

Dialogue between the universal church and the local church

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I have been asked to reflect on the dialogue between the universal church and the local church in the context of 'dialogue and mission'. Mission, dialogue and the church are related themes. But they are not always understood in the same way. So it is better to start clarifying to myself and my readers where I stand with regard to these themes as interrelated. Reflection is always done in a context. My context is Asia/India. The Asian churches, through the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), have been doing a lot of reflection on these themes and their interrelation. That is where I would like to start. Otherwise my reflections on the church, local and universal, and the dialogue between them may tend to be abstract.

For the Asian churches, mission is dialogue. We would not speak of mission and dialogue, but of mission *as* dialogue or dialogical. This may not be evident to many. Some years ago the Congregation for the Evangelisation of People and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue jointly published a document on *Proclamation and Dialogue*. (May 19, 1991) Defined abstractly they are not the same. Mission is primarily proclamation. Dialogue then is seen as a step or means towards it. The Asians approach the issue in two different ways. Whatever may be our abstract theoretical clarity regarding concepts, praxis is more complicated. When I meet a believer of another religion s/he is not someone who has never experienced God. The Word of God has been enlightening everyone coming into the world. (Cf. Jn 1:9) John Paul II accepted in his encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* that the Spirit of God is present and active in all cultures and religions. Earlier the Second Vatican Council had said that God is salvifically reaching out to everyone through the Spirit in ways known to God alone.²⁰³ So before witnessing to my own God-experience,

²⁰³ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

it is only fair that I listen to his/her God-experience and adapt my sharing accordingly. I am obviously engaging in a religious dialogue. My proclamation or mission to free humans can only be dialogical.²⁰⁴

Mission for the Asians also dialogue in another way. At its very first general assembly, the FABC, reflecting on the theme “Evangelisation in Asia Today”, described it as a threefold dialogue with the many poor, the rich cultures and the living religions of Asia.

The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life – realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own.²⁰⁵

Usually, when we speak of dialogue in the context of mission, we refer to interreligious dialogue. Here the Asian Bishops are speaking of dialogue as a way of mission. And what is interesting for us is that the goal of this dialogue is seen as the founding of the local church. So we see here the link between mission, dialogue and the local church. The local church emerges out of a dialogue of the gospel with the local realities of Asia, which is characterised by the poor, the cultures and the religions.

The local church is further particularised by the cultures of Asia. This is elaborated by the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC: “The concrete shape of the local Church will be, on the one hand, conditioned by the culture, and on the other hand, the culture will be evangelised by the life and witness of the local Church.”²⁰⁶

The FABC focused specially on the role of local church in mission in the International Mission Congress held in Manila in 1979. That Congress clearly affirmed: “Every local church is ‘sent’ by Christ and the Father to bring the Gospel to its surrounding milieux, and to bear

²⁰⁴ See Amaladoss, M., “Evangelisation as Dialogue”, *Indian Theological Studies* 48 (2011) 34-49.

²⁰⁵ Rosales, G.B. and Arevalo, C.G., (eds), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol.1. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 14.

²⁰⁶ *Theses on the Local Church*. FABC Papers 60 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1991), 18.

it also into all the world.”²⁰⁷ While strongly aware of its own identity as a local church, Asia becomes also aware of the universal church as a communion of local churches: “Since the context of the local church differs from another, every local church enjoys a legitimate autonomy, while maintaining the universal communion, to shape creatively its own life, structures and fulfil its God-given mission in its cultural environment”²⁰⁸ Having clarified my starting point let me now take up the dialogue between the local church and the universal church. What makes a church local? Without going into elaborate theological argument I can say that the ‘locus’ of church is determined by community, geography and culture. A Basic Christian Community gathered round the Eucharist can be a local church. Going up from there we can think of a parish, a diocese, a national conference of Bishops and a regional conference like the FABC as local churches. A diocese with a bishop, having the fullness of Episcopal ministry, does have a special status. But from a missionary point of view it need not be exclusively emphasised. I also think that culture has a particular role in identifying a local church, because a culture supposes a language, a system of symbols, a way of life and a social structure.

It is not easy to say what the ‘universal church’ is. All would agree that the church is universal and catholic. Most would say that this universal church is a communion of local churches. Is there a church outside and beyond the many local churches? There is no such reality physically. The local churches are not divisions of a universal church. The universal church is not simply an association of local churches. Some however think that there is a universal church prior to the local church. But its a theological, not a phenomenological, priority.

There is a college of Bishops. The Pope is head of the college. He is also the head of the local church of Rome. But the church of Rome is not the head of the local churches. It is not the universal church. The Pope as the head of the college of Bishops has a universal role. When the representatives of all the local churches are gathered in an ecumenical council, it represents the universal church. The Pope as the head of the college is a symbol of this communion of churches. He is not the universal church. He has a group of people to help him

²⁰⁷ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 1, 130.

²⁰⁸ *Theses on the Local Church*, 28.

to fulfil his role as the head of the college. They do not make up a church. The Pope may claim to represent the universal church in so far as he claims universal jurisdiction. But this is a disputed point in ecumenical circles. I do not wish to base my reflection on this point. A local church can dialogue with other local churches. The representative of a local church can dialogue with the representatives of the universal church gathered in council. Otherwise how does a local church dialogue with the universal church?

Whatever the theological difficulties, in practice today the Pope, through the Holy See, claims to represent the universal church. Therefore, in practice, we can say that the dialogue between the local and the universal church happens between the local churches and the Holy See. This is a reality we are living, whether we want it or not, whether it is theologically correct or not. So I shall focus my reflections on this relationship, because it is important to mission. Rather than enter into abstract argument I shall choose the field of liturgy to illustrate what is happening. After this I shall refer to other areas.

An Example: Inculturation of the Liturgy

The *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* elaborates on the relation between the Gospel and cultures.

The Church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances and has utilised the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and understand it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and in various aspects of the life of the faithful. Nevertheless, the Church has been sent to all ages and nations and, therefore, is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or to any customary practices, ancient or modern. The Church is faithful to its traditions and is at the same time conscious of its universal mission; it can, then, enter into communion with different forms of culture, *thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves*. (58) – (italics mine)

This issue receives a specific focus in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. First of all, the ground work is laid before spelling out the concrete norms.

The liturgy is made up of unchangeable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These latter not only may be changed but ought to be changed with the passage of time, if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become less suitable.²⁰⁹ (22)

The goal and the criterion for reform are then clearly laid down: “The Christian people, as far as possible, should be able to understand them with ease and take part in them fully, actively and as a community.” (22) The *Constitution* continues to lay down the openings and the limits.

Provided that the substantial unity of the Roman rite is preserved, provision shall be made, when revising the liturgical books, for legitimate variations and adaptations to different groups, regions and peoples, especially in mission countries. (38)

This opening, however, is further widened, going beyond the Roman rite, in the opinion of commentators. “In some places and circumstances, however, an even more radical adaptation of the liturgy is needed, and this entails greater difficulties.” (40) The initiative is left to local Bishops’ Conferences, helped by experts and experimented by special groups. (40,1-3) The grounds for such an opening beyond the Roman rite had been laid earlier in the *Constitution*: “Holy Mother Church holds all lawfully recognised rites to be of equal right and dignity.” (4) An expert, Pierre-Marie Gy, present at the Council, says: “In the prepared text the Council has simply modified in number 4 ‘lawfully existing’ into ‘lawfully recognised’, which leaves the door open to future development of new particular rites.”²¹⁰

The Indian Church took this opening seriously. As a first step it proposed twelve points in the celebration of the Eucharist that touched the externals like postures, gestures, materials used: squatting by the

²⁰⁹ My doctoral work was on this issue. See Amaladoss, M., *Do Sacraments Change? Variable and Invariable Elements in Sacramental Rites*. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1979).

²¹⁰ Gy, P.M., “Situation historique de la Constitution”, in *La Liturgie après Vatican II*, Ed. By J.- Jossua and Y. Congar (Paris: Cerf, 1967), 116. (The translation is mine) See also A.G. Martimort, “Adaptation Liturgique”, *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 79 (1965) 7; J.-A. Jungmann, “Konstitution über die Heilige Liturgie: Einleitung und Kommentar”, *Lexikon für die Theologie und die Kirche*, Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, Teil I (Freiburg, 1966), 43.

celebrant instead of standing, prostrations, use of a shawl instead of the usual vestments, oil lamps instead of candles, waving flowers, incense and light, etc. These were approved by the Holy See.²¹¹ An Indian Eucharistic prayer was prepared. Though it was passed by a two third majority in the assembly of Indian Bishops, the Holy See insisted that the majority must be with reference, not only to the Bishops present and voting, but to the whole Conference including those not present. A seminar on the Inspiration of Non-Biblical Scriptures concluded that they can be considered as part of a cosmic covenant preceding God's covenant with Moses and so analogically inspired.²¹² It suggested the possibility of using them in the liturgy as a first reading to be followed by readings from the Old and New Testaments. Even before the proposal could go to the Bishops and then to the Holy See, Vatican wrote forbidding its practice. After that it was said that all liturgical experiments were over. The liturgical movement in India came to a standstill. After some years, the Indian Bishops sent another Eucharistic prayer for approval. It was not even considered and nothing at present is happening. On March 29, 1994 an Instruction "Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy: *Varietatis legitimæ*" was published. Though it refers to Nos 37-40 of the conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy in its title, it takes the 'unity of the Roman rite' as a given. Referring to the 'more radical adaptation of the liturgy' mentioned in No. 40, it is affirmed that "adaptations of this kind do not envisage a transformation of the Roman rite, but are made within the context of the Roman rite", ignoring Nos. 4 and 23. Even in these modifications, the Episcopal Conferences have no power to make decision. They have to make a proposal to the Holy See for experimentation and, after the Holy See's approval, conduct the experimentation. After which they have to report back to the Holy See which will make the final decision. (*Varietatis legitimæ*, 65-69)

Can this be considered a dialogue between the Holy See and the local churches? No wonder that the Japanese Bishops protested during the Asian Synod against the obligation to get Japanese translations of

²¹¹ See D.S. Amalopavadass, *The 12 Points of Adaptation in the Liturgy and Their Commentaries*. Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981.

²¹² Cf. D.S. Amalopavadass, *Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures*. Bangalore: NBCLC, 1974.

liturgical texts approved by the Holy See. The protest, of course, was ignored. Of course, John Paul II said in *Ecclesia in Asia*:

The various cultures, when refined and renewed in the light of the Gospel, can become true expressions of the one Christian faith... It is the task of the Pastors, in virtue of their charism, to guide this dialogue with discernment. Likewise, experts in sacred and secular disciplines have important roles to play in the process of inculturation. *But the process must involve the entire People of God*, since the life of the Church as a whole must show forth the faith which is being proclaimed and appropriated. (21) (italics mine)

As we can see, there is no dialogue but rather a monologue, where the local churches are told what they have to do, even while their responsibility is emphasised. The Holy See may claim to be 'universal' and culturally neutral. But as a matter of fact, by holding on to tradition, as it sees it, it is imposing a Greco-Roman-European framework, not respecting the cultural individuality and diversity of the local churches as the Second Vatican Council wanted to do.

Theology and Spirituality

We can see the same thing happening in the area of theology and spirituality. In the area of theology the local churches seem to feel more free. However, the Holy See is sending out ambiguous messages. The Holy See is holding on to Scholastic theology which does not speak the language even of modern Europe, leave alone the rest of the world. John Paul II says in *Fides et Ratio*, 72:

In preaching the Gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy; but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded. Today, as the Gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which once lay beyond Christian influence, there are new tasks of inculturation, which mean that our generation faces problems not unlike those faced by the Church in the first centuries. My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value.

But in a famous speech on “*Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections*” at the University of Regensburg, on September 12, 2006, Benedict XVI seems to say the opposite:

In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was a preliminary inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The later are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieux. *This thesis is not only false; it is coarse and lacking in precision.* The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which has already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed. True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures. Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between the faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself. (italics mine)

This supposes that the Greeks have a monopoly on reason and their dialogue with faith is normative for all. It is surprising that Benedict XVI seems to make the inculturation of the faith in Greek culture a part of faith itself. This is obviously questionable. It is against the whole project of inculturation.²¹³ But in a presentation of St. Ephrem on November 28, 2007 he said:

Common opinion today supposes Christianity to be a European religion which subsequently exported the culture of this continent to other countries... Its expansion in the first centuries was both towards the West – towards the Greco-Latin world, where it later inspired European culture – and in the direction of the East, as far as Persia and India. Thus contributed to creating a specific culture in Semitic languages with an identity of its own.

However the creative theologians in Asia, Africa and Latin America have not felt bound by Scholastic theology. But the Latin American liberation theologians seem to have been successfully subdued. A number of Asian theologians have been sanctioned in various ways.

²¹³ See my book: *Beyond Inculturation. Can the Many be One?* Delhi: ISPCK, 2005.

The document *Dominus Iesus* (August 6, 2000) is widely said to have been directed against Asian theologians. In recent years, the officials of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith have been dialoguing with the theologians in Africa and India. Hopefully, these consultations will lead to a greater understanding of the questions of the local churches.

In the area of spirituality, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith condemned Asian methods of prayer, without consulting any of the local churches. (*Christian Meditation*. Oct. 15, 1989) But *ashrams* in India and zen centres elsewhere continue to flourish. I suppose no one can tell people how to pray 'unofficially'. The whole field of physical and cosmic energy is ignored by the churches in general. That is why people flock to Pentecostal churches and oriental gurus.

Structures of dialogue, like Synods and commissions, are not absent. But they are either nominated or subtly manipulated. There is growing centralisation. Uniformity is mistaken for unity. The universal does not allow pluralism but becomes particular. Pluralism is suspected of being relativism. In recent years the Holy See seems to be organising directly, without involving the local churches, seminars to promote their pet interests like proclamation. How does this affect mission? In India, as elsewhere in Asia, the church is seen as foreign in its cultures and structures, in its financing and administration. So it loses its missionary impact dialoguing with the poor, the cultures and the religions. It is attacked in some places by fundamentalist groups. The Holy See, in fact, does not talk about an 'Indian church', but about the 'church in India', because the church is supposed to be universal. How is a dialogue between the 'universal church' and a local church possible in such a situation? What we have is really a controlling centre and branches.

But in a globalising world that is also seeing a lot of fragmentation and conflict, a coordinating and dialoguing, not a dominating, centre, can bring together the human, cultural and religious riches of all the nations and present them to the world as a viable alternative. This is actually the goal of mission: the gathering up of all things in the fullness of Christ so that God be all in all. (cf. Eph 1:3-10, Col 1:18-20; 1 Cor 15:28) But is the church itself a model of the wrong kind of globalisation?

MISSION AND DIALOGUE

Approaches to a Communicative Understanding of Mission



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