

CHURCH EMERGING FROM BELOW

Historico-theological Study of the Local Church

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Winds of change with far-reaching consequences have been sweeping through the Church since Vatican Council II. One of the major innovations that has taken place in the field of ecclesiology is the shift of emphasis from the universal Church to the local Church. After being immersed in and stained by a centralistic and monolithic conception of the Church for several centuries, the Council generated exuberant enthusiasm in constructing local Churches in its concerted effort to renew the face of the Church in accordance with the vision of the New Testament and emergent signs of the time. We witness today, as a result, an ongoing discussion on the life and mission of the local Church at various levels, namely continental, national, regional, diocesan, parochial etc. The bishops of Asia, in their first plenary assembly held in Taiwan in 1974, declared unequivocally that the primary focus of evangelization in Asia should be "building up of a truly local Church."¹ The same vision and concern have been repeatedly reiterated in their subsequent meetings and gatherings, with an earnest appeal to the Churches of Asia to seriously launch the project of building up Christian communities deeply rooted in the Asian soil. The mission of constructing the indigenous and

¹ *For all Peoples of Asia* Vol. 1 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 14.

inculturated local Churches has now become a worldwide phenomenon.

There is an urgent need, at this juncture, to evolve a theology of the local Church, keeping in mind the emergent context of Asia. In this article, an attempt is made to delve deep into the current theological reflections on the local Church. In order to understand better and analyze deeper the theology of the local Church we begin with a short historical survey of the local Church.

LOCAL CHURCH: A SHORT HISTORICAL SURVEY

In this historical survey, we examine how the Church was a communion of local Churches in the beginning, how the whole image of the local Church was distorted in the course of time for the sake of centralizing the ecclesiastical authority and how the local Church was rediscovered by Vatican Council II.

Church: Local at its Origin

It is to be noted that the Church at its origin was local by character. The word *ekklesia*, before being applied more abstractly to the whole body of Christians, was used first to refer to the Christian community of a given region or city, in accordance with its original usage in Greek, namely the assembly of citizens in a city to decide matters affecting their welfare.² The apostles, as the New Testament demonstrates, preached the word of God, baptized the people, founded the local Christian communities and appointed leaders to take care of them. Despite the fact they were always on the move bringing the good news of Christ to the ends of the world, they never failed to maintain close ties with the local Churches, not only by personal visits but also by writing letters and sending their representatives to them from time to time. Most of the letters of Paul were addressed to the local Churches dealing with the theological and pastoral problems faced by them in their respective contexts. In his pastoral endeavour he adopted the

² Raymond Brown, *Biblical Exegesis and the Church Doctrine*, New York: Paulist Press, 115; Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994, 27.

policy that the problems and prospects of each local Church were to be treated with utmost care bearing in mind the emergent context of that community (e.g. Corinthian community).³ It is worth mentioning that the word *ekklesia*, which has occurred 65 times in his writings, signified mostly a local Church in a given city or region. Only in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians it was employed more comprehensively to refer to the whole body of Christians (Col 1:18; Eph 5: 23-32; Eph 1: 22-23).⁴

An important fact which draws our particular attention is that the local Churches in the New Testament period were primarily house Churches, that is to say that the Christians gathered in the *oikos* of individual Christians where they listened to the Word of God, prayed together, celebrated the Eucharist and shared the common meal called *agape*. The New Testament bears witness to a number of house Churches, which flourished with vitality and dynamism in different places (Acts 12: 12-17; 16:15; 16-31-34; 18:8; Rom 16:5; 16: 10-11, 14,15; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Philem 2). Such smaller gatherings in the house Churches offered them a natural and spontaneous setting for fellowship and communion.⁵ The involvement of the laity in the local Churches was at its height so much so that even some local Churches were founded by them. For instance, the Church in Antioch was founded by some of the persecuted Christians of the Jerusalem Church, probably Hellenistic Christians, who made a great revolution by bringing together Jews as well as gentiles into one community (Acts 11:19-

³ Joseph Pathrapankal, "From the Church of God to the House Church - A Study on Paul's Over-Arching Reflections of the Church," *Word and Worship* 26 (1993), 267.

⁴ Cf. John L. Mckenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968, 135; Joseph Pathrapankal, "Local Church and Universal Church in Pauline Theology," *Vidyajyoti* 40 (1976), 301.

⁵ Cf. F. V. Filson, "The Significance of the Early House Churches," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939), 105-112; V. Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989; Abraham Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983, 60-91; J. H. Elliot, "Philemon and House Churches," *Bible Today* 22 (1984), 145-150; Rafael Aguirre, "Early Christian House Churches," *Theology Digest* 32 (1985), 151-155; Raymond F. Collins, "Small Groups: An Experience of the Church," *Louvain Studies* 13 (1988), 109-136.

21).⁶ In fact, the lay Christians were the founders as well as the administrators of the house Churches. The best example would be the Jewish couple Aquila and Prisca who were first leading a house Church in Rome and founded later on a house Church in Ephesus on their personal initiative.⁷ The ministry in the local Church was collegial in character. There were different kinds of ministries and all of them were exercised for the common good and growth of the local community (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10; Eph 4:11; 1 Cor 12:28). Thus the local Churches in the early period had, "everything it needed to be Church in its own situation: it confessed the apostolic faith; it proclaimed the word of God in Scripture, baptized its members, celebrated the Eucharist; it affirmed and responded to the presence and charisms of the Holy Spirit; announced and looked forward to the Kingdom, and recognized ministries within the community."⁸

More significantly, little emphasis was laid on hierarchy and authority in the primitive Church. It is not an exaggeration to say that it was entirely a non-clerical community. There was no central administrative set-up to check periodically the life and mission of every local Church. Even though the Jerusalem Church, being the mother Church from which the Christian movement arose, enjoyed a certain sense of supremacy, other local Churches were neither understood as filiations nor expected to be carbon copies of the mother Church.⁹ They tried to manage their own problems and issues without bringing them every time to Jerusalem for consultation or decision. Only those problems affecting all the local Churches such as circumcision were referred to the Jerusalem

⁶ Raymond Brown, *Antioch and Rome*, New York: Paulist Press, 1982, 32-36; Joseph Pathrapankal, "The Church in the Acts of the Apostles," *Indian Theological Studies* 34 (1997), 216-217.

⁷ P. Sampathkumar, "Aquila and Prisca: A Family at the Service of the Word," *Indian Theological Studies* 34 (1997), 185-201.

⁸ Michael Fahey, "The Catholicity of the Church in the New Testament and in the Early Patristic Period," *Jurist* 52 (1992), 55.

⁹ Marie -Louise Gubler, "Living Diversity in the New Testament Church," *Theology Digest* 37 (1990), 116.

community and amicable solutions were arrived at after an open and frank discussion. They were so democratically structured that the whole local Church took part in the election of bishops, the choice of ministers and in the various decision making bodies, due to the reason that the voice of the community was respected as the manifestation of the will of God.¹⁰ They enjoyed full autonomy and developed a healthy pluralism in their life style, customs, discipline, worship, patterns of ministry, and administrative and organizational structure.¹¹ In the midst of pluralism and diversity, there was a strong sense of unity and communion among them on the basis of what they possessed as their common heritage, namely the apostolic faith and the Eucharist. Whenever problems and conflicts went beyond the limits of the local Churches, the leaders of the different local Churches gathered together in synods and councils and took important decisions, which were binding all of them. In short, we can say that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church was a communion of different local Churches. As J. E. Lynch succinctly pointed out, "the local *ekklesia* was largely self-sufficient and to a surprising degree autonomous. Unity among Churches manifested itself in agreement on faith rather than in institutional structures. In fact no permanent organizational machinery existed above the level of the local Church."¹² Such living and vibrant local Churches were found in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople and Carthage.

¹⁰ For instance, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, said: "I have made it a rule, ever since my episcopate, to make no decision merely on the strength of my personal opinion without consulting you (the priests and the deacons), without the approbation of the people." (*Epistle* 14.4).

¹¹ James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, London: SCM Press, 1977; James Dunn, "Unity and Diversity in the Church: A New Testament Perspective," *Gregorianum* 71 (1990), 629-656. Ernst Kasemann, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament Ecclesiology," *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963), 298-308.

¹² Quoted by Donald Warwick, "The Centralization of Ecclesiastical Authority: An Organizational Perspective," *Concilium* 10 (1974), 111.

Distortion of the Local Church

History bears out that the local Churches gradually lost their dynamism and autonomy on account of the centralizing tendencies of the Roman Church, which exerted a tremendous influence on the worldwide Church. Though the process of organizational centralization was intensified in the Middle Ages, we can detect its traces already in the post-apostolic and patristic periods owing to increasing heresies and schisms, which endangered the very doctrinal foundation of Christianity. In the second century one could notice a growing tendency to insist on the universality of the apostolic tradition against the Gnostics, Montanists and other aberrant movements.¹³ The task of monitoring the heretical teachings and safeguarding the orthodoxy of doctrine was achieved through the consolidation of the power of the *episcopoi*, who emerged as the leaders of the local Churches in the post-apostolic period. The office of episcopate became a focal point of unity and direction. For instance, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, emphatically said, "the Church is founded upon the bishops, and every act of the Church is controlled by these same rulers."¹⁴ The growing impact of heresies also led the local Churches to develop the concept of apostolic succession and thus began the emphasis on the uninterrupted chain of bishops who unite the present Church with apostolic times.¹⁵ The grave need for unity systematically contributed to "certain homogeneous developments in the formation of ecclesiastical structures, tendencies for uniformity in doctrines and practices and movement for centralization both within and among Churches."¹⁶

Another factor responsible for the centralization of authority and structure was the Church's inseparable link with the Roman empire after the conversion of Emperor Constantine. Christianity obtained an official recognition and became the only lawful

¹³ E. I. Watkin, *The Church in Council*, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966, 19.

¹⁴ Epistle 33, 1.

¹⁵ Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*, New York: Paulist Press, 1998, 81.

¹⁶ Kuncheria Pathil, "Theology of the Local Church," *Jeevadhara* 28 (1998), 280.

religion of the entire empire. The rapid growth of Christian communities, greater geographic dispersion and a more complex situation created unforeseen problems of co-ordination and gradually paved the way to an expanded bureaucracy.¹⁷ Constantine, being an experienced political leader, was keen on promoting the internal cohesion of his kingdom by establishing a unified and well-organized Church. Therefore, when the unity of Church was under serious threat due to the outbreak of Arian controversy, he convoked an Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, intervened personally in the negotiations, pressurized the participants to come to an agreement and enforced the decisions on them.¹⁸ The Church's close rapport with the highly centralized and bureaucratic system of government resulted in acquiring advertently and inadvertently the imperial and feudalistic model in its life, structures, authority, organization etc. As years passed by, the whole process of centralization and institutionalization proceeded apace. In the wake of heresies and schisms that rocked the Church in the 4th and 5th centuries, the political power was used to suppress them with an iron hand and the uniformity in dogmas and practices was established by the Councils, mostly convened by the emperors. The emphasis laid on the organizational and hierarchical structure of the Church and the importance attached to the sacerdotal dimension of ministry jeopardized charismatic and communal structures of the local churches. The laity who played a vital role in the building up of the local Churches in the apostolic and post-apostolic periods were systematically sidelined, pushed to the periphery and finally became a faceless people.

The process of centralization was intensified in the Middle Ages primarily for the sake of strengthening and upholding the supreme authority of the Pope over the universal Church. It is a fact that almost from the first century the Church of Rome, where the apostles Peter and Paul preached the Word of God and

¹⁷ Donald Warwick, "The Centralization of Ecclesiastical Authority: An Organizational Perspective," 113.

¹⁸ Hans Kueng, *Structures of the Church*, London: Burns & Oates, 1965, 70.

suffered martyrdom, was accorded a pre-eminent status, which was acknowledged by other local Churches too.¹⁹ Ignatius of Antioch called it the Church, "presiding in love," and Irenaeus referred to its, "more important prominence."²⁰ The letter of Pope Clement I to the Corinthian Church exhorting its members to accept their presbyters and the active role played by Pope Victor to settle the dispute concerning the date of Easter bear witness to the special place and role of the bishop of Rome in the communion of local Churches. In course of time, the supreme authority of the pope was uncompromisingly upheld and the structure of the monarchical papacy was established to the extent of endangering the rich diversity of the local Churches and their legitimate autonomy. For instance, Pope Innocent I demanded that the decisions arrived at in a local synod after discussing the *causae maiores* were to be referred to the Roman See for confirmation or revision and thus he made the local synods ineffective, weak and incompetent. Leo the Great categorically claimed that the pope was endowed with *plenitudo potestatis* that Jesus Christ gave to Peter on the basis of the identity of the pope's role with that of Peter.²¹ He sought juridical control over the various local Churches. Pope Gregory VII issued his famous *Dictatus Papae* in 1075 in which he affirmed that the pope alone was the supreme head of the universal Church, standing above kings and emperors, claimed the right to make and unmake laws for the whole Church and stated

¹⁹ J. F. McCue, "Roman Primacy in the Patristic Era," *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church* ed. C. Paul Empie & T. Murphy Austin, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974, 44-97; William R. Farmer and Roch Kereszty, *Peter and Paul in the Church of Rome*, New York: Paulist Press, 1990.

²⁰ Cf. Patrick Granfield, *The Papacy in Transition*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980, 36; J. F. McCue, "Roman Primacy in the Second Century and the Problem of the Development of Dogma," *Theological Studies* 25 (1964), 161-196.

²¹ Walter Ullmann, "Leo I and the Theme of Papal Primacy," *Journal of Theological Studies* 11 (1960), 25-51.

his power to depose, reinstate or transfer bishops to another see.²² He maintained a constant watch and continuous vigilance over the activities of the local bishops and emphasized their obligation to visit the see of Rome regularly at fixed intervals and present a detailed report of the affairs of their Church. This visit is called *ad limina apostolorum*. Pope Boniface VIII, in his bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302), declared that obedience to the pope was absolutely necessary for salvation.²³ Even the theologians of the Middle age such as Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas affirmed that the power and pastoral responsibility in the Church emanated only from the Roman Pontiff.²⁴

It is to be noted that Martin Luther, the great reformer of the 16th century, opposed tooth and nail the strong and formidable centralizing tendency of Rome and accentuated the importance of building the local communities by tenaciously upholding the primacy of the Word of God, justification by faith and priesthood of all believers.²⁵ The Council of Trent, on the contrary, laid emphasis on the universalistic ecclesiology, namely, the one true Church under the supreme head of the pope. In the post-tridentine period, Pope Pius V and his successors took series of measures to fortify centralization, which concerned particularly, in the observation of Giuseppe Alberigo, "the choice of bishops, approval of the decisions of diocesan synods and provincial councils, sending of apostolic nuncios into the dioceses, and the interpretation of concilair decisions, which was reserved to an *ad hoc* Roman congregation."²⁶ The publication of the Catechism of the Council of

²² James A. Coriden ed. *The Once and Future Church*, New York: Alba House, 1971, 80; Leonardus Meulenber, "Gregory VII and the Bishops: Centralization of Power?" *Concilium* 8 (1972), 65-78.

²³ J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996, 281.

²⁴ Eric G. Jay, *The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries*, London: SPCK, 1977, 114-122.

²⁵ Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Local Church in the West," *Heythrop Journal* 28 (1987), 128.

²⁶ Giuseppe Alberigo, "The Local Church in the West," 132.

Trent (1566), Roman Breviary (1568) and Roman Missal (1570) and the insistence on the uniform seminary training and celebration of liturgy contributed to a greater centralization of the Church.²⁷ We can say that the dogmatic definitions of papal primacy and infallibility by Vatican I was the culmination of a historical process of centralization of the ecclesiastical administration. It is really unfortunate that this gradual and systematic centralization by the affirmation of the Roman Church over the other Churches led to the tragic consequences of division in the Church and destroying the legitimate autonomy and identity of the local Churches.

Rediscovery of the Local Church

The Church, being plunged into the universalistic and centralist ecclesiology for several centuries as described above, rediscovered her original identity and true vision, thanks to the sincere and serious efforts of the Vatican II to renew the whole *Ecclesia* from the root. A remarkable contribution of the Council was its shift from envisaging the Church as a single body of Christians under the supreme head of the pope to a new way of perceiving it as the communion of local Churches, each one authentically a Church on the model of the New Testament. According to Aloys Grillmeier, "one of the achievements of the Council was the rediscovery of the universal Church as the sum and communion of the local Churches, as understood fully as themselves, and the rediscovery of the universal Church in the local Church."²⁸ Emmanuel Lanne has called the Council's rediscovery of the local Church a "Copernican revolution."²⁹

In fact the rediscovery resulted from the long and vigorous discussions that took place among the Council Fathers. While the conservatives among them were determined in upholding the universalistic, authority-centred and traditional concept of the

²⁷ Anthony Thannikot, 'The Process of Centralization in the Second Millennium,' *Jeevadhara* 5 (1975), 282-283.

²⁸ Aloys Grillmeier, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* Vol. I, New York: Herder and Herder, 1967, 167

²⁹ Emmanuel Lanne, "L'Eglise local et L'eglise universelle: Actualite et portee du theme," *Irenikon* 43 (1990), 490.

Church, the progressives emphasized the ecclesiology of communion and particularly the concrete local realization of the Church. In fact, as noted by Karl Rahner, the first chapters of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church deals only with the universal Church, "founded in the mystery of the divine Trinity, of the Holy people of God; of the body of the Christ in which all of the faithful partake of the one priesthood of Christ, in which each man finds his own gift of grace and his mission, in which each man is called to be a witness to the grace of God."³⁰ Having established the legitimacy of understanding the Church from a universal dimension, he brings to our notice another perceptive of the Church, contained in the Constitution, which perceives the Church primarily from the point of view of the local community. But the concept of the local Church was inserted into the main text at a relatively later date at the request of some of the Council Fathers from the Oriental Churches, who "wanted to see the concrete Church of the every day life there, where she celebrates the death of the Lord, breaks the bread of the Word of God, prays, loves, and bears the cross of existence, where reality is truly unequivocal; where it is tangibly more than an abstract theology, or a dogmatic thesis, or some social megalomania."³¹

As is evident, the concept of communion was at the heart of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in 1985, marking the 20th anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, observed that "the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents."³² It was the Council's rediscovery of the true nature of the Church, namely communion or *koinonia* led to the rediscovery of the local Church. The Council, affirming that the communion of believers in a locality is the Church of Christ, declared:

³⁰ Karl Rahner, *The Church After the Council*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1966, 45.

³¹ Karl Rahner, *The Church After the Council*, 47.

³² *Message to the People of God and The Final Report*, Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986, 17.

This Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament. For these are in fact, in their own localities, the new people called by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit and as the result of full conviction (cf. 1 Thess. 1:5): In them the faithful are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, and the mystery of the Lord's Supper is celebrated "so that, by means of the flesh and blood of the Lord the whole brotherhood of the Body may be welded together."³³

Thus the local Church, in which the Church of Christ is truly present, is a community of believers which proclaims the message of the Kingdom of God, celebrates the Eucharist and other sacraments, practises love and fellowship and continues the liberative mission of Christ in a particular socio-economic and cultural context. The ecclesiology of communion affirmed the legitimacy and importance of the local Church, recognized a variety of gifts within the community and encouraged active participation of the laity in the community life.

It should be noted that the ecclesial communion is not a closed reality circumscribed to a small circle. It has a universal openness due to the fact that the Church is a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all people for the benefit of the whole world.³⁴ The principle of communion that makes the believers into a local Church is also the force, which binds together in fellowship the various local Churches dispersed in various parts of the world so that they could share among themselves their concerns, aspirations and hopes. Thus the Church is a communion of local Churches or to use the expression of the Council, "a corporate body of Churches."³⁵ This communion of various local Churches is concretely and structurally realized when the bishops, in whom the local Church is represented, form one

³³ *Lumen Gentium*, 26.

³⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

³⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 23.

body or college with all members in hierarchical communion under the head of the Roman pontiff.³⁶

At the same time, we should not forget the fact that the Council has not brought out a complete and consistent theology of the local Church. As Louis Bouyer has rightly pointed out, an insufficiency found in the ecclesiology of Vatican II is "a rather poorly developed doctrine of the local Church."³⁷ Moreover, the Council is not consistent in its use of vocabulary referring to the local realizations of the Church. It has employed the expressions 'local Church' and 'particular Church' without any distinction between them, but with a preference for the latter. It becomes clear from the conciliar texts that the term local Church has a general and ambiguous meaning. It could mean a parish community, a Eucharistic assembly, a basic Christian community, a diocese, a regional Church, a national Church, an individual Church etc. Nonetheless, it can be said that what is given in the council documents on the local Church is undoubtedly a major achievement.

THEOLOGY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Against the background of the historical survey we have outlined above, let us now try to present the current reflections on the theology of the local Church.

Church Emerging from Below

Till Vatican II the method and approach followed in the discipline of ecclesiology was '*from above*.' It began generally with defining and portraying the nature of the Church on the basis of Scripture, Fathers of the Church, Magisterium etc. and concluded with some pastoral and practical considerations bearing on its relationship with the world. The pastoral suggestions were made primarily to help concretize what had already been defined in a conceptual framework, as the nature and mission of the Church. The same approach was also adopted in the field of missiology.

³⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 3, 22.

³⁷ Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982, 170.

Accordingly, the principal goal of the mission was the implantation of the visible Church (*implantatio ecclesiae*) wherever it was not established, that is to bring the means of salvation within the reach of all souls. An ideally constructed nature and model of the Church was transposed into mission territories unmindful of the historical situation of the people, particularly the joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the alienated masses. Describing the missionary work of the Church during the colonial period, Karl Rahner pertinently observed that the mission was mainly an activity "of an export firm, exporting it to the whole world a European religion along with other elements of this supposedly superior culture and civilization and not really attempting to change the commodity."³⁸ In this ecclesiological framework, the local Church was considered to be the local realization of the ideally defined nature and mission of the Church. Taking serious note of this situation, Aloysius Pieries remarked: "the majority of the local Churches in Asia are not yet local Churches of Asia, but are extensions of Euro-American local Churches in Asia."³⁹

Obvious as it may be, since Vatican II the methodological approach '*from below*' has gained popularity in theology and particularly in ecclesiology so much so that the Church, its life, mission, structure etc. are envisaged and interpreted through the spectrum of concrete situation of the believing community. It implies that entering deep into the concrete is absolutely necessary to understand and discover the essence of the Church, for it is basically a community of people rooted in a particular socio-economic, historical and cultural context. It emerges from a context, lives in a context and grows in a context. It is intrinsically interwoven with the vicissitudes of human life because the faith praxis does not take place in an abstract, a-temporal and a-spatial world, but always in a concrete historical situation replete with challenges, problems and hurdles. Faith is an act by which the disciples of Jesus are called upon to open themselves to God who is

³⁸ Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1981, 78.

³⁹ Aloysius Pieries, "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches," *Liberation in Asia* ed. S. Arokiasamy and G. Gispert Sauch, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988, 18.

speaking to them in their context, to accept in their lives His salvific plan⁴⁰ for humanity and to fulfil it with utmost commitment. It is evident that a Christian community that loses its vital relationship and interaction with the context in which it lives and bears witness to faith would lose its dynamism and vibrancy and become dead. Therefore, it can be said that the local Church is the assembly of believers whom God has called through the gospel of Jesus Christ to live according to the Spirit in order to realize His plan of salvation in a concrete situation. As Felix Wilfred rightly observes, "a proper understanding of the Church can be arrived at only from the concrete inter-relationship which the believing subjects establish among themselves, with God, with the world around, from the way they shape their history in freedom and from their involvement in the struggles, in the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people like themselves."⁴¹

Fruit of the Divine Initiative and Human Response

Another point, which needs our pointed attention, is that the local Church that is rooted in a concrete life situation is the product of both divine and human initiative. It denotes that the local Church is not purely a human enterprise like an association, club or union, operative in the society to achieve some goals. Unlike such institutions, God is at work in the origin and development of the local Church. That is why St. Paul referred to the Christian community in Corinth as "the Church of God, that is in Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2). In his view the Church was the fruit of God's saving design achieved through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the local Church owes its existence to the call of God, the Word of Jesus Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit, without any of which it would lose its ecclesial character. It is the grace of God that, "enabled certain men and women to recognize God's hand and his very self in Christ, to become convinced that he

⁴⁰ Leonardo Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, London: Collins, 1982, 19.

⁴¹ Felix Wilfred, "Action Groups and the Struggle for Justice in India," *The Ecumenical Review* 39 (1987), 301.

had been raised in the power of God's Spirit, and to come together in a new community."⁴²

At the same time, we should not be under the impression that the local Church comes into being solely out of the divine initiative. God invites all people to positively respond to the good news of His Son Jesus Christ and thereby to a radical transformation of life in every age and time. The call of God and the voice of the Holy Spirit is to be heard and discerned in a particular socio-cultural situation with all its challenges due to the fact that the divine revelation takes place only through concrete events of human history.⁴³ It is through a deep and mutually enriching encounter between the Gospel and the community with its particular culture and tradition that the Church comes into being and is incarnated in a place. By interpreting together the faith experience emanating from the life-situation, they discern the design of God and in the light of which they set the common goal and frame the common programme of action for the community. This dynamic encounter is an ongoing process. The Gospel message becomes a new and vigorous force, whenever a new historical situation arises and therefore, calls for a fresh response from the believing community. The Church is born anew, whenever the people, being led by the Spirit, make a new response to the call of God and renew their commitment to the mission of building up the Kingdom of God.

Understood in this way, the being and becoming of the local Church in a given time, place and culture is called inculturation. More often than not, the inculturation is understood as the process, which consists primarily in adopting certain aspects of the life and practice of the Church by borrowing some elements from the culture of a determined people. In this perspective, the culture of the people has been viewed as a means through which the essence of Christian faith and the nature of the Church, which are considered universal, unchangeable and perennially valid, have

⁴² Joseph A. Komonchak, "Towards a Theology of the Local Church," *FABC Papers* (No 42), 22.

⁴³ Felix Wilfred, *The Emergent Church in a New India*, Trichy: St. Paul's Seminary, 1988, 157.

been made indigenous by presenting them in the garb of their culture.⁴⁴ This way of instrumentalizing the culture for the sake of mission disregards the deeper aspects of faith and points to an inadequate and improper understanding of the role of culture in human society. Culture is the way of life of a social group and embraces every aspect of their life, namely knowledge and language, art and literature, beliefs and myths, rituals and celebrations, values and ideologies, morals and laws, customs and manners etc. It also includes the history of their struggle for a fuller human life with its triple dimension - social, economic and political. Every culture has its own autonomy and inner consistency. Its pluriform expressions, "are the result of God's action in human history and of the presence of the Spirit among the people, right in the midst of their individual and collective existence."⁴⁵ They are really blessings of God. The proper way of inculturation, therefore, consists not in trying to make the Church and faith local and indigenous by relating them to a particular cultural form. On the contrary, we should rather perceive, and understand the essence of the Church itself in terms of the culture of people, their way of life, social organizations and religious experience.⁴⁶ The inculturation should be the result of a genuine encounter of Christ and Gospel with the soul and the spirit of the culture of a people. The various traditions, symbols, worship, institutions, customs, manners etc. should spring from this encounter. It can be called the local realization of the mystery of the Church. It is a continuous incarnation of Jesus Christ in a particular culture of the people. That is why Aloysius Peries remarked: "Inculturation is a natural process which cannot be artificially induced. It cannot and should not be the target of any action. It is something that happens unconsciously and spontaneously in the

⁴⁴ Louis Malieckal, "Total Inculturation as Mission of the Churches in India," *Church in Context* ed. Francis Kanichikattil, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1996, 203.

⁴⁵ Felix Wilfred, *Sunset in the East?* Chennai: Department of Christianity, University of Madras, 1991, 179.

⁴⁶ Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations*, Chennai: Department of Christianity, University of Madras, 1993, 199.

course of our struggle to bring in God's reign in our local context."⁴⁷

Community of Awakened Persons

Delving deep into the origin of world religions, it becomes evident that at the root of every religion there stands a new experience of God, which is none other than the God experience of its founder himself. It is from this foundational experience that every religious tradition originates and it is in the same experience that the believers are expected to participate so that they could make it their own experience. As is well known, Buddha's new insight into the ultimate meaning of reality, which came to him at his enlightenment under the bodhi tree, stands at the origin of Buddhism. The *abba* experience of Jesus at his baptism, his experience of total commitment to God and humanity in the paschal event and the new life he brought to the whole of humanity stand at the origin of Christianity.

The *ekklesia* originated from the foundational experience of Christ and the experience of the saving God in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, in which the first disciples participated by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.⁴⁸ The outpouring of the Holy Spirit touched their hearts and transformed their lives in such a way that they became one community of love and fellowship and dedicated their entire life for the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. The same foundational experience of God in Jesus Christ should be the life-giving force of the local Church. One becomes a member by participating in this experience. Every one should be an awakened person – awakened to the Divine mystery and to the presence of God in the depth of his being. His entering into a new life of communion with God, with fellow persons in the Church and in the society at large should emanate from his profound experience of God in Jesus

⁴⁷ Aloysius Peries, "Inculturation: Some Critical Reflections," *Vidyajyoti* 57 (1993), 644.

⁴⁸ Kurien Kunnumpuram, "The Indian Church of the Future," *Jnanadeepa* 1 (1998), 158.

Christ.⁴⁹ In this connection, Kuncheria Pathil points out that, "the essential element in the local Church is the common sharing in the Apostolic Christ experience through the proclamation of the Word and the Sacraments and the experience of the power of the Spirit which unifies them."⁵⁰

Communion: the Core of the Local Church:

The local Church is basically a community of disciples of Jesus Christ bound together in love and fellowship. The *koinonia* is its basic character. Etymologically the word *koinonia* is derived from *koinos*, which means to pool together or put together. In a general etymological sense, *koinonia* refers to the common sharing, participating, and possessing of something. The local Church, envisaged as communion or *koinonia*, has a twofold dimension, namely vertical and horizontal. Communion is basically a participation or sharing in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit – a divine life that is fostered by the Spirit of God. All the members share in "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:14). They are brought into the fellowship with the Triune God and participate in the divine nature by virtue of baptism.⁵¹ Sharing in the divine life is experienced in a special way in the Eucharist. This vertical dimension of *koinonia* leads to the horizontal dimension. The sharing in the divine life creates among them solidarity and fellowship, forms them into an *ekklesia* of God gathered in the name of his Son and makes them all brothers and sisters to one another (Acts 4:32-35; 2:43-47). That is why Cyprian described the Church as, "the people brought into unity by the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."⁵²

The local Church, understood as communion with God and fellow members, becomes a community, whose members love one another, participate in the sufferings and joys of one another and particularly care for the underprivileged and dehumanized among

⁴⁹ Felix Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations*, 198.

⁵⁰ Kuncheria Pathil, "Theology of the Local Church," 267.

⁵¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 7, 11; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2.

⁵² *De Oratione Dominica*, 23 (PL 4, 553).

them. Each member assumes responsibility for the welfare of all in the community.⁵³ Therefore, the local Church must be patterned on the model of the Jerusalem community as illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles (2:44-47; 4:32-37). However, the love and concern for others, far from remaining within the confines of the Christian community and imbibing sectarian spirit, must go beyond the denominational, religious and ethnic borders to embrace every human person in the society as the son and daughter of God (Mt 8: 5-13; 25: 31-46; Mk 7:25-30; Lk 4: 24-28; 10: 29-37; Jn 4:7-42). The very purpose of Jesus preaching the Kingdom of God and working towards the realization of it was to bring all people into a community of love and fellowship. The Kingdom of God as communion and fellowship is not an abstract reality existing in itself, but a reality that is present among people (Lk 17:21). It must manifest itself through the day-to-day life and activities of the local Church. Furthermore, the same element of communion makes the local Church a community of equality. Since all the members are "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28) and "baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13), they are all basically equal in dignity and responsibility. It means that any form of difference on the basis of race, sex, class or ethnicity should not impede their relationship with one another in the community and in the society at large.

Mission of the Local Church

As pointed out earlier, the traditional missionary method was principally a matter of establishing the visible Church without taking into account the socio-economic and historical situation of the people and especially their aspirations and hopes, longings and anxieties. Contrary to this, the mission of the local Church emerges from below, as it is deeply concerned with the concrete problems and issues of the community living at a specific historical moment. It proceeds from the reading of the signs of the time, which means, "to scrutinize the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live."⁵⁴ The prophets of the Old

⁵³ George Soares Prabhu, "Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church," *Jeevadhara* 15 (1985), 322.

⁵⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, 4; also cf. 11.

Testament and Jesus, the prophet par excellence, adopted this method (Mt 16:1-3; Lk 12:54-56). As the gospels demonstrate, Jesus carefully observed the stark realities of poverty, unemployment, sickness and misery of the marginalized which are coupled with their great expectation of a Messiah and the dawn of a new age.⁵⁵ He could discern not only the presence of God in all these human realities, but also his mission to be carried out as desired by the Father. Likewise, the concrete realities seen and experienced in today's world, as well as the innermost longings of the people are the signs through which God reveals His will for the present generation. The mission of the local Church is exactly born out of the dynamic encounter between the Gospel message and the aspirations and hopes of the people. The mission, instead of being imported from outside, must emanate from within, namely from the faith experience of the community.

Seen in this light, the focal point of the mission is no longer the establishment of the structural Church, but the Kingdom of God which is a web of human relations - a communion - *koinonia*. It is a new communion and fellowship with God as Father and human beings as brothers and sisters and with the whole of the nature as God's wonderful gift. Therefore, the evangelizing mission of the local Church consists primarily in becoming the pilgrim people of God with the message of God's unconditional love for the human person, a visible sign, a sacrament of "communion with God and of unity among all men."⁵⁶ It implies building up of the Kingdom of God by promoting an authentic human community which respects the dignity of every human person irrespective of caste, creed or ethnicity, shares with fellow persons without being selfish and fosters a sense of solidarity shown in dialogue and collaboration. Further, the Kingdom of God is intrinsically interwoven with the world of the poor: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20) was the good

⁵⁵ Cf. Gerhard Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus: The Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Community*, London: SCM Press, 1978, 33ff; L. Schottoff and W. Stagermann, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor*, New York: Orbis Books, 1984, 7ff.

⁵⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

news proclaimed by Jesus. To be at the service of the Kingdom means to participate in what God is bringing about for the poor, the weak and the marginalized (Mt 11:5; Lk 4: 16-21; 6:20). The power of the Kingdom of God could be tangibly experienced in India in the protest of the *dalits* against inequality and discrimination meted out to them. Being in solidarity with the *dalits* and getting fully involved in their struggle for a fuller humanity is the mission to be carried out by the Indian Church with the strong will and indomitable courage.⁵⁷ The mission of building up the Kingdom of God is a joint venture. The local Church, far from remaining aloof and imbibing a sectarian spirit, must strive to fulfil the goal of her earthly pilgrimage in collaboration with people of other religions, since their concern too is all-round liberation and humanization of people, especially the poor.⁵⁸ She is called upon to imbibe a new spirit of openness to discover the inscrutable mystery of God's presence and action in other religious traditions.

Autonomy and Communion

It is evident that the understanding of the local Church as, "a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated" calls for legitimate autonomy and a right for self-expression.⁵⁹ The self-identity of the local Church - an identity to stand up as a Church of the place and of the people - is to be respected, encouraged and guarded so that it would remain, "a Church in continuous and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions - in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own."⁶⁰ The autonomy of the local Church, therefore, signifies its right and duty to determine an identity of its own, and to shape its life and destiny without undue interference from other local Churches. This means

⁵⁷ Cf. S. Devaraj, "Dailt Christians and their Struggle for Liberation," *Vaiharai* 5 (2000), 45-65.

⁵⁸ Cf. Dan Cohn - Sherbok, *World Religions and Human Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992.

⁵⁹ *For all Peoples of Asia* Vol. 1, 14.

⁶⁰ *For all Peoples of Asia* Vol. 1, 14.

the freedom to live its faith in its own context, celebrate its liturgy in a creative manner, develop its own theology, spirituality and catechetics, and structure its life in accordance with its needs and challenges. Explaining the legitimate autonomy of the local Churches, the Theological Advisory Committee of the FABC observes as follows:

By living within their particular context according to the "sense of faith aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth" (LG. 12), the faithful will learn to express their faith not only in fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition, but also in response to their cultural situations. This response is the responsibility of the whole community which discerns God's Word and Spirit in its culture and history. This responsibility is unique; it cannot be delegated or substituted. Since the context of one local Church differs from another, every local Church enjoys a legitimate autonomy, while maintaining the universal communion, to shape creatively its own life, structures and fulfil its God-given mission in its cultural environment.⁶¹

Freedom is a gift of the Holy Spirit and a heritage of every Christian and every Christian community. If the freedom is repressed through the exercise of power and authority, then the freedom to which Christ has called us, namely the freedom of being the children of God by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:1ff) is stifled. That is why Paul is so stern in his admonition when he says, "Do not stifle the Spirit" (1 Thess 5:19). In this light, it can be said that autonomy of the local Church is the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of the Lord who brings them all together, makes them into a community of fellowship and communion, and bestows on them a variety of gifts and charisms so that they would bear abundant fruits for the life of the Church and of the society. It is by the power of the Spirit that they respond to the call of God in a particular life situation, discern the will of God for their community and carry on the mission of the Kingdom of God with utmost determination. As Paul affirms, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3: 17). When the freedom to self-

⁶¹ "Theses on the Local Church", *FABC Papers*, No. 60, 28.

expression is curtailed, the very movement of the Holy Spirit is crippled. As a result, the local Church runs the risk of no longer being a dynamic and vibrant community fully involved in the mission of Jesus Christ, but rather "becoming a community that hears dogmas, laws, rites, canonical prescriptions, edifying exhortations – and not the liberating world of the Spirit."⁶² Imposing servility on the local Churches and fostering immature dependence would turn them into perpetual infants by stunting their growth.

The local Church, therefore, should not be viewed as a subsection or administrative department of the universal Church. In each and every local Church, "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is truly present and active."⁶³ Pope John Paul II said that bishops are "pastors of particular Churches in which there subsists the fullness of the Universal Church."⁶⁴ Only in the concrete gathering of the people as one body of Christ, the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, the mission of the Kingdom of God, a vital community of faith is built up. As the local manifestation of the body of Christ, the local Church is Church because it has the essential ecclesial elements such as the confession of the apostolic faith, the sacraments, the proclamation of the Word, the presence and response to the Holy Spirit and the anticipation of the Kingdom of God in hope. All these elements legitimize and necessitate the autonomy of the local Churches. Hence, the local Churches should not expect Rome to answer every concrete issue that forms part of their socio-political and cultural experiences. That is why Pope Paul VI categorically stated in *Octagesima adveniens* as follows:

In the face of such widely varying situations, it is difficult to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission... It is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who

⁶² Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, London: SCM Press, 1985, 160.

⁶³ *Christus Dominus*, 11.

⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II, "Letter to U. S. Bishops," *Origins* 16 (1986), 339.

hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brothers and sisters and all people of good will, to discern the options and commitment which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed.⁶⁵

The responsibility of the local Church, as acknowledged by the Pope, in relation to social and economic problems must be applied to other areas as well.

At the same time, it is to be borne in mind that the autonomy should not be misinterpreted as separation or isolation of one local Church from other local Churches and particularly from the Church of Rome. Any local Church cannot remain alone imbibing the ghetto spirit due to the fact that the ecclesial communion is not a closed reality, limited to a small circle. It should have a universal openness and establish communion with other local Churches. As already noted, the principle of communion, which moulds the believers into a *ekklesia* in a particular context, is also the force that brings together the various Churches and keeps them in fellowship. The local Churches are in communion with one another, by proclaiming the one and the same apostolic faith, by being rooted in Christ and the Spirit, by bearing witness to the values of the Kingdom of God, and by celebrating the sacraments. They are called upon to contribute to the growth and enrichment of one another through "mutual solicitude, support and recognition, regular communication by exchange of synodal decisions and confessions of faith, intercommunion in the sacraments, collaboration in common programmes and projects, hospitality, reciprocal visits, material help, common meeting in Synods, Episcopal Conferences and Councils."⁶⁶ Only in communion with one another the local Churches can be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Thus each Church is both local and universal.

Understood in this way, the worldwide communion of local Churches united in faith and charity is called the universal Church.

⁶⁵ *Octagesima Adveniens*, 4.

⁶⁶ Kuncheria Pathil, "Theology of the Local Church," 272.

As John Zizioulas expresses it: "There is one Church, as there is one God. But the expression of this one Church is the communion of many local Churches."⁶⁷ Hence, the universal Church should no longer be identified with the Church of Rome. For it is a fuller reality. It comes into being out of the mutual participation and collaboration of many local Churches. Vatican Council II unequivocally emphasizes this communion: "All the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit."⁶⁸ "In and from such particular Churches there comes into being the one and unique Catholic Church."⁶⁹ This communion of the local Churches has an institutional guarantee. It is stabilized and concretized in the communion among the bishops who are the heads of the local Church. The bishop of Rome is the symbol of this communion. He has the responsibility of fostering unity and communion among the local Churches by encouraging coordination, cooperation and communication among them. All the local churches must be in communion with him. In this way, they are in communion with each other.

CONCLUSION

Needless to say, liberation from the monolithic ecclesiology and realization of the importance of the local Church is a remarkable achievement of our time. The historical study bears out that the Church was local by character in the early centuries and all the local Churches enjoyed autonomy and freedom to develop a healthy pluralism in their life style, worship, patterns of ministry, administrative structure etc. taking into account the local needs and challenges. In course of time, they lost their importance and were pushed to the periphery by the systematic efforts of the Roman Church for centralizing the ecclesiastical structure and strengthening of papal authority. Vatican II took a great step forward with its theology of the local Church by going back to the early period and rediscovering the original character of the

⁶⁷ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1985, 134-135.

⁶⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 13.

⁶⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 23.

Church. The bold venture of the Council should not become meaningless and futile. Being inspired by the renewal initiated by the Council, the various Churches in Asia and in the world at large must become indigenous and inculturated by responding to the call of God and actualizing His project of the Kingdom of God in their respective socio-economic and political contexts.

The urgency of building up an authentic local Church is all the more felt in India especially in the face of damaging remarks and scathing criticisms levelled by the *Sang Parivar* against Christianity. The prominent leader of the *Visva Hindu Parisath*, Mr. Asohk Singhal openly stated that, "the Christians are not loyal citizens of India."⁷⁰ The RSS chief K. S. Sudershan made a clarion call to the Indian Christians to sever their rapport with all foreign Churches and to establish independent Swadeshi Churches.⁷¹ The remark that the Indian Church's link with the Western counterparts would be detrimental to the interest and security of the nation is unwarranted and cunningly motivated and betrays a serious ignorance of Christian history and theology. We cannot ignore, nevertheless, the fact that innumerable Hindus still consider Christianity a foreign religion, a faith imported from Europe, and the Christians an alien body in the country. Colonial association, dependence on Western countries for financial resources, lack of involvement in the national stream, disinterestedness in practicing inculturation etc. are some of the reasons which account for this rootlessness of Christianity in India. The Indian Church, more than ever before, is called upon to strip herself of the Western image and become an authentic local Church immersed in the Indian reality.

⁷⁰ *The Times of India*, 22 March 1998.

⁷¹ *The Hindu*, 18th October 2000.