

A SHORT NOTE ON KOINONIA

Communion (koinonia) is the actual sharing together in one and the same good.

Communion, in its specifically Christian meaning, is communion "with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ" (I Jn 1:3), "with the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4: 'koinonoi'). This communion establishes a bond between the believer and God (he becomes a son in the Son), a bond which is 'in mystery' and is 'of the spirit' - and therefore fully real (existence in the Spirit is the definitive eschatological reality). But it is, at the same time, a bond between the faithful themselves who become brothers one of another, in as true and mysterious a way as they are sons.

Here we touch the reality of the communion of saints which creates communion between all those who are made 'saints' by their union with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. This eschatological reality is already present, growing within human history now totally directed towards the plenitude of this communion (1). This will be the Church in the final stage of its fulfilment: "de unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti plebs adunata" (2). It is then that the Church will be identical with the Kingdom (Basileia).

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(1) Cf. Apoc. 6: 9-11. Cf. also St. Paul: all must be renewed and gathered together in Christ; Christ must attain the fullness of his stature when he will submit all things to his Father: I Cor. 15:24. As St. Augustine comments, there will be but one Christ, one Son loving the Father for all eternity.

(2) Cf. St. Cyprian, quoted in Lumen Gentium, n.4.

This communion, however, is by its nature invisible. In line with the economy of the Incarnation, God communicates himself to men and enters into communion with men through the mediation of human realities. The first of these mediations, after that of the humanity of Christ, consists in the apostolic witness within the community (cf. I John 1: 1-3). This includes the community of Christ's faithful which continues to exist in succeeding generations of Christians. By its unity, deriving from its communion with the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit, this community confronts the world with the testimony that the Father has really sent the Son (Jn 17:21) to gather together in one the children of God who were scattered (Jn 11:52).

This unity of the community will reveal itself in its fidelity to the witness of the apostles - by professing the same apostolic faith, by celebrating the same divine worship received from its Lord, and becoming one with him (specifically in Baptism and in the Eucharist), by living a life of charity, of service and of holiness at the instance of and in co-operation with those who continue to exercise among them the mission which the apostles received from the Lord (to the extent to which this mission is destined to continue throughout the ages).

This sharing in common of these goods - the human mediations ordained by Christ for the creation of his community and for its growth in fidelity until he comes - establishes a visible communion between the faithful, in the celebration and partaking of the same sacraments, in the same ministry, in the same pursuit of holiness of life in the service of the brethren after the model of Jesus himself (Phil. 2:5).

This is identical with the visible communion of a local church vividly expressed in the gathering of the faithful round the bishop and the clergy in the celebration of the Eucharist in which the word of God is

proclaimed (3). This common sharing in those very realities which Christ decreed should be constitutive of his Church, also establishes an ecclesial communion with other local churches (4). It is the bishops, as authentic witnesses of the fidelity of their church and of the churches to the apostolic faith, who are the vinculum of this communion. It pertains to them to open their church to the universal communion and to represent it in this universal communion, just as they must link the latter to their own church in which they stand as representative of this universal communion. In this way they articulate (cf. Col. 2:19) the communion of the churches in its unity and catholicity both at the local and the universal level.

One of the principal means of expressing and of maintaining this communion is by conciliarity - as much within the local church (the bishop, his clergy and his people) as at other local levels - the purpose of which is to structure the Catholic communion (regional, national, continental, etc) (5) right up to the universal level of "that which presides over charity" (6) and which has for this reason a "potentior principalitas" (Irenaeus), but one which will always be exercised in the spirit of apostolic brotherhood (the "homothymadon" of the Acts) according to which the first does nothing of importance without his brethren and the brethren nothing of importance without the first among them (7).

The communion between the churches as just described is a full communion in the sense that it entails, according to Catholic faith, the sharing

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- (3) cf. Ignatius of Antioch; Sacrosanctum Concilium, n.26; note the ancient designation of the Eucharist as "synaxis".
- (4) Cf. The Brief Anno Inneunte of Paul VI, dated 25.7.1967, printed in Tomos Agapis, n.176, pp.386-393.
- (5) Cf. the 34th Canon of the Apostles, quoted in ONE IN CHRIST:(1974-1), p. 8.
- (6) Cf. Ignatius of Antioch; HERTLING interprets charity here as communion.
- (7) Cf. the same 34th Canon of the Apostles.

together of all the 'goods' which the Lord has given his Church. It is not, however, full if understood to mean that all these realities are lived and actualised in all the churches and in the whole Church in a perfect way, as though communion with God and the holiness that derives from this were already eschatologically realised. This is not so! In this sense communion within the Church and between the churches must always increase and deepen until the time when God will be 'all in all' (Phil.) and we will all exist eternally to the praise and glory of his grace (Ephes.).

It is only by reference to this mystery of Christ and of his gifts to men for the building up of his Church that it is possible to arrive at a right appreciation of the communion which now exists between the churches. To speak of partial or imperfect communion between the separated churches is to point to the measure in which, to a greater or lesser degree, they share the common possession of these gifts, of these 'goods'; to the degree of agreement among them in their profession of the faith; to the degree in which they participate in the realities contained in the sacraments and in the liturgy; and to the measure in which they enjoy the apostolic ministry and its function of linking all together in catholic unity. Within this perspective Pope Paul VI was able to characterise the communion existing between the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church as "an almost complete communion" (8).

When it is a question of describing the existence of a full communion between the churches which finds its visible expression in formal links between their hierarchies, it is customary to speak of hierarchical or canonical communion.

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(8) Allocution during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1971 and the Letter to the Patriarch Athenagoras, dated the 8th February 1971: cf. Tomos Agapis, n.283, p.614.

Two things must be noted before concluding these comments:-

1. In the description we have given above of Catholic communion, two elements have been interwoven which differ radically in their necessity. The first Catholics believe to be of strict necessity: the ministry of unity pertaining to the bishop in his church and between the churches and, across the churches and between them, the ministry of the bishop of Rome in his church and within the totality of the Catholic communion. The other concerns the modalities in which these ministries are exercised: councils at differing levels, provincial structures, patriarchates, etc; the differing style also evident in the relations of bishops with one another, in the relations of bishops with the bishop of Rome. These modalities or organisational forms are of historical and ecclesiastical origin, and allow for a freedom which becomes so much the greater the deeper agreement is reached regarding the essential reality of these ministries.
  
2. All that has been said concerning visible, ecclesial communion, concerning full communion or imperfect communion, must not cause one to forget or regard as of secondary importance, what was first said concerning communion in 'the Mystery' - the communion with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit - which is the ultimate and definitive reality in relation to which all other aspects are ordered as means to ends, and which transcends all the limitations of visible communion. What we are at the present moment, the reality of our communion, will only be manifested when Christ appears in glory (cf. I Jn 3:2; Col.3:4).

Poringland, 14.12.74

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