

26.8.84: 8.0 p.m.

ARCIC-II 27/(a) (84)

The Servant Church as Sign and Steward

The ultimate quest of our work is the restoration of a true unity between our two communions. This concern springs from our need to be conformed to Christ's will that all his followers be one so that the world may believe that it is the father who sent him (John 17: 22-23). Faithful transmission of the gospel therefore involves more than mere repetition of the apostolic message, for the manner in which the Christian community lives its faith affects the credibility of what it proclaims. It is within the Church that the Holy Spirit gives and nurtures the new life so that the gospel becomes a manifest reality. It is also through the power of the Holy Spirit that the Church proclaims to the world that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). This reconciliation is God's free gift, offered to all mankind. Its once-for-all completion in the saving work of Christ and its continuing actualisation in the Church's life together constitute this free gift of God.

God's grace encompasses the Church's ability to nourish the new life given by the Spirit as well as to proclaim the gospel by word and deed. The salvation gratuitously offered in Christ involves the restoration of the image of God in man which was marred by the fall. To be created in the image of God is to be placed in a special relationship with the Creator and consequently to be given the responsibility of stewardship over the rest of creation. In the new creation,

however, the special relationship is now an adoption into the family of God for everyone who has faith and is baptised: this new humanity is the new Israel, the Bride of Christ, the temple of God, the body of Christ, a royal priesthood. Together with its privilege and dignity the Church is given the responsibility to produce the good works of the life given by the Spirit (Eph. 2:10): its duty is to proclaim the good news of salvation and to provide what is needful for believers to remain faithful to Christ. In this way the Church is called to share in God's work. Such cooperation in no way detracts from the sovereign work and grace of God.

The Church as Sign

Since God's purpose is that we should all be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29), the Church's vocation is to devote itself to the achievement of that goal, thus revealing and embodying the redemptive power contained within the Gospel. What Christ achieved through his cross and resurrection is communicated by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church (Rom. 8: 1-4). In this way the Church becomes both a sign to the world of God's gracious purpose for his creation and of the possibility of this being realised even for sinful humanity. Even in the opposition and persecution experienced by the Church as it endeavours to live by the Gospel and to proclaim it, even in its constant struggles with sin and its own weakness, the Church is a living reminder and a powerful witness that in his compassion God chose the way of the Cross to save the world. "'No servant is greater than his master'.

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). It is when the Church is associated with Christ in humiliation, weakness and suffering that it finds its true power. It has to follow the way of Jesus, the divine image of the Father, who had to be made perfect by suffering and so become the Lord of all creation (Heb. 1:3, 2:10; Phil. 2:8-11).

The Church as Steward

The Church as a whole is given a responsibility of stewardship. This includes both the faithful proclamation of the Gospel and the provision of what is needed for perseverance in the faith and growth in holiness, of which the source is always the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church has no power over the essential content of the Gospel of God. Nevertheless its presentation by the Church will vary from age to age. Neither has the Church any power over the effect the word has in the hearer. However, the manner in which the word is preached, taught and demonstrated in the Church's life is crucial. Similarly what the Church does to nurture and strengthen the Spirit-given life can only be carried out effectively through the power of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, without limiting his activity God has chosen to work through the liturgical, caring and missionary activities

of the Church and not to dispense with them. In this way His Church is the Servant of His design.

The Church - called to share in God's work

All the distinctive activities of the Church as servant of God's design arise from the nature of the Church as the koinonia of the faithful with God and with one another. For instance, in the celebration of the Eucharist the unity of the congregation is assumed. In the penitential prayers when the pardon of God is requested, it is presumed that the community has already experienced conversion. In its ministry of caring the Church gives freely to others because its very existence stems from the liberal generosity of God. In its missionary preaching it shares the good news by which its own life is sustained. Thus the Church as sign of the Gospel is inseparable from the Church called to be steward of the Gospel.