

## **Faith and Order Plenary Commission**

Orthodox Academy of Crete (Kolympari, Chania), 13 October 2009

### **The Nature and Mission of the Church**

An Evaluation from a Latin American Perspective

Fr Jorge A Scampini, OP

I am grateful for the invitation to be a member of this panel that attempts to evaluate ‘The Nature and Mission of the Church’ (NMC) from the perspective of different regional contexts, in my case, from ‘a’ Latin American perspective. On other occasions when I have been asked to do something similar, the first thing that I feel appropriate to note is the fact that Latin America is too vast and complex a reality – not only geographically, but also in its diversity of peoples, cultures, and social, economic, political and even ecclesiastical situations – for one single contribution to be able to be considered as ‘the’ Latin American perspective. However, it is correct that there are many historical, cultural and political factors in Latin America that enable us to speak of a common underlying reality and a shared destiny, to a degree perhaps unknown in other parts of the world. The place where I live, Buenos Aires, in Argentina, is one among many possible settings in Latin America, and many will question whether it is the most representative. My church allegiance, Roman Catholic, cannot be left aside, and that determines how I conceive of the Church and its mission.<sup>1</sup> Also, for historic reasons, the Catholic Church is the church with the most long established presence in Latin America, and which remains, despite the growing diversity in the religious scene, still numerically the largest.

In this meeting, there are six of us from Latin America and one from the Caribbean:

Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (2)

Evangelical Methodist Church of Argentina (1)

Roman Catholic Church, Argentina (1)

Methodist Church in Bolivia (1)

Moravian Church in Nicaragua (1)

Episcopal Church of Cuba (1)

#### **1. Issues in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* that are important for the Church in Latin America**

Without failing to emphasize the value of the whole of the document, which is a panoramic presentation of the nature and mission of the Church, seeking in the most systematic way possible to express in an encouraging way the convergences achieved in the ecumenical field, I shall examine in detail only one aspect of those dealt with in the text: ‘The Mission of the

---

<sup>1</sup> The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has provided a timely contribution to the continuation of the NMC process in ‘A Catholic Contribution toward revising *The Nature and Mission of the Church*’, 14 January 2008.

Church' (34-42), and in connection with that 'The Church as Sign and Instrument of God's Intention and Plan for the World' (43-47), which provides the basis for the final chapter 'In and For the World' (109-123).

In recent decades, Christians in Latin America have been characterized by having made clear options for a more committed service of evangelization, becoming increasingly aware that human promotion, work for justice and peace, and for the protection of creation, are an integral part of the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, addressed to all human beings and to individuals as whole persons. That progressive growth in awareness has been the Church's response to a situation of brokenness, social exclusion, violence and abuse of the goodness of the created world, which have marked our societies and damaged our natural environment, compromising the possibility of a dignified and full life for all. The early and varied experiences of the option for the poor, and the first attempts to provide a theological basis for that option, were not without tensions within the church community and with the secular authorities, which all the churches experienced to a greater or lesser degree. From then onwards we have all become increasingly clearly convinced of the gospel basis of the diakonia which the Church, by its vocation, is called to offer to the world That is stated and encouraged not only in theological writings but also in the official teaching itself of the churches.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, examining *The Nature and Mission of the Church* out of the experiences of our churches in Latin America, it is possible to regard with satisfaction that the statements on the mission of the Church as a whole express a vision of that comprehensive and inclusive mission: the Church as a manifestation of God's mercy to serve the purpose of God (34); the proclamation of the Gospel and the witness to the values of the kingdom (35,38,110); the service of reconciliation, diakonia, and stewardship of creation (36,109), witness (37,39,111), and support and defence of the poor and marginalized (40). All that can help to indicate that certain options by Christians in the world are deeply rooted in the Gospel, and are not 'add-on extras' to the mission of the Church, but are a concrete expression in history of the mystery of the Church as a sign and instrument of God's plan (43-47). That vision, as well as enriching our conception of the Church, can help us overcome certain unresolved tensions in the ecumenical movement – between doctrinal ecumenism and an ecumenism of service and witness – the solution of which requires a clearer examination of the foundations on which the Church is based.

---

<sup>2</sup> One of the most recent examples is the address by Benedict XVI on 13 May 2007 at the opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops in Aparecida, Brazil: 'God is the foundational reality, not a God who is only the object of thought or a hypothesis, but the God with a human face, the God who is with us, the God who loved to the point of the cross. When disciples come to an understanding of this love of Christ 'to the uttermost', they can only respond to that love with a like love. 'I will follow you wherever you go' (Luke 9:57). We can further ask another question: 'What does faith in this God give us?' The first answer is that it gives us a family, the universal family of God in the Catholic Church. Faith fees us from our isolation as individuals because it leads us to communion. Encounter with God is, in itself and as such, an encounter with brothers and sisters, an act of being called, of becoming one with them, of responsibility towards other persons as individuals and collectively. *In this sense, the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the christological faith in the God who became poor for our sakes so that through his poverty we might become rich* (2 Cor. 8:9)... The Latin American and Caribbean peoples have a right to a full life, as befits sons and daughters of God, in more human conditions, free from threats of hunger and all forms of violence. For these peoples, their pastors must promote a culture of life that will enable them, as my predecessor Paul VI said, to make 'the passage from misery towards the possession of necessities, victory over social scourges, the growth of knowledge, the acquisition of culture... cooperation for the common good... [to] the acknowledgement by man of supreme values, and of God their source and their finality' (*Populorum Progressio*, 21)

## 2. What needs to be included in the document from a Latin American Perspective?

It is not easy to make any suggestions here because *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is a document at world level, and in a text of that nature it is not always possible to reflect the particular situations of different contexts. What I would perhaps indicate is that it would be highly important for it to state, both actively and passively, the indissoluble bond between the nature of the Church and its mission, between its ‘mystery’ and its being ‘In and For the World’. Let me explain. Something that Latin American Christians could indicate, to a greater or lesser extent and certainly with different accents, is that at this moment in history, while not wavering in our Christian hope, it is, however, not so easy to be optimistic about the future of our sub-continent. In effect, Latin America is the scene of its own unresolved, or inadequately resolved, conflicts, and often the scene where unresolved, or inadequately resolved, conflicts in the dominant regions of the world are still being fought out. If the Church is called to be the sign and instrument of God’s reconciliation and of reconciliation between human beings and of the renewal in Christ of the whole creation, it can only offer such a service if it embodies within itself what it declares itself to be: ‘a community of the reconciled, who, following the steps of its Lord and in him, offers itself to provide a service of reconciliation.’ This service of healing wounds and brokenness in our brothers and sisters – as is indicated so forcefully and clearly in NMC 112 – demands that we heal the wounds and brokenness of the Christian world. The Church ought to be, by its vocation, the foremost place of inclusion and integration. Unity, then, is not a secondary issue: it is a condition of credibility. I believe that this could be indicated even more forcefully in NMC where it speaks of unity (53), particularly as we approach the centenary of the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work in Stockholm, with its symbolic message: the demand for the unity of Christians in light of the proclamation of the one Gospel of reconciliation. Moreover, it needs to be indicated when speaking of the possible conflicts arising out of different options on ethical issues (116-117).

Stressing the importance of unity in this regard can have, it seems to me, two positive results: the first, more basic; the second, an indication of the direction for future work in Faith and Order:

- To recognize more explicitly the oneness of God’s one plan of salvation, the intention of which is to embrace the whole of humankind and of creation. It is in our service of that plan that we understand the ministry of the Church in this world, where there exist, alongside each other, both globalization, which tends to make everything uniform, and a growing fragmentation, which has produced the most terrible cases of exclusion known to history.
- To emphasize not only the connection between NMC and the study of moral issues, but also to indicate where this recent study should be located in the Faith and Order work plan.

Hence, it may perhaps be important to explain, in chapter IV ‘In and For the World’, how the service of the Church differs from that offered by other bodies and institutions, with which we often share programmes and experiences. However, the Church is not an NGO, nor a political movement, nor a service agency, but a prophetic sign and instrument of God’s plan. Its foundation is the one grace of baptism and it works in an eschatological tension. It endeavours, in Christ, to illumine, to include all, leaving to other bodies the space appropriate

to their own nature. That would be an indication that the contents of NMC 113-115 need to be further developed.

### **3. What further contribution to the future development of NMC could be made by the experience of the churches of Latin America?**

In Latin America, apart from the experiences of each country, the Catholic Church has been engaged at continental level in reflection on its mission in face of our common challenges. Over the years, this reflection has had as its milestones the General Latin American Bishops' Conferences (Rio de Janeiro, 1955; Medellín, 1968; Puebla, 1979; San Domingo, 1992; and Aparecida, 2007). The same could be said of the experiences of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), but for that I am not the most qualified to comment. Over the years, taking into account the features of each period and contemporary concerns, a vision has been formed of the Church and of its service to the Latin American situation. Those findings are public, and are available for consultation and possible use of their contributions for inclusion in our study. The findings in the field of ecumenism produced by bilateral dialogues could be put to similar use.

To conclude, having regard to the time allocated to me, I should like to mention three aspects of the experiences of the path travelled by the churches in Latin America, supported by footnotes giving references to the concluding document from the last Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conference (Aparecida, 2007). My intention is to emphasize the fact that all theological reflection on the Church only becomes meaningful if it leads us to renew our church life, to widen the horizon of our mission, and to enable all our church activities to contribute to making the mystery of its Lord more visible in the eyes of the world.

1) The need for constant renewal of the spirit of evangelization, which should be based on renewal of the Christian life.<sup>3</sup>

2) The need not to neglect the role of diakonia, which, following in the steps of Jesus' diakonia, is the dimension that enables many to perceive the Church with greater clarity as a 'prophetic sign'.<sup>4</sup> In that diakonia many brothers and sisters have given witness as true disciples of Christ, even to the shedding of their blood.<sup>5</sup> For that reason, we should not forget either the dimension of martyrdom in the Church.

3) The need, in order for the Church to be recognized as a 'prophetic sign', for a clear statement of its identity, i.e. of its being rooted in the mystery of Christ and the inpouring of life from the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Only then will Christians be able to present themselves as a true 'letter from Christ' (2 Cor. 3:3),<sup>7</sup> and be an attractive and attracting reflection of the divine koinonia.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Aparecida, 11

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 98

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 151

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 159

*Translated from the Spanish, Language Service, World Council of Churches*