

The Mystery of the Church: Reflections on the Existence of a Council of Churches¹

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THE PURPOSE of this paper is to discuss the implications of the existence of a council of churches for our understanding of the unity of the Church, and to ask how such a body must bear itself towards its own problematic existence. These issues are raised with immediate reference to the life and work of the Canadian Council of Churches. The same problems, however, inevitably present themselves in connection with any similar council, including the World Council of Churches itself.

1. *Councils of this sort are a manifestation of disunity, not an achievement of unity.* Some qualification of this assertion is certainly necessary, for councils are in some ways organs of unity. But just because they are such, they may subtly disguise the disunity from which they derive and which they embody. The name "Canadian Council of Churches" tends to produce a false image in the public mind. For the uninitiated assume that the Council is a parliament of churches, controlling the lives of the churches, and expectations of great achievements on its part tend to be engendered. No doubt it was false expectations of this sort that led to reports in the press at the time of its 1960 biennial meeting that the Council was a disappointing organization. The fact is that the name is grandiose but misleading. A real council of churches, unwieldy though it might be, could only be one in which the governing bodies of the several communions foregathered to make decisions binding on all. What we in fact have is an *ad hoc* committee of denominational representatives running some good sideshows over which a powerless president presides. I do not mean to undervalue what is being done. The point is that this Council is a public advertisement of the fact that in the regions where real spiritual power is exercised the churches are rootedly disunited. The brotherliness of its meetings is a dangerous and false brotherliness if it obscures this fact. It hardly needs to be said that the deeper streams of church life do not run through the Council. Later I shall argue that in one region they can and ought to.

It must first, however, be said that the difference between the Council

1. This article is based on the Presidential Address delivered to the Canadian Council of Churches at its Biennial Meeting in November 1962.

and the churches is that the latter are groups of Christians organized in unity around the means of grace under the ministerial authorities that have the stewardship of these mysteries. It does not matter if within a denomination there are separate associations that take up special commitments in the name of the whole group—for example, schools for the young, young people's work, or men's associations. These are valuable but peripheral activities which are over-arched by the communion of the saints in the means of grace, by which they are together united with Christ. The Council, on the other hand, is an organization in which the denominations are united only in peripheral activities, and are disunited in the matters that belong to the heart and centre, viz. the means of grace and the Ministry. The Council as such has no authoritative possession of the Word or the Sacraments or the Ministry. Lacking these, the Council can never manifest the true unity of the Church. The sinfulness and contradictoriness of our divisions reside in the fact that we separate from one another in order to take part in those mysteries that are the real sources and agencies of unity, and unite only in non-essential activities. Occasional intercommunion is no solution, because it touches only individuals and because these mysteries were instituted by God to be the basic form of our organization together as Christians. If we had this kind of unity, there would be no harm in having lesser associations for peripheral purposes. Until we have it, we do not have the true Church in Canada—except eschatologically.

We all love the adage: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." But the first member of this triad, unity in essentials, is still very far off. The Canadian Council of Churches reveals that this is so.

2. *The Council demands visible unity.* In indirectly giving testimony that real unity is unity in the means of grace, the existence of the Council more directly testifies that there is no real unity where there is not visible unity. Its own activities, even though peripheral, are at least visible, and only as visible do they have their relative uniting value. The belief that unity is essentially spiritual and invisible, and that the churches may therefore without sin remain visibly sundered is thereby belied. At its best, this belief rests on the notion that because the Holy Spirit is invisible and non-bodily all Christian realities are invisible and non-bodily. Yet if the Holy Spirit is non-bodily, the Son of God to whom he joins us is not non-bodily. We can have no union with the Triune God save through the incarnate and glorified body of Christ. To seek a purely spiritual (that is, non-bodily) communion with God and with one another is the ancient heresy of docetism, which is denounced in Scripture in the strongest possible terms as anti-Christ, because it denies that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh (1 John 4:3). We must allow no doctrine of the Holy Spirit which denies that the Spirit is sent to us from the Father *through the Son*. We know no Spirit save the Spirit of Christ, crucified and ascended *in his*

humanity, and we have no access to this Son save through the visible preaching and the visible Sacraments. If anyone retorts that we can have access to him simply through the Scriptures, he must be answered that the New Testament is the visible preaching of the Apostles.

It is odd that those who maintain that unity is "a purely spiritual matter" never apply this doctrine within their own denominations. They demand of all their members that they belong to a visible congregation. Yet unity in the Church at large cannot be something different from unity within a denomination. It cannot be visible within denominations and invisible beyond them. Upholders of "spiritual unity" ought either to dispense their members from the duty of church-membership or to acknowledge that unity for all Christians means unity in the visible Church Catholic.

The Canadian Council of Churches is an enigma and an anomaly because it testifies that we cannot have even the measure of unity that it does provide for us except by means of its *visible* organization, and yet it has not attained to unity in those Christ-given appointments by which we are meant to be visibly his. The Council leads a borrowed life. Authority regarding the means of grace resides in the churches, not in the Council. But at the same time, the measure of unity that the Council gives us, which is real only because it is visible, challenges us to accept the truth that the churches will not be really one until they are visibly one. The mark of real unity will not be tight-fisted organization but a common and unrestricted sharing of the means of grace, which are both the sources and the seals of unity.

This demonstration by the Council that unity means visible unity shows, as we have long known, that the Council itself is not the Church. This is its weakness. But it also has a strength over against the weakness of the churches, for its existence is a testimony that the churches are not the Church either, in the full meaning of the word. The Council manifests the catholicity of the Church in a manner in which they cannot manifest it. As I have said, it shows that in Canada we do not have the Church of Christ in its true form. If anyone is disposed to retort: "But my Church is the true Church and it does not need any other Church to make it such. We could withdraw from the Council tomorrow and still be the true Church," the answer must be: "No, you cannot be complete in Christ without the completeness of his whole body. One is your Lord, and all ye are brethren." This standpoint does not make all churches equally good or equally true, but it does mean that no body of Christians is whole unless the whole catholic Church is whole. If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. The churches that have entered into mutual obligations and fellowship in the Council have thereby confessed that they are incomplete without one another. To withdraw or to stay outside in self-sufficiency is prideful rejection of the Christ who dwells in the brethren. Because the Council is our only organ of visible unity, it puts us all in the wrong for our fundamental lack of visible unity.

3. *The unity of the Church belongs to the mystery of the Church.* In his very stimulating book, *The Coming Reformation*, which is composed of lectures delivered in Emmanuel College, Toronto, Geddes MacGregor accuses modern Protestants of having lost "the reality of the Church." If his charge is true, as I think it is, there is something sad and farcical in an attempt to unite the Church on the part of those who have lost its reality. We need to fit ourselves better for this task, and—thank God—there are signs that we Protestants are beginning to do so.

What we have been saying about the Council points to the *mystery* of the Church—"that wonderful and sacred mystery," to quote a beautiful theologumenon of the Book of Common Prayer. The Council is not the Church, and yet at one point it reveals the catholicity of the Church better than the severed denominations do. This is because the Church is a mystery of revelation that sometimes makes itself unexpectedly known. Perhaps those whose insistence is upon invisibility and "spirituality" could interpret their concern more biblically if they used instead the biblical word *mystery*, for in Scripture the mystery of God is always revealed in the fleshly signs of history. Jesus said to Nicodemus that a man must be born "from above" if he is to "see" the kingdom, for the Spirit is like the wind that blows where it listeth. But the Spirit is not prompted by haphazard, unrelated, or purposeless motives. Too often John 3 is read apart from John 1. No one can be born from above except through the Christ who was born of the flesh. The spiritual rebirth—or rather, birth "from above"—can take place only through the fleshly embodiment of the Word. Nicodemus could not be born of the Spirit except through the Christ who stood visibly in the flesh before him. To "see" the kingdom is to see the mystery of God in the humanity of his Son, for this is the mystery of salvation: God manifest in the flesh.

This, too, is the mystery of the Church, the visible body that is at the same time Christ's Body. The mystery of the Church does not reside in its invisibility, but in the *conjunction* in it of the invisible and the visible. Our word *sacrament* stands for the New Testament word *mystery*. The mystery of the Church is its sacramental character, its unity of invisible and visible. St. Paul uses the term in Ephesians 5, when he speaks of Christian marriage. It is impoverishing to take his words only in an ethical sense, as if he were saying only—important though this is—that a man must love his wife in the sacrificial way in which Christ loves his Church. Paul is saying that in the Church the personal union of a man and woman through bodily union represents the bodily union between Christ and his members. He is uttering a dogmatic truth that is the basis of the ethical requirement. Marriage becomes "sacramentalized," so to speak, within the Church. The mystery of the Church turns marriage into a Christian mystery. In a similar way, when Christians come together *visibly* in this Council, the lost mystery of the one Body begins to be revealed. I am sure that everyone with experience of "ecumenical" meetings will agree that

in such gatherings he encounters the Church Catholic in a way (problematic though it be) in which he never encounters it within his own denomination. The longer a man is engaged and challenged in the ecumenical encounter the more inescapably covenanted he becomes to the Church Catholic that he finds there. The only reason for this is that the divine mystery of the Church has been and continues to be more fully revealed to him.

4. *The mystery of the Church is a theological mystery.* Two points are worth dwelling on for a little in this connection. The first is that, since the Church is a divine mystery, the intellectual way of grasping this mystery is the theological way. It can also be grasped sacramentally, or in kerygmatic encounter, or in ethical action, or in artistic symbolism, or in a Christian biography. But it must be grasped theologically also, because a man with no mind is no man. The mysteries of faith must transform and thereby inform the mind of the believer. Undogmatic Christianity is always mentally distorted Christianity. We have not yet fully overcome the false liberal and pietistic craving for undogmatic religion, which still leads some to attempt to unite the churches on the basis of blurred theology. Theology is difficult, but the flight from theology is corrupting and fatal. This flight is one of the reasons for loss of "the reality of the Church." Since Christianity is a mystery of revelation, it must communicate itself in its own language, the language of Canaan, as Barth says. The mystery cannot be expressed simply in the language of the newspaper. In using this latter language, the preacher has to re-mint it. Otherwise nothing Christian would be communicated. The theological enterprise is not simply the effort to be rationally precise and consistent in what one says, although, of course, it is this, in the second place. But in the first place it is the acquirement of a new tongue and the singing of a new song, the language of the mystery of revelation. At its heart, concern for theology is concern for the distinctiveness and uniqueness of God's mystery in his Son. It is impossible to "talk Church" or to preach Christ without theology. The mystery of the Church is a theological mystery.

Let us not be disheartened by the philistine slogan that doctrine divides. One might as well say—for it is also true in its way—that the Gospel divides. Or we might as well give up our minds, cease to have the image of God, and lose the Gospel. *Polemical* theology, which is theology without the gift of charity, divides because it hopes to divide, being theology in the service of Satan. Ecumenical theology, if by this term one means not logistic compromises but seeking and speaking the truth in love, unites, because it assumes that other Christians have a gift that we need to learn from them and also perhaps error from which we may gently correct them. It is theology conducted with the love that has "a sense of what is vital," to use Moffatt's translation of Philippians 1:9: "And it is my prayer that your love may be more and more rich in knowledge and all manner of insight, enabling you to have a sense of what is vital. . . ."

A major event in the spiritual renewal of the Church in our time has been the advance from polemical theology to ecumenical theology. Doctrine is often now uniting instead of dividing. The most startling evidence of this change is a book by a Roman theologian, Hans Küng, in which he maintains, on the highly controversial issue of *justification*, that there is no opposition between Karl Barth and the Council of Trent. What is even more remarkable is a letter from Barth printed at the beginning of the book in which he says that Küng has represented his teaching with complete understanding and faithfulness, and that, if Roman teaching is as Küng describes it to be, there is really no difference between the two.² Other evidences are that Presbyterians now say that Calvin's doctrine of predestination and election, one of their distinctive hallmarks hitherto, was unsoundly formulated; that Protestants are beginning to see that they must stop misrepresenting the Roman doctrine of *opus operatum* in the sacraments as magical and mechanical because in fact it is a formula for safeguarding what Protestants also are anxious to safeguard, viz., the sovereign priority and efficacy of personal divine grace; and we all know that the eager prosecution of biblical and historical researches, free from domination by Protestant-Roman or intra-Protestant polemics, is putting a new face on a whole host of issues. For those who would like to maintain old-time, polemical, doctrinaire positions, these are hard times in which to live. In matters of doctrine there is now no excuse for being weary in well-doing. It is not only in the general culture of the secular world that changes are happening all around us. There is a new, refreshing, biblical wind of the Spirit blowing through all the churches, wherever they allow themselves to be touched by this ecumenical theological endeavour, and it is producing a very exciting spiritual rebirth. The entry of Eastern Orthodoxy into the World Council of Churches in large numbers and Rome's open engagement in theological dialogue are already introducing new orientations and perspectives upon old issues, and with them will come new vistas of hope as we together explore the divine mystery of the Church.

A second point is that the Church is an end in itself. I mean directly to challenge the assertion, too often heard nowadays, that the Church is not an end in itself. A superficial truth in the assertion may be acknowledged. If, for example, we plead for church extension by asking: "What will happen to the Church in Canada if we do not engage in extension?" the retort must be made that such motivation is false. The Church cannot be an end in itself in a self-protective way. But it cannot follow that the Church is only a means to an end that exists in the secular world. If one says that the end is the kingdom of God and that this kingdom is greater than the Church, it still remains true that this kingdom is not known outside the Church.

Sometimes enthusiasm for the mission of the Church makes Christians

2. Cf. D. J. Callahan, H. A. Oberman, and D. J. O'Hanlon, s.j. (eds.), *Christianity Divided* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), pp. 307f.

disturbed and dissatisfied with introverted "church-life," and because the Church is dead if it is not outgoing they try to awaken missionary zeal by saying that the Church is not an end in itself. But to make the world an end in itself is to run out in humanism and secularism. Once more the kingdom-idea has to be brought into view, but it is impossible to do so without drawing in the Church to which and in which the kingdom has been revealed.

The problem may be raised from the other end. If the Church exists not for itself but for mission, for what does mission exist? As soon as we start answering in terms of the kingdom we find ourselves embroiled with the Church, not simply as the *instrument* of the kingdom but as the place of the *revelation of the kingdom* and therefore as belonging to the *goal or end of mission*. The mystery of the Church cannot be rationalized into the concept *mission*, important and deep though this concept be, any more than St. Paul's view of marriage can be rationalized into ethics alone. The mystery of the Church is precisely the mystery of the kingdom made manifest in this age. The kingdom is an eschatological mystery, but so is the Church. The Church is this eschatological mystery revealed in time, so that, while the Church goes out on mission, it embodies in itself the goal of mission. Mission is meaningless without the Church, not only as instrument but also as *sign* of the kingdom. In this basic sense, the Church is an end in itself. It is only in this kind of way that we can encompass the great Pauline teaching in Ephesians 1 and Colossians 1 that the Church is the Head of the creation—of the whole creation—as the Body of him in whom all things consist. The church must not only look outwards towards the world but must teach the world to look upwards in and through itself to God. Mission is fruitless unless it communicates this theological mystery. We know very well that the world does not want to be confronted with a theological mystery. The tragedy is that many Christians do not want it either. They want something with a lower ceiling, more encompassable. But what God has actually given us is the mystery of the kingdom, revealed to and in the Church, which is the mystery of the glory of God.

5. *Church Order is a Sacrament of the mystery of the Church.* The question of the order of the Church must be seen in this vast perspective. The mystery of the Church, which is the root of "the reality of the Church," will be lost if we fail to see how it enshrines itself or declares itself in the order of the Church. We must resist tired ecumenists who are weary with the difficulties of faith and order problems, or who more than suspect that interest in the doctrine of the ministry is a symptom of ecclesiastical degeneracy, and who think that the new thrilling topics of global mission and the ministry of the laity will rescue us from the faith and order deadlock of ministry and apostolical succession. Before these urgent needs and tasks, the problem of church order will, they feel, pale into insignificance and solve itself as the Church becomes one in its gigantic mission.

But let us not exchange an ivory tower for a will-o'-the-wisp. We shall harm the pressing tasks of world mission and lay participation if we expect them to solve questions that they cannot solve. Down that road lies further loss of the reality of the Church through loss of its mystery. As I have said, when we lose this mystery, the mission becomes meaningless. It is worth remarking that those who are unclear about the order of the Church are unclear also about its mission, or have a delusory notion that the Church's mission is a simple thing to understand. This, I think, is one of our biggest hidden problems, that people think they know what the Church's mission is when they do not know what the Church is. *Let us try and face the stark fact that we do not have an agreed understanding of the Church's mission.* There are as many conceptions of evangelism, that is, of what kind of Christians we want people to be and of the methods by which we are to make them such, as there are of church life and church order. The fact that there are as many evangelistic approaches as there are churches and sects only needs to have attention called to it to be obvious. Of course there are likenesses, but of course there are differences. We are unclear about mission because we are unclear about order.

The moral is that if we want to understand mission, we must first understand the mystery of the Church, and *not* vice versa. The mystery gives birth to the mission, not the mission to the mystery. And the mystery gives birth not only to the mission but to something else which can now be only named, for lack of space to expound it. In addition to the outgoing movement there is also the returning, upgoing movement. In addition to the sending forth of the Son, the Incarnation, there is also the return of the glorified Son of the Father, the Ascension. The Church is incorporated into both these divine-human movements of the Christ, expressed in her liturgy or worship. Her outgoing movement to the world must be matched by the offering of the world in an ascending movement through her body, which is Christ's Body, to the Father. In due but different orders, Christ, the Ministry, the Word, the Sacraments, the laity, comprise an organism which in its ordering reflects the mystery of the Church. The mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ give the Church a visible shape and activity as a new phenomenon within the old creation. The whole of theology might be described as an effort to understand the Church's order. So little is it possible to neglect faith and order work, or try to substitute for it studies in mission or in the laity. On the contrary, dogmatically speaking, these subjects are sub-sections of "Faith and Order."

Let me conclude by making the claim that the Canadian Council of Churches ought to confront itself more directly with the fruitful problem of its own existence. The peripheral character of its activities reminds us that we are rootedly divided. It is deceptive to regard the Council as an expression of unity if we do not regard it also as an expression of our profounder disunity. Yet in the Council the Church Catholic is in some ways better revealed than in the denominations, and we ought to be allowing

this challenge to sear our denominational souls. Our Study Commission on Faith and Order has been a rewarding feature of the Council's life, but its issues ought to be dragged out on the floor as a prime purpose of any Council meeting.

I do not mean that the Council ought to take charge of the conversations now going on between Anglicans and the United Church and between Anglicans and Presbyterians; and yet how can we go on evading the fact that such conversations have necessary repercussions on us all? Perhaps it is not the Council's task to say to United Churchmen and Presbyterians, and to other bodies as well, that it is time that they got into Christian dialogue, for who in these relations has the right to cast the first stone? Not even the Anglicans, until they start something with Baptists, Lutherans, and others. But there is a fallacy in this negative result—the fallacy that this Council contains nothing more than each of its denominational sections. It contains the something more in virtue of which it is questioning each one of them, and this “something more” is struggling hard to be born. Perhaps it would be helped towards birth if the bodies that are now in consultation would review their problems on its floor, seeking the help and the profit of all.

Or at least the Council might start discussing in council the problematic meaning of its own existence. The World Council of Churches has asked for study of this problem, and in the United States a commission upon it has been established. Better than a commission would be work upon the matter in council-meetings themselves, guided, of course, by a steering committee. In view of the forthcoming World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal, we ought to be up and doing. The Council is idling at the prime point of its own vocation if it does not square up to its own relation to the mystery of the Church. Since in a measure it embodies the catholic ideal as the denominations do not, perhaps it ought to claim more authority in relation to them than it at present has, more boldly asserting its rights and speaking to them a word with power. For it has something, now too inarticulate, that they do not have, and it ought more authoritatively, in view of this word, to be challenging the proud, isolated sovereignties of the denominations. Since the Council embodies, as it is not elsewhere embodied, something of the mystery of the Church, it cannot remain both obedient and silent.