

**Reflection on *The Nature and Mission of the Church*
in Light of the Experience of the Persecuted Church**

The document *The Nature and Mission of the Church* finds the basis of the nature and mission of the church on the triune nature and mission of God. For a Christian understanding of God and the created world, this must necessarily be so because the central tenet of Christianity as expounded in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed is the Trinity. God is triune and the nature of His church reflects its relationship with each member of the Trinity. Thus, the Bible contains images or metaphors of the church that reflect each of these relationships: the people of God (the Father), the body of Christ (the Son), and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity, however, is not just individual members; the three persons form the archetypal community (*koinonia*). Although each human being has been fashioned in the image of God and is thus capable and in need of forming relationships within a community such as the family and tribe (#25), the presence of sin prevents human beings from actualizing the *telos* of full communion with God and with His creation (#26).¹ The church, however, as the communion of the redeemed people of God can and must go beyond the naturally forming communities in the world. The very fact that all human beings whose hope is in Christ have been united with Him by the baptism of the Spirit through faith (symbolized in the later act of water baptism) in accordance with the will of the Father, have been placed in a covenantal relationship with God and in communion with other members of the church. Each local church is also in communion with other local churches, although unfortunately differences in doctrine and practice among churches and denominations prevent this unity and communion from being visibly manifested (#56-#59).

What is significant in communion is “to be in a contractual relationship involving obligations of mutual accountability” (#28). This concept of covenant is significant because a covenant defines the depth and extent of communion. Although God is never obligated to His creatures, the (new) covenant He has freely made with His church limits His freedom and bounds Him to them, them to Him, and them to one another. One could argue that there has been a covenant among the members of the Trinity (as in Covenant Theology), but what is more ontologically significant than the concept of the covenant is the mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) among the members of the Trinity. It is this concept that seems lacking in the discussion of communion. If the church is to reflect the Trinity, then each member of the church and each local church must be aware of and strive for not only communion but also mutual indwelling. Definitely no creatures are capable of mutual indwelling in the same way as the Trinitarian members are, but for humanity, *perichoresis* can be manifested in other ways such as genuine sympathy, empathy, and advocacy. This is all the more important when one considers the plight of the majority of Christians in the world throughout history: persecuted Christians. In light of *perichoresis* of the church, how should Christians in the free world experience the persecution experienced by Christians in hostile environments? It should be noted at this point that Paul’s concept of the Christian’s union with Christ probably finds its origin in part in his Damascus encounter with Christ where Christ is said to experience the persecution of Christians. Should not Christians in the free world also say together with Christ towards hostile powers, “Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4)? If Christ indwells each member of the church, but more especially those that are persecuted, members of the church should manifest mutual indwelling

¹ This *telos* cannot be attained by biological or historical evolution. See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 59.

with one another. Each individual Christian and group of Christians now should feel the joys and sufferings of all other individual Christians and groups of Christians in the world throughout history including the final tribulation and deliverance in the consummation of the eschaton.

In the same way that the manifestation of one's *koinonia* with the church in every time and place is initiated in water baptism (#74), so must the expression of one's *perichoresis* with the church and especially with the persecuted church in every time and place be also initiated in water baptism. Water baptism symbolizes the baptism of the Spirit that has identified the believer with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and with every body else in the church. If mutual indwelling is to be seen as the deeper communion among believers, then water baptism should also symbolize that other aspect of the Spirit's baptism, which is to identify each believer with the joys and sufferings of all other believers, especially those whose Lordship of Christ demands their life from them. The connection between *koinonia/perichoresis* and water baptism becomes all the more evident when one considers that in many cases water baptism, as one's declaration of his or her allegiance to Christ as Lord above every power under heaven, initiates persecution by hostile powers. Thus, water baptism is one's entrance into a life of persecution (in many parts of the world throughout history) and into a genuine communion and indwelling with those who were, are, and will be persecuted. Baptism "constitutes an urgent call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their communion in faith and through mutual accountability in all aspects of Christian life and witness" (#74). In the same way, baptism constitutes an urgent call to the churches to identify themselves with their persecuted brothers and sisters and manifest their mutual indwelling in all aspects of Christian life and martyrdom.

Every aspect of the Eucharist also applies to the church's *perichoresis*. First, the Eucharist is a memorial (anamnesis, #79) and celebration of the death of Christ, which is proclaimed until He comes. A perichoretic view of the Eucharist also sees in it a memorial and celebration of the sufferings and death of all "those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God" until "they came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (Rev. 20:4). Second, the Eucharist is also a visible expression of the unity of the church (#80). This unity, however, is demanded even more by those who are persecuted. "Because the Lord's Supper is the Sacrament which builds up community, all kinds of injustice, racism, estrangement, and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ" (#81). Because the Lord's Supper is the ongoing Sacrament that manifests allegiance to Christ and *perichoresis* with every other believer, all kinds of persecution of the people of God (the pinnacle of injustice, ..., lack of freedom) are more radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ and in fact share in breaking our bodies and shedding our blood. Third, the Eucharist is "an anticipation and foretaste of the kingdom to come" (#79). But this kingdom is the kingdom of those who had been beheaded and will reign with God and Christ for a thousand years (Rev. 20:5), a kingdom that becomes the kingdom of all of God's servants who will reign for ever and ever (Rev. 22:5). Thus, the Eucharist is also the anticipation of the deliverance and glorification of the persecuted church.

The church is called to serve God (#82) and look after His creation through the freely given gifts of the Spirit (#83). There is no member of the church that has no gift or that has every gift. In the same way, there is no gift of the Spirit that is given to everyone or that is not given to anyone in a local church. A member is a minister. In every case of the Spirit's gift is a task of serving God and His church. And if there is any segment of the church that needs most of the service of the other members, it is the persecuted church, whose "witness to the Gospel in word and deed" (#83) is not only "potentially costly" (#84), but is actually costly. Since the ministry of the persecuted church is the most costly, it behooves the rest of the church to minister to them by all possible means. The church must strive to setting at liberty those who are persecuted (cf. #85) and to working out at reconciliation between the persecuted and persecutors by proclaiming the non-negotiable demands of the kingdom for repentance and allegiance to Christ. This is a task not only of the ordained but all of the faithful.

This, however, does not flatten out the distinction between the ordained and those who are not, for the ordained have been ordained to special tasks. Such tasks include the coordination of the gifts within the church. Others are “to assemble and build up the Body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating baptism and the Eucharist and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its service” (#88). In the same way, the ordained have special ministries with respect to the persecuted church. They are to provide an example of how to bear witness to the gospel despite its costs and to guide the rest of the church to identify with the persecuted. Furthermore, “the ministry of the ordained is to serve in a specific way the apostolic continuity of the Church as a whole” (#89). Apostolic continuity is continuity with the teachings of the apostles. However, it is also continuity with the radical lifestyle and discipleship of the apostles and their exclusive allegiance to Christ. It is this commitment that provokes persecution from the world’s powers that be, and that the church should continue to uphold if it wants to be faithful to the apostolic teaching. As Moltmann has noted, “participation in the apostolic mission of Christ therefore leads inescapably into *tribulation, contradiction and suffering*.”²

The church is not only apostolic but also one, holy, and catholic. The unity in the church’s oneness is expressed most deeply in the recognition of the each member’s *perichoresis* especially with the persecuted Christians. A church that shares in the experiences of the persecution of churches in hostile environments (even if it does not actually experience persecution) is one with them. There is only one Lord, one faith, and one baptism that the hostile powers hate. If hostile powers hate the churches within their territories, they also hate all the churches of Christ in every time and place. A mission of the church in the free world then is to manifest its unity with the persecuted church and to become advocates for the Lordship of Christ, the liberation of the persecuted, the removal of unjust structures, and the reconciliation between the persecuted and their former persecutors. “Working for the unity of the Church means working for fuller visible embodiment of the oneness that belongs to its nature” (#53), oneness that belongs to the persecuted and free parts of the church.

The church is holy, set apart for God’s own purposes. The people of God are not to align themselves with the powers and allegiances of the world. They are not the unholy people of the world, but the holy people of God. The holiness of the people of God is most evident in the persecuted church, whose love for Christ has overcome their love for their own lives and their hate for their persecutors. Their lives are “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom. 12:1).

The church is catholic, transcending all barriers and proclaiming God’s word to all peoples (#55). Because of the catholicity of the church, so is persecution catholic. “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). “A great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, ... These are they who have come out of the great tribulation ...” (Rev. 7:9,14). It is true that “the integrity of the Gospel is not adequately preached to all; the fullness of communion is not offered to all” (#55). The integrity of the gospel includes the necessity of suffering for it; the fullness of communion includes *perichoresis* with the persecuted church. It is unfortunate that these are not adequately preached nor offered to all. A task of the church is to proclaim the catholicity of persecution.

To experience persecution is the mission of the church in this side of the eschaton. “It is God’s design to gather all creation under the Lordship of Christ (cf. Eph 1:10) and to bring humanity and all creation into communion” (#34). The place where both the lordship of Christ and the non-lordship of Christ and both the communion of believers and the factionalism of unbelievers are most manifest is the parts of the world that are hostile to the church. Since “the Church is God’s instrument in fulfilling this goal” of gathering everything under Christ’s lordship and communion (#34), hostile places should be the church’s top priority in doing mission, although that does not preclude the church from doing mission in other parts of the world. What

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), 361, emphasis his.

is important to note, however, is that hostility should not be a reason for the church's retreat from these places. In fact, hostility should be a sign for the church that God desires ever so to bring His rule upon these places. It is these places where the good news and the demands of the kingdom need to be voiced most loudly. It is these places where the church is called to pour most of its resources in doing mission.

It is encouraging that this document from WCC mentions the necessity of suffering for the gospel. "Because the servanthood of Christ entails suffering it is evident (as expressed in the New Testament writings) that the witness (martyria) of the Church will entail – for both individuals and for the community – the way of the cross, even to the point of martyrdom" (#39). It is unfortunate, however, that this paragraph of only one sentence (and part of #40) is the only place where persecution is mentioned or implied. It is a tragedy that persecution is not seen or shown as a necessary integral component of the nature and mission of the church. It is not that "faithful witness may involve Christians themselves in suffering for the sake of the Gospel" (#40). Faithful witness does necessarily involve in suffering in one way or another. Part of the task of WCC should be to become an advocate for the persecuted church in every part of the world.

When the martyrs asked for God's vengeance upon the inhabitants of the earth who had persecuted them, God responds by saying that the *Parousia* will be delayed until the number of martyrs is complete (Rev. 6:9-11). History in this side of the *Parousia* and the church within history exist because the number of martyrs is not yet complete. The number of martyrs must be complete so that the kingdom of Christ, which belongs to the martyrs of the church, can come in its full glory.