

Christian mystagogy, the universal Church and the particular churches

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Living organisms (and human institutions, which reflect similar life processes) always exhibit two opposing dynamics in permanent tension. One expresses the principle of identity (securing the organism's cohesion, ensuring the balance it needs if it is to develop the characteristics proper to it), the other is the principle of adaptation (allowing it to adjust to a changing environment). When the principle of identity is lacking, the organism loses inner cohesion and finally disintegrates. When the capacity for adaptation is missing, the inability to adjust to environmental change can lead to stagnation and death. Every living thing must maintain a healthy, dynamic tension between these two principles, and indeed the existence of a strong or active tension between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies may be taken as a good indicator of the organism's health.

Applying this understanding of real processes to the development of human institutions, we may observe that their activity is always constrained by a core of identity which may be termed "institutional", serving as a source of stability and coherence, but also by adaptive and creative tendencies which may be termed "charismatic," generating appropriate responses to an ever-changing world. Such organisations must maintain the tension between institution and charisma if they are to stay healthy. An over-emphasis on stability will diminish vitality and they will finally die, incapable of maintaining connection with an actively changing environment; excessive emphasis on adjustment to external changes can lead to loss of identity and disintegration.¹⁷⁹

Both tendencies must be operational if life is to carry on in balance: they can never be treated as ends in themselves. Both tendencies work

¹⁷⁹ See Melloni Ribas, J., *El Uno en lo Múltiple. Aproximación a la diversidad y unidad de las religiones* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2003), 97-122.

for life, they subserve the life of the organism. When activated, their role is to promote life rather than to promote themselves. For either to take itself as the sole criterion of viability would effectively be suicide, putting an end to life and thus to itself.¹⁸⁰

The Church is no exception to this dynamics. One can see throughout its history the permanent tension between what can be called its institutional core of identity and its adaptive, charismatic energies. As already suggested, this tension is not necessarily negative. The Church has been able remain true to its identity and at the same time to embody the Good News of Jesus Christ in very different cultural environments. Centripetal forces thus predominate in the central leadership of the Church and centrifugal forces at the boundary, where Christian faith meets new cultural worlds.

The universal Church and the particular churches

When one speaks of the universal Church, the phrase can mean different things. In principle, for our own Church, the universality is that of the Catholic communion under the pastoral authority of the successors of Peter and that of a joint vision of revelation as mediated by living tradition, dogma and teaching, sacramental-liturgical practice, ethical-moral principles, ecclesiastical organisation and so on. This universal Church is identified with the mystery that finds expression in our confession of faith, in which we confess to one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Certainly, elements of this mystery are to be found in the institutional structures of the Church, but it is obvious that there are also many other elements of its universality that are not covered by the current organisational state of the Church.

For the purposes of our discussion, then, a further clarification is necessary. The universal Church is commonly identified with its central leadership, which is with the Roman Curia. The latter, however, is properly to be understood as a kind of support for the Pontiff in office, who serves as guarantor that the deposit of the faith received by the universal Church is loyally preserved and rightly transmitted to new generations of believers. Certainly there are indispensable elements of

¹⁸⁰ See Ellis, G., "Kenosis as a Unifying Theme and Cosmology" in: Polkinghorne, J., (ed.), *The Work of Love. Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 107-126.

organisation and hierarchy that fortify the ministry of the successor of Peter, called upon to strengthen the faith of his brothers and sisters, but in no way can the universal Church be identified with its central leadership. The role of the latter is not so much to enforce a particular expression of the faith but to guarantee the mutual enrichment of all the local churches, facilitating dialogue and exchange between them and authenticating their respective positions by common criteria for discerning the distinctive dynamics of the Spirit.¹⁸¹ In this way the central leadership and the particular churches together serve the vitality of the universal Church.

Regional communities came to be called local or particular churches, subject to the pastoral authority of a bishop, whose jurisdiction is as a rule geographically defined (apart from certain prelatures such as military ordinariates). Put simply, the particular church corresponds to a diocese (a specific area under the authority of a bishop or prelate).¹⁸² As a living and dynamic reality, the universal Church encompasses within its identity the many particularities of the local churches as well as the historical particularities of the central leadership that is called to the service of this community.¹⁸³

Tensions between the “universal” and its particular expressions are to be found at the very beginnings of Christianity. A clear example of this are the arguments of Paul and Peter against certain Pharisees of Christian origin who sought to impose the Law of Moses on all the faithful.¹⁸⁴ For these Jewish-Christian missionaries compliance with the letter of the law was a crucial element of the process of salvation. They had not yet grasped the radical novelty of the Christian message, which implied the emergence of an inner dynamic that transforms the life of the believer, leading him or her to live in accordance with God’s

¹⁸¹ Cf. Luke 22:32.

¹⁸² One problem with this territorial conception is that, while it simplifies pastoral administration and limits the possibility of a conflict of authority, it leaves out of account fundamental aspects of a local church with its own characteristics, such as belonging to a particular and distinctive culture.

¹⁸³ See the interesting discussion in “Unidad de la Iglesia y pluralismo cultural”, Chapter 3 of Part III of Tornos Cubillo, A., *Inculturación. Teología y método* (Madrid: Desclee de Brouwer, 2001), 251-292.

¹⁸⁴ See Acts 11:1-18 and 15:1-35.

will (i.e., under the “sovereignty” of God, in the deepest sense of the notion of God’s kingship).

One could say that the way in which this conflict was resolved ought to serve as the very model of how local churches should stand in relation to each other within the structure of the universal Church. As the outcome of an honest and sober dialogue between partners open to the establishment of general criteria and seeking to recognise the activity of the Holy Spirit, the first Christians concluded that faith was not necessarily tied to a particular culture and its religious expressions.¹⁸⁵ It is transcultural, which means that it can manifest itself in different forms, even in terms of ritual, without thereby losing its essence. It is by virtue of his or her relationship with Christ that a member of the Church becomes a Christian, and it is through Christ that one comes to God.¹⁸⁶ The appearance of particular gifts of the Spirit showed that this dynamics had also manifested itself in entirely Gentile contexts without any cultural (or religious) connection to Judaism. Everyone involved in the controversy accepted this criterion for the acceptance of Greco-Roman Christians, without insisting on any cultural change or the acceptance of Jewish religious practices on their part.

There are other important lessons we can learn from this historic moment. The Jerusalem congregation understood that its role as mother church, founded and fortified by the direct witness of the Apostles, did not entitle it to think of itself as the only road to belief in God. Their duty was rather to bear witness to Christ as the final message of God and, in docility to the Holy Spirit, to embody and to pass on the Good News in the different cultures that they encountered. No church, whether Jewish or Gentile in origin, should be overly concerned to impose its cultural patterns on others, but should rather ensure that its people come to know the Good News of God’s kingdom.

¹⁸⁵ *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN) (1975) ‘Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Pope Paul VI to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to All the Faithful of the Entire World’, no. 22, at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html; and also ‘Evangelisation in Latin America’s Present and Future’, final document of the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate (Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, 27 January - 13 February 1979), no. 407, in: Eagleson, J., and Scharper, P., eds., *Puebla and Beyond* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979).

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Snyder, G., *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 202-215.

The criterion for the authenticity of its apostolic labours would be the appearance of what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit”: a correct attitude to those sons and daughters of God who live without Christ in them.¹⁸⁷ It is the ubiquity of the Good News and the Christian’s distinctive way of being, mirroring the behaviour of Christ, that make the Church universal. As also the grace to live this, granted us through his Spirit.¹⁸⁸ It is a matter of universality of conduct, of character, and of unitary cultural expression.

The universal Church and the universality of the kerygma

For the purposes of this discussion it seems to me to be essential to explain exactly what I understand by the Christian kerygma, the essence of the Good News. The reason is simple. The Church (the universal Church and each local church) is called to safeguard the vitality of this core of belief and its proper transmission to new generations of believers. The most important criteria of these churches’ faithfulness to the mission entrusted to them by Jesus must be the indicators that they do in fact function as Good News for their congregations and for the society in which they find themselves.

At the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ lies the experience of God that grounds our faith and without which it makes no sense, the encounter with the One who so forcefully presents himself as the last and final truth that in his presence everything else becomes relative. He thus changes people radically, engaging them in a life-giving dynamic that leads to a continuous process of transformation and growth. This allows humanity to experience what it means to be a son of God, living in synergy with the divine will as a citizen of God’s kingdom.

This particular experience of person-to-person encounter with God is rightly described as the “fundamental experience”. For all who undergo it, it grounds and gives meaning to their view of reality. This fundamental experience is felt as a kind of revelation, that is, as the sudden appearance of one who was apparently not there before, who

¹⁸⁷ See Gal 2:19-20, and especially Gal 5:22-23, where the fruit of the Spirit is said to be “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

¹⁸⁸ “The Christian in the World”, Chapter 3 of “The Epistle to Diognetus”, in: *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Staniforth, M., and Louth, A., (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 144-145.

suddenly becomes visible and understandable as the ultimate point of reference. This encounter with supreme reality always brings with it a liberation, an escape from darkness into light, from chaos to cosmos, from meaninglessness to meaning and clarity.

For us as Christians this fundamental experience signifies an encounter with a person, Jesus of Nazareth. Here the concept of person is used in a theological sense, denoting a relational self-presence in the sense of the persons of the Trinity. Each individual's core identity is necessarily and inextricably tied up with their relationship to others. This relationship is, however, informed by the dynamics of surrender, of kenotic love: giving oneself up to the other, granting him the gift of life and at the same time receiving the gift of the love of others, as the source of life. When the divine enters into a relationship with us, it is revealed to us how we are constituted as persons. This is the essence of our likeness to God.¹⁸⁹

As a rule, true kerygma is identified by virtue of a whole series of features, by the conceptual content that is to be learned and accepted. This narrow view of faith tends to turn Christianity into a kind of Gnosticism. Kerygma is something more than conceptual content: it is a personal experience that forms us. At the heart of such a kerygma stands the experience of God in Christ as the philanthropist par excellence, the ally of humanity, the one who loves mankind. I would sum this up in the words of the Gospel: "For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life".¹⁹⁰ For us to approach the fundamental experience of Christianity it is necessary to enter into a relationship with Christ, the concretisation of His gratuitous, boundless love for us. Christ's gift reveals to us the radicality of God's kenotic love, bringing us Good News. The encounter with the risen Christ as a person may be considered the fundamental experience of our faith, the core of the kerygma.

Jesus' earthly life was the manifestation of this revelation: whoever saw him saw the Father.¹⁹¹ In other words, Jesus of Nazareth is God,

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Gen 1:26.

¹⁹⁰ John 3:16.

¹⁹¹ John 12:45.

who speaks to us as a man, in a language accessible to us. The way that the Lord followed as a man is the experience that he wished to communicate to his disciples: God loves us, so it is worth our putting our lives in his hands. This means to know how he behaves (love as pure gift, free and unconditional, in kenosis, in self-emptying, in self-abandonment), and to want to subordinate ourselves to this kenotic dynamics: to live faithful to his will, to live under the sovereignty (the Kingdom) of God and to love one another, as he has taught us.

Christ endeavoured to bring his followers' experience of God into accord with his own. In doing this, he was concerned neither to give a string of doctrinal explanations, nor to lay down moral prescriptions, but to bring them closer to the experience of encounter with his Father. He was clearly concerned about those who felt drawn by his message: they were not to be content to listen to him or to quote him by heart,¹⁹² but to have the same fundamental experience, to come to know God as the Father of boundless, unconditional love. This was always the essence of his preaching and of his mysteries: the encounter with a personal God, who in becoming man reveals himself as intimate Creator, merciful, compassionate and loving, the teacher of what it means to be human.¹⁹³ This is the Good News that calls to be proclaimed universally.

Mystagogy: the problem of communicating the kerygma

How can access to the experience of God the Father, who is the very essence of the kerygma, be ensured or at least facilitated? Since apostolic times, the process of initiation into the fundamental experience has been structured in forms of spiritual didactics known as mystagogies. These are intended to save a person from sin (understood as a false, untruthful inner dynamics, self-centred and predatory, the polar opposite of the kenotic love of God) and to show them that their vocation is to become fully human, to love as God loves.

The mystagogy is based on cultural references proper to the society to be evangelised. Every culture is a universe of signification, a

¹⁹² Cf. Matt 7:21: "It is not anyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' who will enter the kingdom of Heaven..."

¹⁹³ Cf. Sophrony, *Ver a Dios como Él es* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2002), 207-242.

kind of meta-language that we must attend to if we want our message to be understood. Although the goal is always the same – that is, access to the fundamental experience of Christian faith – mystagogies must differ, each being adapted to an individual culture.¹⁹⁴ These mystagogies begin with the blindness and error in which our fellow humans find themselves. Evil appears as a dynamics that runs counter to God's bounteous love, a view of oneself as inhabiting a world that is a battleground between enemies, in which happiness is thought to be the assurance of one's own satisfaction, a goal to be defended against all-comers. The biblical account of the Fall is paradigmatic. The serpent (Evil) persuades Adam and Eve that God, whom they knew as their good friend and companion, is in fact an enemy who exploits them. They stop living in openness and complementarity, becoming "egos": individuals for whom happiness seemingly consists of isolating oneself as far as possible in order to avoid harm but at the same time to dispose of all that is needed for one's own satisfaction. In the grip of this distorted vision, they are no longer in a position to see God's presence in creation. They see only objects, objects they consume and with which they satisfy their needs. They live in perpetual anxiety over their loss or frustration at not possessing them. The encounter with Christ is proposed as a way out of this situation of dehumanisation.¹⁹⁵

The best epitome of Christian mystagogy ever vouchsafed to the Church is perhaps to be found at the end of Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God [the Father] and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all".¹⁹⁶ In this blessing Paul asks that the Corinthian congregation should come to know the experience of the encounter with God, upon which their faith is based. The apostle evokes a distinctive mystagogical process in which the order of reference (Son → God [the Father] → Holy Spirit) is by no means an accident but rather describes an ordered process of experience, a kerygmatic dynamics: a mystagogy. The hermeneutic

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Velasco, R., *La Iglesia de Jesús: Proceso histórico de la conciencia eclesial* (Estella, Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2011), 21-48.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Zacharias, *The Enlargement of the Heart* (South Canaan, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2006), 92-113.

¹⁹⁶ 2 Cor 13:13.

key lies in living Christ's surrender as an act of love for us as the profoundest revelation of the divine nature and as the model for so-called human nature.

The core of the kerygma is, then, the grace of Christ, utterly gratuitous, an unconditional gift, a love without conditions. Who so receives Christ, dropping their guard and allowing themselves to love, attains at last to the secret of eternal love, which has its source in the Father. Inclusion within the circle of Trinitarian love comes in the end through the experience of fellowship, mutual attachment and shared enjoyment of goods that is love's essence, personified in the Holy Spirit, in the spirit of Christ. When a soul truly encounters Christ, it in the end rediscovers itself in Him. In the face of the Lord I recognise how much of him is in me, and everything too that is foreign to my Creator. Under his loving gaze I discover what I have been called to be.

Since the very beginning of the Christian religion, the unflagging surrender that Christ himself teaches us through his love has stood as the sign of authentic Christian life. Whoever encounters the Servant of Yahweh, prepared for love's sake to give up his life so that others might live, is changed by the encounter and invited to become like him: poor blameless and free, a sacrificial offering, a gift. The Church, then, is called upon to make this mystagogy known to all. The presence of this attitude of kenotic love, as it is found in Jesus, is the fundamental criterion of faithfulness to the Gospel and to the Lord. Together with the central leadership of the Church, every particular church must constantly keep this aspect under review. That local church serves the universality of the Church to the extent that its structure, teaching, pastoral work and so on constitute an effective mystagogy that instills the dynamic characteristic of kenotic love.

The fundamental Christian experience can be passed on in many different ways, but to tie the Gospel of Christ to power, imposition, privilege and the accumulation of worldly goods is corrosive. Similarly corrosive is our behaviour when, as bearers of the Good News, we show concern for outward uniformity while showing no concern for the inequality and exclusion that result from the misuse of power and the misappropriation of wealth.

Inculturation and universality: recommendations for a constructive dialogue

If Christian faith is to find a place for itself in new cultural contexts, correspondingly, appropriate mystagogies must be developed that give the latter access to what we have called the core of the Christian kerygma, the fundamental experience. This is applicable both to missionary lands as normally understood and to newly secularised and post-modern cultures.¹⁹⁷ The choice of the most appropriate methods for the development of these inculturated mystagogies belongs to the local churches. If we discern real changes in those addressed and the fruit of the Spirit becomes manifest in Christian communities, then they are fulfilling their mission and thus strengthening the universal Church. If we observe exactly the opposite, however, we must criticise their way of doing things, honestly and in the spirit of the Gospel. The criterion of success is a radical change of attitude brought about by the encounter,¹⁹⁸ a change that must be in some way verifiable. This criterion of validity is to be applied both to local churches and to the Church's central leadership. It should not be forgotten that we all serve a single universal Church.

We have recently seen conflicts between the pastoral options adopted by local churches and the decisions of certain departments

¹⁹⁷ See Fornet-Betancourt, R., *Interkulturalität und Religion. Zur interkulturellen Interpretation der gegenwärtigen Krise des Christentums*, Concordia Monograph no. 55, (Aachen: Verlag Mainz, 2011), 145-161.

¹⁹⁸ See *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no. 19; Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council, Vol. VI (Bogota: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970)*, no. 2,5; *ibid.*, 'Evangelisation in Latin America's Present and Future', no. 228; John Paul II., *Slavorum Apostoli* (EN) (1985), 'Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Pope John Paul II to the Bishops, Priests and Religious Families and to All the Christian Faithful in Commemoration of the Eleventh Centenary of the Evangelising Work of Saints Cyril and Methodius', no. 65; *Ecclesia in Africa* (EN) (1995), 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father John Paul II to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Men and Women Religious and All the Lay Faithful on the Church in Africa and its Evangelising Mission towards the Year 2000', no. 123, at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa_en.html; *Ecclesia in Oceania* (EN) (2001), 'Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops Priests and Deacons, Men and Women in the Consecrated Life and All the Lay Faithful on Jesus Christ and the Peoples of Oceania,' at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20011122_ecclesia-in-oceania_en.html.

of the Roman Curia, in which the latter were presented as indicators of the sense of the universal Church.¹⁹⁹ As already discussed, we are faced by different ministries within the universal Church. This tension should not dismay us: it is part of the healthy life of the Church. This tension, however, can be constructive – or destructive, seriously undermining the evangelisation process. The theoretical approach described here can help ensure that the tension serves as an energising function, promoting the growth of the Church as a whole. From this a number of observations follow:

1. The process itself has to take the form of a constructive dialogue, grounded in the dynamics underlying the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem, i.e. in a sincere striving after the will of God in accord with the movement of the Holy Spirit. For this to happen it requires a spirit of encounter and of mutual esteem. We cannot attain a universal community through *a priori* exercise of power, closing ourselves off to the experience of the other. It is important that we do not feel like members of two opposing parties, each seeking to assert its own position, but rather see each other as brothers and sisters who together strive after God's will.
2. We should never lose sight of the criterion of faithfulness to Christian belief, especially when it is a matter of living testimony to the values of the Gospel. This gives each participant in the dialogue a certain weight, a moral authority, a sensitivity to the here-and-now that is more interested in recognition than in authority of office. And the more institutional decision-making power a participant possesses, the more carefully it must reflect the attitude of the Lord whom it represents. In this, the manner in which one treats one's

¹⁹⁹ Cf. "Carta sobre la ordenación de diáconos permanentes" (Letter on the Ordination of Permanent Deacons) of 26 October 2005, sent to the Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, by the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments; "Carta a su santidad Bededicto XVI" (Letter to H. H. Benedict XVI) of 24 March 2005, from the parishes and the Diaconal Council of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico; "Iglesia autóctona y diaconado Permanente" (The Autochthonous Church and the Permanent Diaconate), a letter of 16 March 2006 from the bishops of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico; all these are to be found in *Revista Iberoamericana de Teología* 2:2 (2006), 97-109.

interlocutor is especially important. Today, inquisitorial proceedings are unacceptable.²⁰⁰

3. It would be a serious error to pay no heed to the evangelising vitality of the local churches in question, their faithfulness to the Gospel, their service and solidarity, their love of Christ and his Church.²⁰¹ Also important is the community's capacity to engender and to recognise ministerial vocations appropriate to the particular culture and in keeping with the life of the ministers. The presence of these signs would indicate that these churches are practiced in the inculturation of the Gospel. They have, in fact, been capable of developing distinctive mystagogies in their own cultural contexts, affording their members access to the fundamental experience of the Christian faith.
4. One should pay heed in particular to those local churches whose pastors or ministers have concurred in supporting the same pastoral options and these have proved successful in terms of the criteria of evaluation set forth.
5. One should avoid presenting cultural and contextual situations as fundamental and unchangeable features of the universal Church. Papal teaching has already indicated that the inculturation process is comprehensive, "includ[ing] the whole life of the church and the whole process of evangelisation. It includes theology, liturgy, the Church's life and structures."²⁰²

It has been our goal here to consider, from the perspective of Christian kerygma and mystagogy, certain elements of the particular churches and the institutions in the service of the Petrine Primate that make their own contributions to the universal Church, each helping to ensure that the energising tension between identity and adaptation is maintained. In the quest for God's will, all who participate are subject

²⁰⁰ Cf. Schickendantz, C., *Cambio estructural de la Iglesia como tarea y oportunidad* (Córdoba, Argentina: Editorial de la Universidad Católica de Córdoba, 2005), 36-38, 150-160.

²⁰¹ This was in part the reason for the failure of the great missionary project of the first evangelisation of Latin America, the *Ecclesia Indiana* that the Franciscans called for in New Spain. For a detailed account see my article "The rise and fall of the *Ecclesia Indiana*", *Revista Iberoamericana de Teología* 2:3 (2006), 27-61.

²⁰² *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 62.

to conversion and growth. If they are to grow in faithfulness, it is important that they each recognise the other and allow themselves to be unmade and remade by the ways in which the Gospel manifests itself on each side in ways hitherto unknown. The specific form of Christian life in each culture, expressive in each case of the fruit of the Spirit, is part of the inheritance of the Spirit and enriches the catholicity of the universal Church. It is the responsibility of all the faithful to protect and strengthen it.

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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