

# **Ecclesiology: What in the World is the Church?**

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(2 of 3)

Yesterday—or rather, the day before yesterday—we were discussing the doctrine of God and suggesting some indications of how it has been affected by the social and economic interests of theologians, politicians, and the church at large. Today I would like for us to turn our attention to the doctrine of the church—or, again for those of you who like big words, ecclesiology.

Allow me to begin with my own experience of church as I was growing up. As I now reflect on that experience, and on the theology we were taught, it is clear to me that there was a great disconnection between our experience of church and our doctrine of the church.

In our experience, the church was of central importance. This was a Protestant church in a traditionally Roman Catholic country. It was long before the Second Vatican Council. The mass was still said in Latin; and we Protestants were not "separated brethren," but simply heretics. A few of my peers were devout Catholics who attended mass at least once a week. All that they knew of Protestantism was what they had been taught in the Catholic Church, usually by

teachers who themselves knew little of Protestantism. When they first learned that I was a Protestant, some of them would cross themselves and walk away. Others were surprised to learn that Protestants believed in Christ.

Those devout Catholics, however, were a minority. Most of my peers, when asked about their religion, would respond with one of two standard phrases that one heard quite commonly: "*Soy católico a mi manera*" [I am a Catholic after my own fashion] or "*Soy católico, pero no creo en las curas*" [I am a Catholic, but I don't believe in priests]. They were what today I would call "cultural Catholics." Since the culture at large supported Roman Catholicism, that is what they were. But they accepted Roman Catholicism as filtered by a very anti-clerical culture, and in a culture very much immersed in modernity, they rejected the strictures of pre-Vatican Catholicism against modernity.

This did not mean that they were particularly sympathetic towards Protestantism—and certainly not towards the sort of Protestantism my church and I represented. Ours was a strictly counter-cultural Protestantism. We did not drink. We did not dance. We did not swear. We did

not gamble. We did not celebrate the feast days of the saints. And, since at least one of those activities, and usually more than one, were involved in most celebrations, we stayed away from such celebrations. We did not know what to do or how to behave at the birthday parties of our peers, and therefore we often did not attend, even when invited. When a whole town was celebrating the feast day of its patron saint with processions, street dances, and all sorts of games of chance, we were not part of the festivities. We simply went to church, where we felt at home, and where we also felt that we were somehow better than the rest of society around us.

Today, as I look back on those days, I fully understand why we were not too popular among our peers. (In fact, today I am often inclined to look at some conservative Christians in much the same way that those peers used to look at me and my church.)

But that is not the main point I wish to make. The main point is that, because of all of this, the church was very important to us. Not only our spiritual life, but also our social life, revolved around the church. We gathered several times a week. On Sunday mornings we had Sunday

School, and then the main worship service on Sunday evening. On Tuesdays we had prayer meetings. Wednesdays we had Bible study, and youth programs on Friday. On Saturdays we visited people in the neighborhood, inviting them to come to church. And on the days that were still free we had business meetings, committees, we got together to plan worship, we visited the sick, we had services in prisons . . . In short, once again, the church was the center of our lives, both social and religious.

But then—and this is the other side of the equation—we had been taught a theology that had little to say about the church. Had I been asked at that time what is the function of the church, I probably would have responded with three points:

First, the church is a byproduct of the Gospel. When people believe, they want to share their Christian life with others, and therefore it is quite natural that they come together.

Secondly, I would have said, the church is a support system for Christians. In a hostile world, we need to support each other, and it is for that reason that we gather.

Third, I would also have said, the church is the means by which Christ works on earth. When the Bible says that the church is the body of Christ, what it means is that, as the old hymn said, he has no hands but our hands, and no feet but our feet.

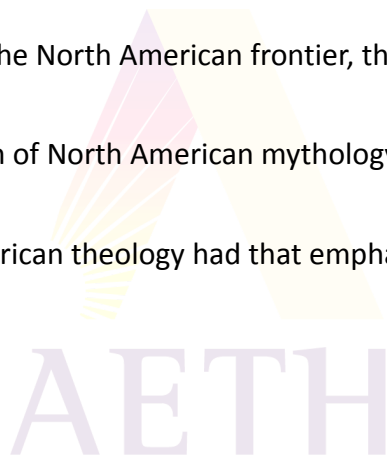
All of this, even when put together, practically amounts to what theologians call a very low doctrine of the church—a very low ecclesiology. In this view, the church is conceived mostly in functional terms. It is not part of the Gospel; it is a consequence of the Gospel. It is not the place where Christians are born and formed; it is rather the place where Christians gather to support each other, much as Democrats or Republicans gather for the same purpose. This was the theological dysfunctionality with which I grew up. The church was very important in our life and our experience, but not in our theology.

Historically, this was quite understandable. Our church had been founded by Cuban pastors who had grown up in exile in Tampa and Key West, who had studied in North American seminaries, and who brought with them the theology they had learned in those seminaries.

Then came the missionaries, most of whom had been trained in the same seminaries and in the

same theology. This was a highly individualistic theology, even when it had social implications. What was important was an individual's salvation. Salvation was always an individual matter.

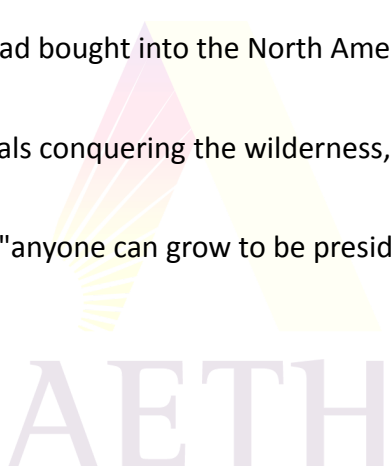
The Christian life was essentially a personal, even private, relationship with God. Other Christians, and therefore the church, were there in order to help the individual along the way. But in the last analysis the church was nothing but an aggregate of individuals. This was the theology that had developed in the North American frontier, the counterpart of the rugged individual and the self-made man of North American mythology. No matter whether liberal or fundamentalist, most North American theology had that emphasis on the individual as one of its salient characteristics.



A low ecclesiology was a normal byproduct of a society that had been shaped by the notion that "all men are created equal," thus implying that life is a level playing field, that success depended solely on personal effort and creativity, and that society is the result of a contract drawn up for the good of the individual.

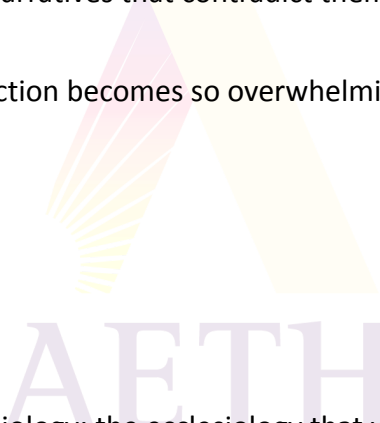
Transplanted to our land, this theology had little to say to us about the church, even though the church was the center of our life, and the locale of our Christian experience. Thus, while our ecclesial experience was central to our life as believers, our ecclesiology was practically nonexistent.

Yet, that was not quite true. Together with our theology, we had also received many of the myths of the culture in which that theology had been forged—again, for those of you who like big words, to a large extent we had bought into the North American metanarrative, a metanarrative of rugged individuals conquering the wilderness, of personal success, and of a society where, at least in theory, "anyone can grow to be president."



I say that we had bought into that metanarrative "to a large extent," because we also saw the flaws and at least some of the untruths in it. This became quite clear to me when I was a teenager, and during a summer in North Carolina went to see the movie about Jackie Robinson. It is a powerful movie, showing all the difficulties and humiliations that Jackie Robinson had to endure in order to play baseball. As I recall, at the end of the movie, while we were looking at a shot of Dodger Stadium, a narrator's voice came on and said something to the effect that "this

is the story of Jackie Robinson, the ebony idol. A story that could only happen in the United States of America, a country where any boy can grow to be president...or to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers." I was shocked. The entire story said precisely the opposite. Many who were almost as good as Jackie Robinson, or perhaps even better, were not able to play because they were black. And then I received an even greater shock: the audience applauded! They had just been told what a flagrant lie was; and they applauded! That is the power of metanarratives. They seem able to absorb facts, narratives that contradict them, and to remain apparently unchallenged—until the contradiction becomes so overwhelming that the metanarrative is no longer sustainable.



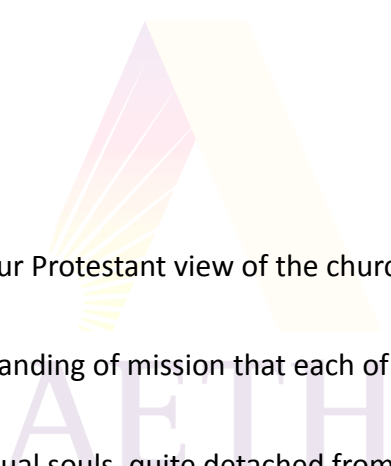
Back then to the subject of ecclesiology: the ecclesiology that we had learned brought with it a metanarrative of success through individual effort, of an even playing field, and therefore of failure through one's own fault. And, at least to an extent, we came to believe most of this. We believed it to the point where we were convinced that we would solve the grave social ills of our country by converting individuals one by one, by educating them out of much of our cultural heritage, and by instilling in them the same "can do" spirit, the same sense of individual

responsibility and individual opportunity that we saw in our neighbors to the North, and that their missionaries told us was the great reason for their nation's success.

We believed it to the point that we blamed our own nation and our own culture for the social ills of the nation, for the inequities within our society, for our condition of what was then called an "underdeveloped" country, without ever considering the possibility that at least part of our poverty, that at least part of our social ills had to do with the wealth and the overpowering influence of the "developed" world. We internalized the metanarrative that said that those who fail do so because of their own fault, and those who succeed do so as a result of their hard work and great creativity, and we allowed ourselves to blame our culture and our traditions for all that was amiss in our lives and in our society.

This contrasted widely with the ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church that was always part of our context. This was a strongly hierarchical ecclesiology. This could be seen even in the everyday language when I was growing up. When my devout Roman Catholic peers said "the church teaches," or "the church has decided," what they in fact meant was the hierarchy of the

church. Even my most devout peers, the ones that went to mass and confessed their sins at least once a week, were not really part of the church. Actually, as their usual language put it, they did not "partake" of the mass; they did not even "attend" mass. When they were going to church, they said, "*voy a oír misa*" [I am going to hear mass]. The mass was like a spectator's sport. It was an act of the clergy, performed by the clergy, with the cup always reserved for the clergy, and the host rarely eaten by more than a few parishioners, usually on some special occasion.



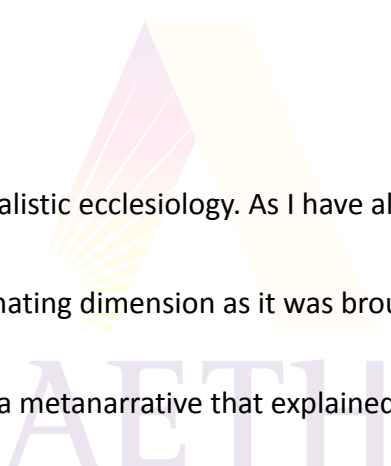
The radical difference between our Protestant view of the church and the Roman Catholic view could also be seen in the understanding of mission that each of the two had. We Protestants were out to "save souls"—individual souls, quite detached from their context. We hoped they would then join our church; but that was not our purpose. Our purpose was to save each one of them. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church spoke of "planting the church"—*plantatio ecclesiae*—, and this usually meant establishing the hierarchical structure in a place by founding a diocese, dividing it into parishes, appointing clergy, etc. For us, what actually existed were the members, and the church was the result; for them, the church existed on its own, in its

hierarchy, and then recruited members.

Now, early in the twenty-first century, after the enormous demographic changes in Christianity to which I referred the day before yesterday, it is time for us to look again at ecclesiology from a different perspective. But first, allow me to describe those demographic changes in a somewhat different way. Two days ago, I did so in terms of numbers. Today, simply to provide a sharper perspective on the matter, I would put it this way: While statistics on the matter are somewhat slippery, it would seem that at the beginning of the twentieth century the typical Christian was a woman of European nationality or descent, belonging to the lower middle classes, and moderately educated. At the same time, the typical ecclesiastical leader was a man, also of European nationality or descent, probably belonging to the middle classes or above, and significantly more educated than most of his contemporaries. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the typical Christian was a poor African or Latin-American woman—in the latter case of mixed racial descent. She had little or no education, and if she could read, she had probably learned in order to read the Bible. At the same time, the typical ecclesiastical leader was still a man, also of African or Latin-American descent, belonging to the lower middle

classes, and at best moderately educated.

Taking this into account, we may look at the two ecclesiologies that I have described as I was growing up, which were essentially the two functional ecclesiologies throughout most of the Christian world at the beginning of the twentieth century, and see the socio-political role they played, or the socio-political agendas they furthered.



First, my own Protestant individualistic ecclesiology. As I have already indicated, I am convinced that this ecclesiology had an alienating dimension as it was brought into my own society and my own culture. It was based on a metanarrative that explained our economic and political circumstances essentially as our own failure—as a failure of character at the individual level, and as a failure of culture at a national level. Yes, it inspired us to greater efforts, precisely because it was based on the metanarrative of individual success and individual effort. Yes, it inspired us to build schools, to instill on our younger generations a desire for success and self-improvement. It even led us to organize our ministries so as to pull as many individuals as we could out of poverty and illiteracy. I can attest to the results of those efforts in my own

family history. My grandfather was a farmer who had, so to speak, forty acres and a mule. My father was a professor and an author. And now here I am. Our ecclesiology led us to all this. But, on the other hand, while we sought to pull individuals out of poverty, we seldom inquired into the causes of the poverty of our people, and if we did so, we did not connect it with the ministry to which the church was called.

That is how I now perceive an imported Protestant ecclesiology functioning in the society in which I grew up. How it has functioned in your society, is for you to analyze and decide. I suspect that, as in my society, it has served to inspire many Christians to social service, and to improve the lot of the poor, but has led very few to inquire about the tensions and even contradictions between the North American metanarrative of individual success and the values and promises of the gospel.

In short, this typically Protestant, individualistic ecclesiology reflected the values and the perspectives of that typical Christian of the early twentieth century, and even more so of that typical Christian leader of the early twentieth century: a male of European descent, middle or

higher class, more educated than the rest of the population. For such people, an ecclesiology based on the metanarrative of individual success and the sure reward of effort was a strong affirmation, for it assured them that who they were, and their standing in society, were the result of their own effort.

Now a word about the other ecclesiology in whose context I grew up, the hierarchical ecclesiology of Tridentine Roman Catholicism. This too was connected to a metanarrative—a metanarrative of justified privilege. While the church has always needed some sort of government, there is a difference between the church *having* a hierarchy and the church *being* a hierarchy. Although the details are confusing, there is no doubt that from a very early date the church had bishops, presbyters, deacons, and the like. Yet it is not until the fourth century, and particularly in the fifth, that the church begins to move away from its vision of itself as the people of God, and begins to understand itself as a hierarchy—as a hierarchy parallel to that of the Empire to which it was now joined, and in which it was enjoying increasing privileges. Significantly, it is precisely around the year 500 that two works appeared that would greatly impact the church's view of itself as a divinely ordered hierarchy. At that point, some unknown

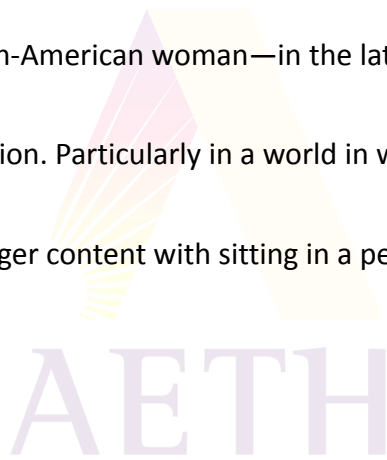
author posing as Dionysius the Areopagite, and therefore as a direct disciple of St. Paul, published two books that would impact the life of the church for centuries, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

In typically Neoplatonic fashion, this false Dionysius saw the entire world as an ordered hierarchy. Up above, the heavenly host is divided into three levels, each with three subdivisions, thus resulting in a hierarchy of nine orders: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels. It is through these orders that God communicates with the world and acts on it. Below them, here on earth, is the ecclesiastical hierarchy, composed of two orders, the clergy and the laity, each with three subdivisions, so that the whole comprises six levels. The clergy are organized into a hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons. The laity, into monastics, believers in general, and finally those who are excluded from communion: catechumens, penitents, and those being exorcized.

I do not think I need to spell out how this hierarchical ecclesiology relates to a metanarrative of order and privilege. Significantly, as this view of the church was brought to the Western

hemisphere, it served to justify a tripartite social order in which the owner of the *hacienda*, the *patrón*, stood above the *capataz*, the foreman, who then served as a link with the *peones*, the peons. And one could also argue that there is a further tripartite hierarchy in which the *peón* lords it over his wife, who then serves as a link with the children.

Needless to say, such an ecclesiology is no longer functional in a world in which the typical Christian is a poor African or Latin-American woman—in the latter case of mixed racial descent—with little or no education. Particularly in a world in which, for a number of reasons, such typical Christians are no longer content with sitting in a pew and listening to what those above them have to say.



The conclusion of all of this is that we need a new ecclesiology—one in which those typical Christians, and all the people of God, have an active role, and at the same time one which is somehow in continuity with the historic Christian faith and its tradition. In order to do so, I propose that we look, however briefly, at two of what the ancient creeds list as the essential marks or characteristics of the church. How can the church today, this new church that is mostly

a Third World church, reinterpret and reclaim what the Nicene Creed declares, that it is *one*, and that it is catholic? (If we had more time, I would also discuss the need to redefine what we understand by "holy" and by "apostolic." But I leave that for another occasion.)

Let us look first at the unity of the church. How are we to understand such unity? Back in the second century, Clement of Alexandria gave us an important hint when he declared that the unity of the church is a reflection of the unity of God.<sup>1</sup> To put it in a few words, our notion of unity is to be drawn from the way we understand the unity of God. Two days ago, I tried to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a metaphysical puzzle or a mathematical contradiction that we are supposed to solve. The doctrine of the Trinity is a particular way of understanding the unity of God, not as solitude, but as love.

Significantly, as I pointed out then, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity was developed to counteract and to reject the hierarchical understanding of the Godhead that was typical of Arianism. For Eunomius and the other leading Arian theologians, there was a divine hierarchy.

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<sup>1</sup>Strom. 7.17.

On top of the hierarchy is the Father, who alone is true God in the strict sense. Below the Father is the Son or Word of God, a lesser being that may be said to be divine, but who is not really such in the strict sense. And—in the few cases when the Holy Spirit came into the discussion—then there is the Holy Spirit, a third-rank being below the Father and the Son. As I also pointed out then, it is no surprise that Emperor Constantius, and Emperor Valens, and Empress Justina, and many others of such rank, found this doctrine preferable to the notion that God was truly and fully present in a humble carpenter put to death by imperial authorities on a charge of sedition against the Roman Empire.

Over against such doctrine, the church declared that the Son is God, and that the Spirit is God, just as much and fully in the same sense in which the Father is God. This is the real scandal, the real difficulty, with the Trinity. Not that the Three are One—that may be a logical difficulty. But rather that the Ruler of all was crucified, and that the Ruler of all, the Holy Spirit, dwells in the least and most humble and ignorant of all believers. It is this that we must reaffirm today, when the typical Christian is a poor African or Latin-American woman—in the latter case of mixed racial descent—with little or no education, who, if she can read, had probably learned in order

to read the Bible. In that woman dwells the Holy Spirit of God. Not a bit of God. Not a reflection of God. Not a lesser being. But the very God who in the beginning of all things moved over the face of the waters.

So, just as the church wisely rejected any hierarchical view of the Trinity, it behooves us today to reject any hierarchical view of the church and its unity. Obviously, the church needs governance; but it is not in its hierarchy, nor in its polity and structures, that resides the unity to the church. Ecclesiology based on a hierarchical view of God and of the universe must go.

But it is not enough to say that. We must also look at that other ecclesiology, that individualistic ecclesiology with which I grew up, and declare that it too must go. In order to do that, look again at the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity does not say only that God is three persons in one substance. The doctrine of the Trinity also says that in each of those persons the whole Trinity dwells. For those of you who like big words, and for those who were not here then, I remind you that in traditional Trinitarian theology this is called *perichoresis*, or *circumincessio*. Leaving aside the big words and the metaphysical explanations, what this

means is that in each of the three divine persons the other two also dwell. That African woman who is the typical Christian believer of the twenty-first century does not have only the Spirit; she has the Triune God!

Now join this with Clement's dictum, that the unity of the church is a reflection of the unity of God, and what do we have? What we have is that somehow in that woman the entire church is present! It is not that she "represents" the church because she is typical, or as someone is supposed to represent me in Congress. It is that she is so connected with the whole church that wherever she goes the church goes with her. It is that when I gather with my congregation, she is there with me, even though I may not remember it and she may not know it. It is that we are bound together by God's love, no matter whether we like it or not, no matter whether we agree with each other or not. It is that in our common baptism we are joined as in one family. I may not like my relatives; I may disagree with my relatives; I may even hate my relatives: but they are still my relatives, because we are of the same blood. Or think about the image of the church as the body of Christ, and all believers as its members. My finger is not me. And yet, in a way all of me is in my finger, to the point that when my finger hurts I hurt; where my finger goes I go;

and if my finger is cut from me it is no longer even a finger. I may not like my nose; but I cannot cut off my nose to spite my face. I may not like much of the church; I may disagree with many in the church; I may even hate some segments of the church; but it is still my church, because we share the same Lord, the same Spirit.

This is why divisions within the church are such a tragedy. It is not just because they make us less effective—which they do. It is not just because they weaken our testimony—which they do. It is because they deny who we are; because in affirming them we deny what God has made us.

But enough on unity. Let us look at that other great mark of the church, its catholicity. What do we mean when we say that the church is catholic? This is a word many of us Protestants don't like, because it seems to imply that we do not believe in our own church, but in that other church that calls itself "Catholic." As I was growing up, I was taught to say, towards the end of the Apostles' Creed, *creo en la santa iglesia universal* [I believe in the holy universal church] on the grounds that, after all, what the word "catholic" actually means is "universal." And it is true that in a sense "catholic" and "universal" are the same. But now I perceive that these two

words have different connotations. And I am convinced that the early Christian writers who used these words were aware of such differences. The term "catholic" is Greek in origin. It was beginning to make its way into Latin just as Christianity was beginning to make its way into the Greco-Roman world, usually in discussions of grammatical rules, as when Probus refers to his collection of rules applying to names the *catholica nominum*—by which he means the various rules applying to nouns in different circumstances. It is, however, among Christian writers that the term gains prominence. And it soon has such a technical meaning that, rather than translating it into Latin as "*universalis*," Latin Christian writers begin transliterating the Greek, and thus speaking of "the catholic church," the "catholic faith," and the "catholic witness to the Gospel." There are other cases in which early Christians, unable to find in their Latin tradition words that fully expressed their experience, simply resorted to importing Greek words into Latin. Thus, apparently, they felt that their message of good news was such a radically new thing in Greco-Roman society that, rather than finding a typical Latin expression to refer to their message as good news, they simply took the Greek *euangelion* and Latinized it. And, apparently because they found in the surrounding society no community or notion of community that expressed what they experienced in the community of the church, and what they meant by this community that was bound to Christ as his body, early Latin-speaking Christians simply began

using the Greek *ekklesia*, which thus became the Latin *ecclesia*. Significantly, the first use of the term *ecclesia* in a Latin writer that I can find occurs early in the second century, when pagan governor Pliny is writing to Emperor Trajan describing Christian practices, and rather than using a Latin term to refer to the body of Christians simply Latinized the Greek.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to imagine that this pagan governor who knew so little about the church, knew enough to realize that his everyday words did not suffice to name this unique assembly of Christians.

The point of all of this is simply that the very fact that Latin-speaking Christians preferred to speak of the church as "catholic," borrowing a word from the Greek, is an indication that they did not find the Latin equivalent *universalis* quite adequate. There is therefore a subtle, but important difference between "universal" and "catholic," with the result that something is lost when we speak of the church only as "universal," and not as "catholic."

Let us try to discern that difference by looking at both words. First, "universal." Etymologically, "universal" means unidirectional, moving in a single direction. It has connotations of uniformity.

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<sup>2</sup>Ep. 10.110.

If something, being originally limited or particular, expands to cover the totality, it is called "universal." Thus, for instance, one hears today that, thanks to the economic power of the English-speaking nations and to the new forms of communication, English is becoming a universal language. Although it may be true that in the process English is picking up a few words from Spanish here, and a few from Swahili there, this is not what makes it a universal language. What makes it universal is that anyone who wishes to communicate with the rest of the world has to speak it. What makes it universal is that it is connected to a uniformity of expression, where people use the Internet in English, and refer to currency in terms of dollars.

Look then at the word "catholic." Etymologically, "catholic" means "according to the whole," or "according to all." The prefix *katá*, which in "catholic" becomes *kath*, means "according to." It is the same root as in the titles of the Gospels, such as *katá Loukan*—according to Luke. The second part of the word "cath'olic" means "all," or "the whole." When one looks at it this way, "catholic" and "universal" do have some elements in common: both refer to a far-reaching extension that encompasses the whole. But while universality underlines uniformity within that whole, catholicity includes diversity within the whole. Thus, had Alexander succeeded in

conquering the world, his rule would have been universal, but not catholic.

This becomes quite clear in a passage in the writings of second-century theologian Irenaeus, who speaks of the "four catholic winds."<sup>3</sup> The phrase is usually translated as "four universal winds." But what Irenaeus actually means is the four winds that jointly make the wind cath'olic, according to the whole. Were there only the North wind, it would be a universal wind, but it would have lost its cath'holicity.

Along the same lines, it is important to note also that "catholic" is not exactly the same as "orthodox." Through a process that it is not necessary to review here, the early church determined that the canon of the New Testament would include the different witnesses of the four gospels. This they called the "cath'olic canon," a canon that includes the multiform witness of the four gospels. Our sisters and brother of those times were not fools. They knew that the gospels differed and even disagreed in many aspects. But these differences, rather than a problem as they appear to be for so many of us today, were an asset. They showed that the Gospel that the church preached was "according to the whole." It was the Gospel *katá* Mathaion, and *katá* Markon, and *katá* Loukan, and *katá* Ioannen. It was the cath'olic witness

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<sup>3</sup>Adv. haer. 3.11.8.

to the Gospel, the Gospel according to the whole. So, to put it quite bluntly, by itself; the Gospel according to Matthew would be perfectly orthodox; and if it were the only Gospel, and its authority extended throughout the world, it could well be universal. But even this would not make it cath'olic. Cath'holicity requires a variety of perspectives, a coming together, not by the imposition of a particular perspective or a particular group, but by a sharing of both commonalities and differences—by a sharing in love, in imitation to the life of the Trinity.

This means that if today the church is no longer a mostly white, Western institution, it can only claim to be truly cath'olic inasmuch as it includes the perspectives and insights, not only of venerated writers of old such as Augustine and Athanasius, and respected medieval theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas, and admired reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and St. Teresa, and influential evangelists such as John Wesley, and denominational founders such as the Campbells, but also of that typical Christian of today, that poor African or Latin-American woman—in the latter case of mixed racial descent—with little or no education, who, if she can read, had probably learned in order to read the Bible. Or even better, since even "typical" is a universalizing term, the cath'olic church of the twenty-first

century must reflect and include the views, however dissonant, of the many whom social, political, and economic orders exclude, but who are nevertheless part of the church cath'olic, in whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Triune God dwells, and whose contribution I dare say will be the source of the greatest reformation the church has even seen.

I have said elsewhere that what we have traditionally called the history of the expansion of Christianity is in fact the history of the many conversions of Christianity. Just as Peter was converted when he spoke the Gospel to Cornelius, and just as through his conversion the entire church in Jerusalem was converted, so are all Christians converted anew whenever the Gospel is preached in new circumstances, to new people, in a new context.

Let me put it another way. As I look back at the history of Christianity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what I find most striking is the seriousness with which Christians took to heart what is commonly called the "Great Commission": "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." They took it so seriously, that Archbishop Temple is often quoted as declaring that for the first time Christianity had become "a truly universal faith." But today, in this twenty-first

century, what I see is that Christians are beginning to take equally to heart the reason that Jesus gives for that Great Commission, for the fuller text says: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go *therefore* and make disciples of all nations." The reason for going is not to make Jesus Lord over the world, as many used to claim. The reason is not to take Jesus there. If these words of Jesus are true, the reason for going is that Jesus is already there, that in some sense that we cannot fathom he is already Lord even where his name is not known, and therefore that, as we cross any of the many borders between belief and unbelief, we do not go so much to take Jesus there, as to meet him there, and thus to learn more of his lordship and his purposes. In the nineteenth century Christians went out of Britain impelled by what they called "the white man's burden" to share their supposedly superior faith, culture, and riches. North Americans proclaimed a parallel principle of a "manifest destiny." This was a mission from the powerful of the world to help the powerless, and from the rich of the world to share their riches. But it was still the mission of the powerful, from the rich nations, presenting and promoting a church that might at best be *for* the poor, but was not designed nor structured to be a church *of* the poor.

But what we are learning in the twenty-first century is that the supposedly benighted, underprivileged, African woman whom Western missionaries sought to enlighten and to help; and that another Christian, a native of the high Andes with an experience of generations of oppression and exploitation; and that still another Christian in Shanghai, having learned how to survive and how to keep the faith and the believing community alive even in the midst of the Cultural Revolution; they are the ones whose voices and whose presence are giving us a clearer understanding of what it means to be, not just a universal church because our presence is felt everywhere, but a church cath'olic, because "everywhere" is now present in our midst.

And thus, if the great challenge of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was to develop a church that could really claim to be universal, the great challenge, the great reformation of the church in our day, will be the rediscovery and the experience of what it means to be the church cath'olic in a world divided by too many powers, too many interests, too many faiths, too many churches, all seeking to become universal, but few with the grace to be also cath'olic. So be it!