

The life of God

CRACKED WIDE OPEN

Diocesan Lent Course 2021

in the paschal mystery

The suffering, death, resurrection
and glorification of Jesus

Diocese of Chichester Lent Course 2021

Week Three
Background Reading

Background reading

Extracts from TCTCV:

A. Already but Not Yet

33. The Church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the kingdom, but not yet its full realization. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent in establishing the kingdom and in guiding the Church so that it can be a servant of God's work in this process. Only as we view the present in the light of the activity of the Holy Spirit, guiding the whole process of salvation history to its final recapitulation in Christ to the glory of the Father, do we begin to grasp something of the mystery of the Church.

34. On the one hand, as the communion of believers held in personal relationship with God, the Church is already the eschatological community God wills. Visible and tangible signs which express that this new life of communion has been effectively realized are: receiving and sharing the faith of the apostles, baptising, breaking and sharing the eucharistic bread, praying with and for one another and for the needs of the world, serving one another in love, participating in each other's joys and sorrows, giving material aid, proclaiming and witnessing to the good news in mission and working together for justice and peace. On the other hand, as an historical reality the

Church is made up of human beings who are subject to the conditions of the world. One such condition is change, either positive in the sense of growth and development or negative in the sense of decline and distortion. Other conditions include cultural and historical factors which can have either a positive or a negative impact on the Church's faith, life and witness.

35. As a pilgrim community the Church contends with the reality of sin. Ecumenical dialogue has shown that there are deep, commonly-held convictions behind what have sometimes been seen as conflicting views concerning the relation between the Church's holiness and human sin. There are significant differences in the way in which Christians articulate these common convictions. For some, their tradition affirms that the Church is sinless since, being the body of the sinless Christ, it cannot sin. Others consider that it is appropriate to refer to the Church as sinning, since sin may become systemic so as to affect the institution of the Church itself and, although sin is in contradiction to the true identity of the Church, it is nonetheless real. The different ways in which various communities understand sin itself, whether primarily as moral imperfection

or primarily as a break in relationship, as well as whether and how sin may be systemic, can also have an impact upon this question.

36. The Church is the body of Christ; according to his promise, the gates of hell cannot prevail against it (cf. Matt. 16:18). Christ's victory over sin is complete and irreversible, and by Christ's promise and grace Christians have confidence that the Church will always share in the fruits of that victory. They also share the realization that, in this present age, believers are vulnerable to the power of sin, both individually and collectively. All churches acknowledge the fact of sin among believers and its often grievous impact. All recognize the continual need for Christian self-examination, penitence, conversion (*metanoia*), reconciliation and renewal. Holiness and sin relate to the life of the Church in different and unequal ways. Holiness expresses the Church's identity according to the will of God, while sin stands in contradiction to this identity (cf. Rom. 6 :1-11).

A. God's Plan for Creation: The Kingdom

58. The reason for the mission of Jesus is succinctly expressed in the words, "God so loved the world that

he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). Thus the first and foremost attitude of God towards the world is love, for every child, woman and man who has ever become part of human history and, indeed, for the whole of creation. The kingdom of God, which Jesus preached by revealing the Word of God in parables and inaugurated by his mighty deeds, especially by the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection, is the final destiny of the whole universe. The Church was intended by God, not for its own sake, but to serve the divine plan for the transformation of the world. Thus, service (*diakonia*) belongs to the very being of the Church. The study document *Church and World* described such service in the following way: "As the Body of Christ, the Church participates in the divine mystery. As mystery, it reveals Christ to the world by proclaiming the Gospel, by celebrating the sacraments (which are themselves called 'mysteries'), and by manifesting the newness of life given by him, thus anticipating the Kingdom already present in him."

The study document Church and World referred to above is available [here](#). It was published in 1990 after 7 years of work by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. The Preface to the Study Document describes its content as a contribution

towards bringing the need for the unity of the Church and its witness in the world into a proper relationship since,

"... relationship between efforts towards manifesting the unity of the church and efforts towards common Christian witness and service in the world has, from the beginning, occupied an important place on the ecumenical agenda. There have been repeated affirmations that these two efforts should be held together - and equally frequent statements, and actions, which set one against the other."

E. Communion of Local Churches

31. The ecclesiology of communion provides a helpful framework for considering the relation between the local church and the universal Church. Most Christians could agree that the local church is "a community of baptized believers in which the word of God is preached, the apostolic faith confessed, the sacraments are celebrated, the redemptive work of Christ for the world is witnessed to, and a ministry of *episkopé* exercised by bishops or other ministers in serving the community." Culture, language and shared history all enter into the very fabric of the local church. At the same time, the Christian community in each place shares with all the other local communities all that is essential to the life of communion. Each local church contains within it the fullness of what it is to be the Church.

It is wholly Church, but not the whole Church. Thus, the local church should not be seen in isolation from but in dynamic relation with other local churches. From the beginning communion was maintained between local churches by collections, exchanges of letters, visits, eucharistic hospitality and tangible expressions of solidarity (cf. 1 Cor. 16; 2 Cor. 8:1-9; Gal. 2:1-10). From time to time, during the first centuries, local churches assembled to take counsel together. All of these were ways of nurturing interdependence and maintaining communion. This communion of local churches is thus not an optional extra. The universal Church is the communion of all local churches united in faith and worship around the world. It is not merely the sum, federation or juxtaposition of local churches, but all of them together are the same Church present and acting in this world. Catholicity, as described in the baptismal catechesis of Cyril of Jerusalem, refers not simply to geographic extension but also to the manifold variety of local churches and their participation in the fullness of faith and life that unites them in the one *koinonia*.

A Study Guide produced to accompany TCTCV provides the following explanation about the critically important word koinonia:

Communion: This is a translation of the New Testament word *koinonia*, another translation of which is “fellowship”. Its root meaning is sharing in common or participation; hence it can refer to the principle of sharing, to what is shared or to the consequences of sharing. Some examples of these different uses:

- “the communion/fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (e.g. II Cor 13.13). This could mean either the fellowship created by the Holy Spirit or fellowship with (or in) the Holy Spirit (or possibly both!);
- the fellowship or sharing among the disciples (Acts 2.42) 9/18
- the solidarity that flows from this as, for example, the contribution to the needs of the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Rom 15.26);
- the sharing of the body and blood of Christ (I Cor 10.16), thus leading to the expression “holy communion” applied to what is for most Christians the central act of Christian worship;
- these different meanings come together when “communion” is used to describe the life of the Church itself and relations between churches and their members.

Even when they do not use the word, most churches have a sense of who is fully in their fellowship, and of their relationship to other communities. This is what is meant when the expression “being in communion with” is used; a similar idea is expressed by phrases like “offering the right hand of fellowship” or “being in connexion”. For many churches the link between understanding the Church as a communion and the sacrament of Holy Communion is particularly close. Some families of churches describe themselves as “communions”, for example the Anglican Communion. In the present divided state of Christendom, it is hard to avoid language like “full”, “partial” and “impaired” communion. A helpful development in recent years has been the recognition that Christians in their separated churches are in real but imperfect communion with each other. A major theological problem remains, however: if Christ is the source of our unity, how can those who “in Christ” not be in communion with each other? Resolving this is the aim of the ecumenical movement. Because it introduces such an illogicality to the heart of the Gospel community, it is a tragedy when Christians do not feel their disunity to be a matter of urgency, even something that challenges their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

32. Within this shared understanding of the communion of the local churches in the universal Church, differences arise, not only about the geographical extent of the community intended by the expression “local church” but also in relation to the role of bishops. Some churches are convinced that the bishop, as a successor to the apostles, is essential to the structure and reality of the local church. Thus, in a strict sense, the local church is a diocese, comprised of a number of parishes. For others, having developed various forms of self-understanding, the expression “local church” is less common and not defined in reference to the ministry of a bishop. For some of those churches, the local church is simply the congregation of believers gathered in one place to hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments. Both for those who see the bishop as essential and for those who do not, the expression “local church” has also at times been used to refer to a regional configuration of churches, gathered together in a synodal structure under a presidency. Finally there is not yet agreement about how local, regional and universal levels of ecclesial order relate to one another, although valuable steps in seeking convergence about those relations can be found in both multilateral and bilateral dialogues.

The relationship between local and universal Church

Many churches can embrace a shared understanding of the fundamental relationship and communion of local churches within the universal Church. They share the understanding that the presence of Christ, by the will of the Father and the power of the Spirit, is truly manifested in the local church (it is “wholly Church”), and that this very presence of Christ impels the local church to be in communion with the universal Church (it is not “the whole Church”). Where this fundamental agreement is found, the expression “local church” may nonetheless be used in varying ways. In our common quest for closer unity, we invite the churches to seek more precise mutual understanding and agreement in this area: what is the appropriate relation between the various levels of life of a fully united Church and what specific ministries of leadership are needed to serve and foster those relations?