

What do Catholics think of Methodism as a church? How do Catholics see Methodists as an ecclesial reality? There is no easy answer to such questions. Except for a few precise questions it is not easy in most areas to provide the Roman Catholic answer. An official reply from episcopal or papal sources could certainly go a long way, but even that might not be quite definitive. So the few observations that follow come from a Roman Catholic. But an attempt will be made to indicate the lines that many theologians have been following. And whenever one can quote the second Vatican Council one can be sure one is giving a standard and official statement that is very widely accepted.

One does not want to make any attempt at an historical study of this question, for, until very recently, Roman Catholic theologians would have given a negative answer. While being prepared to recognise the evident Christian integrity of individual members of separated communities, theologians were not prepared to recognise the separated community as such. In this they were generally following St Augustine who had affirmed:

"There is one church which alone is called catholic. And whatever she has of her own in these communions...separated from her unity..is precisely that through which it is not they, but she herself who gives life. For it is not their separation that gives life but what they have retained from her" (1)

Père Congar claims (2) that he was the first to urge that separated communities as such should be recognised when he insisted in 1937 that "There is oecumenism...when it is believed that others are Christian, not in spite of their particular confession, but in it and by it" (3). But even that was not

entirely original, for, in an appendix ~~(4)~~ to the same volume (4), he listed texts from Pope Leo XIII and from Pope Pius XI which speak of separated Eastern 'churches'. However, neither of the popes applied the term 'church' to communities owing their origin to the Reformation. To do that is a new departure.

In the twenty-five years before the second Vatican Council Catholic theologians began to develop a theology of vestiges or elements of true church which can be found in other churches. This was encouraged by the statement of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches at its meeting in Toronto in 1950. It explained

"The member churches of the World Council recognize in other churches elements of the true Church...Such elements are the preaching of the Word, the teaching of the Holy Scriptures and the administration of the sacraments....What are these elements? Not dead remnants of the past but powerful means by which God works" (5)

There are passages in the second Vatican Council which speak of other communities having elements of the one Church. The decree on ecumenism says:

"Moreover, some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements."

In the decree on the church it is affirmed that the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. The word 'subsists' replaced the word 'is' of the original draft precisely to make the statement non-exclusive. But at that stage the council speaks only of elements of church existing in other communities.

"This Church, constituted and organised as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successors of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity" (n.8.)

This passage has been criticised ~~for~~ for being excessively Roman Catholic centred. At the council one of the bishops described the listing of elements as merely quantitative. And when the check-list consists of elements in which the Roman Catholic Church is strong (papacy, episcopacy, unity of faith) she is evidently being taken as the point of reference.

But there are other approaches in the documents of the second Vatican Council. Other bodies are described several times as 'churches and ecclesial communities'. This was deliberately vague. It is applied in general and also to the whole ~~group~~ movement coming from the Reformation. But no attempt was made to establish among the bishops at the Council an agreed definition of what constitutes a church. It could have been difficult to fix such an agreed definition. No attempt was made at the council to list the communities judged to deserve the title church. But communities that (some) Catholics might not wish to call church, and communities (such as Quakers) who do not <sup>call</sup> <sup>themselves</sup> wish to be called a church, can all be described as 'ecclesial communities'. This term is not a merely factual, sociological description for a group of people but it indicates that there are characteristics which belong to the one Church of Christ and that there are relationships which ~~are~~ come from Christ and the Holy Spirit. In fact the council takes a dynamic approach and speaks of the Holy Spirit working in other communities. This is expressed in a sentence redolent of latin style with negatives and understatement; the positive content is not unimportant.

"...separated churches and communities as such...have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of ~~salvation~~ ~~(Ecumenism n.3)~~ salvation which derive their efficacy from the very ~~richness~~ fulness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church" (Ecumenism n.3.).

In fact, fundamental ecclesial qualities come from baptism. The Roman Catholic Church is not Donatist and tendencies in

that direction have regularly been resisted in Rome itself. Any baptism properly carried out (with use of water, Trinitarian form and as a means of entry into a christian church) is acceptable to the Roman Catholic Church as the unrepeatable sacrament which makes a person a member of the Church.

Baptism, therefore, is never a merely personal, private affair but it puts a person into a network of ecclesial relationships. The decree on ecumenism speaks several times of baptism.

"All who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have the right to be called Christians and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church." (n.3.).

"For those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptised are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church" (n.3.). "Baptism..constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn. But baptism, of itself, is only a beginning...it is ordained toward a complete profession of faith, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ himself willed it to be, and, finally, toward a complete integration into eucharistic communion" (n.22).

Although baptism can be conferred by someone who is not personally a christian, every valid baptism is an act of the Church and joins the <sup>baptised</sup> person to the apostolic origins of the Church. Any group of baptised christians organised for worship, teaching and evangelism has ecclesial characteristics. Its apostolic character is strengthened by its use of Scripture and by faithful adherence to the apostolic faith. The stability and continuity of its ministry, of pastoral care and of christian instruction ~~and training~~ and training all extend its ecclesial quality.

A main sign and instrument for apostolic succession is the direct continuity of the ~~ministry~~ episcopal ministry back over the centuries. The Roman Catholic Church acknowledges that the eastern churches have a ministry of bishops, priests and deacons which is in the full apostolic succession. It is for that reason especially that it has been customary to speak of them as 'churches'. The same cannot be said so readily about

the communities stemming from the Reformation. Such was the break in continuity that the ministries in the Reformed churches did not come by the usual episcopal succession (though in many instances there was ~~an~~ a presbyteral succession), nor was it clear that the old ministries were meant to be continued from medieval times. And the idea that the minister is a special kind of 'priest' was rejected outright. For the most part the three-fold ministry of bishops, 'priests', deacons was abandoned. For a long time Roman Catholics centred their understanding of ministry on the 'priest' and stressed his functions in the sacraments and especially the eucharist. This is a rather narrow base for a doctrine of the ministry and made any approaches to an agreed doctrine of the ministry more or less impossible. But at least it was obvious that one could compare the Roman Catholic priest with the minister in a church of the reformation tradition. Recently the doctrine of 'ministry' among Roman Catholics has been extended and deepened so that it includes ministry of word and pastoral care as integral parts of the very essence of 'priestly ministry'. But now the doctrine is centred on the episcopate which is held to be the fullest ministry from which the others are derived. And the conferring of the episcopate has become the highest form of ordination. This makes it more difficult to make a direct comparison with an ordained ministry which is in only one form. Nevertheless there is a considerable agreement now on the doctrine of the ministry, as the many agreed statements on ministry testify. But the reconciling of ministries will have to overcome the difficulties which Roman Catholics have with regard to ministries in the reformed tradition. The second Vatican Council says flatly that the sacrament of orders is absent among christians in the Reformation tradition. But I do not think that is the last word. For it makes that statement in the context of affirming:

"We believe they have not preserved the proper reality of the eucharistic mystery in its fulness, especially because of the absence of the sacrament of orders, nevertheless etc" (Ecumenism n.22).

To affirm the actuality of the eucharistic ~~mystery~~ mystery, even in an incomplete form, is a notable advance. And it leads one to think that the same could be said about a duly constituted ministry in a church which, nevertheless, could be judged to lack something in regard to its nature and apostolicity. Such a ministry, therefore, could be judged to have some at least of the qualities needed to establish the ecclesiological standing and the apostolic succession in a particular church. These suggestions are evidently very much my personal view. But they are dependant on a theology of church and ministry which has been proposed by a number of theologians, including Roman Catholics, in recent years.

Another important strand in the thinking of the second Vatican Council is the emphasis on the local church. In the New Testament the one word ekklesia is used both for the whole community of which Christ is head and for the small group of believers that gathers in someone's house. The local or regional church is not complete on its own, yet it is more than just a fraction or subdivision of the universal church. It is a church in miniature and something of the full reality of 'church' can be found in the grouping of Christians of a whole region, in a diocese with its bishop and even in the local congregation. With regard to the eastern churches the council becomes eloquent:

"From the earliest times the Churches of the East followed their own disciplines, sanctioned by the ~~Holy~~ holy Fathers, by Synods and even by Ecumenical Councils. Far from being an obstacle to the Church's unity, such diversity of customs and observances only adds to her beauty and contributes greatly to the carrying out of her mission,... To remove all shadow of doubt, then, this holy Synod solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, while keeping in mind the necessary unity of the whole Church, have the power to govern themselves according to their own disciplines, since these are better suited to the character of their faithful and better adapted to foster the good of souls. The perfect observance of this traditional

principle - which indeed has not always been observed - is a prerequisite for any restoration of union. What has already been said about legitimate variety we are pleased to apply to differences in theological expressions of doctrine..." (Ecumenism n.16 - 17)

Although this passage does not explain what exactly is required for the preservation of unity, it does treat other traditions as having an independence and a right of existence in the church universal. But it does concern traditions that developed before there were any major divisions and traditions whose doctrinal positions correspond more or less exactly to those of the Roman Catholic Church. A ~~mutual~~ certain mutual equality is indicated by the readiness to speak of 'sister churches' (Ecumenism n.14). ~~But that is not to say that the universal church is thought of as a communion of churches. Since the~~ Since the council, and developing ideas which it proposes, many have come to speak of the universal church as a communion of churches. And the present state of separation is not a state of division but of less than perfect communion. Pope Paul VI, in a letter to the Patriarch Athenagoras, could speak of an almost total communion existing already between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches (6).

When the decree on ecumenism speaks of the separated churches that sprang from the Reformation the tone changes and it ~~speaks~~ mentions differences "due to..different origins and convictions in doctrine and spiritual life" (n.19). But with due allowance for these difficulties one can still say that the same principles must apply. And if different but legitimate traditions could grow up in the early church before the divisions, other legitimate traditions may grow up later even in separated churches. Provided one is not stressing division and ~~separation~~ separation as the distinctive contribution, then one ought to be ready to welcome new styles of living the Christian faith that have a distinctive piety, theology and liturgy, provided, of course, that

the new developments are consistent with the main, shared \* tradition. And there is one notable public statement that is worth mentioning. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that the Anglican Communion holds a special place among the churches stemming from the Reformation (Ecumenism n.13). Pope Paul VI, at the canonization of English and Welsh martyrs, was directly concerned with the Church of England when he spoke of a 'sister church'.

"There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Catholic Church -this humble 'servant of the servants of God' - is able to embrace her ever beloved sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ: a communion of origin and of faith, a communion of priesthood and rule, a communion of the saints in the freedom and love of the Spirit of Jesus" (7)

That kind of statement can also apply to other traditions.

So what can one say in conclusion? To the extent that Methodism is simply an association of independant, regional churches it lacks something of the world-wide cohesion, co-operation and unity which, in the Roman Catholic view, are a mark of the full reality of the Church of Christ. In so far as Methodist churches are not in communion with the Bishop of Rome they will be judged by Roman Catholics to lack a God-given means for universal unity. To the extent that the ministry exercised in Methodist churches may be judged to lack something of full 'apostolic succession' back to apostolic times it will be seen to be deficient. And in so far as the form of ministry fails to conform to the traditional threefold pattern it is out of line with the main tradition. But as an association of ~~mediocrif~~ communities of Christians who gather for worship, celebrate the eucharist, study, teach and proclaim the apostolic faith and especially that which is enshrined in the Scriptures, who form communities and train and ordain a ministry, who take pastoral care of all their members and who go out to



evangelise and bring in new members for baptism, it has all the main characteristics of 'church'. And the various traditions to be found in world-wide Methodism have, each in their own way, something distinctive to contribute to the variety there ought to be in the one Church of Christ. Though these traditions may have been nurtured and have grown in separation they are not necessarily characteristics that are divisive but rather new forms of Christian living that can go on developing as part of a wider unity.

Methodism began as a reform movement within a church and became a separate church almost by accident. Roman Catholics find it very easy to think of it as very like a religious order inspired by a great founder (8). The origins of Methodism are not associated with any direct quarrel with Roman Catholics so there is no legacy of bitterness. Instead there is an affinity which is very real, though difficult to define, and which has not been captured at all in these theological reflections on ecclesial reality.

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- (1) Augustine. De Baptismo Lib I, 10.
- (2) Congar.Y. Le developpement de l'evaluation ecclesiologique des Eglises Non-Catholiques. pp.65. In Unitatis Redintegratio 1964-74. edit. Bekes.G. & Vajta.V. (Roma 1976) pp.63-97. Considerable use has been made of this article by Père Congar in what follows.
- ~~(3)~~
- (3) Congar.Y. Divided Christendom (London 1939) p.135. (ET of Chrétiens Desunis (Paris 1937) p.173)
- ~~(4) Documents on Christian Unity, Fourth Series~~
- (4) Ibid pp.294-5 (p.381-2).
- (5) Documents on Christian Unity. Fourth Series. edit. G.K.A.Bell. p.221.
- (6) Original French version in A.A.S. LXIII (1971) p.214.
- (7) A.A.S. LXII (1970) p.753.
- (8) A recent example of this can be found in the article Methodisme by Francis Frost in Catholicisme Tom.VI.c.48.