

Relationships among local churches

Anselme Titianma Sanon

Like Anselm of Aosta who, in his youth, imagined that the greatest and biggest that the human mind could conceive was beyond the high peaks of the Alps, we all tend to see our neighbours as being very far away from us. However, the live footage and soundbites we receive in real time, whether pleasing or terrifying, do tell us about those neighbours – “our seven billion neighbours”.

There was a time when written news – and thus the history of the world and of our continent – would reach us much later: days, weeks, months or even years after an event. “Yet the world is becoming one and is aware of the fact” (Pius XI). Is today’s world becoming even more one now, and is it aware of it? Who are my neighbours? I know who they are, but do they know it? And if they do, what about myself?

Is this perhaps one of those fundamental questions? My neighbour – the person who is nearest to me and whom I face – is whoever I happen to meet. He or she may come from a different area, a different country or a different continent – one of the five continents on planet earth. This person enters my life. Yet unfortunately, unless we take the time to become aware of each other, we are often judged or evaluated before we meet in a face-to-face encounter. A beggar? A stranger?... How can we feel “oneness” in view of our differences and otherness?

An ecclesiology of conversion

In any newly planted local church the faith that is preached and agreed upon is the faith that is created by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God as proclaimed within this church. Therefore the reasons for living as disciples of Jesus Christ, having faith and living a life of love are continually passed on in a new way. The ties that form between a new local church and its parent church are relationships which are based on

knowing and appreciating one another. This, in turn, expresses itself in mutual or reciprocal respect, with everyone bearing and sharing an ongoing concern about the development of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

A latent ecclesiology: an ecclesiology of convergence, not dominance: The messages which the Apostle Paul preached to the churches he had planted (1 Cor. 4:15, Gal. 4:19 and 1 Thess. 2:11) were presented to certain sociocultural entities – church fellowships – within a specific geographical context and at a specific point in time where they faced the same challenges and where, incidentally, they were often influenced by the same prevailing trends of the time. In this respect the history of Christian antiquity is quite instructive, as it shows that all those young churches were beset by the same problems: The Book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul form the beginning of the main chapter in this history, creating relationships between brothers and sisters and knitting them together in close fellowship. There is a clear focus on this awareness and the issues arising within a church or fellowship concerning the forms and practices of their emerging traditions – traditions which are still becoming established, which are alive and on fire and which come straight from the heart of Jesus and are based on the Word of the Apostles. The apostolic fatherhood of Peter as the primate is, of course, clearly reinforced, yet at the same time helpfulness and consideration are by no means set aside; and wherever a voice is raised it is for the sake of newly converted, born-again Christians out of a wish to spare them the burden of following the Jewish law (Acts 15:1-30 and Gal. 2:1-14). And we may want to ask ourselves what might be our modern equivalents of “Judaising”.

Historical comments

The 2,000-year anniversary celebrations and other Christian events of the same significance and also celebrations initiated by various local and particular churches served to highlight the short and long-term historical dimension of redemption through the incarnation, both in the Catholic Church and indeed in all churches. It is true that our present age sometimes raises questions which are embarrassingly difficult to answer. In recent years they have included issues of peace,

the right of intervention, hunger, products made from genetically modified organisms and bio-ethics in relation to the family.

Does doctrine have all the answers or might it not be better to explore ways to guide people towards redemption through the incarnation by actually getting alongside them and meeting them where they are, and then leading them to God in this way? After all, the people we want to reach are no longer really listening to us or, if they do listen, they only pick out the words that meet their expectations.

Communion through mutual recognition

Recognition here means a concept of communion and a spirit of forging increasingly stronger relationships while striving for convergence and nourishing feelings of mutual respect and regard for one another.

We have entered the time of the heirs. After this time, and sometimes even during it, the seed of the Gospel bears fruit and brings forth local churches. All these churches have been planted within an apostolic succession and are jointly accepting the challenge of evangelising the world – *urbis et orbis*. We need to understand *urbis et orbis* as the world of the cities, towns and villages, the world of ethnic groups, nations and continents with their social, economic, political and cultural traditions (i.e. religion, spirituality and mysticism), and we need to do so by looking at its circular relationship with its surrounding culture and with the predominating cultures – elements which undoubtedly influence the interpretation and practice of the Church at large.

If anyone believes that all revelation has come to an end, then the Second Vatican Council teaches in *Dei Verbum* that tradition continually develops and is enriched by new forms of catechesis and also by liturgical and pastoral practices within the churches, giving space for development, implementation and verification.²⁹²

Dialogue among local churches

This is not about terminology or circumstances – i.e. local churches or particular churches – even though their status does determine the

²⁹² See Eph. 1:1 ff.

type of relationship among them, both vertically and horizontally. With a few exceptions the Church, as seen from the vantage point of Christology, does indeed derive its existence from the top downwards, but it comes into existence from the bottom upwards. No matter how small local churches may be, if they have formed in the name of the risen Lord, they are part of the Church as the Family of God and thus of the mystical, sacramental and fraternal Body of Christ.

Bauer's book on 2,000 years of Christianity in Africa starts with a detailed overview of the emergence and strong growth of local missionary churches and of African churches. It then focuses on their relationships with the centre of their communion – i.e. Rome, on the one hand, but, on the other, also the cross-links that have developed between those churches under the aegis of one and the same centre: dioceses and church districts as well as national, international, regional and continental bishops' conferences. It concerns the entire organisation: building a lively and brotherly African Church of the Family of God requires the people who form part of it and the energy that drives us.

One initial hope is that we should be aware of the great challenges of our present day and also of the dangers that are threatening the continent of Black Africa which – unfairly – is often lagging behind at all levels. The fact that Africa has so far been denied any significance is part of a historical development imposed on us from outside, and this cannot remain without theological and soteriological consequences! As fellow citizens of this new Africa, which has been robbed of its own identity and which is trying to make humane progress on the levels of politics, business, finance and culture, despite numerous betrayals under the pretext of dubious values, we must take a pastoral look at the large local churches where messengers of the Gospel have been planting and watering, and we must identify a need for transverse relationships. Here are some important points:

The linguistic and cultural dynamics which are involved in imparting the Word of God;

The dynamics of African religions, spirituality and mysticism with a view to maximum appropriation of inculturation;

The dynamics of an internalised and globalised world and its

paradigms whose consequences and accompanying products subsequently impact our countries;

The issue of human rights as reformulated for the African continent by the African Union in its *Charter of Human Rights and Peoples' Rights*. If the Church and thus the Family of God takes heed of such clarification, this will greatly assist the advancement of the Gospel, as it will help us gain a better understanding of the current global situation, in which Africa is the greatest victim;

A right to interfere in the internal affairs of a country must be put firmly on the agenda! The arguments and modalities that are put forward differ considerably and are applied arbitrarily. What common line can there be for local or particular churches that might help to promote and strengthen neighbourly relations and shared missionary responsibilities?

When we consider that the commission to evangelise is an obligation to establish a relationship between the God of Creation and the people He seeks to redeem, as an alliance of all nations from one generation to the next, then this requires sending a group of disciples, following the practices we know from Biblical sources. This group of believers must work together and form a fellowship in the name of the risen Lord – the Lord and ruler of history. It is important that there should be such relationships between them, relationships between people who have been sent, and it is equally important that they should communicate with each other and do so as part of the commission they have received from their Redeemer. This never-ending commission of love continues between the sent and the recipients as they share the joint task and responsibility of carrying the Good News to the ends of the earth.

Everything speaks for such relationships both within and among the churches, which we may want to call solidarity and interdependence among local churches. Obviously there are also barriers and limits, and these are perceived as referring to the continent's structures of administration and its politics. Of course this also affects the organisation of the Church itself. As long as political, economic and financial strategies are employed in order to qualify these barriers and thus to widen one's own scope, it is not surprising that pastoral forces include the utopian dreams of unity and integration in their joint action plans for an organic pastoral approach at all levels.

New perspectives

Dialogue and mission cover the missionary activities of mission-focused churches, the persuasive work of missionary expeditions and the ministry of spreading the Gospel which is available for those who want to hear what God has done for everyone and especially for them.

This context is new, because Western Christian hegemony has so far found it difficult to enter into any kind of dialogue of whatever kind – with the exception of people like St. Francis of Assisi, Matteo Ricci, Gregory XVI and Don Sarmiento.

The accepted method was apologetics, and any basis in ecclesiology, especially of a missionary kind, did not receive its theological clarification and structure until the Vatican Council.

Likewise, the concept and reality of mission and evangelisation – which is synonymous with the life and activities of the living Church – were very pronounced, but they came under the responsibility of specific bodies. As a result, it was almost impossible to develop any missionary ecclesiology that was not overloaded with categories of Western Christendom and its cultural concepts. Evangelisation and cultures only entered a new and exciting chapter with the Second Vatican Council when several resolute documents were published, such as *Lumen Gentium*, *Nostra Aetate*, *Ad Gentes* and the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* by Paul VI on dialogue. All this was set forth in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

As there can be no doubt about the essence of mission in the Church of the Apostles, every local church is a symbol and tool of its realisation. A local church owes its existence, growth and survival to mission. After all, regardless of whether a Christian church is old or new, unless it actively engages in missionary activities within itself – something which also radiates to the outside – it is in danger of going into decline and suffocating under various levels of encrustation.

When, after descending from the cross, the risen Lord entrusted his disciples with the Great Commission, He did so by breathing into them the Spirit of the Pentecost before they became permanently scattered throughout the world. Much of the Book of Acts is about the evangelistic activities of Peter after he himself was evangelised. He operates on the basis of his own Jewish traditions which are religious

and spiritual, social and cultural. The breath of the Spirit continues to move, first to Athens and later to Rome. Evangelising all of creation means all of mankind which has spread throughout the entire world. Spreading the Good News of the Gospel means taking the Word, the Eucharist and the Spirit to all nations (*Ad Gentes*) – both to the closest and to the most remote – first in Jerusalem and then to the ends of the earth, starting with the traditions and customs of the Apostles, through new forms of humanism which have continually caused a stir in every historical period, and eventually reaching up to seven billion neighbours. This is a sign of life, communion and a reconciled mankind which populates (*pervadit*: spreads throughout) the world.

Within, among and beyond

It is a logical consequence of mission that we should enter into a calm dialogue with those outside, bearing witness to our faith and our profession of this faith. Yet even for the initiators of our faith, the concept of dialogue – that is, full communion among brothers and sisters within churches and fellowships of the risen Lord – is very much the fundamental yardstick of what we call loving one's neighbour and doing good works. This means that missionary evangelisation is a command that follows from the very existence and nature of the Church and from our love of the Church. For the Church it is a fundamental office instituted by the Lord Himself and it involves rights and duties for both officeholders and recipients. History – especially the history of young churches – is full of procrastination, suffering and tension which sometimes even led to rupture.

This is where the dynamics and strategy of dialogue must come into play, both within the Church itself and in the way it relates to the outside. Such dialogue should include, among other things:

- human, personal and brotherly dialogue with Jesus in His humanity – *homo ad hominem missus*;
- intercultural and interethnic dialogue;
- interreligious relations (including spirituality and mysticism);
- manifold international relations;
- and – most importantly – relations among the nations.

After all, our own convictions and ideas can only survive if they are shared with neighbours, if they are enriched through probing questions and if they genuinely withstand the test and bring about an experience of a genuinely sincere dialogue, conducted in a spirit of openness and tolerance.

If everyone understands the other person's position, then it is possible to enter into a dialogue that transcends all opposites and contradictions. The Church needs this concept of dialogue, both within itself and with those outside it.

Theology of impartation

In today's globalisation the Church experiences the development of the world at a breathtaking speed, so that the world of today is quickly turning into the world of tomorrow. This means that churches, both on the wider level and locally, must pursue a pastoral policy of reading the signs of the times in every film and in every piece of music, a policy of understanding day by day that the Lord gives us clear signs of His saving grace. This must lead to collaboration between those who think deeply about the world, who write about it and who interpret the world in one way or another. They, too, are called upon to compile books, collections and libraries for the world, ensuring that Christian thinkers put the intellectual focus on what happens at major international world conferences and spreading the truth and light of the risen Lord.