

The Local Church in China

by Hans Waldenfels



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One of the most challenging results of Vatican II has been the rediscovery of the importance of local churches. This was mainly due to two factors: firstly to biblical and historical research, and secondly, to an increased awareness of the need to respond to the rapidly changing world, which is always affecting the Church, and of which the Church herself has become more acutely aware. The fact is that the world we share in common is formed by a multiplicity of cultures and nations, political and economical systems, religions and philosophies, language and thought patterns all of which have to be taken into consideration when we talk about "the World". Both factors have led to a rethinking of the concrete relationship between the Church and the World, and of the self-understanding of the Church as well.

Biblical Research

The results of biblical research have proven two things: (1) All those who follow the way of Christ form a community which is called the Church. However, (2) this Church consists in turn, of many local communities which, again, by themselves are called "churches". In fact, there are two basic conceptions by which the Church is understood in the New Testament. On the one hand, the Church is mentioned in a rather general and universal way, for example, "On this rock I shall build my Church" (Mt 16:18), or "He - Christ - is the head of his

body.... the body, however, is the Church" (Col 1:18; cf. Eph 1:22, etc.). On the other hand, even more frequently the New Testament refers to a specific Christian community or to several communities which are called equally "church" or "churches", for example when St. Paul and others are writing letters to "the church of Tessalonica" (1/2 Tess 1:1), or when greetings are sent "from the churches of the province of Asia" (1 Cor 16:19; Cf. 2 Cor 8:1.18; Gal 1:2.22 etc.), or again, in the Apocalypse, where we read of letters sent to the angels of the seven "churches" (1:20-2:22). All these churches are local communities, as we know today, perhaps differing somewhat in structure, but united in the same faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Undoubtedly, this situation changed in the unfolding of history. There were divisions, ways of dealing with dissensions, and the building up of common church structures. In the Occidental Church at the end, there was a growing centralism, with its concentration on the local church of Rome and its bishop, the Roman Pontiff, as the successor of St. Peter. Eventually, the Catholic Church was defined in terms of this central local church as the Roman Catholic Church; the concept of the Roman Catholic Church and the Universal Church became one and the same. The process which led to this development in Church history can be explained by a study of its theological and non-theological causes. It can also be asked what are the essential elements which define the unchangeable substance of the Church, and those elements which legitimately undergo historical change. All these points however, we shall leave undiscussed. Instead, I would like to call attention here to the basic idea of Church and churches which in Vatican II stems from biblical and historical research.

The Local Church in Vatican II

It might be described as revolutionary the way in which, for the first time in centuries, the term "Church" is now being used not only in the singular but also in the plural. Since Vatican II, the terms "Universal Church" and "Particular Churches", "World Church" and "Local Churches" are in constant use. In a way, these two modes of speaking are very close. Even though "World Church" and "Local Churches" relate more explicitly to a locality - the world or a special place in the world; nevertheless, the current explanation of their meaning starts from the concept of "particularity", which implies the relationship of a "part" to the "whole" or to the "totality", i.e. the "Particular Church" to the "Universal Church". This, however, is not to be misunderstood in the sense that the Church is realized only partly in a "particular Church" and totally only in the "Universal Church". On the contrary,

the Church in her full substance, is essentially realized in every "particular Church". Therefore, Vatican II states in Lumen Gentium no.23 that the Universal Church "exists in and by the particular Churches". Accordingly, the "Mystical Body of Christ" is nothing but the "corpus ecclesiarum". Today, in our understanding of Vatican II's ecclesiology as an ecclesiology of communion, we prefer the term "communion of Churches" (Communio Ecclesiarum). However, according to Lumen Gentium no.26, we are allowed to add: "The Church of Christ is truly present in all local communities of the faithful which in the New Testament - connected with their pastors - are called themselves 'Churches'." That is to say, one decisive point in the concept of "particularity", is the "locality" of a Church, and thus it becomes a question of defining what is meant by "local" respective of a place: a city (the Roman Church), a country (the Chinese Church), a region (the European Church), a continent (the Asian Church), or something else.

Returning once again to Lumen Gentium no.23 article, this text concerning the particular Churches adds that the "various Churches which were founded at various places by the Apostles and their successors, during the course of time, grew into a number of communities which were connected with each other in an organic manner". Without prejudice to the universal Church, these particular Churches enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical rites, and their own theological and spiritual heritage. In the same article, Vatican II points this out with especial regard to the Eastern Patriarchal Churches; it even calls these Churches "mothers of faith giving life to others as their daughters". What is applicable to past history, can be applied to the present and the future as well. Moreover, the question arises whether the restoration of a Bible-oriented concept of the Church does not call for some necessary amendments in the realization of the concrete Church structure today.

Also, without any detriment to the dogmatic understanding of Papal jurisdiction respective of the unique position of the Pope within the universal Church, the exercise of Papal power and authority in the course of history and today can and should be discussed. It should be done wherever the concrete exercise of Papal authority has led to a confusion of spiritual and political power. Actually, even a small sovereign state like Vatican City gives the Pope the appearance of a political ruler, at least outside the Church herself. Although it does seem ridiculous, apparently quite a few people still worry about this. To give only one instance at random, in April 1990 I was invited to participate in a conference held in East Berlin dealing with "East Europe and China in Transition - Past, Present and Future". According to the program, one

of the afternoon sessions was given over to a discussion of the theme "Communism and the Churches - How many divisions does the Pope still have?"

China and the Catholic Church

As a matter of fact, it seems to be rather difficult for people outside the Church, influenced as many are by ideologies which are unfavorable to religion in general and the Christian religion in particular, to make a fair judgment about the true intentions of a supra-national religious institution like the Roman Catholic Church. The difficulty some Chinese people have with regard to this issue can be easily understood by members of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany when they recall that, after Vatican I and its definition of the Pope's jurisdiction, the Prussian government under Bismarck was strongly disturbed about the influence which they imagined the Pope was able to exercise upon German Catholics. They had the impression that German citizens were going to be forced into a dual political loyalty which could lead them to the point where they would stand up in the name of the Pope against their own people and its government. Their own bishops seemed to them to be officials appointed by a foreign government and acting in its name.

In order to diffuse the fear of the Prussian government, the German bishops worked out a formal paper in which they corrected the false impression originating from Vatican I's ecclesiology. In it, they emphasized that the teaching bearing upon the Pope's universal jurisdiction and infallibility was never understood in the political sense as a sovereign ruling over all the Catholics in the world. On the contrary, the Pope exercises a purely religious authority, which is completely different from the sovereignty of a worldly ruler: "the full sovereignty of the ruler in a State is nowhere contested by Catholics". According to this Declaration of the German Bishops, which was approved by Pope Pius IX on March 15, 1875, not even in spiritual matters does the Roman Pontiff enjoy an authority which can be called "absolute".

We recall to mind this instance of modern German Church history when speaking of the present context of China for two reasons: 1) What makes the relationship between Church and State a problem for China, namely, the possible interpretation of the Church's leadership in terms of political leadership, is neither a new problem nor a problem limited to China itself. 2) The basic understanding of the "dual loyalty" allegiance to country and government, and loyalty to God and Church has relevance to Chinese Catholics as Catholic Chinese, too. As Pope John Paul

II has repeatedly pointed out, there is no contradiction between true patriotism and true love of the Church. We have to insist on this point, even if the experiences after the Chinese revolution of 1949, especially the frictions which prevail between the Patriotic Association and the Church of Rome, seem to prove the contrary.

The Local Church of China

Applying the teaching of Vatican II to the Chinese situation, we can insist on the fact that the development of a local church corresponding more explicitly to the thought patterns and the social and individual behaviour of the Chinese people is highly conceivable. Gottlieb Söhnngen, a late German Catholic professor of fundamental theology who taught at Munich university after the war, over thirty years ago dreamed of the exciting experience of developing a truly Chinese theology. When the time comes that the Chinese work out their own system of doing theology, he mused, the Europeans will "lose all sight and hearing", so stunning will it be. In any case, if the development of such a kind of authentic Chinese theology can be realistically foreseen, certain changes in Church structures, e.g. in the procedures for the selection and appointment of bishops, are even more realistically imaginable.

The gravest problem in building a Chinese Local Church, however, is the fact that the relationship of the Roman Catholic church to China does not start with a blank slate. There is the experience of a Chinese Christian history which has, for various reasons, repeatedly ended in disaster, and has become a burden for both sides, i.e. for the Chinese people and the Universal Catholic Church. The fact that in our day the Catholic Church in China is divided and that there are Catholics who are trusted as Chinese citizens and other Catholics who are not, cannot be overlooked in a situation where peace and reconciliation are desired by the great majority of all the people involved. Of course, it is not the right of foreigners to interfere in situations which have to be resolved in the places where they occur. And yet, since Christians throughout the world see themselves as sisters and brothers in one family, they cannot be insensitive towards the fellow Christians of a local church who must suffer, either because these Christians cannot live peacefully in a State which treats them unfavorably, or because they are cut off from the greater community of the followers of Jesus Christ which is the Universal Church, or because the faithful are divided among themselves and are "excommunicating" each other from the Christian community.

In such a situation, negotiations and deliberations between the various groups involved are urgently needed. As long as people are talk-

ing with each other, there is hope that they will resolve their problems and find peace again. Therefore, a process of mutual understanding is required to restore confidence and partnership. This is, I repeat, first and foremost, a matter for the Chinese themselves. Trust and friendship must be restored inside the Chinese nation, independently of the fact of whether the people are Christians or not.

The Chinese as citizens of China and Christians as members of the Church must be aware of the fact that they belong to communities surpassing national local church boundaries. Concretely speaking, all Chinese as members of the Chinese people belong at the same time to the community of man and all Christians as members of the Chinese local church belong at the same time to the Universal Church. For the local church is only truly the Church of Christ as far as she lives in communion with all other local churches forming the communio Ecclesiarum.

In our day, many nations who had isolated themselves from the greater human society, which we call "mankind", had to learn the painful lesson that a nation can barely survive without granting freedom to its citizens and allowing the free exchange of thought and communication between peoples of different nations, cultures, religions and political systems. Presently, many walls are being broken down. China cannot stand outside of the family of nations. In this context, Christians, although they are only a very small minority group inside an overwhelmingly vast population following other religions and ideologies, will claim their rights as citizens and as human beings.

On the other hand, what is requested in the field of politics must be equally granted by religious authorities. It is a fact that throughout history the Church has again and again defended human rights whenever they were threatened by political authorities. However, history also shows that often enough the Church was not equally sensitive in situations when the same rights were requested inside the Church. The question I would like to raise in this context is not so much the question of the individual rights of the faithful, but rather the question of the rights the local church can demand inside the communio Ecclesiarum. More concretely speaking, Rome and the central authorities of the Church should grant greater freedom in solving local questions on the local level wherever it can be done for the good of the people, and restrict this freedom only where it is necessary for the good of the unity of the universal Church. In fact, only when the relationship between China and the Universal Church is adequately restored, will the process of true inculturation and the building up of a truly Local Chinese Church begin.