

What is a Church ?

by Edmund Hill, O.P.

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The ecumenical movement is now old enough to merit a second volume to its history.¹ It covers the twenty years from 1948 to 1968; or in the esoteric language of the movement, from Amsterdam to Uppsala. The book inevitably abounds in this kind of esoteric language; conferences, committees and consultations have been held at innumerable places, and the name of every such place thereupon becomes the name of an event as well. One is used to the habit in general history, in which it seems normal to talk about before and after Trent or Versailles; but the over-employment of it in specialized history creates an atmosphere of a close little world of people in the know. So, too, councils and associations and conferences have multiplied, each equipped with its proper set of initials. Under the heading 'Abbreviations' eighty-six of these code names and letters, with their meanings, are listed at the beginning of the work.

All this makes it a book that is hard—indeed, I would say impossible—to read. Had the fifteen contributors to the volume been literary historians of genius, it is doubtful whether they could have made it much more readable than it is; the material is too intractable. What they have provided is an indispensable reference book for the study and understanding of the contemporary ecumenical movement.

If a book is practically impossible to read, for the unimpeachable reasons suggested, it follows that it is practically impossible to review. Instead, therefore, of attempting any further appreciation of it, I propose to discuss one of the many interesting points, problems, or questions that floated into my mind as I flipped and browsed, in no particular order, through these fifteen essays. The problem I choose can best be fixed in the question 'What is a Church?'. Not '*the* Church', but '*a* Church'. It began to take shape in my mind as I read the essay by the editor of the volume, entitled 'Confessional Families and the Ecumenical Movement.' Now the movement is organized in the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.), not in the World Council of Confessional Families, and it is interesting to learn that the existence and especially the increasingly effective organization of these confessional families has been causing some tension within the ecumenical movement. It raises the possibility of divided loyalties, and has been regarded with reserve, not to say suspicion, particularly by the younger mission Churches of Asia, organized in the East Asia Christian Conference (E.A.C.C., or 'Bangkok 1964'). Is, for example, the first loyalty of a committed and ecumenically minded Lutheran to the Lutheran World Federation, or to the ecumenical unity of all the Christians, whatever their confession or

¹*The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Vol. 2, 1948-1968*; edited by Harold E. Fey (S.P.C.K., 65s.).

denomination, of the place where he lives, and through them to that unity of 'the Church' which the World Council of Churches was established to forward? And so, of course, with the other confessional families, such as the Anglican Communion, the Baptist World Alliance, the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Salvation Army, the Old Catholic Churches and a number of others.

Nearly all such organizations or confessional families in fact willingly subordinate themselves to the ecumenical idea, and enjoy close liaison, as organizations, with the World Council of Churches, though as organizations they are not members of that Council. And yet clearly there is a real potential here for endless cross-purposes and misunderstandings, if not actual rivalry; there will be a tendency, it would seem, for these confessional families each to become 'the Church' in the eyes of the ordinary Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and so forth. In the view of nearly all experienced ecumenists this would be a most unfortunate tendency, one to be resisted; it is no doubt the tendency feared by the East Asian Christian Conference.

One thing, however, which this particular issue forces on our attention is the difference in semantic status between 'the Church' and 'a Church'. 'The Church' is not definable by observation, not empirically describable. What you understand by it will depend wholly on your theological premisses or prejudices, on your ecclesiology; and there is no agreed ecclesiology among Christians of different confessional traditions, or even very often of the same tradition. An agreed understanding of what 'the Church' means is not something from which the ecumenical movement starts, but something in which it bravely hopes to end. That is why the W.C.C. is *not* a Council of 'Churches' in the loose and perhaps sinister sense of the word, in which a confessional family might be called a Church in that it either claims some sort of identification with 'the Church' (like the Orthodox), or some sort of special relationship to it or manifestation of it, or at least view of it, according to its particular ecclesiology.

'A Church', on the other hand, though theological pre-suppositions will indeed enter into your full understanding of what it means, is none the less empirically or sociologically describable as, for example, 'a body or community of Christians, in full fellowship or communion with each other, organized on a local and not on a world-wide basis'. Such bodies of Christians are empirically observable; willy-nilly you come across them everywhere you go, whatever your theology or your anti-theology may be. And it is of such Churches that the W.C.C. is a Council, though there are of course many such Churches that do not belong to it. The important element in the description I have offered is the last phrase. It means that one should never use the expression 'a Church'—if one wishes to avoid endless confusion—for a world-wide organization. The reason for

this is that worldwideness, universality (catholicity), is a property of 'the Church', whatever your ecclesiology may be. It follows that there should really be no plural of 'the Church', that 'the Churches' is really the plural, varying in extension according to the context, of 'a Church', and that the world-wide confessional families should never be referred to collectively as 'the Churches' or any of them singly as 'a Church'. I realize that I am trying to rule out a very common way of using the word 'Church'; but I submit that it is a manner of speaking that has bedevilled countless discussions; and that Professor Fey has done us all a great service by giving us this expression 'confessional family', which will help us to avoid such confusion in the future, and perhaps to make some real progress in some particular discussions.

Let us take, for example, the relations between the W.C.C. and the Roman Catholic Church. Now what is this empirically observable phenomenon, generally known as the Roman Catholic Church, what is it in relation to the word 'Church'? According to its own doctrine as expounded by Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis*, it quite simply is 'the Church'. The official doctrine is elaborated with much more subtlety and with important developments by Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium*, which declares that 'the Church' *subsists in* what is commonly known as the Roman Catholic Church. This is an extremely valuable qualification or development of the rather stark exposition of *Mystici Corporis*, but its particular value is not my concern here, and for our present purposes I think we can just say that according to the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, this Church is 'the Church'.

Now this doctrine, of course, is not accepted by other Christian bodies; most of them will not allow that any Christian body is in itself 'the Church'; none of them will allow that the Roman Catholic Church is 'the Church'. They will commonly regard it as 'one of the Churches' or as 'a Church'. But this, now, is an assessment of it which the Roman Catholic cannot accept; if you regard a body as 'the Church', you cannot logically agree to its description as 'a Church', and if it appears, as it has appeared, that agreement to such a description would be implied by membership of the W.C.C., then you cannot agree to such a body applying for membership. I think this is a fair, if slightly over-simplified, account of why the W.C.C. does not yet include Roman Catholic membership.

To overcome this *impasse* we want a description of the Roman Catholic Church which does not even implicitly involve any theological presuppositions. To call it 'the Church' clearly does so; and so, if only by way of negation, does the habit of calling it 'a Church'. In any case, if we stick to the strict, and I maintain the only proper, use of the phrase 'a Church', defined above, and implied in the very constitution of the W.C.C., the Roman Catholic Church is clearly not 'a Church', because it is a world-wide and not a local body or

organization. So whatever your theology may be, it is descriptively inaccurate to call it 'a Church'.

What, then, can everybody agree to call it? Why not a confessional family? The only difficulty about this is that it involves an implication which is strange to our usual habits of thought, but which to my mind is the chief beauty of the description. To call the R.C. Church a confessional family carries the implication that it is a confessional family of *Churches* (plural of 'a Church'). The difficulty is that our Catholic ecclesiology has for so long concentrated its attention on 'the Church' (which really has no plural), and for so long ignored the theological validity and implications of the idea of 'a Church' (and its plural 'the Churches'), that we Catholics find it very hard to think of ourselves as constituting a whole collection of local Churches, or to think that the word 'Churches' in the plural can justly be employed, in a theological sense, at all. Likewise those Christians who do not accept our ecclesiology have nonetheless taken our estimate of ourselves at its face value, and seen us as one unusually coherent and, as they often put it, monolithic body; one Church rather than a family of Churches.

But the beauty of the description is precisely this; it makes us put into words what the experience of the last ten years has surely been revealing to us, that the monolithic character of the R.C. communion is empirically an illusion and doctrinally an ecclesiological monstrosity. 'The Church' neither is nor ought to be a monolith; therefore on R.C. premisses the R.C. communion neither is nor ought to be a monolith. Therefore we must bring the concept of 'a Church' (plural 'the Churches') into our working descriptions and theological appraisals of the ecclesial scene. Therefore we should welcome the description of the R.C. communion as a confessional family of Churches, and begin thinking of it more as 'the Catholic Churches in communion with the Roman see', or for short, as 'the Roman Catholic Churches', than as 'the Roman Catholic Church'.

It is not difficult to see what this means for R.C. membership of the W.C.C. Since that body is a Council of local Churches, there should now be no question of the R.C. communion being admitted to membership, or seeking it, as 'a Church'. To put objections to this course at its lowest, it would mean that Roman Catholics would be grossly under-represented at the W.C.C. The various Catholic Churches in the different countries of the world should be admitted to membership, if they seek it and are of sufficient size, as distinct local Churches. Among these local R.C. Churches would be the Roman Church itself; or perhaps it would be preferable for the Holy See, as embodying or symbolizing the unity of all these Catholic Churches in one confessional family, to have the same sort of liaison with the W.C.C. as the other confessional families do.

The case of Orthodox membership of the W.C.C. presents a very good illustration of how our R.C. problem could be solved in the

way I have suggested. The Orthodox have, if anything, an even more intransigent ecclesiology than Roman Catholics, identifying their communion quite unequivocally with 'the Church'. But their communion consists of a whole number of Churches (plural of 'a Church'), the Russian Orthodox Church, Greek, Rumanian, Cypriot, Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and so forth. It is these various Orthodox Churches, not 'the Orthodox Church', that are members—indeed not all of them are, even now—of the W.C.C. Such membership in no way compromises their high and intransigent ecclesiology. There is no reason why a similar kind of membership should compromise our Roman Catholic ecclesiology either.

The definition or description of 'a Church' proposed above is chiefly important for stressing the *local* character of 'a Church'. Such a stress has more theological value than just to provide an intellectually respectable *rationale* for R.C. membership of the W.C.C. It is locally, after all, that nearly all Christians realize or live out their Church membership, together with their neighbours in the place where they live. At the moment they do it in separate or even rival denominational groups, though now these groups have begun to enter into closer local relationships with each other. But full Christian unity will not be achieved, the one Church of Christ will not stand out universally as 'the Church' and a manifest sign to the whole world, until it is manifested locally as 'the unity of all Christians in each place', to paraphrase the dominant theme or motto of the W.C.C. assembly at New Delhi.

This excellent slogan opens up a breathtaking perspective which I will take a rather dizzy look at in a moment; but it also raises a problem about our definition of 'a Church'. The notion of 'a place' enters into that definition, and the question arises, What in fact is a place? At the beginning of Christian history a city seems to have been the natural unit of place; so a Church was usually a city Church, the Church of Corinth, Antioch, Rome, or Hippo. But this form of localization tended to get out of hand in some areas when 'cities' that were no more than large villages started becoming Churches, each with its bishop. Then, at a later date, this city localization, genuine or degenerate, ceased to be relevant to the sociological map of most post-Roman Europe. So a place became first a diocese, an extension of the city Church which could cover, for example, a large tribal area; then a province comprising several such dioceses or Churches; then a country or nation comprising several provinces; with subdivision in each case into what you could call sub-places, the smallest of which is the parish. The problem remains, What is a place in the meaning of the New Delhi slogan?—a perplexing problem of organization with unavoidable political complications.

Now for the dizzy perspective. At the moment, in each place (however delimited) there are likely to be several Churches, in the 'a Church' sense, according to the number of denominations or

confessions established there. But the New Delhi ideal is that just as in the whole world there should only be one 'the Church', visibly united and articulated, so in each place there should only be one 'a Church', to which all the Christians of that place belong. But while they will all enjoy full doctrinal, sacramental and ecclesial communion with each other—otherwise they would not constitute 'a Church'—it is impossible to imagine that they will be bound in such 'a Church' of the future to any local uniformity either of worship or organizational structure. We must be prepared to envisage pluriformity at the local 'a Church' level as well as at the universal 'the Church' level, though it is not easy to conceive how such local pluriformity would be organized.

Now this raises the problem of episcopacy, just as the prospect of full unity at the universal level raises the problem of papacy. At the universal level of 'the Church', Roman Catholics sincerely claim that their doctrine of papacy has something vital to contribute. But the contribution has not the slightest chance of being convincing to other Christians unless and until the whole style and practice of the existential papacy undergoes the most far-reaching changes. I would sum them up by suggesting that the emphasis on the role of the Pope as *governing* the universal Church must yield, almost to vanishing point if necessary, to an emphasis on his role as *representing* the universal Church by being the focal point of the communion of all the Churches.

It is much the same with episcopacy at the local level of 'a Church'. To the definition of 'a Church' given above, Catholics, whether Roman, Anglican or Orthodox, would really like to add that 'a Church' is a community of Christians presided over by a bishop, and they would claim that episcopacy has something vital to contribute to the local 'a Church' of the future. Again, however, this contribution has not the slightest chance of being appreciated by non-episcopal Christians unless the current practice of episcopacy is radically altered. I confess I find it even harder to envisage the kind of alteration required here than at the universal level of papacy. But at least, a bishop who presides in 'a place'—or a sub-place—over a pluriform local Church to which non-episcopal traditions like the Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist and Pentecostalist make their contributions, will clearly not be called on or able to govern that Church in the kind of way that any bishop of any of the Catholic traditions governs his Church at the present moment.

So I conclude, finally, that the question 'What is a Church?' is open to a far greater extent to an empirical, or phenomenological answer than the question 'What is the Church?'; that it is quite as important as this question for the ecumenical debate, because though largely empirical it still has important theological implications; and that neither is a question to which we can prescribe the full answer for the Church, or the Churches (plural of 'a Church'), of the future.