

Culture and History as the Material Conditions of the Genesis of the Local Church

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The Emergence of a Theology of the Local Church

Our symposium reflects the emergence in Catholic theology since Vatican II of an ecclesiology that seeks to restore their proper place to the local Churches. The ecclesiology dominant before the Council had focused simply on "the Church," in the singular, a universalistic perspective that was taken for granted both by an institutionally oriented ecclesiology which stressed the universal primatial role of the Bishop of Rome and by the first generations of ecclesiological renewal who insisted on the spiritual and sacramental principles of the Church's distinctive life. Vatican II began its work in this context, and its scattered references to and vindications of the local or particular Churches significantly nuanced but did not eliminate the universalistic assumptions.

Within a remarkably short time after the Council, some began to speak of a "Copernican revolution" in ecclesiology whereby initial attention is focused on the local Churches, on what we might call their cultural distinctiveness, and on their right to self-determination. A primary factor leading to this "revolution" was the conciliar affirmation that the one Church exists only in and out of the local Churches (LG 23). This simple sentence made it impossible to think of the one Church as existing prior to the many Churches and contributed greatly to the discrediting of an idea or image of the Church as a transnational religious corporation with central headquarters in Rome, branch offices in major cities, and retail shops in parishes.

Another factor was Karl Rahner's proposal that pastoral theology be conceived as the theory for the Church's Selbstvollzug, its self-realization. While this process can be outlined in general terms, as a sort of heuristics of the Church's self-realization, the fact remains that if the one Church is realized only in the many particular Churches, the many Churches are precisely that: particular, specific, individual, coming to be in concrete and perhaps even unique circumstances and conditions. There was a need then to include in one's generalized heuristics of the Church what we are calling the various "material conditions" of the Church's self-realization.

Since the Council these material conditions have often been addressed in terms of inculturation, a word that itself emerged as an element of this new focus on the local Churches. Against a perceived Euro-centric bias and against a tendency to conceive unity as uniformity, the need for the Church to be concretely global, duly respectful and welcoming of cultural variety, was stressed over and over again. The Church, like Christ, the Council had said, should not be a stranger to any time or place or culture. And the last two or three decades have seen a massive emphasis on the need for an African, an Asian, a North and South American Church, etc.

Elsewhere I have tried to put a good deal of this together in an outline of a heuristic ecclesiology which distinguishes two moments in the self-realization of the Church.¹ The first rests upon the divine and universal principles that make the Church the distinctive social body it is supposed to be. The Council identified them as the call of God, the Gospel of Christ, the grace of the Spirit, and communion under apostolic ministry. But of themselves these principles do not yet constitute the Church. The Church only exists when these principles have generated the human principles of the Church: the faith, hope and love by which men and women receive and appropriate the divine principles.

Yves Congar some time ago proposed distinguishing these two moments in terms of the classic difference between "form" and "matter." The formal divine principle of the Church's essence is the divine gifts of Word and Grace, the material human principle the men and women who receive and appropriate those gifts by and in their active subjectivity of faith, hope and love. And the actual Church, of course, comes to be only when form and matter, the "essence" of the Church, are given concrete existence by the power of the Holy Spirit.²

The analogy has its uses, particularly in opposition to a tendency to reify the formal principles, as, for example, in facile distinctions between the Church that is holy, sinless, in its distinctive and generative principles, and the members of the Church who are sinners. In fact, of course, that Church, pure in its formal principles, does not exist, at least not on earth; all that exists and can be called "the Church" is a community of sinners gathered out of their alienation and division by the Gospel and grace of reconciliation, struggling to be faithful to those gifts, and required, as Augustine and Aquinas said, daily to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses." In this respect the analogy is useful in keeping ecclesiology focused on actual communities.

Another value of the metaphysical analogy is its stress upon the differentiating principles of the Church. Some people resist referring to these principles as "universal" on the grounds that this adjective threatens the values being recovered in new emphases on regionalism and localism. But if the day ever comes when there are genuinely inculturated forms of Christianity in Asia, Africa, etc. and it is still possible to say that all these distinctive Churches are still one Church, then there must be some common principles of origin, purpose, and communion which ground, generate and embody that unity. And these are what Congar called the divine generative principles of every one of the Churches outside of which there is no Church.

On the other hand, there is one inconvenience in the application of the metaphysical categories to the genesis of the Church. In classical metaphysics "matter" is purely passive and receptive: all the initiative and activity is on the side of "form." Now while there is no doubt that the active initiative in the genesis of the Church comes from God, it remains that no Church is generated unless the divine subjectivity is recognized and received in gratitude by the active responsive subjectivity of believers. Inert matter seems an inappropriate term for such a constitutive role. There

¹ See *Towards a Theology of the Local Church*. Hong Kong: FABC Papers, 1986; "The Church: God's Gift and Our Task," *Origins*, 16 (1987) 735-41; "The Local Church and the Church Catholic: The Contemporary Theological Problematic," *The Jurist* 52 (1992) 416-47; *Foundations in Ecclesiology*. Boston: Lonergan Workshop, 1995.

² Yves Congar, *Lay People in the Church*, rev. ed. (Westminster: Newman Press, 1965) 30; *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Eglise*, 2d ed. (Paris: du Cerf, 1968) 92-93.

are important senses in which the human principles are also *formally* constitutive of the actually existing Church.

The genesis of a Christian occurs at the intersection of a life-project and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If it is possible to write a sort of formal theological anthropology, the sort of thing latent in the classical treatises on creation, sin and grave, it remains that that justification is always a unique event in which the peculiarities of an individual's life define the subjectivity that is transformed by the encounter with Christ. One can see this in the New Testament: Simon is not Saul and Peter is not Paul and neither of them is the Beloved Disciple. One can see it in the variety of metaphors that embody the great encounter, some of which are natural and illuminating to certain individuals and not to others or to some moments in the same life and not to others. Think of darkness and light, weakness and strength, depth and height, thirst and water, hunger and food, lameness and dancing, dumbness and speech, filth and cleansing, etc.

A theology of the local Church tries to achieve something similar in an ecclesiology that supplements a general field-theory of the genesis of the Church with specific accounts of what it means for the Church to be born in various specific situations, in the face of varied challenges, and among differing communities of men and women. Here we can think of the differences among Paul's many Churches and between them and the Johannine communities, between the house-churches of the first century and the great Church in any large metropolis today, between the Church today in Mali and in Peru, in Thailand and the United States, or in the United States between the Church that meets in a suburban town and the Churches that meet in a prison, a nursing home, or in an inner city. Across the generations and across the situations of a single generation, something wonderfully different happens: the Church remains *circumamicta varietate*, clothed in a many-colored garment.

Catholicity and Particular Cultures

These postconciliar emphases remain valid and still need to be urged against tendencies in governing bodies of the Church toward uniformity and top-down management. But there are other tendencies that also need to be acknowledged and resisted, in particular the tendency for individual Churches to consider their own sets of assumptions, expectations and challenges to be so normative that others are regarded as at best tolerable exceptions. Catholicity is not simply variety or diversity. The word refers to a "whole," and a whole inter-relates and integrates a multiplicity. For the Church the principles of this integration are the word of Christ and the grace of the Spirit, two principles that have their own integrity and substance, which are not reducible to any one of the principles that differentiate individuals or groups. Particular cultures make a community a *local* Church, but it is the word and grace of God, received in faith, hope and love, that make a community a local *Church*.

I would like to recount a few things that have led me to wonder whether it is not time to start re-emphasizing the integrative dimension of catholicity. First, I read some months ago the following plea by a theologian:

To every age the eternal gospel must be proclaimed. But to every age it has to be proclaimed differently, as an answer to the specific questions of that age... At the time of the Reformation the question of salvation was the question of deliverance from guilt, of peace with God... Today we are an utterly political species. And our quest for "salvation" comes alive in the political dimension. People of our day are not concerned about peace with God, but with overcoming political calamity in the broadest sense--the mortal distress of a people, the destruction of the national

community, the freedom of the people for its own life, the fulfillment of its particular mission. If that is the key question for our age, the gospel must be preached to it in terms of its "political" concept: the kingdom of God, the Lordship of God.

With a few changes, this could have been a paragraph of my composition about twenty years ago when I was arguing for the legitimacy and need of the "political turn" in theology. You may understand my distress, then, when I learned that "people" in the original language was "*Volk*" and that the Kingdom of God was here invoked as part of an apologia in the service of the Third Reich.³

Secondly, last night I watched on the evening-news a bishop walk along a very long trench and sprinkle holy water on three hundred bodies, mostly of women and children, victims of the latest slaughter in Burundi. The Church accompanied European colonists to Burundi and to its partner in horror, Rwanda, but over a century a Church that calls itself Catholic, so far from preventing the colonialists from turning tribal differences into racial differences, reflected this view in the structure and membership of its hierarchy and in its religious orders, and some of its leaders may even have participated in the recent genocidal spiral of violence.

Thirdly, there is the great paradox that where a Communist regime was able by force to preserve peace for forty years among Roman Catholics, Orthodox Catholics, and Muslims in Yugoslavia, the two Christian Churches, finally set free, were unable to prevent the disinterring of ancient hatreds and even at times seemed to be blessing policies of "ethnic cleansing."

Surely such examples should give us pause. If we want still to promote and defend the possibility of an Asian Church, an African Church, an American Church, etc., do we not have some reservations today about promoting a Hutu Church, a Tutsi Church, a Croat Church, a Serbian Church?

How did it happen that genuine catholicity failed so miserably? Perhaps one reason was that ecclesiology often so stressed formal and universal elements that catholicity was commonly seen in exclusively theological and ecclesio-centric terms. In a rapid review of recent work on the theme, I have been struck by how little space is given to the *historic* significance of catholicity. The classic texts are cited, of course: "Teach all nations;" "...neither Jew nor Greek nor barbarian nor Scythian;" "...from every race and language and people." But the focus tends to remain on the inner inclusiveness and variety of the Church, with little discussion of the implications of catholicity for the redemption of history and society.

A book like de Lubac's *Catholicism* might have taught the lesson. It was subtitled: "The Social Aspects of Dogma," and while its argument was based on the recovery of biblical and patristic christology and ecclesiology, these were presented as redemptively overcoming the fatal disjunction between person and community that modernity has fostered and as integral dimensions of a divine plan which began with the creation of a single human race which was splintered by sin's fratricide and Babel, was renewed by the all-embracing love of Christ, new integrative Head of humanity ("recapitulation" means: being brought under a new Head, Christ, the "second Adam"), and will be fulfilled in the communion of saints that is the Kingdom of God. De Lubac wrote the chapters of that book in the late 1930s at a time when a renascent nationalism was threatening once again to give

³ Paul Althaus, in an article written in 1933 and entitled "The Third Reich and the Kingdom of God," quoted in Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, I, 104, as cited by M. Hollerich, *Pro Ecclesia* 2 (1993) 316n.

more importance to particular adjectives ("French" or "German") than to the one great integrative adjective: "Catholic."⁴

A second factor may be the relation between the divisions within Christendom that followed upon the Reformation and the rise of modern nationalism, particularly when religious and national identity were thought to coincide: *Cujus regio ejus religio*. In both Protestant and Catholic countries, nationalism moved in a direction contrary to the inclusiveness of the catholicity both traditions claimed for themselves. The stronger the nationalism the more powerful the tendency to remove from catholicity its this-worldly redemptive finality and either to forget it entirely or to conceive it in solely intra-ecclesial terms.

Finally, as secularization proceeds, the nation-state tends to become the sovereign social unit within which any integration of variety occurs. Religion is sent to the margins to take care of the realm of the private in all its particularity, not to say idiosyncrasy. Religion is given a sectarian definition that is the opposite of catholicity and, as in the U.S. today, is far more commonly thought to be divisive and disruptive of national unity than integrative or catholic.

In this situation passions that were once summed up in the term *odium theologicum* often are transferred to the realm of the political as *odium politicum*. And it not unfrequently happens that these latter passions appear within the Church itself and at times become more powerful principles of association and unity than the distinctive principles of the Church. Yves Congar was already describing the problem in 1961:

It is only natural that we attempt to achieve a synthesis between the realities of culture or nationality, of social or even political engagement,...and our faith, our service of God and neighbor. Natural, yes, but how dangerous! Historically, many schisms arose from such syntheses. In two unfortunately posthumous articles, Dom Nicolas Oehmen showed that the "place" of schisms, that is, the point of ambiguity and danger, is precisely that too close a link is drawn between Christianity and a culture, a national interest, a human, a personal and above all a social enterprise. For if this link is too tight, it entails the practice--I use examples without passing judgment--of an Egyptian or a progressive or a middle-class Christianity indisposed to communion with an Israeli or a conservative or a working-class Christianity, or even quite simply with a universal Christianity. A Church of the Elect, which in fact is a chapel, is more important than the Church itself. The "Other" is banished from a communion that is reduced to my personal and spontaneous orientations.⁵

It is perhaps not necessary to cite examples in which in the past and present this "*esprit de chapelle*" has been found among us, the instances in which, as Congar put it in the same article, it leads people, members of the same Church, for social or political or ideological reasons to become strangers to one another and to "sense more communion with a non-Catholic or a non-Christian of the same tendencies than with their brethren in the faith." It is not rare to find groups who passionately desire as great a pluralism as possible when it comes to questions of orthodoxy but who

⁴ See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: The Social Aspects of Dogma* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958; "Patriotisme et nationalisme," *Vie intellectuelle* 19 (1933) 283-300; see Joseph A. Komonchak, "Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac," *Theological Studies* 51 (1990) 579-602.

⁵ Congar, "Unité, diversités et divisions," *Sainte Eglise: Etudes et approches ecclésiologiques* (Unam Sanctam, 41; Paris: du Cerf, 1963) 123-24; see also "Unité de l'humanité et vocation des peuples," *ibid.*, 175-78.

carry out their own forms of excommunication when it comes to questions of orthopraxis. I take Cardinal Bernardin's "Catholic Common Ground Project" to be an effort to overcome these and other polarities.⁶

The solution is not to promote a Christianity that remains indifferent to economic, political and social problems nor to argue that one's Christianity ought not to inspire and direct one's attempts to address them. But the whole question concerns the relationship between one's specific engagements, intentions and loyalties and the Christianity that is never merely one's own but something much larger and much more inclusive, something of which "others," with different engagements, intentions, and loyalties, are not to be presumed to be more unworthy. Here lies the ambiguity of a phrase like "Intentional Christian Communities," sometimes proposed as a North American parallel to "Basic Christian Communities." As in Latin America such pioneers of liberation-theology as Gustavo Gutierrez have had to warn against the instrumentalizing of Christianity for the benefit of specific political theories and practices, so in North America the great question is the relationship between and relative weight of specific "intentions" and the Church-constitutive "intending" of God in Christ. Similarly, there is the great ambiguity, to say the least, of a name such as "WomanChurch."⁷

Catholicity as Redemptive Integration

I have used before as a parable the example of a parish in the Bronx in the early 1970s. A white teenager, student at the Catholic high school, was murdered by a black teenager, student at the local public high school. It was the second such tragedy in recent months. Racist calls for revenge were being heard in the neighborhood from students at the Catholic high school. The pastor of the parish had to prepare a homily for the victim's funeral.

What is at stake here? What will be represented at that funeral? Consider what a journalist or an historian might have to record a few weeks or decades later. Will it be the story that the funeral became the occasion for an intensification of racial hatreds, the religious legitimation for another turn of the spiral of violence? We have seen enough examples of this on television from Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Yugoslavia, Africa, and in New York itself for us to ignore the possibility. Or will the story be that the funeral became the occasion for efforts at reconciliation, for new efforts to overcome racial bitterness and social injustice? And what role might the preacher's words at the funeral play in deciding between the two possible stories?

Might he not remind the grieving and angry congregation, white and black, of the unjust and early death of Jesus of Nazareth? Might he not recall that his last words pleaded for forgiveness for his executioners? Might he not speak of how the Cross broke down an earlier and equally bitter wall of separation? Might he not remind them that they all, black and white, are about to receive from the table of his sacrifice a bread that is his Body and makes them all his Body, in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor freeman nor slave, nor male nor female, nor black and white, so that to promote those differences is to fail to recognize the Body that they are?

⁶ See the statement issued August 12, 1996, "Called to be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril," *America* 175 (August 31, 1996) 5-8.

⁷ For pertinent remarks on the general question, see K. Dobbelaere and J. Billet, "Community-formation and the Church: A Sociological Study of an Ideology and the Empirical Reality," in *Foi et société* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1978) 211-59.

If some such words are spoken and received, two things happen at once. The Church is called to be the Church in what is most constitutive and distinctive about it: the assembly of those who believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. And the world--the little portion of the world that is that section of the Bronx--is different because there is a genuine Church within it. This world now includes men and women who do not accept the *lex talionis* as the supreme rule of human conduct, who have experienced a communion with God and with one another that transcends their racial and other differences, who seek to make that reconciled communion the reality of their relationships when they leave the church. What is most distinctive about the Church is what is most "relevant" to the world, most redemptive of history. The world is history and history is what human beings do and make with their freedom, and the Church is supposed to be one of the agents whose exercise of their freedom makes the world what it will become.

The example illustrates a notion of catholicity as "redemptive integration." Catholicity is not primarily a "mark" of the Church invoked in order to ground the latter's transcendence and superiority to the world. It is a characteristic that, as a "sign," displays what the world of God's creation is supposed to be like and, as an instrument, serves the realization of that purpose. Sign and instrument are the words *Lumen gentium* used to exegete the term "sacrament" (LG 1), and the Council both in that text and elsewhere gives this technical term an application that is the opposite of a sectarian withdrawal from the world into some sort of separate ecclesial "communion."⁸

There are several areas that deserve further consideration in the light of these reflections. The first concerns the concrete reference of local community. An ambiguity resides, first, in the adjective "local." Does the at first sight banal reference to a particular physical place have any theological relevance or should it be disregarded in favor of a more meaning-centered, or cultural, notion of the local? This issue arose just before the Council, when some French theologians argued that the word "mission" should not be applied only to non-evangelized areas of the world, but that there were also cultural "spaces," as they called them, which needed to be (re-)evangelized, as, for example, the milieu of the workers. "Space," locality, was here defined by shared meanings and values.

The two meanings are found also in the two sociological approaches to "community," one of which emphasizes community of meanings and values, the other people in a (relatively small) territory. In these terms, it would appear that the post-conciliar phenomenon of "basic Christian communities" and of "intentional communities" reflects the first more than the second, with the Latin American form, largely confined to the poor, reflecting an engagement for justice as a co-constituent of their communal identity and the North American form, often found among middle-class people, gathering for one or another "intention" that distinguishes them perhaps from other "intentional" communities and from the territorial parish. In these cases, a cultural, meaning-ful, notion of local space seems to be primary.

The question for discussion is the one proposed by Hervé Legrand and Gilles Routhier, whether there is not a theological justification of the Church's traditional territorial differentiation of its life into dioceses and parishes.⁹ In the first place, geographical space *per se* is no respecter of

⁸ See Joseph A. Komonchak, "Concepts of Communion, Past and Present," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 16 (1993) 321-40.

⁹ See H. Legrand, "La délimitation des diocèses," in *La charge pastorale des évêques: Décret "Christus Dominus"*, Unam Sanctam 71 (Paris: du Cerf, 1969) 177-219; "La réalisation de l'Eglise en un lieu," in *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie*, III (Paris: du Cerf, 1983) 171-76; G. Routhier, "'Eglise locale' ou 'Eglise particulière': querelle sémantique ou option

persons; everyone within it is supposed to be welcome.¹⁰ And this advantage is even more important when one considers that the number of places on the globe which contain people of only one race or culture grows smaller every day. To choose a principle of ecclesial circumscription that in principle is not defined by meaning is, it turns out, remarkably catholic in implication, in the sense of Joyce's comment: Catholic means, "Here comes everybody!" That is, of course, the point: everyone within that territory has a right to come, and barriers of race and ethnicity, economic class and political interest, are supposed to fall. The territorial basis of ecclesial community opens out upon and makes possible the construction of a local Church on the basis of distinctively Christian meanings and values.¹¹ Consider, for example, the comparative redemptive significance of being able to say that an economically, socially, ethnically, racially, and politically diverse parish has become a genuine community and saying that a group of people economically, socially, ethnically, racially, and politically already like-minded is a community.

A second area that deserves renewed theological reflection is that of nationalism. There was a time when leaders of the Catholic Church regularly warned against exaggerated nationalism, not least of all because its members so regularly indulged in it.¹² Perhaps it is time to echo the warning. More than one observer has predicted that the revival of nationalism will pose the greatest threat to world peace in the coming century. The threat is even greater when it is thought that ethnic identity requires distinct nationhood and when attempts are made to ground national identity on ethnic or linguistic purity, as in the some of the rhetoric of the movement for independence in Québec, Canada, or in calls for an official national language in the United States, both of these mild by comparison to the bloody ethnic cleansings we have witnessed in Europe and in Africa. Under such circumstances it should give one pause to link distinct ecclesial identities to national or even to cultural identities. The supra-national and trans-cultural identity of the one Church in the many Churches here surely has something to offer, and perhaps we ought to think of reviving modern papal and conciliar calls for a genuine international community.

Thirdly, one may ask whether these first two considerations do not imply a third: that the point of local insertion of the mystery of the Church should not be located in particular cultures but in particular historical moments and challenges. Too often cultures are described as if they exist in some pure form, which has its own integrity, distinctiveness, and rights over and against both other

théologique," *Studia Canonica* 25 (1991) 277-334, esp. 324-32; "Territorialité et différenciations culturelles: défi ecclésial et problème théologique," in *Espace et culture*, ed. Serge Courville and Normand Ségun (Sainte Foy: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1995) 155-64.

¹⁰ Routhier quotes Emile Pin: "What basically distinguishes geographical differentiation from every other kind of differentiation is that it does not effect an arbitrary or voluntary selection among the possible members of the common life.... The universality of the Church thus appears on the local level where it is symbolized by this non-discriminating welcome. Thus the parish is not only a link with the universal Church; it reproduces it locally and makes it present;" "'Eglise locale' ou 'Eglise particulière,'" 325n.

¹¹ An obvious exception to this has been the "national parish" which U.S. bishops were allowed to establish in the last century as a way of trying to preserve the faith of immigrants whose Christianity was often expressed in distinct ethnic and cultural patterns. Even then, however, the Church did not authorize the establishment of national *dioceses*; this larger unit presided over by the bishop was to integrate all Catholics as a single Church.

¹² Thus Pope Benedict XV's description in *Maximum illud* of excessive patriotism as a "*pestis teterrima*" ("most frightful plague") was directed at Catholic missionaries; see Claude Soetens, "The Holy See and the Promotion of an Indigenous Clergy from Leo XIII to Pius XII," *The Jurist* 52 (1992) 172.

cultures and the Christian message. But is there a single culture today that can claim such purity, that is not the result of historical processes of cultural contact and cross-fertilization? And what about situations in which a variety of cultures are interacting and perhaps even competing?¹³ The point was once brought home to me by a priest from Singapore who was taking part in a discussion of what it means to be a local Church in Asia. All of the conversation was about the Church's respecting the integrity of local cultures. At one point he protested that this model of reflection was of little use to him in a country defined precisely by several cultural identities, one of whose major problems was precisely this diversity. To link particular ecclesial identity with culture, he felt, missed the local challenge his Church faced.

He had a point. "Culture," after all, is something of an abstraction. Even if one were to imagine a "pure" culture, where representatives of two or more of these enter into regular contact, the immediate challenge is to create a common culture, in the sense that as a minimum they have to learn how to live together and to ground this common life in sets of meanings and values that will not wholly correspond to any one of the particular cultures. These common meanings and values, if they should respect legitimate particular cultural identities and aspirations, must also inevitably relativize the latter in the search for grounds for an integrated common life. If this is a requirement of civil society, surely it applies, *a fortiori*, to the life of the Church.

Perhaps we ought to think of ecclesiology in terms of a theology of history. By history I mean what human beings have made, are making, and will make by the exercise of their individual and collective freedom. (The word "world" has the same meaning, at least in its most relevant theological sense.) The self-realization or the genesis of the Church then is seen as a moment in the great project of the collective self-realization of humanity. We enter a world, or worlds, created by those who came before us and embodying in its achievements and institutions all the grandeur and misery of the human. Enabled and limited by those products of an earlier age, we now have the task of doing something better with our own freedom in order to leave our children a world less unlike the world God's creation intends, less unlike the communion to be realized in God's Kingdom. Within this great world there is the body of believers, the Church, which participates in the common and grand historic project in the light of Jesus Christ and by the aid of his Holy Spirit. To become a member of that Church is not thereby to leave the world, but rather to make the world different because one's individual freedom and one's share in the collective project are inspired by Christ and animated by the Spirit.

But the one world, of course, are many worlds, like the world of the Bronx in my real-life parable, like Rwanda and Burundi, like Bosnia and Croatia. The challenge represented by these three situations is not most adequately described in terms of culture; in fact mistaken stress on cultural identity, one might be tempted to say, is a very large part of the problem in each. Those terms evoke historical situations, historical challenges, historic opportunities. Certainly culture defines elements of each of them, and respect for cultural difference is a legitimate demand in each. But what in all three of those situations is required is the ability to relativize those differences and to transcend them

¹³ For very perceptive comments on the question, see Peter C. Phan, "Contemporary Theology and Inculturation in the United States," in *The Multicultural Church: A New Landscape in U.S. Theologies*, ed. William Cenkner (New York: Paulist Press, 1996) 109-30.

in the achievement of a reconciled and integrated communion. A Church that is not the sign and instrument of that goal falls short of being genuinely Catholic.

My point is that we ought to make local historical challenge--local need and opportunity--the primary factor in defining the local character of a particular Church. Respect for "culture" or, better, "cultures" defines only one dimension of that challenge, but a Church in which barbarians and even Scythians are as welcome as Greeks and Jews should be very wary of making any one culture its locally defining characteristic. The "material conditions," the "matter" awaiting formation from Christ and animation from the Spirit, are the local needs and opportunities that form part of the single grand historical human project.

And the challenge of catholicity is intrinsic to *every* ecclesial community, which is supposed to be internally and intrinsically Catholic. It is not a challenge that arises only as a second moment and in terms of a community's relations or communion with other particular communities. The reversal of Babel at Pentecost--a favorite patristic symbol of catholicity--must take place in each community that wishes to be called a Church. Everyone should be welcome everywhere.

Finally, redemptive integration or catholicity cannot remain at the level of vague theological affirmation but must be made concrete in conversations, collaborations, communications, etc. These need to be promoted in culturally diverse parishes, dioceses, and within the worldwide Church. Catholicity is less a given than a task to be accomplished, and where communion is not translated into communication and collaboration one may question whether it really exists in anything but name.

In this respect we might usefully meditate on St. Paul's discussion of the dispute over the legitimacy of eating meat sacrificed to idols that endangered the unity of his local Churches (1 Cor 8; Rom 14). The Apostle made it clear on which side he himself stood, but he was also unwilling to allow it to become church-defining to the exclusion or harm of others:

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. ... Let us then pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God" (Rom 14:14-15, 19-20).

This admirable discrimination and pastoral tact was unfortunately lacking in more than one case of ecclesial dispute in the past; perhaps we have something to learn from it today when multiple variants on food sacrificed to idols once again threaten to destroy the work of God by causing the ruin of people for whom Christ died.