

The NATURE and MISSION of the CHURCH.

A Stage on the way to a common Statement.

Nairobi Study Group.

Fr Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator SJ

I have read the Faith and Order Commission's "The Nature and Mission of the Church" with the interest of a theologian currently engaged in the intellectual discipline of ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church. The following remarks are based on my knowledge of RCC and other ecclesial traditions.

The Faith and Order document is quite remarkable for its balance and ability to elicit the deep binding ties among the theologies of the respective ecclesial traditions, while holding in creative tension the points of divergence (and without overlooking the differences). To a very remarkable degree, the text agrees with the major tenets of *Lumen Gentium* on the "nature and mission" of the church. So remarkable is the agreement, that it is hard to believe that the authors are not familiar with *Lumen Gentium*. By way of example, I note the following points of convergence in the Faith and Order document:

- The Trinitarian origin and foundation of the church, no. 9.
- The divine and human nature of the church, no. 13.
- The exquisitely rich scriptural images and symbols of the church, no. 17.
- The church as *ecclesia*, called and convoked by Yahweh as a permanent community of believers, no. 18.
- The church as a pilgrim reality, no. 19 (see also no. 48 ff), as well as the Body of Christ (no. 20), pneumatological community (no. 22), *koinonia* (no. 24). See also no. 27 ff.
- The treatment of local and particular churches, to a large extent, is in agreement with current theological thinking in the RCC, no. 64 ff.

I found the following points as areas for further debate and clarification:

1. As a Roman Catholic theologian, I have reservation about how the text treats the sacramentality of the church in relation to the notion of the instrumentality of the church. The church is in the nature of a sacrament, the sacrament of Christ. This is a cardinal principle of Catholic ecclesiology. In the Faith and Order document, instrumentality appears to substitute sacramentality. Certainly, the latter is a point of dispute, but, from a RCC perspective, instrumentality would represent a significant shift away from the idea of church as sacrament. I would hold that instrumentality is a weaker notion. Without actually saying it, I believe that the Faith and Order document recognizes the importance of sacramentality (see nos. 34 – 36 and especially no. 38, no. 43). Perhaps, therefore, what I am saying is that the document should offer a more explicit statement of the idea. In other words, the ambiguity between instrumentality and sacramentality would need to be resolved.
2. The Faith and Order document is weak (cautious?) on the question of the hierarchical constitution of the church. What Vatican II affirms subsumes conciliarity into primacy, understood as a key component of the hierarchical constitution of the church. The Faith and Order document would seem to offer a more diffuse notion of hierarchy, which hierarchy, as understood in RCC, is closely connected to Tradition and the Magisterium.

This is not to undermine the fact that how primacy is expressed remains the focus of intense debate and interpretation (no. 104).

3. A final issue that needs further clarification is that of apostolic succession. In Roman Catholic ecclesiology, this is a dynamic reality which is incarnated in ecclesiastical institutions, namely, the episcopacy. While it is true that several means exist for maintaining the apostolicity of the church (no. 89), Roman Catholic ecclesiology gives a pride of place to the hierarchically constituted episcopacy. The “apostolic succession” in RCC is not simply a function of an “oversight” (no. 90, no. 94). According to Vatican II, it belongs to the very nature and essence of the church, as a hierarchically constituted community with a visible structure of authority. It is a much deeper theological notion in the ecclesiology of RCC.

On the whole, this Faith and Order document is perhaps the most ecumenically balanced text on the nature and mission of the church that I am familiar with.