TD 52:2 (Summer 2005) CHRISTOPH BÖTTIGHEIMER

Unity, yes, but which unity?

Different confessional self-understandings lead to different estimations of what will indispensably belong to the visible form of church unity. In Roman Catholic/Lutheran ecumenism, the question is papal primacy, and in Roman Catholic/Orthodox ecumenism, the question is whether or not visible church unity needs a universal office of ministry. In the end, for all confessions, ecumenical progress requires determining a common ecclesiology.

"Einheit ja, aber welche? Über die Problematik ökumenischer Zielvorstellungen." *Stimmen der Zeit* (2005): 24–36.

In recent years the ecumenical euphoria that followed Vatican II appears to have lost its dynamism and left many people disillusioned. One hears words such as "crisis," "low point," "stagnation," and "hardening" with respect to Roman Catholic/Lutheran as well as Roman Catholic/Orthodox ecumenism. Not all factors that have contributed to this situation are theological in nature. Perhaps the greatest hindrance to the unity of the church involves the varying ideas of what constitutes church unity.

Ecumenical models of unity

There are distinctions in ecumenical processes. Formulating or shaping a goal is not automatic. Nor is it clear how the goal can concretely be achieved. That the goal of ecumenism is church unity says nothing about its concrete form, for an ecumenical goal of the structure and order of the "Una Sancta" can happen in very different ways. Discussion of ideas about achieving church unity does not say how to put such unity into practice.

While the goal of ecumenism is "visible...unity in one faith and a eucharistic community" (World Council of Churches), the chief problem of the ecumenical crisis concerns the order and structure visible church unity should take. Chronologically, the models of "federation," "organic union," and "mutual acknowledgement" have determined the ecumenical movement. Each model has different emphases that correspond to its primary interests.

The cooperative-federative model is primarily concerned with working together on theological questions in the social and ecological realms. If church unity is to be attained, churches must live and work together (practical Christianity) and be concerned for life, work, faith, and order.

The organic model aspires to close community in all areas of church life, where churches lose their confessional uniqueness and identities. This model seeks both internal and external unity in a transconfessional church that has a new identity and a unified structure and leadership. The plenary meeting of the WCC in New Delhi (1961) spoke of a "totally committed community."

Parallel to the organic model is the initiative for reconciled diversity proposed by churches who share the same confession. This model does not seek complete doctri-

nal agreement but "unity in diversity," "unity through diversity." Doctrinal condemnations should be avoided, and doctrinal distinctions should lose their "divisive character" on the basis of a consensus to become "reconciled with one another." Confessional distinctiveness should be considered a legitimate interpretation of basic Christian truth so that there is unity in diversity. The advantage of this ecumenical model is its concern for confessional identity, which leads to ecumenical consensus. The growing number of consensus statements strengthens the significance of confessional differences.

The cooperative-federative model is a preliminary form of church unity, while the model of reconciled diversity is presently considered the short-term ecumenical goal. The model of organic/conciliar unity is, generally speaking, a distant goal.

Problems

The ascendant model of church unity today is unity in diversity, or reconciled differences:

> [Ecumenism] is concerned with unity in diversity and diversity in unity or, as one often says today, reconciled diversity.... Ecumenical engagement proceeds from the hope that with the help of God's Spirit such a reconciled diversity can also be achieved in controversial questions such as church office and, especially, the Petrine office. (W. Kasper)

The major problem in achieving the goal of unity in diversity is reaching agreement on which constitutive elements comprise visible church unity. How much unity is necessary in order to avoid the danger of coexistence and thus a futile invisible unity? Conversely, how much diversity is necessary in order to guarantee the uniqueness of the churches? The discussion here is wide open. The model of reconciled diversity lacks a common definition of the theological content and concrete form of visible church unity. The desideratum of a basic ecclesial consensus can be seen, for example, when the question of allowing eucharistic guest status in Roman Catholic/Lutheran ecumenism touches on church office or in discussion of the place of the papacy with respect to the Uniate question in Roman Catholic/Orthodox ecumenism.

Agreement on the constitutive elements of visible church unity is difficult because, unlike every other theological question, the forms of confessional tradition are so very different from one another that confessional self-understandings immediately come to the fore. Every ecclesial concept of church unity has a definite, confessionally specific imprint. Thus the search for an ecumenical model of unity is indissolubly joined to the struggle to find a common concept of ecclesiology. I will compare the Catholic concept of the church with the Lutheran and the Greek Orthodox concepts and point out implications of the differences.

Lutheran ecclesial understanding

On the basis of Rom 3:4, Martin Luther formulated a passive justification; God's truth is, in itself, victorious:

> God proves himself as truthful, but *every human being* is a *liar.* As scripture says, "So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging." (cf. Ps 51:4)

In the context of the doctrine of justification, the Reformers defined the church primarily as God's people gathered in the Holy Spirit and empowered in God's

words and works. Thus, the church is justified and receives God's promise of salvation and life. "Praise God, every seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely the communion of saints and the 'sheep who know their shepherd's voice' (Jn 10:3)" (Smalcald Art. III, XII).

The church is indebted to God's word, which is offered in the proclamation of the word and the sacraments and assures participation in divine life. According to Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession, the *magna charta* of Lutheran ecclesiology, church unity is primarily "proclamation and sacramental community," which is lived out especially in the community of the Lord's Supper. On the basis of communion with the triune God, believers become "members of Christ's body, and as such, form its community...in which Jesus Christ is present in word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit" (Lutheran Church in Germany).

The fundamental determinative essence of the church as the extension of the divine work of salvation in Jesus Christ, as "spirit-mediated existence in Christ" (G. Wenz), is not distinctively different from Catholic or Orthodox ecclesiology. For Luther, however, the church is intended not to be seen but believed, and since faith is directed at what cannot be seen, the true church, according to its spiritual essence, is hidden. As *congregatio sanctorum*, the church is the assembly of believers hidden from earthly sight. The Wittenberg Reformation emphasized the controversial theological idea of the invisible church, without denying that the church also needs an external manifestation. The institutional dimension, however, is clearly subordinate to the spiritual dimension. Consequently, the church's unity is understood primarily as a hidden, spiritual reality.

Despite this hiddenness, however, believers know that through God's actions they are commissioned and empowered to give shape to the community of believers in accord with that community's origin and character. "This hiddenness does not therefore simply mean invisibility" (G. Wenz). In the gathering of the community—the Lutheran understanding of church is marked predominantly by community—the proclamation of the gospel in word and sacrament is perceptible to everyone. The church's essence is not manifested in some purely invisible dimension. According to the Reformation understanding, there is an invisible but also a visible church.

The Lutheran understanding of church distinguishes between the inner basis of the church, the justifying action of Jesus Christ, and the external form and order of the church as the work of human beings. The external form and spiritual hiddenness of the faith community are interconnected: God's self-realization in the invisible faith community requires an external order, while at the same time the last word has apparently not been spoken in the gospel concerning the precise relationship between the two forms of the church. Church form and order, however, are the responsibility of human beings, and therefore a clear distinction needs to be made between the work of human beings and the work of God. The church is composed of justified Christians—righteous and sinners at the same time.

At the center of human responsibility and thus at the center of the shape of the church stand the correct preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accord with the gospel. Proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments are the decisive marks of the true church (CA 7). They must be present in the church of Jesus Christ; if they

are constitutive of the true church, there is no proper church order without them. With these marks of the true church, it is the church's task and the task of all its members to proclaim in word and deed the message of God's free grace. For the sake of public and communal proclamation, however, the church calls individuals to the "office of the ministry" (CA 5).

Correct proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accord with the gospel, which are sufficient for church unity, also include an office, "provided that [that office] allows the freedom of the gospel as understood in the sense of the Protestant doctrine of justification" (W. Kasper). The form of this preaching office, which belongs to the church's essence and is proper to the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments can, like all elements of church order, be altered according to the changing historical situations in which public proclamation is exercised.

Because the Lutheran understanding of the church concentrates on word and sacrament gathered around communal worship, the pastoral office is central and takes precedence over the office of regional bishop. While the preaching office exists according to divine right, the office of regional bishop belongs to the human order. Thus, the apostolic succession of the office of bishop as it took shape in the Catholic Church (among others) is desirable and beneficial *(bene esse)* for the unity of the church, but is not constitutive *(plene esse)* of the church. For this reason the historical development of the structures of church office cannot serve as a criterion for the true church of Jesus Christ; nor does the criterion of apostolic succession have binding character.

Ecumenical implications

When, in the light of ecumenical considerations, the fathers of Vatican II revisited the idea of the sacraments (LG 1), they noted the need for a careful distinction between the visible and the invisible church, between the actual church and the body of Christ—analogous to the distinction between Christ's two natures. This perception comes close to the Lutheran understanding of the church.

Nevertheless, there is no agreed-upon relationship between the hidden and the visible church, especially because the Lutheran understanding of the sacraments has led to some distrust. One controversy is the salvation-mediating function of the visible, institutional church and the question of the extent to which the church's structure and order, including the Roman primacy, derive from divine right:

> Concerning the precise relationship between the visible, institutional church and the hidden church, there are clear differences in the traditions of our churches only in the spiritual essence of the church, which is accessible only by faith.... In the future it may be possible...to reestablish the church community that was broken. [Such community] depends, however, on a solution to this controversial question. (*Church Community in Word and Sacrament*, 1984)

Different confessional self-understandings lead to different assessments of what is indispensable for the visible form of church unity in the future. From the Lutheran side, this means that the external, structural form of the church is less significant and is more in line with the model of church unity as already realized within Protestantism in the Leuenberger Church Fellowship. This Fellowship of 103 Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, as well as pre-Reformation churches (Hus-

sites, Waldensians), has reached a basic consensus in the understanding of the gospel and the sacraments. The churches have retracted mutual condemnations of doctrine and have declared chancel and Lord's Supper fellowship.

These churches have become a complete community in which their confessions are safeguarded but are no longer divisive. The churches remain tied to their confessions and, with respect to the mutual condemnations of doctrine, firmly maintain that on account of the concordat on the mutual understanding of the gospel these condemnations no longer have currency and are thus no longer divisive. On the basis of a common understanding of the gospel and its correct dissemination, there is fellowship in proclamation, baptism, and the Lord's Supper community. Fellowship is realized in the church's life as community in word and sacrament.

Ecclesial organizational forms have subordinate significance. Ordination is mutually acknowledged, and thus there is legitimate diversity concerning the form and structure of church office. Doctrinal differences in and between the churches (including differences on office and ordination) remain unsolved. Church community is understood as a visible mark of an already existing unity in Jesus Christ. This unity should continue to deepen and grow in intensity.

The Lutheran goal of unity, especially among Continental Protestants, is limited to basic consensus on the interpretation of the gospel, without drawing institutional consequences from theological consensus. Consequently, the shape of institutional organization remains open, and each confession can more or less retain its structure—episcopal, presbyteral, synodal, or combinations thereof. According to the Protestant understanding, the Catholic particular church or Petrine model is unnecessary; for many, in fact, it is even undesirable or downright unacceptable. Although this unity model is concerned primarily with the Reformation churches, it might be important for global ecumenism as a contribution to the "ecumenical communion of all Christian churches."

For chancel and Lord's Supper communion among the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, "unity without structures" is quite sufficient, whereas in Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican ecclesiologies, "total unity in the faith" does not differentiate between eucharistic and full church communion. This leaves some important questions. For example, from the Catholic side, the office of bishop as a visible expression of church catholicity, and the apostolic succession of office as a more visible expression of ecclesial apostolicity belong to the church's constitutive essence. And from both the Catholic and the Orthodox perspectives, it is important to realize that the Reformation churches struggle for unity in diversity with respect to church structure and office. Concretely, this means it will be important to find an episcopally imprinted, unified church leadership and structure.

For the Catholic Church, a decisive question is whether the Protestant model of church community will allow for communion at the ecclesial-structural and leadership levels, as well as at the levels of chancel and Lord's Supper fellowship.

Within Protestantism the significance of church structures and offices, especially the significance of the superordinate office of bishop, has not been theologically eliminated. For example, in the Porvoo Declaration (1993), the Anglican churches of the British Isles, the Lutheran churches of Scandinavia (without Denmark), and the Baltics (without Latvia) agreed on the office of bishop

and the theological importance of historical succession. Ecumenists such as Ulrich Kühn, Gunther Wenz, and Wolfhart Pannenberg do not question that an overarching office of church leadership belongs to the church's essence. With such leadership, the unity of the ordained office would stand in the foreground, and various structural possibilities would be thinkable beyond the traditional form of the bishop's office.

Orthodox ecclesial understanding

The designation "Orthodoxy" or "Orthodox Church" provides a perspective on the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Eastern Church. The word orthodox, derived from *doxazein* ("to glorify") or from *dokein* ("to think, to have a perspective"), can mean the "church that correctly praises God," or the "church of the right faith," or "right doctrine." Both interpretations form a unity of orthodoxy and orthopraxy that pertains to the self-understanding of the Orthodox churches, which place a special emphasis on doxology, the correct glorification of God.

As the church of right faith and right praise of God, Orthodoxy is essentially the Constantinopolitan church, marked by the four *notae ecclesiae*: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. According to its self-declaration, it represents neither one Christian confession alongside others nor a confession within divided Christendom, but the church of Jesus Christ that is fundamentally indivisible—analogous to the body of Christ. In the Orthodox church, the church of Jesus Christ as it was established in the first Christian centuries is visibly manifest.

What complicates the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Orthodox Church is that for a long time its ecclesiology was not dogmatically fixed, and thus its relationship to other Christian churches had not been definitively articulated. This was due to the patristic conviction of the indefinability of the church's essence. The church is a living organism and is grounded in the mystery of divine salvation. The power of the Holy Spirit unites the church in Christ, the head, with the faithful, who are members of Christ's body—especially in the eucharist, where the fullness of the church is disclosed and Christ is present with the entire church. Thus, the gifted community is charismatic and invisible but also visible and institutional. Ultimately, however, the mystery of the church cannot be defined but only considered ever anew.

The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church appears in every church patriarchy and other autocephalous (autonomous and equal) churches, which together comprise Orthodoxy united in the one faith, sacraments, and canonical community *(koinonia/communio)*. Because Orthodoxy's liturgical-sacramental origin is the eucharist, in the last century a "eucharistic ecclesiology" was formulated, which is widely shared today by Orthodox theologians.

Ecumenical implications

The Orthodox Church's self-understanding comes very close to that of the Catholic Church, which also sees itself as preserving the true church of Jesus Christ in a special measure. Indeed, all Christian churches claim to be the church of Jesus Christ, but with various claims to exclusivity. From the perspectives of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, the church of the East and the churches of the West stand over against each other, and their claims to exclusivity allow only one ecumenical path—return. Every church that has broken with original church doctrine and order must return to the church of Jesus Christ, *mutatis mutandis*, to the orthodox, Catholic Church.

Since Vatican II, the "return to Rome" is

no longer a goal of the Catholic Church. And the Orthodox Church does not reject other confessional churches simply on the basis of ecclesiology, but encounters them differently. The "goal of ecumenism from the Orthodox perspective is not a 'Byzantinization' of Christianity, but the mutual acknowledgement of the churches as authentic forms of expression of the one apostolic heritage." From the Orthodox perspective, the way of ecumenism is not insistence on return, but on a dynamic restoration of apostolic origins. Orthodoxy is concerned with the ecumenical integration of the already existing "ecumenicity of the church, which finds its full expression in the life of the Orthodox local churches."

A key difference between Orthodox and Catholic ecclesiology is the way in which the visible unity of the churches is organized. For the Orthodox Church, the patriarchate structure—the principle of synodal autocephalism, synodality—dominates. Orthodoxy does not see itself as a united, institutional whole, whereas the Catholic Church's self-understanding proceeds from the principle of primatiality.

In other words, the Eastern church understands itself as the *koinonia* of many patriarchates and other autocephalic churches which are not considered to be particular churches (as they are in universal Catholic ecclesiology) but churches of Jesus Christ which manage their own canonical territory with their own autonomous heads. According to ancient church law, jurisdiction is limited to a church's own territory. An autocephalous Orthodox church has no canonical relationship to other Orthodox churches, but is its own head. No patriarch has the right to interfere arbitrarily in the internal problems of neighboring churches or to engage in missionary activity in a territory that is under the pastoral responsibility of another church. The churches of the East follow the principle of autonomy and equality; they are autonomous in their relationships among churches and understand themselves as autocephalous communities—as autonomous but at the same time as sister churches: "the Orthodox Church exists as unity in diversity and as diversity in unity" (A. Kallis).

For the Catholic Church, the theology of sister churches has no currency; churches exist as "particular" churches that are not absolutely autonomous (LG 23). Their autonomy is conditioned by being joined together in the *koinonia* of the universal church. Thus the aggregate church is not merely an idea, but a reality, referred to in the creed and in the liturgy. The Bishop of Rome is the church's head. The unity of the particular churches is a result and consequence of community with the successors of Peter, so that there is a concurrence of the universal and local churches in the sense of a reciprocal immanence (LG 23), which universally imprints Western ecclesiology and which is primatially determined.

Consequently, the Western theology of the universal church and the Eastern theology of sister churches are incompatible; the Orthodox churches understand unity, above all, as unity with the bishop, while in the Catholic Church, in addition to the office of bishops as the "visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches," there is a further principle of unity—primatiality: "The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (LG 23). The question of primacy continues to separate East and West.

The Orthodox, in accord with ancient church practice, could perhaps grant the Bishop of Rome an honorary primacy among the patriarchs of Christianity, with

certain privileges—for example, a synodally binding primacy—but not the jurisdictional primacy defined by Vatican I. The difference between sacramental and canonical life is difficult to harmonize. Sacramentally, there is no difference between pope and bishops, and this makes a sister church or eucharistic ecclesiology important.

The goal of ecumenism

For continued ecumenical progress, the concept of unity in diversity needs considerable clarification. Divergent ideas about the visible structure and order of future church unity are important causes of the standstill in ecumenical progress. Controversy over which elements and shape of church unity are constitutive leads to differences of opinion on the conditions of church unity and to different valuations of ecumenical efforts.

The confessional ideas of the church, which have been historically stamped, will probably not be brought into total accord in the sense that reconciled diversity will be able to preserve confessional identities, but the unity of the churches must include an understanding of the visible church. Ecumenical unity cannot disclaim the church's collective, visible shape and order any more than it can detach the believed church from the empirical church.

More ecclesiological groundwork is needed in order to achieve a differentiated consensus on the understanding of the church, which can then support an agreement concerning the future shape of church unity and from which an ecumenical goal can be formulated. Only if the constitutive elements of the essence of church unity are agreed on will it be possible to say "how much unity in the visible order of the church is necessary to be able to witness to the unity that corresponds to the body of Christ." A fundamental ecclesiology is the condition for the possibility of being able to achieve a common ecumenical goal.

In Roman Catholic/Lutheran ecumenism, the fundamental question is whether or not visible church unity needs a community overseer that stands in the historical succession of office, and in Roman Catholic/Orthodox ecumenism, the question is whether or not visible church unity needs an "office of unity" in the sense of a universal office of ministry. Here the Catholic Church has to sound its ecumenical voice and ask to what extent Vatican I's papal dogma of pastoral primacy, which protects the autonomy of the particular churches and demands their unity, is to be continued. The Catholic Church still needs to answer questions about how binding the jurisdictional primacy is in a communio ecclesiology and about the relationship of the universal and particular churches.

The desire for a fundamental ecclesiology highlights the difficulties of the ecumenical moment. All church confessions need to work at this, all the more so because only from the clarification of the controversial questions can we hope to achieve a beneficial outcome in the light of the divergent. *(BAA)*