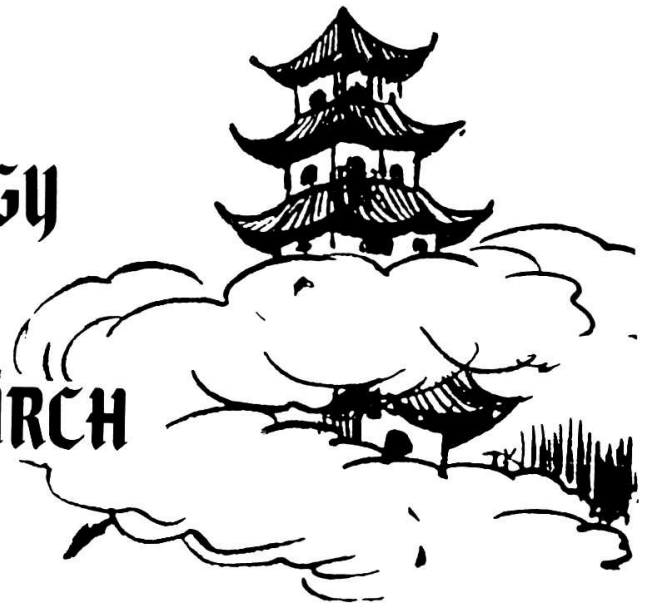


# TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF A PARTICULAR CHURCH



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## INTRODUCTION

I must begin with an apology. I know only what I read in the papers about the Church in China, and my area of interest is general ecclesiology, not the specific area of local theology.

This apology limits what I can do here today. My intention is to try to do two things:

- 1) to point out some of the distinctive developments in ecclesiology since Vatican II which might help us to understand better

- the ecclesiological situation of the Church in China;
- 2) to suggest what might be done to resolve the dilemma created by the existence of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, or at least to suggest new ways of thinking about the Catholic Church in China.

### (1) ECCLESIOLOGY: VATICAN II AND AFTER

One of the most significant developments at Vatican II was what I call the shift from an ecclesiology of the universal church to an ecclesiology of a universal communion of particular churches.

An ecclesiology of the universal church tends to see the church as one community spread throughout the world, governed by the Pope as universal pastor. Bishops are his representatives in the government and pastoral care of local sub-divisions of this universal community. Local churches have no real particular identity; differences among them are accidental. The local church is inherently incomplete; it is but a part of the universal church.

In Lumen Gentium we read:

"... within the Church particular Churches hold a rightful place. These Churches retain their own traditions without in any way lessening the primacy of the Chair of Peter. This Chair presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects legitimate differences, while at the same time it sees that such differences do not hinder unity but rather contribute to it" (L.G., 13, emphasis added).

It is important to note how the Chair of Peter functions with respect to particular Churches. Its functions are governed by the law of charity, of which I Corinthians, Chapter 13, is a good example.

And further on, we read in the same document:

"This variety of local churches with one common aspiration is particularly splendid evidence of the catholicity of the undivided Church." (L.G., 23)

Another text from Vatican Council II, in Christus Dominus, specifically defines the diocese as a particular Church:

"A diocese is that portion of God's people which is

entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the presbytery. Adhering thus to its pastor and gathered together by him in the Holy Spirit through the gospel and the Eucharist, this portion constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative." (C.D., 11)

Note, too, that the particular Church is genuinely and wholly Church -- not partially Church.

Further, in the document on the mission, Ad Gentes, the Council expresses the desire that particular churches increase in number:

"All over the world indigenous particular Churches ought to grow from the seed of the word of God, churches which would be adequately organized and would possess their own proper strength and maturity." (A.G., 6)

And when considering the particularity of Oriental Catholic Churches the Council states:

"Provision must be made therefore everywhere in the world to protect and advance all these individual churches. For this purpose, each should organize its own parishes and hierarchy, where the spiritual good of the faithful requires it." (O.E., 4)

Note, too, that the particularity of a church is a function of the spiritual good of its faithful.

"For the Catholic Church wishes the traditions of each particular church or rite to remain whole and entire, and it likewise wishes to adapt its own way of life to the needs of different times and places." (O.E., 2)

The Council issues a specific call for the particular church to express the genius of a particular people and to meet their needs.

These are but a few of the Conciliar texts which lay the groundwork for an ecclesiology of a universal communion of particular churches. This ecclesiology begins with the particular church as a concrete realization in a particular place and time of the one, holy, catholic,



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apostolic Church of Christ. In virtue of its ecclesial character, the particular church has an obligation in fidelity to the gospel of Jesus Christ to establish communion with other particular churches. Its participation in the universal communion under the pastoral care of the Chair of Peter is in fact constitutive of its own catholicity. Thus while the particular church is wholly church, it is not the whole (or entire) church, and its wholeness as church is dependent on its relationship to the whole church. This ecclesiology, then, sees the Catholic Church to be a universal communion of particular churches. It is the responsibility and office of the Pope, who occupies the Chair of Peter, to assure that this universal communion remains one in faith, and sacrament, and in fidelity to its only Lord, Jesus.

It might be useful to look for a moment at the notion of particular church. There is still considerable canonical and theological ambiguity surrounding this concept.

Vatican II in the Decree on Missionary Activity of the Church, Ad Gentes, provides certain elements which help toward a descriptive definition.

A particular church must be 1) a congregated faithful people, 2) rooted in the life of the society in which it exists, 3) adapted to the local culture, and 4) enjoying a certain stability and firmness. Just a note: the idea of being a congregated people is very important for an understanding of Church.

A particular church must also be able to provide, however

inadequately, its own ministry, religious life, and laity. In other words it should have the capacity for self-generation.

It must also possess the ministries and institutions necessary for a people of God to develop under the guidance of its own bishop.

Further, the particular church must be capable of participating in the evangelizing mission of the Church, i.e. continuing the mission of Jesus in its time and place.

Finally, the particular church must be able to theologize from its own culture and experience; to express the truth of revelation in ways appropriate to its own people.

Put in another way, this descriptive definition simply affirms that a particular church must possess the resources needed to realize in a particular, concrete time and place the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ.

In considering further what a particular church is, several dimensions of particularity need to be explored.

First, to speak of a particular church is to recognize fully the historicity of the Christian church. It exists only as a concretely realized community of believing people in a given time and place. It is the recognition that this community not only shapes history and culture but is ineluctably shaped by them. There is no church apart from the particular church. Just as Jesus does not escape history, except in resurrection (an eschatological event), neither can the church escape history, until it too experiences the eschatological event in all its fullness.

Secondly, particularity establishes a tension among particular churches, and between the particular church and the universal communion of churches. This tension can be productive of much good; but it can also be destructive and a source of evil. Particularity, as all things human, is subject to the human condition and tainted by sin. Particularity can give rise to narrowness, parochialism, insularity, selfishness, division, and suspicion. Not only can particularity give rise to these; it always does.

Thirdly, the particularity of the particular church also defines in practice the nature of the communion that exists between particular

churches. Promotion of particularity in the church is necessary to create communion. Only when a church recognizes its particularity will it surrender the illusion that its life and faith are universally normative. Awareness of its own particularity enables the particular church to recognize its limitations, its parochialism and its inadequacies. This recognition makes the particular church aware, too, of its need for communion if it is to be faithful to the gospel, so that in communion its own life may be made more complete, and its faith and life protected and corrected by the communion. Finally, particularity prevents the universal communion of particular churches from identifying its unity with uniformity. This too is very important, for the search for unity tends naturally to see uniformity as an essential element of unity.

A fourth element to be considered in talking about particularity is that it is the product of inculturation. 1) Inculturation allows the expression of God's Spirit in a particular people and at a particular moment of God's ongoing creativity to illumine new dimensions of God's Word incarnated in Jesus and continued in the Church. 2) Inculturation also enables the uniqueness of God's Word in Jesus and continued in the Church to penetrate a culture, a people, a particular moment in history, in order to make manifest in it new expressions of God's Spirit at work and thus to renew, revitalize and open this people, this culture, this moment to the promise and hope of Resurrection.

To conclude this section of my presentation, let me touch upon the role of ministerial leadership.

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One central function of ministerial leadership is to maintain the unity of the Christian community. It functions as a kind of mechanism sacramentalizing unity and effecting what it symbolizes. Ministerial leadership, in all its forms and manifestations, is a sacrament of God's action in Jesus, congregating a believing people, making this people the people of God. Ministerial leadership functions at all levels of ecclesial existence to maintain the unity of God's people - at the level of the local worshipping community, at the level of the particular church, and at the level of the universal communion of particular churches. However, at each level this ministerial leadership functions in a different way to preserve and promote unity, and the nature of the unity it seeks to develop is also different at each level or manifestation of ecclesial existence.

## (2) THE CHURCH IN CHINA

As I understand it, the situation of the Catholic Church in China could be described as follows. There is a Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association which is officially recognized by the civil government as the Catholic Church. This "official" Catholic group, in obedience to the constitution of the Peoples Republic of China, does not acknowledge any obedience to the Vatican since the Vatican is seen as a foreign ecclesiastical power. There is, however, another Catholic group in China, living more or less underground and subject to sporadic persecution. It recognizes the primacy of the Holy See and seeks to live out a faithful relationship to the universal communion of churches under the pastoral care of the Chair of Peter. In practice, there may be some overlap in the populations of these "two" churches. There also seems to be some doubt as to how genuine some refusals to recognize the primacy of the Holy See are. There are also some suggestions made that the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association may see itself as a condition for the possibility of the existence of the church as a whole; it may see itself as a kind of "front" organization in the ecclesial sphere. It is probably also true that the "official" Church sees its stance as expressive of a particular need of the Chinese people. There is no question about the fidelity and ecclesial character of the "non-patriotic" group. But what of the ecclesial nature of the "official" Church?

First of all, no one seems to doubt that the "official" Catholic Church, the Patriotic Association, continues to be a true Church of Christ, that is, living in and from the inner mystery of the Church as the continuation of the active and saving presence of Jesus present in the community of believers through the gift of the Spirit. Because it

does not acknowledge the role of the Holy See in the Church's life, this church is, at the least, defective in its catholicity. From a Roman Catholic point of view it stands very much in the same situation as the Orthodox Churches. It is important to note here that one of the contributions of the Vatican Council was to enable us to see clearly that there is a hierarchy of values in ecclesial reality and the essential characteristics which constitute the fullness of ecclesial existence. Thus participation in the life of the Church as the mystery revealed in Christ takes priority over defects in catholicity no matter how important that might be.

Secondly, the situation in which xenophobic nationalism gives rise to "official" national churches which separate themselves from communion with the Holy See is nothing new in the history of Christianity. To what degree did the Persian empire and diversity of culture affect the development of the monophysite churches and their separation from the ecumene? We are very much aware today that the split between the churches of the East and Rome was the product of growing cultural isolation and the role of Caesaro-papism.

We clearly recognize that nationalism was one of the major factors in the English Reformation and also played a role in the German Reformation. In more recent times, we have seen the same phenomenon in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Perhaps, even at this very moment, the tension between Rome and the American Church may be a product of fear of this kind of nationalism.

How should the Great Church react to this xenophobic nationalism and the kinds of "official" churches which often arise from it?

First, the Great Church should strive to create conditions which make communion easy, desirable, and helpful - communion cannot be commanded. The Chair of Peter presides in an assembly of charity. The guidelines of this charity are forcefully expressed in I Cor. 13. Further, it is the particular responsibility of the Chair of Peter to do all it can, within the limits of fidelity to the Gospel, and to them alone, to enable communion to exist. The Great Church must then be truly great - magnanimous of spirit.

Secondly, it seems to me that the Great Church should be patient with the cultural and historic conditions which may force Catholics to forswear communion - at least formally. It should re-affirm the values of the "official" Catholic Church, no matter what its defects, parti-



cularly if the values are of more significance ecclesially than the defects.

Thirdly, it does not seem wise to use a faithful and persecuted Church as a foil to dramatize or exacerbate the separation of the official Church from the universal communion. One reason for this is that there is still communion in faith, sacrament, and in the one Lord, no matter how defective that communion is in its visible and ministerial dimension. A second reason, is that such a policy may without sufficient cause put at risk the lives of brothers and sisters. To create a situation in which heroism becomes a moral obligation is to run the risk of grievous injustice.

Finally, we need to ask ourselves some questions. Does the ministerial leadership required of the Chair of Peter for the promotion of universal communion necessarily require that one Church be subject to another? Is the nature of the ministerial function and the nature of union sought such that it can only be expressed in terms of subjugation? What is the nature of the communion of the two Churches in China? How should they relate to one another? Are they not brothers and sisters, called to mutual service and reconciliation? Are not all particular churches defective in some way?

Are there not approaches that the Great Church could make to smoothe the road to full communion? Must all bishops be approved or appointed by Rome? Is celibacy such an essential characteristic of ministerial leadership that it can become a stumbling block to unity? And do we not need to take particularity more seriously - as shaped by culture, history, and politics? China is a great nation, a great culture, a great people. But it is also a nation cruelly exploited, plundered and dismembered by the West. It has been forced by foreign Christians for centuries to drink long bitter draughts of shame and humiliation. Is not the resultant xenophobia part of the particularity of the Catholic Church in China? Are there not ways to recognize that a Catholic Church that is truly Chinese today must have new ways to relate to the Great Church?

### CONCLUSION

You know the answers to these questions better than I. My only hope is that these reflections on Church and on the situation of China might stimulate us all to greater charity and to a renewed search for reconciliation.