

Unity and Catholicity of the Church

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In its statement on church unity, the assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), meeting in Porto Alegre in February 2006, urged the member churches to give priority on the ecclesiological issues of unity and catholicity. Our theme connects well with this decision and in its way fulfills the wish of the WCC. I will proceed in this paper in three steps. First, I will discuss the issue of catholicity of the church in the so-called unity statements of the World Council. Second, I will argue that these statements reflect certain tensions present in the self-understanding of the churches as well as in the models of unity employed in ecumenism. I will also use some other ecumenical documents, in particular the new ecclesiological text of the WCC, "The Nature and Mission of the Church". This document has been sent to churches for responses, and it is therefore a proper time to analyse some of its basic tenets.

In the third part of my presentation I will describe some contemporary Protestant positions with regard to unity and catholicity. Some historical references to Protestant confessions will be made, but the main confessional thrust of my discussion will be on contemporary Protestant ecclesiology. I hope that the theological treatises can show in a representative manner why Protestants think of unity and catholicity as they do.

1. Catholicity in the Ecumenical Movement

The WCC has adopted four unity statements which aim at spelling out the nature of the unity sought in the ecumenical movement. The first and probably the most important of these is the New Delhi 1961 statement:

"We believe that 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."

(Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993, ed. G. Gassmann, 1993, 3).

The New Delhi statement connects unity and catholicity with the help of the concept of place. A lived communion is presupposed in "each place". The different places need not be identical with one another, but they are nevertheless united "in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all". Thus a fellowship emerges which comprises "all places and all ages". Catholicity in the sense of universality and commonality is thus embedded in the unity statement of New Delhi, although the actual model is spelled out with the concept of place.

At the same time, the concept of place may pose problems for this unity statement. New Delhi seems to presuppose a territorial concept of one church at one place. Differences can be tolerated if other churches remain in another territory and under another jurisdiction. This model, let us label it as "Catholicity among places", may be helpful for the Orthodox churches and also, if we forget Roman Catholicism, to German territorial churches. For churches in my own country, Finland, the model is, however, both too easy and too difficult at the same time. The problematic ease can be seen in the case of the so-called Porvoo communion. Finnish Lutherans and British Anglicans are in communion and thus participate in the same catholicity in different places. In fact, however, because of geographical distance both can just preserve their status quo. This is a much too easy solution for the problem of unity, since common structures need not be developed.

The difficulty can be exemplified with the relationship of Finnish Lutheran and Finnish Orthodox church. We have peaceful co-existence and good co-operation. But according to New Delhi, the Finnish Orthodox should actually join the Lutheran church in order to obtain the "unity of all in each place". This is practically impossible. The basic problem of "catholicity among places" is thus that in today's world churches are no more territorially divided in the way presupposed back in 1961.

The second unity statement was launched in Nairobi 1975. Interestingly, the notion of "place" has now completely disappeared and catholicity is defined as follows: "The one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship, each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity ..." (Documentary History, 3).

The Nairobi statement is more straightforward but also more vague than New Delhi. It does not spell out what it means to be "truly united". Common decision-making structures are probably presupposed in the notion of "conciliarity", but the local churches, which are

spoken of in plural, continue in some sense as rather autonomous bodies which may co-exist in the same territory. This is not an obvious conclusion, since one can read "truly united" to mean the same kind of local merger as in New Delhi. But it is also possible, and more probable, to read Nairobi so that the "conciliar fellowship" in itself is already the true unity, within which "each local church" continues its existence.

Since each local church possesses full catholicity, no universality needs to be presupposed. Let us label this idea as "catholicity of each local church". In practice, the concept of place is in Nairobi replaced with the phrase "local church" and the problem of different local churches in the same territory is simply avoided by the idea that each local church in communion with others possesses the fullness of catholicity.

The third unity statement of Canberra 1991 enriches the previous statements through introducing the language of *koinonia*/ communion more strongly than its predecessors. The statement speaks in classical terms of "one, holy, apostolic and catholic church" and holds that a full communion "will be expressed on the local and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action" The unity statement further says that churches are bound together at all levels of their life. (Documentary History, 3-4). Canberra no more holds that each local church would be *per se* catholic, but it leans towards a concept of catholicity which comprises the universal level more strongly than Nairobi. The concept of catholicity in Canberra text would thus lie somewhere between New Delhi and Nairobi.

The fourth and most recent unity statement of Porto Alegre 2006, titled "Called to Be the One Church" is by far the longest text. The concept of unity is in many ways similar to Canberra 1991, but particular topics are formulated more extensively. The paragraph on catholicity goes as follows:

"The catholicity of the Church expresses the fullness, integrity and totality of its life in Christ through the Holy Spirit in all times and places. This mystery is expressed in each community of baptized believers in which the apostolic faith is confessed and lived, the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are celebrated. Each church is the Church catholic and not simply part of it. Each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it. Each church fulfills its catholicity when it is in communion with the other churches. [We affirm that the catholicity of the Church is expressed most visibly in sharing holy communion and in a mutually recognised and reconciled ministry]." (the text is available at: www.wcc-assembly.info)

Let me just mention in passing why the last sentence is put into brackets. It was not in the draft of Porto Alegre text but was added by the assembly. I am uncertain of what to

think about it (or whether I understand it, e.g. the phrase "most visible" expression of catholicity). It may be a dogmatically true sentence, but I am uncertain whether it adequately belongs here and in any case I will not deal with the eucharist and ministry in the present paper.

The new unity statement is not only the longest, but also in many ways the most balanced formulation of catholicity in the history of the WCC unity statements. As the Canberra text, the Porto Alegre text finds that the dilemma of local and universal catholicity needs to be solved so that both aspects are adequately respected. Each church can call itself "catholic", but at the same time the reality of catholicity is fulfilled in the universal communion. Let us label this view "we-and-others catholicity".

Let me summarise briefly. In the four unity statement we can see an elegant, though maybe also somewhat accidental, tendency leading to the gradual disappearance of the idea of spatial catholicity. In New Delhi, catholicity is given through the concept of place. In Nairobi and Canberra, the concepts of "local", or "local and universal" define the spatial component. But in Porto Alegre, the spatial component has almost completely disappeared (it only occurs in the phrase "all times and places"). Churches are no more in "each place" nor are they called "local churches". They and their catholicity are defined without spatial concepts. Each church may be everywhere, as is proper in the age of internet and globalisation.

In Porto Alegre, a new ecclesiological document, "The Nature and Mission of the Church" (NMC, 2005/6) was launched. This statement contains an important passage on catholicity. It is formulated with the help of two earlier Faith and Order texts, namely "Confessing the One Faith" (4th ed 1996, §240) and "The Nature and Purpose of the Church" (1998, §12). At the same time, NMC broadens and deepens the Porto Alegre unity statement. The relevant passage reads as follows:

"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' (1 Tim 2:4), 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." (NMC §12)

In the NMC text, as well as in its predecessors, the emphasis is stronger laid on God as giver and guarantee of catholicity. An attempt to spell out the Trinitarian dimension of catholicity is also undertaken. No reference to concrete place or locality is made, but universality is highlighted.. The concept of place appears as a non-local attribute of the

church: God makes God's people, i.e. the church, "the place" of salvation. The church is not a concrete place, but it is nevertheless a concrete gathering of God's people and a "place" in this sense. In addition, the issue of equality among all humanity is mentioned. The NMC in its way exemplifies the "we-and-others catholicity" through its emphasis on universality and equality rather than on the catholicity of local churches.

Can a Protestant theologian recognise his or her own tradition in these documents? The Reformation movement in Germany clearly adopted Nicean faith and taught the catholicity of the church. The Reformers did criticize Roman church for being too external and canonical. As a consequence of this criticism, Lutheran confessional writings sometimes translate catholic with "common" and "Christian" (allgemeine, christliche, Apology, BSLK 236,13f). This is done in order to spell out that catholicity cannot be an external or formal sign and criterion of true church, but it remains an article of faith, a hidden reality. If a church is made a "politia externa" (Apol. 235,57), it will easily become a particularist organ and thus loses its universal character. A catholic church consists of human beings who are scattered around the whole earth but who have the same faith, same Christ, same Holy Spirit and same sacraments (236,2-5). It should be noted that although Protestants criticize an "externalist" idea of catholicity, they do not move to a consistent "internalism" or "spiritualism". Sacraments and other "external signs" (234,30f) remain necessary.

In principle and theologically speaking, the theocentric and non-spatial way of expressing catholicity in the most recent WCC statements should be compatible with these features of Protestant ecclesiology. The statements presuppose that true, catholic church is scattered around the globe. "We-and-others catholicity" may therefore be a more fruitful model for Protestants than "catholicity among places" or "catholicity of each local church".

In reality, however, things are more complex. Protestants may be theologically global, but in church practice we remain almost hopelessly bound to our local and national circumstances. Protestant churches are very autonomous bodies within their national and "spatial" boundaries. Moreover, the criticism of "external forms" is not only used to downplay superficial formalism, but also in order to withdraw from binding international and inter-church agreements and structures which are thought of as problematic "politia externa". In reality, Protestants (this is of course my subjective evaluation) tend to favor the model of "catholicity of each local church" because it is a complacent solution to the problem of Christian universality.

2. Unity in the Ecumenical Movement

For a deeper understanding of unity and catholicity, let us turn briefly to the models and realisations of unity found in the ecumenical movement. I will not, however, go through the ecumenical history for a second time. Instead, I will simply raise the issue of various inherent tensions found in the models of unity. These tensions are probably familiar to most of us and they can be expressed in different ways. My intention is to present them in such a guise that they may shed light to the issue of catholicity as well.

In the work of the WCC, three different but related ecclesiological tensions influence the drafting of texts and the ongoing renewal processes of the ecumenical movement. The so-called unity statements can be described as attempts to cope with these basic tensions.

The *first tension is found between two principles, "no models of unity" and "unity statements"*. The famous Toronto Declaration (1950, III.5), a text which until today states the requirements of membership in the WCC, holds: "Membership in the WCC does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity." Thus a member church need not adopt any models concerning the nature of unity. In reality, however, member churches have approved the above-mentioned unity statements which clearly contain visions of church unity.

Thus New Delhi 1961 says that unity "is being made visible as all in each place ... are brought ... into one fully committed fellowship". Nairobi 1975 speaks of "conciliar fellowship" and Canberra 1991 of "the unity of the church as koinonia". Porto Alegre 2006 repeats this language and affirms the Nicene creed, but says also that the church "is called to manifest its oneness in rich diversity". Until Canberra 1991, the development of unity statements may be regarded as attempt to overcome Toronto 1950.

In Porto Alegre, however, the sheer length of the document and expressions like "rich diversity" may prompt the question whether the churches here simply go back to the non-affirmation of any specific view of unity, as it was stated in Toronto 1950. This doubt is strengthened by a closer lecture of the commentary document (NMC). In the NMC text, the biblical insights spelled out in §§14-17 offer a platform in which no specific model of church unity is preferred but a plurality is affirmed. It is said that the "canon of the New Testament testifies to the compatibility of unity and diversity" (16). Moreover, "to honour the varied biblical insights into the nature and mission of the church, various approaches are required." (17). The biblical part of the NMC tends to exclude any preferred models

and to affirm a variant ecclesiological pluralism. This feature corresponds to the "no models" minimalism of Toronto 1950 rather than to the unity statements mentioned above.

The *second tension exists between the identity of the WCC as "fellowship of churches" and the nature of unity as *communio/ koinonia**. If the WCC is, again according to Toronto 1950, regarded as mere instrument of ecumenism, we should make a clear distinction between instrumental fellowship (i-fellowship) on the one hand and the "real" koinonia or communion of churches (k-fellowship). Again, the unity statements attempt to bridge the difference between i-fellowship and k-fellowship. Many Christian World Communions, e.g. the Lutheran World Federation, or the Leuenberg church fellowship, define themselves as communions in the sense of k-fellowship. The WCC cannot do this, but it nevertheless attempts to formulate the "real" unity which it serves as instrument. In this process, however, the theological character of the organisation becomes debatable. This point has often been made by the Orthodox churches, most recently in the crisis that led to the constructive and fruitful work of the so-called "Special Commission on Orthodox Participation".

In the NMC document, the second tension can be seen between §§24-33 and 34-42. In the former part, the concept of koinonia is presented in strongly biblical and trinitarian terms as a participation in God. This language avoids the difficulties present in the distinction between i-fellowship and k-fellowship, since the communion among humans/institutions is not spelled out in any concrete terms. The language of participation in God, however, clearly assumes that a "deep" communion, a k-fellowship, is meant and implied.

The latter part (34-42) continues with the topic of mission. Here, however, the tone changes significantly. The task of the church is presented in strongly instrumental terms, as advocacy, care and proclamation. The reader now gets the impression that the communion occurs in terms of i-fellowship, as a strategic alliance for the sake of something else than the unity. Thus the tension between different meanings of fellowship/ unity is not resolved.

The *third tension is related to the second and concerns the tensions and differences between the terms "church", "communion" and "fellowship"*. Especially in Protestantism it is common to enter a communion (German: Kirchengemeinschaft) in which each church nevertheless remains an autonomous body. This is more difficult, though not totally impossible, in Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology, given that the church is defined as communion. Again, the unity statements attempt to formulate a careful balance between the autonomy of a participating church and the theological nature of koinonia.

One controversial way to express this tension is to speak of different "ecclesial

densities" pertaining to different bodies. Thus the WCC would have less ecclesial density than a confessional world communion, which in turn has less density than an individual member church. Although such quantitative terms have their obvious theological problems, various unity statements choose their terminology in order to express shades and aspects of unity which would not compromise the legal autonomy of a member church. Thus the unity statements in fact do employ the idea of "ecclesial density" in order to cope with the third tension.

In the NMC document, §§57-59 employ the phrases "growth in communion" and "not yet full communion". These are clearly quantitative terms which presuppose a "more" and "less" of communion. But if we look at the trinitarian passages (24-33), the quantitative language disappears and Christians simply are in communion with God and with one another.

What do we learn from this brief identification of some tensions within the ecumenical language of unity? One can first say that although the issue of unity is vital for all churches within the ecumenical movement, the concrete will to proceed in the search of unity is often lacking or the time is not found to be ripe. The hesitations, tensions and even contradictions present in the ecumenical language are not symptomatic of the lack of common sense and clarity among drafters, but they simply reflect the hesitation of the churches. You want to proceed towards unity, but you also want to preserve your identity and autonomy. This is an understandable phenomenon which can be found in many other areas of human life as well.

We can find similar tension or oscillation in the concept of catholicity. Whereas New Delhi promoted visible unity, Nairobi was more inclined to leave local churches in peace. The communion language of Canberra was again more binding, whereas the "rich diversity" language of Porto Alegre in its way moderates the nature of unity.

An important concept relating unity with catholicity is that of identity. Both Protestants and Orthodox have a Christian identity, and in that sense they have the "same" identity as Christians. But the "same" must be left to quotation marks, since it is obvious that their confessional self-understandings differ and may often be more important for their real identity. Unity implies the idea of having the "same" identity in a rather strong sense. Catholicity, too, employs the idea of identity. The Orthodox in Finland, Russia and Greece are in communion and in that sense participate in their "catholic" church. Today's Lutherans belong together with the 18th century Pietists and the 16th century Reformers and thus they all belong to the same "catholic" church which stretches through the ages.

With the help of catholicity, we thus often distinguish between "us" and "them". Although we can ecumenically speak of "we-and-others" catholicity, the historical meaning of this term has not seldom been almost the opposite. "Catholic" Christians are those who are not non-catholic and not heterodox. In this sense the concept of catholicity safeguards one's own identity and promotes unity within one's own group through time and place.

For obvious reasons, this is not the meaning of catholicity promoted in the ecumenical texts. In order to discuss the issue of identity in more detail, we must turn to other theological treatises.

3. The Issue of Identity in Contemporary Protestant Ecclesiology

In order to deepen my discussion, I will exemplify current Protestant discussion on unity and catholicity with two major studies which I personally find very helpful. The first of these is the book of Hans-Peter Grosshans, *Die Kirche - irdischer Raum der Wahrheit des Evangeliums* (2003). In his discussion on catholicity, Grosshans pays attention to the issue that the Nicean predicate of catholicity does not yet say much, if anything, about the content of the identity of the church. Of course, this does not yield the conclusion that catholicity would be a superfluous predicate, since it basically says that the church has to have an identity. (179-182) But the predicate of catholicity does not yet define, for instance, the relative importance of sacraments. The eucharist certainly belongs to a catholic church, but the mere predicate of catholicity does not yet constitute this fact. What this predicate constitutes, is the requirement of "sameness" or integrity.

In other words, in order to be catholic, the church has to remain the same during different ages and different places. If this requirement is fulfilled, we can say that our church is the "same" as the church of Luther or Calvin or Augustine, but "different" from the church of Marcion or the Mormons. The predicate of catholicity is thus a necessary prerequisite of the possibility of doctrinal identification. But it does not yet give concrete criteria of this identification. For Grosshans, the very concept of Reformation, as re-formation, as re-receiving the identity-giving form, is a central aspect of this catholicity. Put in this way, catholicity is an indispensable feature of Reformation churches.

Grosshans holds that the content of this identity is the being of the church as the body of Christ. It is Jesus Christ who gives the church the content of its identity. If we look at both Porto Alegre and NMC texts, they are very well compatible with this basic tenet.

According to Porto Alegre, "the catholicity of the Church expresses the fullness, integrity and totality of its life in Christ". In keeping with this, the NMC text says that in the catholic church Christians are made "participants in Christ's life and salvation". Of course the christological being of the church is not lacking in earlier ecumenism, but it is important that the new texts explicitly bring this reality together with the issue of catholicity.

Another important feature in Grosshans's study is that he pays a lot of attention to the spatial dimension of church. Too often Protestants have left this issue to the Catholics, making merely the non-external aspects of catholicity explicit in their ecclesiology. For Grosshans, church is the "earthly space" for the truth of the gospel (e.g. 298). The concept of space thus becomes transferred to the description of the church itself. It is not a local concept, but it nevertheless underlines the importance of having an existence in time and place. This move has an interesting parallel in the NMC text. In it, as we have seen, God "makes his people the place and instrument of his saving and life-giving presence". The concept of place now appears as an attribute of the church.

Calling church "a place" may be a fruitful way of avoiding both the exaggeration of spatial catholicity, which remains too committed to various territories, and the exaggeration of completely non-spatial catholicity, which may be idealistic even in the age of globalisation and the internet. Church does not remain committed to a territory, but the church in itself offers a "place" or an "earthly space" for something that is not local, namely, the gospel. In such "place" it becomes possible to identify the concrete church as the church catholic.

Another inspiring recent book is Kevin Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine* (2005). A long-time teacher in Edinburgh, Vanhoozer offers a more Calvinist blend of Protestantism, but with a high respect of doctrinal traditions of all churches. His point of departure is the authority of biblical interpretation as criterion of the identity of the church and thus of its catholicity. Vanhoozer exercises self-criticism: "The church has typically been attracted to one of three interpretative options: ... ecclesiastical magisterium, unchanging communal tradition, and private interpretation, or, ... Rome, Constantinople, and Wittenberg/Geneva. Increasing numbers of Protestants are today on the Constantinople trail. Wittenberg/Geneva, by contrast, is a buyer's market; the intellectual property prices in these two Reformation cities may have reached an all-time low." (122). This point refers to the recent popularity of communitarian and post-liberal theological approaches in the English-speaking Protestantism.

Vanhoozer's own programme aims at grounding Protestant authority structures in a manner which could surpass private interpretation but nevertheless remains true to the principle of sola scriptura. Like Grosshans, he sees the issue of identity as crucial for the interpretation and proclamation of the gospel message. Following Paul Ricoeur, Vanhoozer distinguishes between two kinds of identity. Whereas the so-called idem-identity, "hard identity" or "what-identity", really requires unchanging communal interpretation, the so-called ipse-identity, "soft identity" or "who-identity" can be more flexible. In ipse-identity, we do know who you are even though you sometimes adjust your views and react to new situations. Ipse-identity is not pluralism, but a non-identical repetition of central practices. Protestant biblical interpretation could avoid both legalism and privatism with the help of conceiving its teaching and church practices in terms of ipse-identity.

Remaining the same, and in that sense catholic, can be labeled as the "ecclesial performance of Scripture" (167). In this sense the scripture determines the range of catholicity and ipse-identity of the church. Vanhoozer refines this basic idea with another distinction, namely that between "cultural-linguistic" (PII) and "canonical-linguistic" (PI) performance. Roughly, PII affirms tradition and culture more strongly and gives more weight to the argument that our understanding of the scripture is conditioned by ecclesial (and other cultural) traditions.

Vanhoozer's own and typically Protestant model is, however, PI. He argues that PI and PII relate to one another as "receiving" and "using" a text. He further holds that we have the possibility to become guided by the canonical text so that we sometimes can also criticize traditions. It is indeed possible to listen and to receive a text and not just to use it.

Vanhoozer's discussion is rather complex, since he believes that genuine obedience to the biblical message is only possible with regard to the canonical scripture as a whole, not with regard to the exegesis of individual passages. Moreover, he is not hostile to tradition, but claims that a "linguistic" approach must always affirm historical traditions and that even "sola scriptura" presupposes an interplay between scripture and tradition. Remaining the same, in terms of ipse-identity, must leave room for some conscious and unconscious changes, while being also confident that the canonical scripture is capable of leading the church through the ages. Of course he also affirms the christological core of the scripture and thinks that in many ways it is finally the content of the Word of God rather than its formal or legal structure which keeps the church together.

Looking briefly back at both Porto Alegre and NMC texts on catholicity, we see that

both briefly mention the Word of God and the proclamation of the gospel. But one could perhaps say that a true Protestant would expect the role of Scripture to be stronger in these statements. If one adopts Vanhoozer's views, one thinks that Scripture is not only relevant as the doctrinal content which the principle of catholicity formally safeguards, but that the principle of catholicity is itself being upheld by the canonical norm of Scripture.

I will not here discuss Vanhoozer's position any further. For our purposes, the most important thing in it is to see how a typically Protestant theologian understands the canonical Scripture to be the norm and guarantee of the unity and catholicity of the church. In order to keep the church "the same" and in this sense catholic, the scripture is the most important criterion. Canonical scripture is not merely another instance of tradition, but it has the ability to judge tradition, at least to an extent. At the same time, sola scriptura neither means private interpretation nor does it imply rigid literalism.

The ecclesial performance should be consonant to the canonical intentions of the scripture. The ecclesial performance may vary in different times and places and it can be and should be re-formed. Maybe it is an exaggeration to say that the performance should "constantly" (*semper*) be reformed, but in any case the chain of catholicity as "sameness" is based on non-identical repetition. And yet, this chain builds an ipse-identity in which we can know who the Christians are. We may be to an extent uncertain of "what" the church finally is and even of "what" is precisely teaches. But we do know who represents the church and who are (and were) God's people. In this sense the church has both unity and catholicity.