

ANew VISION OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO LUMEN GENTIUM

Dr. S. Devaraj

Secretary

Tamilnadu Laity Commission, Tiruchirapalli

The renowned Protestant theologian Otto Dibelius, in his well-known book titled *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche*, made a prophetic statement that the 20th century would be called “the century of the Church.”¹ Although treatises on the Church had appeared sporadically since the 14th century, ecclesiology had not assumed the central place in the Catholic theology in the mediaeval and counter-reformation periods. It may not be an exaggeration to state that the 20th century was really an era of ecclesiology due to the fact that the entire perception of the Church had been changed as a result of the reading of the signs of the times. It is to be noted that the Council of Vatican II was really a landmark in the history of the Church. It can be called the wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. The principal aim of the Council was to renew the Church from top to bottom so that it would become really a community of believers committed to the mission of Jesus Christ. The Church was undoubtedly the central theme of Vatican II. As Karl Rahner pertinently observes in his book, *The Church After the Council*, all the 16 documents of Vatican II deal with the Church.² They articulate the Church’s fundamental self-understanding. They describe its inner life – liturgy, role of the laity, ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing of the People of

God, ministers of the Church; they clarify its mission in the world and they elucidate its relationship with other religious traditions, its involvement in the society. Thus Vatican II has made a valuable contribution to the development of a new ecclesiology.

CHURCH AS MYSTERY

For many centuries in the past the Church was perceived as an institution or as a perfect society. It was primarily defined “in terms of its visible structures, especially the rights and powers of its officers.”³ For instance, Robert Bellarmine, an outstanding theologian of the counter reformation period, defined the Church as a society that was “as visible and palpable as the community of the Roman people, or the Kingdom of France, or Republic of Venice.”⁴ The medieval theologians reduced the Church to a perfect society and visible institution with clear-cut definitions, regulations, structures and boundaries that the mystery aspect of the Church was lost to a great extent. As Yves Congar aptly pointed out, the Roman Catholic ecclesiology of counter-reformation period was nothing but a hierarchology.⁵

Vatican II did not offer a simple definition of the Church, the sort of thing one might have expected from the first draft of the document *De Ecclesia* whose first chapter was in fact entitled “The Nature of the Church.” *Lumen Gentium*’s first chapter is entitled, instead, “The Mystery of the Church”. Transcending a predominately juridical and legalistic perception, the Council has understood and presented the Church primarily as a “Mystery.” The vision of the Church as communion, its relationship to the mystery of the Trinity, its intimate connection with Jesus’ message of the Kingdom of God, the reality of the People of God, the eschatological goal of the Church – all these theological insights have made us become aware of the inner reality of

the Church. This is a clear rejection of the theological rationalism of medieval theologians, which thought that the rich reality of the Church could be encapsulated within human categories.⁶

In this connection, we have to bear in mind that the Church as mystery is realized in stages. It is a divine plan of God gradually revealed and accomplished in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit and reaches its full manifestation at the end of time.⁷ Hence the Church can be called a divine reality, inserted into history, which cannot be fully captured by human thought or language. What is emphasized here is that the Church is not merely a social reality about which we can have an objective, scientific knowledge. It is a faith reality which can be known only through self-closure. Only by participating in the life of the Church can one really come to know it. To speak of the Church as a mystery is to affirm its divine origin, maintenance and destiny. From this it becomes clear that the Church cannot be defined in terms of organizational structures, authority and jurisdiction as done by the medieval theologians.

The Council's assertion that the Church is a mystery is theologically very significant. It means that the reality of the Church can never be adequately conceptualized and expressed in human categories. No model or image of the Church has an absolute value. As Pope Paul VI stated in his opening address at the second session of the Council, "the Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore, within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and even greater exploration"⁸ The same Pope, in his encyclical letter *Ecclesiam Suam*, affirms that "The mystery of the Church is not merely an object of theological knowledge. But it is something to be lived and experienced"⁹ Pope John Paul II also echoes the same view: "The Church is a great mystery, and how do we communicate mystery."¹⁰ Therefore, the depth dimension of the Church cannot be adequately explained through theological categories. It has to be

experienced. We can talk about the depth dimension of the Church in symbols or images, which can never exhaust the total reality of the Church.

Furthermore, the Council brings out the mystery of the Church by employing several images of the Church. *Lumen Gentium* enumerates the images such as House of God, Vineyard of the Lord, Flock of Christ, Temple of the Spirit, People of God, Body of Christ etc (LG 6-8). The variety of images also reveals the inexplicable and inexhaustible richness of the reality of the Church. Thus the divine and human, visible and invisible characters of the Church have been clearly established by the Council (LG 8, SC 2).

CHURCH AS THE SACRAMENT OF SALVATION

A remarkable theological contribution of the Council is the description of the Church as the sacrament of salvation. Even though the Fathers of the Church such as Cyprian and Augustine had attempted to bring out the sacramental character of the Church, it was Vatican II, an Ecumenical Council for the first time in the history of the Church, which affirmed the intimate relation between Church and sacrament (LG 1, 2, 9, 48, 59; SC 5, 26; GS 42, 45; AG 1, 5). The opening section of *Lumen Gentium* states, "The Church in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all human beings."¹¹ This image is a shift from the older and outmoded views of the Church which tended to perceive it primarily as a hierarchical institution. It has enlarged the traditional notion of sacraments and consequently opened new avenues to understand in-depth the nature and mission of Church in the contemporary society.

The unification of humankind is ultimately the plan of God for humanity. Transcending all the barriers and brushing aside all the divisions and discriminations, all human persons in this world must get united and become

one people of God. The plan of God has been realized in the person and works of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The Church, as a redeemed community of the disciples of Jesus, remains united with God and with one another. She is called upon to establish the same twofold communion in the society at large by continuing her mission for the Kingdom of God. As Avery Dulles succinctly observes, "Christ is the sacrament of God – the one in whom God's redemptive love becomes present in a historically tangible manner in the world. The Church, in turn, is the sacrament of Christ – the living symbol that he is still actively present in the world through his "alter ego," the Holy Spirit. Christ is embodied in the community of his disciples."¹² The Church can exhibit the love of Jesus Christ and become a sign and instrument of the unity of humankind only to the extent that she meticulously follows the teachings of her master and takes concerted efforts to foster unity and fellowship among her members and in the society at large. Therefore, the communion is to be experienced and lived in a concrete manner, to be celebrated through signs and symbols and to be made available through humanitarian services to the less fortunate brethren in the society.¹³ The Church has to become the sacrament of salvation in the different situations in which it lives.

CHURCH AS THE NEW PEOPLE OF GOD

One of the principal images of the Church enshrined in the dogmatic constitution of the Church is that of the New People of God. The Council rediscovered the Church as the People of God, which belonged to the original vision of the Church found in the New Testament. The Church at its origin was a people's movement, people's Church. It was the community of Jesus' disciples, a community of brothers and sisters, where all the members enjoyed perfect equality, fraternity and equal dignity and status. But in course of time,

the image of the Church as the People of God disappeared from the scene. But this concept was reestablished in the Catholic theology only during the years 1937-1942. This rediscovery was done by those who looked at the Church beyond the juridical point of view. They searched in the Bible and rediscovered the continuity of the Church with Israel and they understood the Church within the broader perspective of salvation history. In 1940 M. D. Koster, a Dominican theologian, affirmed that the true definition of the Church is found in the image of the People of God, to which men and women belong by virtue of baptism.¹⁴ This image of the People of God is further strengthened and vivified by the sacraments of Eucharist and Confirmation. L. Cerfaux also showed how fundamental is the notion of the people of God for Paul, much more than the concept of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.¹⁵

Drawing inspiration from the new theology of the Church that was slowly budding forth in the pre-Vatican scenario, the Council envisaged the Church as the new People of God. It is one of the principal paradigms of the Church as found in the Council documents. That is why *Lumen Gentium* has a whole chapter on the People of God (Chapter II) and it is significantly placed before the chapter on hierarchy; for the Pope, bishops, priests, religious and laity – all belong to the People of God and are equal as the members of the People of God. This image of the Church has become popular since Vatican II. As Daniel J. Harrington rightly points out, “if any single phrase or idea has served as the slogan for capturing the spirit and direction of Vatican II, the title “People of God” for the Church has done so.”¹⁶

In the New Testament the disciples of Jesus Christ are called the community of the new People of God. It is a community of those who believe in Jesus Christ or the community of believers whom God himself has summoned through Christ in the Spirit. The new People of God gathered by God through his Son Christ was called *laos*. St. Peter, in his first letter, writes:

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9). Peter simply calls them *laos*, which means the People of God.

An important term that is employed in the New Testament to designate the assembly of Christians is *ekklesia*. It is derived from the verb *ek-kaleo* (to summon or to call out). *Ek* means “from” or “from out” and *kaleo* means, “to call.” It means an assembly called together (those who have been called out or summoned together).¹⁷ Thus the Church is an assembly that God has called to constitute as His own people. But the word *ekklesia* was primarily used in the secular sense. In its secular usage it meant an assembly of free citizens. Looking into the Greek literature, it becomes clear that it referred to a group of free citizens “called out” to assemble for legislative or deliberative political purposes. It met at regular intervals to discuss all matters concerning the running of the city-state.¹⁸ This secular usage is found in Acts 19: 32, 39 and 41. As mentioned earlier, the word *ekklesia* is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *Qahal*. The Jewish Christians opted for the term *ekklesia* to show that their roots lay in the Old Testament and that they continued to be the Old Testament people of God in a new manner. Let us enumerate some of the basic characteristics of the new People of God.

1. Fruit of Divine Initiative and Human Response: The Church is the product of both divine and human initiative. God’s call and human response are important in the formation of the Church as the People of God. It denotes that the 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 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 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. The *ekklesia*, true to its meaning as explained above, is a community of people summoned together by God.

At the same time, we should not be under the impression that the Church comes into being solely out of the divine initiative. God invites all people to respond to the good news of His Son Jesus Christ. The people are free to respond either positively or negatively to the call of God. God's call comes to each one as an individual, but through one's positive response one becomes a member of the Church. In other words, all those who positively respond to the call of God and the voice of the Holy Spirit become the members of the *ekklesia*.

2. *Faith in Jesus Christ*: An important and distinct mark of this community of the People of God is the confession of faith that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Saviour of humanity. That Jesus Christ is the Lord is the sum and substance of the proclamation of the first Christians. The faith in Christ unites them all together and makes them into a community of disciples. The love and fellowship are fostered and strengthened among them, as all participate in the same faith proclamation. Despite the fact that they hail from different families with diverse backgrounds and belong to different ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups, they are very intimately and closely united with one another for the reason that all of them believe in the same Lord and Master.

In continuation with what we observed above, we can say that according to Paul the Israelites lost their privileges which they enjoyed as the People of God because they refused to respond to the call of God and accept his Son Jesus Christ. To explain that some Jews have rejected Jesus while some Gentiles have accepted him, Paul uses the analogy of an olive tree: "... Some of the branches were broken off and you, a wild olive shoot, were

grafted in their place to share their richness of the olive tree.” (Rom 11:17). Jews who have rejected Jesus are portrayed as branches broken off the olive tree, while Gentiles who have accepted Jesus have been grafted onto the olive tree. The Gentile Christians have been incorporated into the People of God because of their faith in Jesus. Thus all the privileges enjoyed by the Jews as the People of God are now transferred to the new People of God.

3. *People of the New Covenant*: The new People of God emerges out of the new saving initiative of God. God enters into the human history in order to bring salvation to the humanity through his Son Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus has reconciled the entire humanity with God. He has led the people from darkness to light, from bondage to liberation and from the state of sinfulness to a new life of grace. All those who are liberated from bondage by participating in the paschal event become the people of new covenant. The paschal event of Jesus is seen as marking the new and eternal covenant (1 Cor 11: 25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:13). The sign of this new covenant is the sacrament of baptism which is decisive for admission into the people of God and membership of God’s Church.

4. *Basic equality both in dignity and in responsibility*: The Council stresses that in the Church there is a basic equality both in dignity and in responsibility. All the members, without any disparity and distinction, enjoy this equality. That is the reason why the *Lumen Gentium* speaks of the People of God before it deals with the functional differences in the Church. “The state of this people is that of dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in the temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us (Jn. 13-34). Its destiny is the Kingdom of God...”¹⁹

In the view of the Council, this basic equality has a sacramental foundation. It emanates from the direct union of every believer with Christ through baptism. “There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to

the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:4-5). As members, they *share a common dignity* from their rebirth in Christ. They have the same *filial grace* and the *same vocation to perfection*. They possess in common *one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity*."²⁰ Even though they are engaged in different types of ministries making use of the charisms of the Holy Spirit which they received through baptism, they are not discriminated in any way. "And if by the will of Christ some are made teachers, dispensers of mysteries and shepherds on behalf of others, yet *all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and activity common to all the faithful* for the building up of the Body of Christ."²¹ Therefore, what lies at the heart of the constitution on the Church is the sacramental reality, which cannot be undone by the hierarchy and clergy.

If we see the Church as the People of God whose members enjoy equality in dignity and responsibility, it becomes clear that the Church can never be a community of particular class or a dominant group within the fellowship. The Church is always the whole People of God, the whole *ecclesia*, and the whole fellowship of the faithful. Everyone belongs to the Chosen race, the royal priesthood and holy nation. All members of the people of God have been called by God, justified by Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, there must be no clericalization of the Church.

5. *Universal Character of the People of God*: The Council brings out the universal character of the People of God. It is open to the entire human community. All who believe in Christ, irrespective of their race, class, caste, colour, nation or profession, can become its members. Breaking off the barriers like race, ethnicity, linguistic groups etc., it should remain as a sign of universal communion and brotherhood: "All people are called to belong to the new People of God. The People, therefore, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and to all ages in order

that the design of Gods' will may be fulfilled."²² "In Christ and in the Church there is no inequality with respect to race or nationality, social status, because there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all "one" in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11)"²³

6. *Priesthood of all Believers*: The Council unequivocally upholds the priesthood of all believers. It is a logical conclusion that flows from the nature of the Church as the People of God. As St. Peter writes in his first letter, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no more people, but now you are God's people" (1 Pet 2:9). The Church, the new people of God, is called to offer the spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:5). The entire People of God is prophetic, priestly and royal. All participate in the threefold mission of the Church: teaching, sanctifying and governing. Therefore, it goes without saying that the lay people participate in the priesthood of Jesus Christ and have their full share in the mission of Christ. The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity states: "But the laity, too share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own role to play in the mission of the whole of the People of God in the Church and in the world."²⁴ Considering the fact that their participation in the mission of Christ has a strong sacramental foundation, there is no need for them to receive any mandate from the hierarchy to engage in any missionary enterprise. "The laity derive the right and duty with respect to the apostolate from their union with Christ, their Head. Incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself."²⁵

At the same time, the controversy arises concerning the statement of the Council, which seems to reinforce the clergy-laity division. While dealing

with the participation of the People of God in the priestly office of Christ, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church maintains that the common priesthood of the laity and the ministerial priesthood, “differ from one another in essence and not only in degree” (LG 10). Many theologians today have difficulty in accepting the difference made by the Council. Because it might create an impression that the ministerial priesthood is of higher degree and the common priesthood lower degree. The theologians like Avery Dulles would say that the common priesthood belongs to the whole People of God. The role of the ordained ministers is to serve the faithful in such way that they must enable the lay faithful to exercise their common priesthood for the building up of the local community. The ministerial priesthood should be always at the service of common priesthood. The ministerial priesthood becomes meaningful only when it builds up the common priesthood.²⁶

4. *Lay-centered Church*: This understanding of Church as the People of God has opened up a fresh and new image of the laity and offered a new structural possibility for the exercise of their Christian responsibility. It must be recognized, first of all, that the laity are no longer simply a silent marginalized group to be ruled by the hierarchy, but they themselves are the Church due to the fact that the Church exists and becomes a vibrant community of faith only by their life of communion and collective witness to the values of the Kingdom of God. We cannot say that the Church is truly present merely by the fact that the articles of faith are meticulously professed, sacraments are regularly administered and hierarchical structures are firmly established. Even though these constitutive elements are indeed essential, the *ekklesia* is not fully formed as long as the laity remain passive without any opportunity for exercising their charisms in accordance with the call of the Holy Spirit. As the Council pertinently observes, “the Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is a perfect sign of Christ unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy.” (AG 21). It

is very legitimate, therefore, that they are in the forefront and assume the role of leadership in the local communities. Moreover, collegiality and co-responsibility, flowing from the bond of communion, demands that the laity, true to their vocation, involve themselves in different kinds of ministries for the building up of the local community. Considering the fact that their active participation has a strong sacramental foundation, there is no need for them to receive any mandate from the hierarchy to engage in the task of mission.

5. *An Open Community*: The new People of God is an open community. All people, irrespective of caste, ethnicity and culture, are legible to be admitted into the community of believers. No one is in a privileged position here, nor is anyone excluded. All merge into one community on the basis of the faith that unites them, which transcends all frontiers of national, ethnic, social and sexual distinctions and groupings. As Paul puts it, "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3: 26-28; 1 Cor 12: 13; Col 3:11). All those who believe in Jesus Christ become one people of God.

The Council's inclusive concept of the People of God is another major challenge which calls for a more "Open Church" with the whole of humanity as her own children (Lumen Gentium Nos. 13-16). The Catholics, Christians of other Churches, those who belong to other religions, those who do not belong to any religion but live according to the dictates of their conscience - all are related to the Church as the People of God, though in varying degrees or levels. This inclusive concept of the People of God has inspired contemporary theology to examine seriously the relationship of the Catholic Church with other Churches, other religions and with entire humanity. As a result, a new vision of ecumenism and a new theology of other religions are on the horizon.

6. *Historical People*: If the Church really sees itself as the People of God, it is obvious that it can never be a static or a supra-historical phenomenon, which remains undisturbed by historical events and social changes. The Church is always and everywhere a living people, gathered together from the people of this world and journeying in a particular period or time. In other words, the Church is essentially on a journey and pilgrimage. So the Church that pitches its tent on the earth without looking out constantly for new horizons becomes untrue to its calling. The historical nature of the Church is revealed by the fact that it remains the pilgrim people of God. It journeys through history towards the final realization of the eschatological Kingdom of God.

If the Church is really a historical people, then it is impossible to idealize it as something totally free from sin and error. Looking back at the history it becomes obvious that the Church has its own history of error and sin. It always journeys through the darkness of failures and wrong turnings. Our own experience affirms that the Church in India is swayed by the temptation of alienating the poor, temptation of being succumbed to the caste structure and the temptation of being more authoritative and autocratic. It has constantly drifted from the path of the Kingdom of God. Hence it is in need of God's grace, mercy and forgiveness. It is called to mend its ways and reaffirm its fidelity to the Lord (LG 8, Chapter 7).

Rediscovery of the Local Church

It is a matter of fact that for several centuries the universal and centralistic ecclesiology was so dominant in the theological thinking that the Church was perceived only as a huge institution governed by Roman Pontiff, the head of the Church, and obedience to him was considered absolutely necessary for salvation. 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 being 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."²⁷ Emmanuel Lanne has called the Council's rediscovery of the local Church a "Copernican revolution."²⁸

In fact the rediscovery resulted from the long and vigorous discussions that took place among the Council Fathers. While the conservatives were determined in upholding the universalistic, authority-centred and traditional concept of the 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 deal 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."²⁹ Having established the legitimacy of understanding the Church from a universal dimension, he brings to our notice another perception 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 everyday 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 megalo-organization.”³⁰

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 the Vatican II, observed that “the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents.”³¹ 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 the concept that the communion of believers in a locality is the Church of Christ, declared:

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.”³²

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 also a universal openness for, the Church is a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all people for the benefit of the whole world.³³ The principle of communion that makes the believers into a local Church is also the force, which binds together in fellowship all the 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, it is "a corporate body of Churches."³⁴ This communion of various local Churches is concretely and structurally realized when the bishops, in whom the local Church is represented, form one body or college with all members in hierarchical communion under the head of the Roman pontiff.³⁵

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. Louis Bouyer has rightly pointed out the insufficiency found in the ecclesiology of Vatican II and says that it is "a rather poorly developed doctrine of the local Church."³⁶ Moreover, the Council is not consistent in its use of the vocabulary referring to the local realizations of the Church. It has employed both 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.

Episcopal Collegiality

It is to be noted that collegiality is one of the significant rediscoveries of Vatican II. Collegiality implies collective responsibility in planning, making decisions and executing them for the common good of the Church. The early Church was collegial by character. There were collegial structures like Provincial Councils and Synods to sort out the problems and issues that cropped up in the early period. The fourth and fifth centuries witnessed a number of Ecumenical Councils which gathered to establish the true faith in the context of Trinitarian and Christological controversies that endangered the unity of the Church. But in course of time, collegiality was sidelined and ignored for the sake of strengthening the papal authority. From 340 AD onwards popes claimed authority over the whole Church. But the Oriental bishops and councils consistently denied the Pope's primacy of jurisdiction over the universal Church, while recognizing a primacy of honour in the entire Church as well as a primacy of jurisdiction in the patriarchate of the West. In the Middle Ages the monarchical papacy and a totally centralized Church began to emerge. The bishops were looked upon as mere functionaries of the Pope. They received their office by his favour and exercised according to his good pleasure.

But the Council of Vatican II changed the manner in which the authority was exercised in the Church by rediscovering and stabilizing the principle of collegiality. As Norman Tanner points out, "A huge amount of time at Vatican II was devoted to collegiality. Indeed probably more time and discussion was given to it than to any other key concept"³⁷ It is interesting to note that when the concept of collegiality was introduced for discussion in the Council, the great majority of the bishops welcomed it positively. At the same time, the conservative bishops like Luigi Carli and Ruffini of Italy under the leadership of Cardinal Ottaviani strenuously opposed the notion of collegiality and even

demanded the withdrawal of it. They were under the impression that it would infringe upon the monarchical power exercised by the Pope in the universal Church. Cardinal Ottaviani insisted that there is little or no foundation for collegiality in the New Testament. He said: "The fact is that Peter only has responsibility for the whole flock of Christ. It is not the sheep who lead Peter, but it is Peter who leads the sheep." In spite of such a strong and vehement opposition from the conservatives, it was finally approved by the council fathers³⁸. At the same time, we have to keep in mind that Vatican II did not give a systematic treatment of the principle of collegiality applying to the various levels of the Church's administration, thanks to the stiff opposition from the conservatives. It confined its teaching on collegiality to the universal Church and left to later development the application of this principle to other areas.

Lumen Gentium devoted a whole chapter to the hierarchical structure, especially to the episcopate. Among the many insights of the Council on the nature and function of the bishops one is of particular significance for us - that is the collegiality of the bishops. The Council speaks of collegiality in no. 22. Collegiality refers to the principle that all bishops, by virtue of their episcopal ordination and their communion among themselves and with the head of the college, the Pope, have a corporate responsibility for the unity of the Church and for the communion in the universal Church. The Council points out that collegiality is the design of Christ for the Church. It is only a rediscovery of a very ancient concept and practice in the Church, by which the apostles were linked to one another and to St. Peter, the head of the Apostolic College: "Just as, by the Lord's will, St Peter and the other apostles constituted the one apostolic college, so in a similar way the Roman Pontiff as the successor of Peter and the bishops as the successors of the apostles are joined together" (LG 22). Jesus Christ constituted the apostles under the leadership of Peter in the form of a college or permanent assembly. Today the bishops, as the

successors of the apostles, are formed into a college under the head of the Pope. One is constituted as a member of the apostolic college by episcopal ordination and by hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college. The Council explicitly speaks of two ways in which episcopal collegiality may be exercised: in an ecumenical council and, in a less solemn way, by a collegiate action of all the bishops throughout the world in union with the pope.

Despite the fact that the council discussed collegiality as largely pertaining to the papal-episcopal level, it has to be applied to other levels: collegiality between bishop and priests, collegiality among priests, collegiality between priests and lay people, collegiality among the lay people, collegiality between diocesan priests and religious and finally collegiality among the religious. The ultimate aim of collegiality is to build up the Church into a participatory community where the planning, decision making and execution of decisions are to be carried out collectively through dialogue and mutual collaboration.

A way Forward: A New way of Being Church

Vatican Council II was indeed a watershed in the history of the Church. Shifting from the highly structured and institutionalized ecclesiology, it has launched a new ecclesiology of participatory communion at various levels. It has made this great revolution in spite of stiff and severe oppositions from the conservatives who were determined to preserve the traditional understanding of the Church without any change or renewal. The *aggiornamento* initiated by the Council must be continued with determination and single-minded devotion. In the light of new ecclesiology of Vatican II, let us analyze how a way of being Church could be envisaged and promoted based on the documents of FABC.

In the first place, the communion, as pointed out earlier, is the central element of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. This awakening of the Church as a communion could be called a historical necessity. As Walter Kasper points out, "Together with the biblical, liturgical, patristic and pastoral revival which took place in the first half of the century, the awakening of the idea of the Church as communion provided the historical precondition for the Second Vatican Council, and for its ecclesiological renewal. One of the guiding ideas of the last Council – perhaps the guiding idea – was *communio* – communion."³⁹ The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in 1985, marking the 20th anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, observed, "the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents."⁴⁰ The ecclesiology of communion, as envisaged by the Council, affirmed that 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.⁴¹ Drawing inspiration from the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference firmly affirmed that the local Church is basically a communion. It is a "communion in the Spirit, a community of sharing and fellowship, of witness and service."⁴²

The participation in the life of communion with the Triune God fosters among the members of the local Church a bond of solidarity and fellowship. It forms them into a Church of God gathered in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and makes them all brothers and sisters to one another. Since all proclaim the same faith, share the same Word of God and participate in the same sacraments, all are called upon to love one another, participate in the joys and sufferings of one another and particularly care for the oppressed and marginalized among them. Each member assumes responsibility for the welfare of all in the community. "Openness to one another in sharing, mutual

concern and self-giving, attitudes of being *with* others and *for* others, making the joys and sorrows of the community truly their own” are some of the indispensable characteristics to be nurtured in the local Churches as pointed out by the Asian bishops in their Statement of the Third Plenary Assembly.⁴³

The love and concern for others, at the same time, should not remain within the confines of the local Church and imbibe the sectarian spirit. It is imperative that it goes beyond the denominational, religious and ethnic borders to embrace everyone in the society as the son and daughter of God. The communion with God and with one another in the Christian community liberates them from every form of selfishness and invites them to build up relationship with other Christian Churches and collaborate with them in evangelical witness and service of the people.⁴⁴ In order to make inter-religious fellowship a concrete and viable reality dialogue is to be initiated and promoted at all level with people belonging to various religious traditions. This is the reason why the bishops, in the very first meeting at Manila in 1970, pledged to, “an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of human development.”⁴⁵

Another important area of concern for the members of the local Church to express their solidarity and commitment is the massive poverty and social oppression, which is deeply rooted in the Asian soil. The bishops emphasize that the poor are deprived of access to material goods and resources for human life, because they live under oppression and live in social, economic and political structures which have injustice built into them.⁴⁶ Therefore, the local Churches in Asia, as a fruit of their experience of *koinonia*, must make an option for the marginalized and involve themselves in creating a new humanity marked by love, justice and solidarity.⁴⁷ This preferential option for the poor and the oppressed is seen by the FABC as an act of faith.⁴⁸

Secondly, in accordance with the new vision of the Church that has been blooming after Vatican II, the Church, instead of being perceived as a huge, powerful and authoritative structure controlled by the hierarchy, is understood in terms of smaller Christian communities in which all are considered to be equal in dignity and responsibility; all are endowed with the charisms and gifts of the Holy Spirit and all are committed to the mission of Christ. The communion of such smaller communities is the new model of the Church adopted and promoted by the Asian bishops. In one of the meetings of the Bishops' Institute for the Lay Apostolate of the FABC held in Pakistan in 1993, they clearly stated that, "we decide to adopt as our vision the model of the Church as a "COMMUNION OF COMMUNITIES" so that the Kingdom of God may become a reality in our land."⁴⁹ Prior to this, the Fifth Plenary Assembly spelt out the meaning of communion of communities within the Church in line of Basic Christian Communities. The laity, the religious and the clergy are, "called together by the Word of God, which regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of the Risen Lord, leads them to form small Christian communities (e.g., neighbourhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and covenant communities). There they pray together the Gospel of Jesus, living it in their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are in one mind and heart."⁵⁰ The Seventh Plenary Assembly considers the Basic Christian Communities as an ecclesial movement flourishing in Asia through which the local Church "desires to be a community of faith, love and service and to be truly a community of communities and to open to building up Basic Human Communities."⁵¹

It is to be underlined that in the local Church, understood as a communion of communities, communion assumes a participatory character. It becomes participatory only when all the faithful – clergy, religious and the laity- exercise their charisms for the building up of the community and to fulfill the vocation of the Gospel. For this the participatory structures have to

be established and continuously strengthened and activated. In this participatory communion, "all are equal, co-responsible and interdependent."⁵² Since, "communion represents both the source and fruit of mission; communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion" all the members of the local Church, true to their vocation, are bound to participate in the mission of the Kingdom of God with a collaborative spirit.⁵³

Thirdly, till Vatican II the ministry in the Church was identified only with the priestly ministry. The lay people who were pushed to the periphery of the Church had no active participation in the pastoral activities of the Church. They remained silent spectators subjecting themselves to the pastoral care of the clerics for their salvation. On the contrary, as a result of the total renewal initiated by Vatican II, a new vision of the Church emerged in which all the members would play an active role by virtue of their baptismal vocation. The Council unequivocally affirmed that the Church is the people of God, which included all the faithful – the Pope, bishops, priests and lay people; that in the Church "all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the body of Christ."⁵⁴ The Vatican II declared that the whole Church is missionary and that every Christian vocation is a call to mission. It highlighted the theme of the servant Church and maintained that "Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men of the modern world ever more generously and effectively."⁵⁵ It underlined the secular quality of the life and activity of the lay people and expressed the hope that through them the Church would be present in the heart of the world. Thus the Council opened a new era of ecclesial thinking along the lines of collegiality and co-responsibility.

Being influenced by the Council, the Asian bishops are determined to build up the local Churches in which all the members are co-responsible in continuing the mission of Christ. As they point out, "The principle of communion, collegiality and co-responsibility stressed by Vatican II demand

that we reexamine our ecclesial structures with respect to their purpose and thrust and recognize them to yield optimum benefit. The renewal of inner ecclesial structures does not consist only in strengthening and multiplying the existing parochial and diocesan organizations, or in creating new ones. It consists in creating the right atmosphere of communion and co-responsibility for an active and fuller lay initiation, participation and action.”⁵⁶

Fourthly, it is to be noted that the Asian bishops, having been enlightened by the new ecclesial vision of the Council, emphatically affirm that the local Churches must become communities of God in which all the members, true to their vocation, actively involve themselves in different kind of ministries. The Asian Colloquium on Ministries reiterates that the mission of Christ, which is universal by character, is not entrusted to a few individuals, but, “is incumbent on the entire community of each local or particular Church in its own situation and human environment.”⁵⁷ Since the whole community is missionary, all the members participate in the common mission, though in various ways. The Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC harped on the same point by affirming that the ministry of the local Church cannot be confined to one or any specialized groups, but “the whole community, every group, every person, with whom we relate in service, is an agent of evangelization.”⁵⁸ Therefore, the Asian bishops demand that the whole concept of ministry be completely revised in the light of a new ecclesial vision and, “a broad, more biblical and need-oriented concept of ecclesial ministry” be envisaged.⁵⁹ In accordance with the needs of the local Church a variety of ministries must be evolved, which could be of immense help, not only for the Christian communities, but also to respond to the socio-economic demands of the society.

Finally since the clergy are called to play the role of leadership in the local Churches, they must take necessary measures to initiate changes in the parish communities and be more creative and daring in entrusting more

responsibility to the laity. They must, "strive towards a willingness to listen and a readiness to understand and respect lay persons, their concerns and their decisions in matters of their conscience."⁶⁰ The creation of this atmosphere of mutual respect and appreciation is indispensable for a co-responsible and active Church.

CONCLUSION

The Council is the marvelous and stupendous gift of the Holy Spirit. It has made a Copernican revolution in the ecclesiological history by rediscovering the original image of the Church as the people of God, mystery of communion and sacrament of salvation. This new image should not remain an abstract concept but become a concrete reality by establishing dynamic and vibrant ecclesial communities rooted in communion and committed to the mission for the Kingdom of God. The Spirit of the Lord invites each and every one of us to creatively respond to the challenges of the Council and take every effort to march on the path of *aggiornamento* with indomitable courage.

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