

**The NATURE and MISSION of the CHURCH.**  
*A Stage on the way to a common Statement.*

Nairobi Study Group.

*The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*  
(Faith and Order Paper 1980, Geneva: WCC 2005.

Comments on the Text

Reactions by:

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**Positive comments**

1. This text expresses in *a very general way* many of our common ecclesiological convictions, such as the Trinitarian Dimension of the Church; the nature of the Church as a community (Church as *Koinonia*); some of the elements that are constitutive of the Church (Faith, Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry); and the Mission of the church.
2. The text also highlights most of the doctrinal matters that are divisive between the communities. The reader can get an idea of the differences that exist between the communities in their self-understanding.
3. The mission of the Church in its multi-dimensional aspects, including the contemporary emphasis on the mission as comprising ecological and social matters is praise-worthy. I believe that much of the strength of this text is in its explication of the mission of the Church (nn. 34-42; 43-47). However the soteriological dimension of the mission of the Church is mostly absent, describing Church's mission mostly on horizontal lines, along social and material well-being of the society and the well-being and right ordering of the planet earth.
4. The text could very well serve the Christian communities to continue reflecting on the nature and the mission of their own communities, and with God's help, to move towards greater appreciation of the nature and importance of the Church in the world today.

**Drawbacks of the text**

1. Many statements in the text tend to trivialise major doctrinal points of disagreement from a Catholic (also Orthodox) perspective. Given below are some of the blaring cases:
  - a. The essentials of unity - Faith, Sacraments (especially Eucharist), Episcopate united with the successor of Peter (apostolic college) and Petrine ministry –are not treated with the seriousness and weight they require. For example the text on Creed says: “The fact that some churches do not explicitly use this [Nicene-Constantinople] Creed liturgically or catechetically need not be interpreted as a sign of departure from the apostolic faith” (n. 72). If so, what do we have “to measure” our standing as a community rooted in the faith of the apostles?
  - b. After mentioning very fundamental doctrinal differences, when the text says, “it remains for future theological work to find out whether these differences are real

disagreements or mere differences in emphasis that can be reconciled” (p. 16), as a Catholic reader I am disappointed. I don’t think there is any doubt that these are doctrinal matters and “real disagreements” between the Churches and not matters that can be treated lightly.

- c. “One type of Ecclesiology identifies the Church exclusively with one’s own community, dismissing other communities or persons which claim churchly status into an ecclesiological void. According to a modified form of this type, other communities may possess elements of the Church which bring those who enjoy them into a real, though imperfect, communion outside of one’s own community” (p. 38). According to me such statements trivialise important convictions and doctrinal matters.
2. The marks of the Church (One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic) are spoken of in very vague, spiritualised terms devoid of doctrinal and juridical contents. Thus we read, “the Church is One because God is the One creator and redeemer”; “the Church is holy because God is holy”; “the Church is catholic because God is the fullness of life”, etc. (n. 12). It avoids the question: how is the Church “here and now” as a visible community, one, holy, catholic and apostolic? Unanswered, they leave the text as a whole very vague open to all types of interpretations, justifications and claims.
  3. In the attempt to seek common points of agreement – probably to please all the member Christian communities -, the text has been much emptied of the doctrinal and juridical aspects of the Church. Hence there are very many vague statements which could be interpreted very differently depending on the background of the reader. Given below are a few examples:
    - a. “The Church is centred and grounded in the Word of God” (n. 10). From the next quotation explaining this statement, we understand that “Word of God” could mean Jesus, the word of God in the OT and NT, and word of God in the proclamation of the Church. The vagueness regarding the grounding of the Church on the Word of God arises because: (1) Jesus as Word of God is not available to us directly and hence anyone can say anything and claim he is speaking about Jesus; (2) interpretation of the OT & NT continues to be problematic between the communities; (3) the proclamation and praxis of the communities are many times not in harmony when it comes to matters of faith and moral life. So how do we ground the Church in the Word of God when there is such ambiguity in these matters between the communities? Besides, this statement has no reference to the Sacraments especially to the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist). Thus this statement can leave a particular Christian community just where they are, self-satisfied in its way of being the Church!
    - b. A few other similar examples: The Church “is apostolic because the Word of God, sent by the Father, creates and sustains the Church” (n. 12). This sentence end up saying almost nothing about the apostolicity of the Church in terms of faith and ministry.
    - c. “Unity given to the Church is already manifested in the Gospel present in all Churches” (n. 53). What is the “Gospel” that is referred to? What does that imply for the individual communities?

- d. The explanation of the term “collegiality” (n. 97) and “primacy” (n. 99) – two important theological concepts for the Catholic Church are explained in very general and vague ways.
4. The text highlights the ‘sinfulness’ within the ecclesial community and the diversities existing between the communities. This may be fine. However it could easily give way to a partial reading, since it leaves room for a biased reader to over-emphasise the ‘sin’ aspect of the Church and the diversity of the Churches to the detriment of the unity of the one Church of Christ. Besides, this could accentuate the division of the Church into two, the visible Church of sinners and the invisible Church of saints.
  5. The ecclesiology that is emerging in the text is strongly “local”. The universal Church is understood as coming together of the local Churches. The principle, the “local Churches in and out of the universal Church” and the “ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church” (part of the Catholic conviction) is ignored in the main text; neither is it sufficiently emphasised as a serious issue that divides the Christian communities.
  6. The ontological bond between the Eucharist (Body of Christ) and the Church (Body of Christ) is basically ignored. Also the origin of the Church from the “side of Christ” as “blood and water poured out” (cf. Jn 19:34) is ignored. Full incorporation into the Church is tied to faith and Baptism avoiding the Eucharistic link. Besides, when Eucharist is mentioned (nn. 78-81), it is understood primarily as a “table fellowship” devoid of its sacrificial content. Hence the Church ends up to be, either mostly a sociological reality or a purely spiritual other-worldly reality. Both positions seem to emerge from the texts depending on where the reader’s affiliations lie.
  7. Mary is spoken of as a symbol of the Church because of her “faithful responsiveness” (the only instance Mary is mentioned in the whole text on the Church is this in n. 10). For a Catholic it is evident that Mary is the symbol and mother of the Church for many other reasons, not merely this; in a special way she is the icon of the Church because of her participation in the Paschal mystery of her Son. The Marian dimension of the Church is not mentioned at all in the boxes where points of divergences appear.
  8. The juridical aspects of ecclesial unity are basically ignored. One wonders how we can be one in faith and charity, one in faith and sacraments, one in faith and moral life if the “oversight” (nn. 90 ff) is emptied of real authority (and not just a symbolic figure of unity). The text seems to exhibit more the “old fears” about an absolute monarchical papacy controlling everything or suppressing legitimate diversity, than a sober approach to present day exercise of papacy as well as the trends of globalisation which calls for figures of real unity at the global stage.
  9. The principle “*sola scriptura*” runs through and through the text. I believe that it is almost impossible to have a solid text on the *nature and mission of the Church* based on biblical references alone without taking-in the writings of the praxis of the Fathers, given the historical contexts and specific goals of the NT writings. None of the New Testament authors wrote to give a precise ecclesiology, though all may have implicit ecclesiologies. The questions regarding the identity and mission of the Church came up mostly *after* New Testament times. New Testament writers were more concerned about the person of Jesus for our salvation, and not on the necessity of the Church for our salvation.

Because of that, I think there has to be greater agreement on the role of tradition, and acceptance of it, especially the apostolic tradition of the patristic times, for a solid text on the nature and mission of the Church to emerge.

Another problem that will continue to haunt us will be on the interpretation of the Scriptures. While Scripture is foundational and normative, the problem of interpretation continues to cause serious difficulties between Christian communities. Here again, even if scripture alone is used as the only source, we are left with a serious difficulty in arriving at a solid text because of the lack of agreements in interpreting key Biblical texts with ecclesiological implications.

## **Conclusion**

The Text *The Nature and Mission of the Church* can serve as a **stage** on the way to a common statement. However, existing doctrinal differences and doctrinal lacunae are still enormous before a much more doctrinally solid text can emerge. Towards that there has to be greater agreement on the interpretation of the Scripture (especially of the basic biblical texts with an ecclesiological impact), and the importance of apostolic Tradition. There also has to be more study and greater agreement on the Eucharist (one of the texts of the *BEM* Document), especially on the central place of the Eucharist for a sound ecclesiology. Without these the text remains what it says to be: a *stage*, an initial step. Much more work awaits us all.