

The 2008 Hughes-Cheong Trust Lecture

**"THE ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH:
WHO, WHAT AND WHERE?"**

Delivered at Christ Church South Yarra on 24 October 2008

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Aim

When I was told the terms of the Hughes Cheong Trust it quickly struck me that few things are more relevant to the present situation of the catholic faith as lived and practised in the churches of the Anglican Communion than the question (or perhaps three questions) I have posed in my title: "*The One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church: who, what and where?*"

The trust deed emphasizes "*the needs of the time in which the lectures shall be given.*" The Anglican "*needs of the time*" certainly include some serious reflection on the nature of the Church and its unity. Whatever we may think or say about the particular and immediate issues behind the current disarray of the Anglican Communion, underlying them is a defect in ecclesiality which goes beyond a simple failure to articulate clearly what we mean when we profess our faith in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. I do not intend to speak directly about Anglican difficulties, but hope some ecclesiological reflection in an ecumenical context might help even us!

Introduction

The idea for the particular theme of this lecture came to me from two sources. The first is the current ecclesiological programme of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, of which Fr Richard Treloar and I are both members.

The other is the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, issued in 2000 by the Holy See's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

a) Faith and Order

I start with the Faith and Order Commission.

According to its *Constitution*, the World Council of Churches exists to "*to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.*"

The highpoint of this vision of the unity of the church was articulated at the Council's Assembly at New Delhi in 1961: "*The unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and*

all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.”¹

To facilitate that demanding agenda, it is the task of the Faith and Order Commission to reflect specifically on what is meant by and what is required for “*visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship*”.

In doing so, the Commission seeks to serve not just the WCC as an organisation, but the whole Christian family in clarifying and, if possible, finding agreement on these matters.

In recent years its focus has increasingly been on the understanding of the Church as such, that is to say, on ecclesiology. The aim has been to see whether the churches might be able to register a convergence over their understandings of the Church, comparable to that previously attempted in relation to the sacraments and which resulted in the Lima text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* ² just over a quarter of a century ago.

The Lima text is often held up as a model of what can be achieved by multi-lateral dialogue. In the rather headier ecumenical days of the 1980s many were optimistic that the goal of visible unity was attainable within the foreseeable future. Agreement about sacramental faith and practice³ is of course essential if this is to happen – and this includes areas over which it is possible for churches to agree to differ without their differences being church-dividing. The text itself was the fruit of a long period of preparation and reflection including extensive consultation with churches, councils of churches, theological schools and individual theologians both about previous drafts and particular points. The outcome was a convergence text, falling short however of consensus, or that “*experience of life and articulation of faith necessary to realize and maintain the Church’s visible unity.*”

BEM itself addressed a number of questions to the churches. Two of these questions are directly relevant to this evening’s topic:

- i) the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the Church throughout the ages: and
- ii) the consequences your church can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognize the text as an expression of the apostolic faith.

Several responses to *BEM* observed that the text did not contain an explicit ecclesiology. Some criticised it for that, while others thought they could discern in it an implicit doctrine of the Church – and either liked or did not like what they found there.

This led quickly to the realisation that behind differences and agreements about the means of grace, the sacraments, lie differences or agreements about the nature of the church itself.

¹ WCC Assembly New Delhi 1961. Report of the Section on Unity para. 2, described as “*probably the greatest run-on sentence in ecumenical history.*”

² FO Paper 111

³ “If the divided churches are to achieve the visible unity they seek, one of the essential prerequisites is that they should be in basic agreement on baptism, eucharist and ministry.” (Preface)

One section of the “*Report on the Process and Responses to BEM 1982 – 1990*” was entitled “*Perspectives on Ecclesiology in the Churches’ Responses.*”⁴ The Report suggested that the Faith and Order Commission should continue to seek “a convergent vision on ecclesiology.”

The same report noted different ways of thinking about the Church: as the gift of the word of God, as mystery or sacrament of God’s love for the world, as the pilgrim people of God and as servant and prophetic sign of God’s coming kingdom. The Report concluded “*Since all these images and concepts belong to the common biblical heritage and are found in the apostolic tradition there is hope that in the future work of Faith and Order on ecumenical perspectives of ecclesiology these complementary approaches will lead to a convergent vision on the nature, unity and mission of the church.*”⁵

The Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order held at Santiago de Compostela in 1993 endorsed this agenda and so the Commission began work and in 1998, under the leading genius of the late Jean Tillard, produced a report entitled *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*⁶. Despite some difficulty in securing enough responses to be able to gauge progress towards agreement, the Commission has continued its work and in 2005 produced a new text *The Nature and Mission of the Church*⁷ which tried to take account of comments and criticisms received and of the reflections of a number of consultations on such themes as the sacramentality of the Church, authority in the Church and the complementarity of women and men in the Church.

One of the difficulties of inter-church or inter-confessional dialogue on ecclesiology is the rather obvious question of what is actually understood by the word “church.” Go no further than the early use of the term ecclesiology in the nineteenth century to mean the study of styles and forms in the architecture and furnishing of church buildings! Such matters may not be at the forefront of what we imagine today to be the subject matter of ecclesiology – although it is important to remember that people’s experience of the Church is closely bound up with the places in which the worship, the way in which they worship and how they find access to the Divine through such outward forms. Two practical observations: Bishop Butler, “Take a candle away from an altar and you destroy someone’s god.” And the story of the third step!

So don’t despise those things. The Church may not be buildings but the study of buildings can help us understand the Church.

Perhaps in our day, a greater temptation is to see the Church as primarily a form of religion organisation and thus to give a privileged interpretative place to religious sociology. Theologians may huff and puff, but in this world the Church is constituted as an organisation and its organisational forms and structures help us understand at the same time as they may sometimes obscure its real nature. So we should not reject such secular tools, even if we know they will not take us to the heart of what as believers we know to be the reality of our ecclesial life.

Christians believe in “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.” This is an article of the creed – in other words it is a part of the Christian faith and not an optional extra or mere

⁴ op.cit. V. C(1-3). pp 147ff.

⁵ op. cit. p. 151

⁶ FO Paper 181

⁷ FO Paper 198

consequence of faith.. I shall come back to that later, but want to stress at this stage that that, in the words of a famous collect, the church is a “wonderful and sacred mystery” and, as mystery, its nature and identity is also a matter of faith. As *NMC* itself puts it, “*To acknowledge the nature of the Church as “mysterion” indicates the transcendent character of its God-given reality as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. The Church can never be fully and unequivocally grasped only in its visible appearance. Therefore the visible organisational structures of the Church must always been seen and judged, for good or ill, in the light of God’s gifts of salvation in Christ, celebrated in the Liturgy.*”⁸

This is why however precise we try to be in the formulations of our understanding and any agreement we manage to discern or achieve, such agreement will not in itself be sufficient for unity. Nevertheless we can need to acknowledge probably say that different expressions may reflect the same reality and that, for the same reason, some diversity of expression may not in itself justify continued disunity.

All this suggests the need for a certain modesty in expression and a willingness for the sake of ecumenical dialogue to reserve judgement at some crucial points.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the very title of the World Council of Churches itself. Not all member churches are happy to describe all other ember churches as churches. The problem is addressed directly in the introduction to *The Nature and Mission of the Church*: “*to participate in a council of churches ... does not imply that all members regard all other members as churches in the same way in which they regard themselves.*”⁹

This suspension of judgement is of course essential as separated churches and ecclesial communities¹⁰ begin to rediscover each other and discern what authentically Christian elements they can see in each other. But, as *NMC* continues, “*Such courtesy is not merely pragmatic, but can contribute to a spiritual encounter between different communities in which as trust grows it becomes possible to face the theological issues together.*”¹¹ Allowing “*each other space to use their own language to describe themselves*” enables dialogue without sacrifice of principle.

This kind of ecumenical courtesy is obvious necessary as the churches edge towards each other. It must not however be used as a way of short cutting the hard and laborious work of reaching genuine agreement about the identity of the Church. If the identity of the Church is a matter of revealed truth apprehended by faith, it clearly matters not only what we believe about the Church, but also, and more importantly, how we actually live it. And of course how we actually live it is prior to how we articulate what we believe about it. So ecumenical courtesy should not make us theologically indifferent.

b) Dominus Iesus

This brings me naturally to what I described as the second source for this lecture, the 2000 Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, or rather to one

⁸ NMC 45

⁹ *NMC Intro. para. 8*

¹⁰ See note 19 *infra* on the Declaration *Dominus Iesus (On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church)* Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000

¹¹ *NMC Intro. para. 8*

particular phrase in that Declaration which continues to create a fair degree of excitement in a number of quarters.

I refer of course to the famous reference to certain ecclesial communities as “*not churches in the proper sense*”¹² Despite the careful qualifications with which this assertion was made, it is hardly surprising that many people took offence. That such a statement could be made and offence taken demonstrates however how important it is for those communities who count themselves “churches”, who participate in the ecumenical movement and who aspire to unity in some form, to find better ways of understanding each other and, if possible, move towards some common understanding and expressing what it means to be “the Church.”

The subtitle of the Declaration was *On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*. Principally intended as a warning against relativism or indifferentism in Christian relations with other faiths, it is a robust defence of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the role of the Church in the economy of salvation. Many Christians, not only Catholics, were grateful for the clarity of the declaration, affirming as it did the finality of God’s revelation and resisting the kind of religious pluralism or relativism which holds sway in some modern theological schools of thought.

Central to such a defence from a Catholic perspective is of course the role of the Church, which, as the mystical body of the Universal Saviour, is intimately associated with Christ’s own redemptive and mediatorial activity as human history continues.

The Declaration states that, “*The mission of the Church is “to proclaim and establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom”. On the one hand, the Church is “a sacrament — that is, sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of unity of the entire human race”. She is therefore the sign and instrument of the kingdom; she is called to announce and to establish the kingdom. On the other hand, the Church is the “people gathered by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”; she is therefore “the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery” and constitutes its seed and beginning. The kingdom of God, in fact, has an eschatological dimension: it is a reality present in time, but its full realization will arrive only with the completion or fulfilment of history.*”¹³

A similar view is expressed in NMC: “*The one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is is sign and instrument of God’s inention and plan for the whole world. Already participating in the love and life of God, the Church is a prophetic sign which points beyond itself to the purpose of all creation, the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.*”¹⁴

Dominus Iesus could not of course ignore the question of the identity of the community charged with being here and now such a “sign and instrument.”

The Second Vatican Council famously said that the one holy catholic and apostolic church “*constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These*

¹² DI 17 sensu proprio Ecclesiae non sunt

¹³ DI 18

¹⁴ NMC 43

elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity."¹⁵

The 2000 Declaration commented that, "*With the expression subsistit in, the Second Vatican Council sought to harmonize two doctrinal statements: on the one hand, that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, that "outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth", that is, in those Churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church. But with respect to these, it needs to be stated that "they derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church".*"¹⁶

I do not want to enter here into some of the questions arising within the Roman Catholic Church which led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to need to clarify his point, nor to do so again last year with the publication of *Responses (and a Commentary) to some questions regarding certain aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*. Suffice it to say that we should all be grateful for honesty in ecumenical relations – which are not best served by what Jean Tillard used to describe as "kissy-kissy ecumenism." *Dominus Iesus* pointed two doctrinal principles which must underlie all true ecumenism: that Christians ought to recognize in their concrete experience of church life the solid reality of what God has done in Christ and that they ought to recognize elements of that in others even if they cannot see them as equally faithful reflections of the wholeness of God's saving work.

Now, of course *Dominus Iesus* meant and said much more than that. In fact it was the next paragraph that led to an anguished reaction from many other churches.

"Therefore, there exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. The Churches which, while not existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular Churches. Therefore, the Church of Christ is present and operative also in these Churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy, which, according to the will of God, the Bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire Church.

*On the other hand, the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense; however, those who are baptized in these communities are, by Baptism, incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church. Baptism in fact tends per se toward the full development of life in Christ, through the integral profession of faith, the Eucharist, and full communion in the Church."*¹⁷

Despite the directness and robustness of the language, this is quite a nuanced paragraph. Nuances however could not take away the sharpness of the assertion that certain communities, calling themselves churches, "are not (because of certain objective defects) churches in the proper sense."

¹⁵ Lumen Gentium 8

¹⁶ DI 16

¹⁷ DI 17

Now once again, I do intend to deal with that in detail. As a prominent Vatican spokesman himself commented “It could have been put in a gentler way!”

On the other hand, I do want to do is affirm the importance of the question of what constitutes a church in the proper sense. When the great Dominican theologian Yves Congar was called to Rome to explain certain of his writings, he is reported to have said, “*I do not claim all my answers are right, but I assure you that the questions are real.*”

Serious ecumenists cannot avoid the question of what constitutes a church in the proper sense.

I return now to the Faith and Order text NMC for an attempt to offer a brief ecumenical summary of the meaning of the epithets “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” in relation to the Church. I should just add that the format of NMC is to have a main text representing “*common perspectives which can be claimed*” with shaded boxes exploring “*areas where differences remain both within and between churches.*” The passage I quote comes from the main text, and is therefore regarded, by the FO Commission at least, as a non-controversial statement:

“Being the creature of God’s own Word and Spirit, the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. These essential attributes flow from and illustrate the Church’s dependence upon God. The Church is one because God is the one creator and redeemer who binds the church to himself by Word and Spirit and makes it a foretaste and instrument for the redemption of all created reality. The Church is holy because God is the holy one who sent his Son Jesus Christ to overcome all unholiness and to call human beings to become merciful like his Father sanctifying the Church by his word of forgiveness in the Holy Spirit and making it his own, the body of Christ. The Church is catholic because God is the fullness of life “who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” and who, through Word and Spirit, makes his people the place and instrument of his saving and life-giving presence, the community “in which, in all ages, the Holy Spirit makes the believers participants in Christ’s life and salvation, regardless of their sex, race or social position.” It is apostolic because the Word of God, sent by the Father, creates and sustains the Church. This word of God is made known to us through the Gospel primarily and normatively borne witness to by the apostles, making the communion of the faithful a community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth expressed in faith and love throughout the ages.”¹⁸

Communion ecclesiology

The FO report on the responses to BEM suggested that *koinonia*, communion, was the an increasingly common theme in churches’ understanding both of themselves and of their relations with other churches. Rather than being seen as yet another model or image of the Church, perhaps *koinonia* is best understood as an overarching approach to the mystery to which various understandings and models may contribute and which it may in turn illuminate.

One of the great modern exponents of communion ecclesiology was of course the late Jean Tillard to whom I have already referred.

¹⁸ NMC 12

Ever since his first book¹⁹, which appeared in 1964, he had been convinced that it was communion (or, properly understood, ‘eucharistic’) ecclesiology that best accorded with the evidence of the Bible and “the intuitions of the great ecclesial traditions.” His *magnum opus* on the subject was of course ‘L’Église d’Églises – l’ecclésiologie de communion’, published in 1987 with an English translation following in 1992. Tillard also considered that “*communion represents the horizon on which the great affirmations [of the Second Vatican Council] on the Church and its mission stand out.*” .

His point about the Bible and the great churches is well made. This is not a “new” theology, but the recovery of the understanding of what it means to be a Christian as it emerges from the first formative period of the Church’s life as testified to in the New Testament and the early fathers and councils. As such it is a challenge to most modern churches (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican), some of whose institutional forms suggest and help form alternative models of Christian identity, which almost by their very institutional nature tend to ask first, “what separates us from each other?” instead of “what unites us to each other?”

Tillard rooted his view and his study in the objective diversity of accents and even of visions of the Church to be found in the New Testament. He described the common content of faith which expressed itself in diverse forms and which, he observed, gradually led to a notion of the Church which was not challenged in its essential content until the great fracture of the Reformation.

It is obvious that this approach opens new “ecumenical”²⁰ possibilities. All churches and ecclesial communities, except the most sectarian and fissiparous, have to deal in practice with the question of diversity-in-unity. Dependent on a basic mindset, this may be asked in one of two ways: either “how much diversity can unity tolerate?” or “how much diversity does unity need?” The approaches are complementary and we need to ask the question from both directions.

Communion ecclesiology attempts to honour both the universal and the particular, not allowing either any wrong priority over the other. I do not now have time to explore the questions this addresses to different forms of church polity, but it is certainly a fundamental challenge to the stress laid by some Anglicans on provincial autonomy reflecting as that does a world of nation-states with emphasis on the values of independence and self-governance - a world view which looks increasingly ridiculous in view of globalisation. On the other hand, the internal Roman Catholic debate between Cardinal Ratzinger (as he then was) and Cardinal Kasper over the relationship between the universal and the local or particular raises the same question in another way.

Without entering into that debate now, I think it is fair to say that if the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, one should expect to be able to recognise those features at every level of the Church’s existence - a particular church can no more live without fellowship with all other particular churches, that the universal Church can exist without or apart from its concrete particular manifestations. To some extent which has priority is an unnecessary

¹⁹ *L’Eucharistie Pâque de l’Église*. coll. *Unam Sanctam* no.44, January 1964

²⁰ The term “ecumenical” is used here in its modern sense of relations between separated churches seeking unity, rather than its original sense of the Church in the whole inhabited world. The shift of meaning is significant in that the earlier usage implied that in every part of the world the Church is present in such a way that each particular church represents the whole and the whole Church is present in each particular church. Communion between particular churches is thus an aspect of the catholicity of each.

question, except of course that the very constitution of the Church, so well summed up in Acts 2.42 as “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers” suggests a universal pattern without which there can be no Church. It is rather like a stick of seaside rock – wherever you cut it, you see the same pattern. As the universal, so every particular church and vice versa.

Conclusion

The answer to the question of who, where and what in relation to the identity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church has to be a matter of the apprehension of revelation rather than the consequence of negotiations. Insofar as particular churches are justified in seeing themselves as “churches in the proper sense”, this can only be because those forces pressing towards catholic unity are alive and at work within them

It is therefore to be expected that the impetus towards unity is an active principle within all authentically Christian churches. Indeed, without it, it is hard to see how any community could regard itself as being faithful to the Scriptures. It also follows that churches should be sensitive to the implications of their actions and decisions for other churches, especially in matters where agreement is essential for the unity of the Church. Such sensitivity might indeed be regarded as one of the practical consequences of the “catholic spirit.”

Is there in this any kind of an answer to the question I posed at the beginning? Perhaps: so long as we are not looking for a “tick the boxes” kind of ecclesiology. Yes, of course there are and have to be objective criteria, and these are an essential guide. Reflection on the Church does not start however with abstract reflections but with the actual experience of being members of Christian congregations. What do the beliefs, practices and habits of Christian life tell us about being the Church? How do we see the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in them? And because as Christians we are “in Christ”, and in partial fellowship with all others who are in Christ even while our churches remain divided, what questions does the experience of others put to us? That too is part of the catholic spirit, receiving from sister churches as well in giving to them. Being mutually accountable within the *Una Sancta* because what affects one affects all, and especially those fundamental features summarised in that famous verse of Acts: fellowship with the apostles, uniting us across the centuries, fidelity to their teaching and sharing in their mission, living a common Eucharistic life and standing before God with the needs of the world on our hearts.

Although these common features have always characterised the Church, in an increasingly global village we can no longer afford the luxury of pretending to a Christian life without each other. Discerning the needs of the times requires a serious engagement with what globalisation demands of church order.

This gives a particular edge to the ecumenical endeavour. To those who remember the etymological roots of the term in the Greek οἰκουμένη (ecumene), the whole inhabited world, it suggests a vision of the wholeness of the Church, and is reflected in the constitution of the World Council of Churches, which I have already quoted: “*The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in*

Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.”²¹

“Ecumenical” in this sense may approximate to being a synonym for “catholic” as expressed by St Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century, *“The Church, Catholic or universal, gets her name from the fact that she is scattered throughout the whole world from one end of the earth to the other, and because she teaches universally and without omission all the doctrines which are to be made known to mankind, whether concerned with visible or invisible things, with heavenly or earthly things. Then again because she teaches one way of worship to all men, nobles or commoners, learned or simple; finally because she universally cures and heals every sort of sin which is committed by soul and body. Moreover there is in her every kind of virtue in words and deeds and spiritual gifts of every sort”*.²²

This one, holy catholic and apostolic church is where this can be discerned. The quest for the unity of Christians is above all an exercise in discerning what reality there is of this in our own churches and in others. The *Una Sancta* already exists and will be more fully manifested as churches are renewed in the essentials of the faith and become more recognisable to each other.

²¹ WCC Constitution III

²² Cyril of Jerusalem. *Cat. Or.* XVIII.23