



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

Reference from Catechism of the Catholic Church

**INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION
SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY**

PREFACE

In this document the International Theological Commission will examine some of the great themes of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*.

On the twentieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, the right approach seemed to be *both* by way of a direct study of the texts of the Constitution *and* via an analysis of the ecclesiological questions posed so sharply since its writing. First and foremost, it is Chapters I, II, III, and VII of *Lumen gentium* that form the object of the studies presented in our report. We felt it important to go back over some of the Constitution's key positions. These have proved particularly fruitful in the life and theology of the Church, in the service of that *aggiornamento* desired by John XXIII and Paul VI. But they have also at times been so neglected and distorted as to have almost lost their original meaning. In addition, we found it necessary to examine certain other questions, whose presence in the Constitution is not so obvious. Examples would be the inculturation of Gospel and Church or the foundation of the Church by Christ. These themes have achieved considerable celebrity in later discussion.

Finally, without in any way regarding the Code of Canon Law of 1983 as a document of the same nature, and with the same bearing, as a conciliar Constitution, we have nevertheless made frequent appeal to it, in order to bring out more clearly the differences, convergence, and reciprocal illumination that relate these two great ecclesiological measures to each other. It has not escaped our attention that, writing some few months before the Extraordinary Synod of November 1985, our work may constitute a contribution to the task which that gathering will carry out.

I. THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH BY JESUS CHRIST

I.1. The State of the Question

The Church has consistently held to the assertion not only that Jesus Christ is the Church's foundation (DS 774) but also that he himself willed to found a Church and did effectively so found one. The Church is born from the free decision of Jesus (DS 3302ff.). The Church owes her existence to the gift Jesus made of his life on the Cross (DS 539, 575). For all these reasons, the Second Vatican Council calls Jesus Christ the founder of the Church (e.g., *LG* 5).

On the other hand, certain representatives of modern historical criticism of the Gospels have sometimes sustained the thesis that Jesus did not in fact found a Church and that, moreover, in virtue of the priority he gave to the announcing of the Kingdom of God, he did not have in mind to found one. The effect of this way of seeing things was to disassociate the foundation of the Church from the historical Jesus. Scholars even renounced the terms "foundation" and "institution" in this connection and deny their application to the acts they referred to. The birth of the Church, as many prefer to call it, is henceforth to be considered as a postpaschal event. And that event itself was increasingly interpreted in purely historical and/or sociological terms.

The disaccord between the Faith of the Church, recalled above, and certain conceptions tendentiously attributed to modern historical criticism has given rise to a number of problems. To tackle these problems, and find a solution to them, it will be necessary to remain on the territory of historical criticism and use its methods, while at the same time seeking out a new way of justifying and confirming the Church's Faith.

I.2. The Different Senses of the Word "Ekklesia"

"Church" (*ekklesia*) is a theological term carrying a rich charge of meaning, bestowed upon it from the very beginning of the history of revelation as the New Testament discloses that to us. *Ekklesia* (*qahal*) certainly derives from the Old Testament idea of the "gathering of the people of God", both through the mediation of the Septuagint and via Jewish apocalyptic. Despite Israel's rejection of him, Jesus did not found a distinct synagogue or create a separate community in the sense of a "holy remnant" or a secessionist sect. On the contrary, he wished that Israel might be converted, addressing to her a message of salvation ultimately to be transmitted in a universal way (cf. Mt 8:5-13; Mk 7:24-30). Yet the Church, in the full theological sense of the word, did not exist until after Easter, taking then the form of a community composed, in the Holy Spirit, of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 9:24).

The term *ekklesia*, absent from the Gospels save for three appearances in Matthew (16:18; 18:17), carries in the New Testament as a whole three possible meanings, which are apt to overlap: (1) the gathering of the community, (2) each of the local communities, and (3) the universal Church.

I.3. The Notion, and Starting Point, of the Foundation of the Church

In the Gospels, two events in particular express the conviction that the Church was founded by Jesus of Nazareth. The first is the renaming of Peter (Mk 3:16) following his profession of messianic faith, a renaming that has reference to the founding of the Church (cf. Mt 16:16ff.). The second is the institution of the Eucharist (cf. Mk 14:22ff.; Mt 26:26ff.; Jn 22:14ff; 1 Cor 11:23ff.). Jesus' *logia* about Peter and the entire narrative about the Last Supper play a role of paramount importance in the debate about the founding of the Church. And yet, in present circumstances it seems better not to tie the question of the founding of the Church by Jesus Christ simply and solely to a saying of Jesus or to a particular event of his life. In a certain sense, the whole of Jesus' activity and destiny constitutes the root and foundation of the Church. The Church is, as it were, the fruit of the life of Jesus. The foundation of the Church presupposes the totality of the saving action of Jesus in his death and Resurrection as well as in the sending of the Spirit. This is why it is possible to identify, within the total activity of Jesus, certain elements that prepare the way for, take steps toward, or constitute the crucial stages of the founding of the Church.

This is already true of the prepaschal deportment of Jesus. Many of the fundamental aspects of the Church, which will only appear in a plenary fashion after Easter, can already be glimpsed in the earthly life of Jesus and find their grounding there.

I.4. Steps and Stages in the Process of Founding the Church

The steps and stages we have just mentioned possess, even when taken separately, some value as testimony to a dynamism in Jesus' ministry leading to the foundation of the Church. This is more clearly so when they are seized in their cumulative orientation. In them the Christian recognizes the saving design of the Father and the redemptive action of the Son, both communicated to mankind by the Holy Spirit (cf. *LG* 2-5). The preparatory elements, steps, and stages may be identified and described in their detail as follows:

- the Old Testament promises about the people of God, promises presupposed by the preaching of Jesus and continuing to maintain their validity for human Salvation

- Jesus' generous appeal to all his hearers, an appeal aimed at their conversion and carrying an invitation to believe in him

- the call and institution of the Twelve as a sign of the future reconstitution of all Israel

- the renaming of Simon Peter and his privileged place in the circle of the disciples and his mission
- the rejection of Jesus by Israel and the schism between the Jewish people and his disciples
- the fact that Jesus, in instituting the Supper, persists in preaching the universal Reign of God, which consists in the gift of his life for the benefit of all
- the rebuilding, thanks to the Lord's Resurrection, of the ruptured communion between Jesus and his disciples, and the postpaschal initiation into ecclesial life, strictly so called
- the sending of the Holy Spirit, which makes the Church a divine creation (the “Pentecost” of the Lucan conception)
- the mission to the Gentiles and the Church of the Gentiles
- the definitive break between the “true Israel” and Judaism

No single step, taken in and by itself, could constitute the total reality, but the entire series, taken as a unity, shows clearly that the Church's foundation must be understood as a historic process, that is, as the becoming of the Church within the history of revelation. The Father "determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ. Already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvelous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and in the old alliance. Established in this last age of the world, and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time" (*LG 2*).

At the same time, as this process unfolds, the permanent and definitive fundamental structure of the Church comes into being. The earthly Church is herself already the place of reunion for the eschatological people of God. This earthly Church continues the mission confided by Jesus to his disciples. In this perspective, one may call the Church "the seed and beginning on earth of the Kingdom of God and of his Christ" (cf. *LG 5* and Section X below).

I.5. The Permanent Origin of the Church in Jesus Christ

Founded by Christ, the Church does not simply depend on him for her external—historical or social—provenance. She comes forth from her Lord in a much deeper sense, since he it is who constantly nourishes her and builds her up in the Spirit. According to Scripture, as understood in Tradition, the Church takes her birth from the riven side of Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 19:34; LG 3). She is “obtained by the blood of” the Son (Acts 20:28; cf. Tit 2:14).

This fundamental structure is expressed in different ways through a variety of biblical images: Bride of Christ; flock of Christ; God’s building, temple, people, house, plantation, field (cf. *LG* 6); and above all, Body of Christ (*LG* 7), the image that Paul develops in the eleventh chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians, alluding doubtless to the Eucharist, which furnished him with the profound basis of his interpretation (cf. 1 Cor 10:16ff.). This formulation is given even more generous expression in the Letter to the Colossians and the Letter to the Ephesians (cf. Col 1:18; Eph 1:22; 5:23): Christ is the Head of his Body, the Church. The Savior “fills the Church, who is his Body and his fullness, with his divine gifts (cf. Eph 1:22-23) so that she may increase and attain to all the fullness of God (cf. Eph 3:19)” (*LG* 7).

