospels would indicate that Jesus willed no structures—none, at least, of the kind known later. The founding act of Jesus is to be understood in the light of his proclamation, his mighty works and his death and resurrection. The Reign of God formed the core of this activity and is the background against which we may understand the Church as sacrament. We cannot deny that structures emerged within the Christian community in the post-resurrection era. However, neither can we deny that these were always at the service of the Church as it fulfilled its mission to minister to the Reign of God. To that extent I would much prefer to see the structural element of the Church regarded as a means to an end rather than the end itself. Structures are a practical element of Church organisation, not the theological backbone around which to build our understanding of Church.

The point at issue in the Instruction is the idea of reform in the Church; specifically the reform of the Church structure and authority. When questioned during his interview Cardinal Ratzinger commented on the concept of *ecclesia semper reformanda* by distinguishing the sin of individuals (who are always in the need of reform) from the holiness of the Church. Given that he sees structures as a divine imperative constituting the nature of the Church, it would seem that structures are beyond reform. The emphasis of the Latin American bishops meeting at Puebla in 1979 was different. In speaking of the poor they noted that 'the poor challenge the Church constantly, summoning it to conversion' (n. 1147). With this shift,

which has occurred in Latin America, concerning authority in the Church and the empowerment of the poor it would seem that at least this group of local Churches has operated from a very different ecclesiology to Cardinal Ratzinger.

Another ecclesiological stumbling block in the Instruction is the notion of the People's Church:

The 'theologies of liberation' ... mean by *Church of the People* a Church of the class, a Church of the oppressed people whom it is necessary to 'conscientise' in the light of the organised struggle for freedom (IX. 12).

The most striking aspect of this statement is that it seems to dismiss the reality in which liberation theologians find themselves. Gustavo Gutierrez has claimed that the liberation theologian does not do theology from an armchair, but rather is involved in the concrete reality and history of a people and illuminates their situation with the Word of God. The Latin American reality is that people are oppressed, that there is a massive gulf between rich and poor and that the people need to become aware of their situation. An ecclesiology which fails to take account of these factors will fail to resonate with the cultural milieu in which the Church seeks to be present.

Cardinal Ratzinger plainly does not like the image of People of God:

A balance has been lost with many theologians. Yet, contrary to what the latter think, in this way there is a risk of moving backward rather than forward ... Here 'People of God' actually refers always to the Old Testament element of the Church, to her continuity with Israel. But the Church receives her New Testament character more distinctively in the concept of the 'Body of Christ'.³

That he prefers the image of 'Body of Christ' to 'People of God' presents a couple of difficulties. Both images are New Testament images rich in meaning; they are not mutually exclusive but complement each other and add to our understanding of that very complex mystery 'Church'. To prefer one to the other is to make use of only part of the scriptural evidence. The second problem is that the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* chose People of God as the focal point around which it situated clusters of other images. That the liberation theologians have chosen to reflect more specifically on this image would seem to be in harmony with conciliar thinking and an effort to assist development in that thinking.

The final key area of concern for the Instruction concerns the relationship of the Church with the world. What is specifically rejected is an ecclesiology which concentrates on the Church in the midst of the historical situation. The implied ecclesiology of the Instruction has the Church transcending history. The words of the Instruction are specific:

As far as the Church is concerned, this system would see her

only as a reality interior to history, herself subject to those laws which are supposed to govern the development of history in its immanence. The Church, the gift of God and mystery of faith, is emptied of any specific reality by this reductionism. At the same time, it is disputed that the participation of Christians who belong to opposing classes at the same Eucharistic Table still makes any sense. (IX. 8)

The question of the relationship between the Church and the world is of major importance. The Church considered this very issue at the time of its ecumenical council over twenty years ago. There was a noticeable shift towards the world, not so as to empty the Church of its meaning but in order to 'raise it (i.e. the world) toward the Kingdom of God'.⁴ Such a shift must surely be regarded as a major theological development. Its importance was emphasised by Paul VI when he asked

Will it not be said that the thought of the Church in the Council has deviated toward the *anthropocentric* positions of modern culture? Deviated, no; turned, yes.⁵

Paul VI made no apologies for this theological development.

The spirit of optimism and openness that characterised this era at the end of the Council is certainly missing from Cardinal Ratzinger's ecclesiology. He cautions

After the phase of indiscriminate 'openness' it is time that the Christian reacquire the consciousness of belonging to a minority and of being in opposition to what is obvious, plausible and natural for that mentality which the New Testament calls—and certainly not in a positive sense—the 'spirit of the world'. It is time to find again the courage of nonconformism, the capacity to oppose many of the trends of the surrounding culture, renouncing a certain euphoric post-conciliar solidarity.⁶

Ratzinger is worried that this openness to the world may result in a deformation of the Church's mission to such an extent that it becomes a 'purely human project: the Gospel becomes the Jesus-project, the social liberation project or other merely historical, immanent projects that can still seem religious in appearance, but which are atheistic in substance'.⁷ In this statement Ratzinger is contrasting the Church as a supernatural reality with the Church as a sociological reality. He wishes to stress that it is a supernatural reality. In doing this he places less emphasis on the historical dimension of both the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Church. A different contrast might have helped to avoid this diminished emphasis. If he had talked about the Church as a *theological* reality he would have been able to affirm that it is a supernatural reality while at the same time still being able to use a phrase like the 'Jesus project' (which does have a meaning in christology) in its genuine theological sense. The phrase highlights the link between christology and ecclesiology. A low christology will result in a

different ecclesiology from a high christology. I suspect that Cardinal Ratzinger is working from a high christology, and this would account for his difficulty with this phrase 'the Jesus project'. His objection to 'immanent projects that can still seem religious in appearance, but which are atheistic in substance' implies a high rather than a low christology. Perhaps there needs to be a greater awareness of a corresponding high and low ecclesiology. The concept of 'immanent projects' fits better into an ecclesiology from below.

In summarising this ecclesiology presented in the *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* we could say that it is an exalted ecclesiology with strong emphasis on the divine nature of the Church, its sacramental and hierarchical nature, and its mission to free all people from sin and lead them to eternal life. Such a theology is properly orthodox. Whether or not it is the only orthodox ecclesiology is another matter.

A proper self-understanding

A different ecclesiology is evident in the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*. We can assume that this ecclesiology is also properly orthodox. The difference can be attributed to the fact that the second Instruction resulted from world-wide consultation, at least at the level of the hierarchy. The first Instruction appears to be substantially the outcome of the thinking of one man, Cardinal Ratzinger. While the later Instruction does show some evidence of the caution displayed by Ratzinger in the earlier document and in his interview, the prevailing ecclesiology is much more positive. For this reason I will consider it as reflecting a greater readiness of the Vatican to be open to the self-understanding of those parts of the Church where a 'liberation ecclesiology' is emerging.

First, let us briefly outline the ecclesiology of the second Instruction as it relates to the alternative ecclesiology of the first Instruction. There the concern was with the question of structure and authority, the notion of the People of God, and the relationship of the Church with the world and its history. These same areas form the basis for the ecclesiology of the second Instruction. In addition I will note a fourth element in the ecclesiology.

Article 20 of the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* refers to a diversity of charisms within the Church and to the fact that these charisms are charisms of service and that they are 'not opposed to the equal dignity of persons'. This ecclesiological position is based on service rather than hierarchy. The reference to a diversity of charisms implies the recognition of Baptism as the primary ecclesial sacrament. Because of their Baptism all people in the Church share an equal dignity and a common vocation (i.e. to holiness). The model is not like a pyramid with its unequal relationships, but could be likened to a plane where all within the Church, whatever their state in life or specific charism, are fundamentally equal. It is the 'rich diversity in the Church' (n. 33) that contributes to its self-

understanding. This emphasis on variety and diversity is far removed from the almost paranoid fear of authority being undermined in the earlier document.

The second Instruction does not speak specifically about theological variety and diversity within the Church; to do so would be very difficult in the light of the strong tone of the earlier Instruction. However, with the new emphasis on diversity and variety among the Church's people and the awareness, which we shall see later, of cultural diversity in the Church, one could well extend this principle of diversity to the area of theology. There is a rich diversity within the Church partly because of a cultural diversity embracing such varied ingredients as the social, political and economic situations of the various peoples. Any authentic ecclesiology will need to respond to this diversity.

The treatment of the People of God in the Instruction is quite thorough and includes both the Old Testament and the New Testament background of the image. The fact that the Old Testament background looms in the forefront of this image is not seen as a regression or stagnation. The community of the disciples of Jesus in the post-Easter period took over that Old Testament image. As such the image helped them understand themselves and helped form them as a new People. This self-awareness was further enhanced by their faith in Jesus. They were constituted as a people through their own anointing with the Spirit. This piece of theology seems to harmonise with that presented by the liberation theologians. For example, Leonardo Boff regards the Spirit as the formative force in the People's Church.⁸ The Instruction itself emphasises that the Spirit-filled People of the new covenant is at the service of the Kingdom of God. As such the Church is an eschatological people, full of hope.

The People of God of the New Covenant is the Church of Christ. Her law is the commandment of love. In the hearts of her members the Spirit dwells as in a Temple. She is the seed and the beginning of the Kingdom of God here below, which will receive its completion at the end of time with the resurrection of the dead and the renewal of the whole of creation. Thus possessing the pledge of the Spirit, the People of God is led towards the fullness of freedom (n. 58).

Those themes of Kingdom of God, people of hope, renewal of creation, and effort on behalf of freedom are all significant themes in liberation theology.

It is these themes that highlight the important relationship between the Church and the world with its history—the third area I want to consider in this ecclesiology. This Instruction has no problems with such phrases as 'earthly city' and 'human progress'. The reference to 'true solidarity with everyone who suffers' (n. 60) is reminiscent of the decision of the Latin American bishops at Medellin, and re-affirmed at Puebla, to embrace a preferential option for the poor. Such an option can only be authentic when

it is the result of a very real prophetic gesture on the part of the Church. Earlier the Instruction had noted the importance of the Church discerning the signs of the times and calling 'man and societies to overcome situations of sin and injustice and to establish the conditions for true freedom' (n. 60). The point can be noted simply here that it is this self-understanding which characterises the behaviour of the Church in such countries as Brazil, Peru and the Philippines.

The Puebla Conference in 1979 spoke of building a new society (n. 1308). This theme is echoed in the second Instruction:

The vigilant and active expectation of the coming of the Kingdom is also the expectation of a finally perfect justice for the living and the dead, for people of all times and places, a justice which Jesus Christ, installed as the supreme Judge, will establish. This promise, which surpasses all human possibilities, directly concerns our life in this world (n. 60).

Because the Church adopts this position as its prevailing ecclesiology it sees itself primarily as a missionary people who are at the service of the Gospel and the Reign of God. The self-understanding of this Church will be arrived at largely through theological reflection on the world and the place of the Kingdom in that world. Its primary concern will be with the Kingdom rather than with itself; it will be a Church which looks outward. It can be observed that such an ecclesiological position is totally different from the ecclesiology proposed in the first Instruction, with its concern for its own interior reality and internal ordering.

Both ecclesiologies seem to be operative in the Church today. The outward-looking Church concerns itself with the temporal order and the historical reality of the people. Article 63 lists specific concerns of this Church: helping people in their need, providing basic education (may we call it 'conscientisation'?), and promoting development. It could be argued that the inward-looking Church also has these same concerns. However, the emphasis is different, all the time concentrating on the building up of the Church as an organisation. One need refer only to the Catholic education system in some developed countries such as Australia to see this happening.

One final point needs to be made in relation to the ecclesiology of the second Instruction and it concerns the significance of culture. Article 96 speaks of 'respect for the identity of each people and nation'. Such an attitude of respect for different cultures was certainly not a part of the first Instruction. One of the very bases for a liberation ecclesiology is the Church's awareness of and interaction with the culture in which it finds itself. The response by the Peruvian bishops to the first Instruction highlighted most clearly the cultural ignorance contained in that document.⁹ This second Instruction notes the close connection between culture and Church. The Church cannot ignore culture; it cannot be 'acultural'. It will reflect the culture to which it belongs and it will also evangelise that culture

so that it becomes an ever more suitable place for the ultimate realisation of the Kingdom.

If we are looking for a phrase to summarise the ecclesiology of the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* it would refer to a Church which is primarily missionary, at the service of the Kingdom of God. This ecclesiology is a genuine alternative to the ecclesiology of the first Instruction.

Ecclesiology in a pluralistic world

This study of the two Instructions from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith raises some very important questions concerning the scope of ecclesiology.

The methodology of the liberation theologians offers us a new hermeneutics—or perhaps more correctly, a new hermeneutic locale. Part of the theological process is hermeneutical (i.e. the interpretation of data). What we see happening today is that the horizon for the collection of data has been expanded beyond magisterial statements and the like to include the experience of people in their concrete situation. The North American theologian, Joseph Komonchak, has called on the ecclesologist to go beyond the hermeneutics of a text to the hermeneutics of social existence.¹⁰ The consideration of the concrete, historical situation urges the theologian to consider new questions which arise from a different situation. The theologian is challenged to discover new meanings which go beyond his normal theological understanding, and he finds himself moving about, as it were, at various levels of experience and within various horizons of comprehension.

Part of the tension we experience today is caused by a failure to recognise the variety of situations or worlds in which the Church finds itself. Any effort at self-awareness on the Church's part which does not take account of cultural diversity will be doomed to confusion and contradiction. Nicholas Lash regards this as a major problem for the Church today. He sees it especially evident in the first Vatican Instruction where the presupposition is that there is what he calls a classical mode of Catholicism. Developing the thoughts of Lonergan, he observes that the characteristics of classicism are that there is just one culture; and that unity of faith is a matter of everyone subscribing to the correct formulae.¹¹ This approach reflects a situation where the Church sees itself 'normatively and abstractly'. With this model it is possible to establish a set of abstract standards against which to judge concrete actions and opinions. Here dissent is regarded as unfaithfulness, and a plea for genuine pluralism is simply a front for anarchy. Once this classical mode breaks down culture is conceived 'empirically and concretely'. No longer is it possible to hold up a set of ideal standards which will be used to judge particular events and discourse. In this

situation the whole hermeneutical locale has changed; there are significant new facts which the theologian must take into account when reflecting on the Church. According to Lash

the quest for understanding our common faith is set in the context of a variety of largely unsurpassable cultural, racial, class, conceptual and ideological pluralisms.¹²

The situation today is *not* that Catholicism or the Church is collapsing, but that the classical mode is collapsing. This means that the theologian has a new and difficult task. The cultural worlds in which people do theology are diverse, confusing and conflicting.¹³ This diversity, confusion and conflict may at least in part explain why two such different documents can emerge from the same Vatican Congregation. Perhaps in this situation both are needed. One represents a particular horizon of thought reflecting an earlier understanding of the Church. The other opens up the possibilities of a new horizon encompassing diverse cultural worlds. The interaction of these two diverse horizons, these two different hermeneutic locales, can assist a true development in the self-understanding of the Church. It is not good enough today to sit tight on a particular ecclesiology which has emerged from that classical culture. This is not where the world is, and hence where the Church should be. The hermeneutic process allows the theologian to 'enlarge' his own capacity to know the Church, and, ultimately, to be Church.

In 1965 Lonergan had a sense of what was needed when he wrote

The breakdown of classical culture and, at least in our day, the manifest comprehensiveness and exclusiveness of modern culture confront Catholic philosophy and Catholic theology with the gravest problems, impose upon them mountainous tasks, invite them to Herculean labours.¹⁴

- 1 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation*, Introduction, 1.
- 2 Ratzinger, Joseph with Messori, Vittorio, *The Ratzinger Report. An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church* (trans. Salvator Attanasio & Graham Harrison), San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1985, p. 49.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 47.
- 4 These words of Paul VI are quoted by Juan Luis Segundo in *Theology and the Church*, Minneapolis, Seabury Press, p. 71.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 70.
- 6 *The Ratzinger Report*, *op. cit.*, pp. 36–37.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 46.
- 8 Cf. Leonardo Boff, *The Church: Charism and Power* (trans. John W. Diercksmeier), New York, Crossroad, 1985, pp. 131–137.
- 9 See Gerard Kelly, 'The Vatican Congregation and Liberation Theology' in Margaret Press & Neil Brown (edd.), *Faith and Culture: Focus on Ministry*, Sydney, Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1985, pp. 36–38.
- 10 Joseph A. Komonchak, 'Lonergan and the Tasks of Ecclesiology' in Matthew Lamb (ed.), *Creativity and Method*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1981, p. 271.
- 11 Nicholas Lash, 'Catholic Theology and the Crisis of Classicism' in *New Blackfriars* 66 (June, 1985), p. 282.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 cf. *ibid.*, 283.
- 14 Quoted by *ibid.*, p. 281.