

Being Church Today:

Paradigms of Discipleship for a Context of Transition

Envisaging the Church of the future is a Herculean task. Especially when epochal changes render one's perception of the future bleak, the task becomes even harder. Amidst this aura of uncertainty, one needs to recognise that the Church as such serves as a paradigm, which has constantly withstood the test of time.

This is not to say that the Church has remained static. Rather, the Church has evolved in relation to the exigencies of its time and contexts. It has been iconic in the sense that it has not been annihilated in the course of history.

One has to acknowledge with humility, however, that the ways in which the Church has manifested or multiplied itself have not always been morally and ethically infallible. In this regard, ecclesiastical history has equipped us with important lessons about what the Church is 'not to be'.

To focus on the future would mean thinking not of how the Church can 'stay-put' but to reflect on the theme of discipleship. Discipleship holds together the past, present and future, because it characterizes one way in which the Church has witnessed to the Gospel through the ages.

Discipleship embodies both the identity and the mission of the Church: the 'being' and the 'doing' of the Church. The Church has proved itself relevant to its milieu by virtue of its discipleship.

Thus, crucial to the task of envisaging the Church of the future is the task of articulating patterns of relevant discipleship, which are presupposed to hold pertinence for the future. As discipleship characterizes what the Church is and means, it is precisely through relevant discipleship that the Church can actually become a 'pre-symbol' of the reign of God.

To further expound the nature of Christian discipleship it would be useful to talk of the Holy Trinity and the Eucharist as guiding paradigms of discipleship.

I. Holy Trinity: Challenge of Embodied Reconfiguration

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a configuration in the sense that it can be considered as the "outcome of a process of sustained and critical reflection on the pattern of the divine activity revealed in the Holy Scripture and continued in Christian experience."¹

Humans have configured the mystery of the divine in a Trinitarian manner. Though not without its problems, one can on a *Biblical* basis analyze God's definitive and Self-revelatory actions through the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. What is important for us is that the Holy Trinity helps us to place communion and relationships as key terms in understanding God.

Understood as a 'communion', the Holy Trinity can serve a heuristic purpose. It not only can help us to understand 'Community' as characterizing the very being of God, but also can enable us to understand God's actions of creation, reconciliation and redemption from a communitarian perspective as inevitable corollaries of such Being. Understood in a Platonic sense, human communities could be seen as mere copies of a transcendental community.

But given the existential dimension of Trinitarian activity through the acts of creation, reconciliation and redemption (all of which are carried on in relation to humanity, and which have the purpose of drawing humanity to the consummation of its purpose), one can with hope, and a lot of risk, recognize that human communities are embodied *reconfigurations* of the Holy Trinity at work.

This analysis of human communities as embodying the Holy Trinity, not only through their diversity but through a Trinitarian God at work in them, challenges us to focus on how Christian discipleship can be carried out in postmodern societies.

¹ McGRATH Alister E., *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford, 2001. 321.

These societies are not merely pluralistic and fragmented, but also contain identities which are realistically fluid and hybrid. Within this spectrum of diversity, how can the doctrine of the Holy Trinity be reconfigured with a missiological thrust?

1. Cultivating Dynamic Interdependence

The implications of the Trinity for Christian discipleship have increasingly been articulated using the notion of *perichoresis* (interpenetration). The concept of *perichoresis* has aided the process of referring to the interrelationship of the three persons of the Trinity.

This important idea is expressed through the image of a ‘community of being’, which, while fully allowing the individuality of the three persons, insists that each shares in the life of the other two.²

An example can be found in the way the Anglican Communion has appropriated this understanding of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Trinity as a ‘community of three’ has given the Anglican Communion a guiding paradigm.

This paradigm is based on cherishing differences and affirming the identity of all those different representations within the Anglican Communion. The *Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission*, well known as the *Virginia Report*, which centres its study on the understanding of the Trinitarian faith, clarifies this with remarkable lucidity:

“The unity of the Anglican Communion derives from the unity given in the Triune God, whose inner personal and relational nature is communion. This is our centre. This mystery of God’s life calls us to communion in visible form. This is why the Church is called again and again to review and to reform the structures of its life together, so that they nurture and enable the life of communion in God, and serve God’s mission in the world.”³

Understood in this manner, discipleship or mission emerges as a means of cultivating dynamic interdependence. It becomes a ministry of recognition, affirmation and celebration of diversity.

Rather than becoming the locus of integration, diversities unfortunately tend to become the locus of conflict. Especially in pluralistic contexts, where multifaith communities exist, this aspect of creating dynamic interdependence leads to mutual enrichment.

2 MCGRATH Alister E., *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford, 2001. 325.

3 *Virginia Report: Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission*. London, 1997. 1.11.

Resolute in this practice of deepening insight and conduct, religious communities can remain unshaken by the discontinuities of experience. Serenity can be maintained and joyfulness and creativity can be nurtured.

Using the Trinitarian paradigm to affirm and cherish diversity is important in a pluralistic world. At times this may be reduced to thorough-going relativism based on an ‘anything-goes’ formula.

Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to imagine that the paradigm of the Holy Trinity is not without its challenges when dealing with the diversity between communities. It does help us to affirm and cherish differences *between* communities.

Nevertheless, how does it help us to understand differences *within* communities? How does the Holy Trinity help us to reconcile the tension between distinctive identity and communitarian vision?

2. Distinctive Identity

In a self-confessedly postmodern society, a pertinent challenge for the Church is how it can be distinctively Christian. In a legacy which can be owed to post-MACINTYRE Christian ethics, one can see a tendency to “produce a theological understanding of churches as moral communities, which underestimates the ‘synchronic and diachronic plurality of Christian resources’.”⁴

We have to consider the extremely divided (or diverse) views, which have been held within Christianity or within a single Church on issues relating to human sexuality, women’s ordination, abortion, gene therapy and just war.

The Trinitarian paradigm helps us to be perceptive to those differences within churches rather than to engage in a homogenizing enterprise ‘un-self-critically’. As Robin GILL understands it:

“Postmodernity fragments, but it also challenges faith groups and their leaders to be distinctive. Perhaps the challenge is finally to articulate Christian principles, which are distinctive, but not exclusive.”⁵

The perichoretic dimension of the Holy Trinity challenges us to delve into our own religious sources to articulate new patterns of our distinctive identity. But at the same time, it helps us to temper these expressions in ways that are neither reduced to hostile binarism nor shallow relativism.

4 GILL Robin, *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*. Edinburgh, 1997. 50.

5 GILL Robin, *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*. Edinburgh, 1997. 31.

3. Beyond Self-Interest in the Handling of Differences

One pertinent challenge ahead for the Church of the future is to ponder and articulate how, on a praxiological level, interrelationship between members of different opinions and ideologies can be practiced consciously.

Discipleship as embodied reconfiguration of the Trinitarian paradigm helps us to recognise that we are part of a communion, whatever the type of the communion is, be it the *Church*, a *church*, (or) a *secular community*.

Understanding our embodiment in a Trinitarian manner helps us to move beyond self-interest in handling contentious issues. The point of handling differences is no longer self-referential, but communitarian.

We open ourselves to the other, place trust in mutuality and help to be shaped by the others. Reconfiguring the notion of *perichoresis* implies also openness to mutual correction. It can be translated as healing and handling differences and conflicts in the realm of relationships.

Thus, in an experiential landscape of competitive expressivity we can note the interplay of group assertions, be it elite or subaltern; all phrased in terms that conflate the political with the sacred.

Nurturing a Trinitarian spirituality can thwart the clandestine motives of parochial and ghettoising forces, which thrive on antagonism and vivisection. A perichoretic vision enables interaction and relationships to happen with much mutuality and freedom.

II. Discipleship and the Eucharist: Challenge of Relevant Re-enactment

1. Discipleship as Thanksgiving and Sharing

Appropriating the Eucharist in mission brings in mind two aspects of the Eucharist: thanksgiving and sharing. First, *Eucharistia*, from which the sacramental communal act gets its name, means thanksgiving and signifies that at the heart of the Eucharist a thanksgiving for God's divine grace lies.

The Eucharist reminds Christians of our identity as a *remembering* community, which constantly remembers God's grace. Constant *anamnesis*, which is revalidated for the future with the spirit of

anticipation and hope, becomes the horizon for the present in the context of the Eucharistic celebration.

The *anamnesis*, which takes place, is the constant remembering again and again of divine grace. Eucharist as an act of remembrance reminds us that discipleship primarily entails thanksgiving.

By premising our existence within the framework of divine grace and love, Eucharist teaches us that discipleship should take the form of gratitude. It is a pity that grace is often understood parochially in a condescending sense in reference to a 'fallen humanity'.

Rather than using the language of *gifts*, language of human *failure* predominates human understanding of grace. The point of reference of grace is God. Biblically, God is understood as the source of our being, Whose very being permeates us to the extent that we are created in God's Own image.

The central project of the Eucharist is gratuitous responding to knowledge, experience and confidence in God's definitive and self-revelatory actions in the past, present and future. This has profound implications for the mission of the Church:

"The Eucharist also embraces all aspects of life. It is a representative of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world. The Eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among those, who are sisters and brothers in the one family of God, and constantly challenges those who participate to search for appropriate relationships in social, economic and political life (Matt 5,23; 1Cor 10,16; 11,20-22; Gal 3,28). All injustice, racism, separation and denial of freedom are radically challenged, when Christians share in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Through the Eucharist, the grace of God penetrates, restores and renews human personality and dignity."⁶

Thus, through the Eucharist, the concepts of thanksgiving and discipleship are connected together. Confronted with the challenge of remembering Jesus Christ, thanksgiving and discipleship no longer lead to mere passivity or pre-occupation with mere self-survival or glorification of God for one's present gifts.

Rather, it leads to a realization of the reality of human existence in all its deprivation and disparity, and evokes a passion to incarnate or re-enact the narrative of God's grace in a relevant manner. Only in this way does the sacrament of the Eucharist gain an incarnational thrust. Again the *Virginia Report* makes it a point of focus in the life of the Church:

⁶ *Virginia Report: Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission*. London, 1997. 2.20.

“A faithful Church signifies by its life that it is the living promise of God’s purpose in the midst of today’s history. The Church lives in the present, remembering again and again (making *anamnesis*) the Jesus Christ event, and receiving in hope the promise of the Kingdom. In this way, the saving events of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and the foretaste of the Kingdom are brought into the present experience of the Church.”⁷

In light of this, it is important to analyse another related aspect of the Eucharist, namely sharing. As a concomitant of thanksgiving, in the context of the Eucharist sharing involves the gift of sharing in Jesus Christ’s body and blood as one family.

Also, the responsibility of sharing in the mission of the broken body of Jesus Christ involves sharing the suffering and pain of the world; a sharing in the eschatological vision of the *community of the table*, which has implications for the sharing of resources and responding to the challenges of economic deprivation and marginalization; a mutual recognition of diversity, through the mutual sharing of *koinonal* space.

Through the Eucharist, the ideas of Church and unity are brought together in an understanding of equality, in which the Gospel becomes credible, communion takes place, and human unity is restored and renewed each day through the idea of a common meal.

This fellowship meal brings out unity among the believers as they share the body of Jesus Christ. The Eucharistic sharing clearly highlights one’s own obligation of mutual love towards each other as members of one large family. It also enables mutual recognition of one another as members of faithful communities of Jesus Christ’s disciples.

On a wider level, it also involves sharing in the compassion of Jesus Christ in the *agapaic* sense of the term. It suggests mutual respect, equality, unconditional acceptance and the gracious sharing of resources and space.

Conscious participation in the Eucharist is a discovery of responsibility, gradually leading to a discovery of one’s identity in and through Jesus Christ. As one progresses in one’s discovery, one gets to understand the deep political-social and economic connotations of the Eucharist.

Through this process, a sharing of surplus values can remove, once and for all, economic exploitation and socio-political and

cultural asymmetries. This can most definitely lead to positive transformation.

It involves facilitating interaction and interrelationship, which should be premised on the need to facilitate a shift from the conception of selfish survival to the conception of fulfilment based on altruism and interconnectedness.

2. Reading the Eucharist Complementarily with the Open Commensality of Jesus Christ

The Eucharist has to be read complementarily with the open commensality of Jesus Christ, manifested in His table fellowship. *Commensality*⁸ comes from *mensa*, the Latin word for *table*: it means the rules of tabling and eating as miniature models for the rules of association and socialization.

Understanding the eating model of Jesus Christ as commensality, John Dominic CROSSAN identifies the table fellowship of Jesus Christ as the embodied ethical correlate of the present or sapiential Reign of God.⁹

Jesus Christ brings deprivation and marginalization into a systemic focus through His aphoristic conjunction of marginalization, poverty and the Reign of God. In a context, where the table was a “miniature map of society’s vertical discriminations and lateral separations”, Jesus Christ reveals the Reign of God as the process of such open commensality, characterised by non-discrimination and radical egalitarianism.¹⁰

The open commensality of Jesus Christ represents the kind of Reign He inaugurates. The trans-spatiality of His meals are “spontaneous occasions of fellowship denoting the hospitality of God’s Kingdom.”¹¹

Jesus Christ’s life involved rebuilding a society on the foundations of economic and religious egalitarianism. The very pattern of Jesus Christ’s ministry was a conscious and intentional conjunction of healing, miracles, table fellowship, compassion and open commensality.

This needs to be reckoned as a challenge, against not only the strictest purity regulations of *Judaism* or the Mediterranean’s patriarchal combination of patronage and clientage, honour and shame.

8 CROSSAN John Dominic, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. New York, 1995. 68.

9 CROSSAN John Dominic, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. New York, 1995. 54–74.

10 CROSSAN John Dominic, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. New York, 1995. 54–74.

11 HAUERWAS Stanley, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. London, 2003. 86–87.

7 *Virginia Report: Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission*. London, 1997. 2.14.

Rather, it needs recognition as a deliberate attack at civilization's unceasing inclination to draw divisions, invoke boundaries, perpetuate hierarchies and maintain discriminations.¹² It is this model of discipleship, which is required for the Church today.

The relevant re-enactment of the Eucharist calls us to a discipleship of participation in the life of Jesus Christ: a ministry of overt identification with Jesus Christ. This ministry of identification makes immense demands on the Church.

It is so, because in the present context, we need to realize that the Church's identification with Jesus Christ automatically entails identification *against* divisive and exploitative forces, as well as identification *with* the disadvantaged and deprived sections of the community.

Identification with the disadvantaged, deprived and the despised, and thereby, against divisive forces can be carried out by pointing to Jesus Christ' identification with the outcastes of His time.

By looking at the paradigm of Jesus Christ, we can interpret that every structure that is delimiting and discriminating is evil and sinful since it denies some people the opportunity to celebrate their own intrinsic worth.

Jesus Christ's life as a paradigm for liberating engagement needs to be interpreted to mean engaging in resistance and emancipation. Unless following Jesus Christ is actualized, Christian religious expressions will cease to find their true meaning and efficacy.

3. The Myth of Incongruity between Identity and Mission

The Eucharist gives Christians an incarnational identity as those who remember Jesus Christ in worship. As an embodied corporate practice, through its spatiality the Church becomes a visible community. In this concreteness, it makes *anamnesis* of its identity and so derives its sense of mission:

“The Church is not, for that period, a vague idea, a marvellous principle, an invisible influence. It becomes *something*, and thus can no longer be *anything*, gives up being *everything*, and is much more than *nothing*. This is a sacrifice, because being able to be *anything* offers flexibility, to be *everything* offers power, and to be *nothing* offers anonymity and therefore safety. By becoming something,

12 CROSSAN John Dominic, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. Edinburgh, 1991. XII.

somewhere, the Church locates itself in space, and is made visible.”¹³

It is not just the visibility factor that characterises the gathering around the table. The liturgy ‘makes present’ the memory of its identity; the gathering is made manifest as the miniature model of the Reign of God, where people participate in a meal. From these two should flow the Church's commitment to re-enact the Eucharist relevantly. From here begins its *dispersion* to live out the *something*, which characterises its identity.

The Eucharist challenges the myth of incongruity between identity and mission, because from its sense of identity the Church derives its mission. It also poses a challenge to the Kantian tradition, which assumes a dichotomy between the immanent world of human experience and the transcendent world of religion, through appropriating the challenge of the relevant re-enactment of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist reveals that the context of worship is deeply connected with the world. One can find a correspondence in the reflections of Mother Mary CLARE SLG, as she explains the existential embeddedness of prayer. She calls prayer the art of spiritual living.

She refutes the fallacious dichotomy that distinguishes prayer as being either “purely Godward or personal activity” on the one hand, or as being a “compassionate involvement with the world's pain, insecurity and frustration”¹⁴ on the other.

She views prayer as a “union with Jesus Christ in His Own redemptive action.” It involves being drawn into the “great cosmic war against evil, which is to bring into the here and now of our daily lives the fruits of Jesus Christ's victorious passion.”¹⁵

Eucharistic re-enactment is characterized by this faith in the ongoing intervention of God in history, which strengthens our faith to act against the prevailing asymmetries and imbalances in the distribution of resources and power.

Faith needs to be translated into an emancipatory impulse, leading to a quest to engage in justice and equality, and thus finds its verification in real life. It is on the existential level that Eucharistic re-enactment must seek for the distinctive import of its path of life.

13 HAUERWAS Stanley – WELLS Samuel, *The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives to it*. In HAUERWAS Stanley – WELLS Samuel (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*. Oxford, 2004. 20.

14 CLARE Mary Mother SLG, *Encountering the Depths*. London, 1981. 1.; Cited in ROWELL Geoffrey – STEVENSON Kenneth – WILLIAMS Rowan (eds.), *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*. Oxford, 2001. 694.

15 CLARE Mary Mother SLG, *Encountering the Depths*. London, 1981. 694.

III. Becoming a Community of Guests and Hosts

In the process of our reflection, we have recognized that the mission of the Church of the future is confronted with a situation that does not promise utopia. As such, the Church's discipleship can be neither an *ersatz*, an outcome of lazy and insensitive privilege; nor merely *cynical apotheosis*. It involves a definite and immediate response to the existing reality.

The challenge ahead, for the Church in particular, is to respond to the shifting centres of social value and ethos, which pluralistic and postmodern societies embody, as well as to the ragged peripheries that define the vicious cycle of contemporary socio-political-economic reality.

This undertaking involves a definite response to the predicament of conflict over how opportunities are given to all, how human potential is identified and nurtured, and how deeply divisive patterns of living are transformed to become more enabling and facilitative.

We have reflected on the Holy Trinity and Eucharist as two models of discipleship. The challenging possibilities that these two models throw before us are the possibilities of embodied reconfiguration and relevant re-enactment.

We have seen how these models can be appropriated in our search for distinctive identity and our engagement in a quest for justice and wholeness. What these models have helped us to do is to recognize that human *communities* form the locus of discipleship.

Hence models of discipleship need to be communitarian models. Only in as far as we posit ourselves as relevant communities can our discipleship be relevant. As such, the Holy Trinity and the Eucharist give us profound insights for a communitarian thrust for mission. What these two models teach us in fact can be summed up using the language of *guests and hosts*.

In his epilogue to *The Modern Theologians*, David FORD writes that the future of Christian theology could appropriately be related to its role of being guests and hosts. This paradigm can be appropriated for Christian discipleship today as well.

Both the Holy Trinity and the Eucharist provide us with models of *guests and hosts*. Making hospitality the basic premise of Christian living has profound implications for the wholeness that the Church can bring to its mission, because in the words of David FORD:

“It has the host's responsibility for homemaking, the hard work of preparation, and the vulnerability of courteously offering something,



while having little control over its reception. It also has the different responsibility of being a guest, trying to be sensitive to strange households, learning complex codes and risking new food and drink. Ideally, habitual hospitality gives rise to trust and friendship, in which exchanges can plumb the depths of similarity, difference and suffering.”¹⁶

Suggested Reading

- CLARE Mary Mother SLG, *Encountering the Depths*. London, 1981.
CROSSAN John Dominic, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. Edinburgh, 1991.
CROSSAN John Dominic, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. New York, 1995.
FORD David F. (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*. Oxford, 1997.
GILL Robin, *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*. Edinburgh, 1997.
HAUERWAS Stanley, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*. London, 2003.
HAUERWAS Stanley – WELLS Samuel (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*. Oxford, 2004.
MCGRATH Alister E., *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Oxford, 2001.
ROWELL Geoffrey – STEVENSON Kenneth – WILLIAMS Rowan (eds.), *Love's Redeeming Work: The Anglican Quest for Holiness*. Oxford, 2001.
Virginia Report: Report of the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission. London, 1997.

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Ecumenism: The Way of Poverty, Fidelity and Obedience

The Princeton Agreement from 2003 is a prophetic call to all denominations and churches. Addressing their consciences, its aim is to awaken churches and denominations from their tranquil lives and well accustomed daily routines.

What the sixteen authors of the Agreement volunteered for is not at all an easy job. We all have experienced how difficult it is to reason with someone who does not feel ill, in order to make her or him recognise the signs of her or his body and go to a doctor.

The authors of the Agreement want to reason and argue with the churches, helping them to realise that they live in a state of sin; and until they get rid of it, all their deeds and their whole existence destroys the credit even of their most sacred message.

The crowds of faithful believers cannot excuse those evil structures, organizations and institutions of the churches, which constantly deepen the division among Christians and as a result they enlarge lovelessness and exclusion, providing ground and munitions for the survival of hatred and the growth of suffering.

Notwithstanding, the task of the Princeton Agreement has been completed. The role of a prophet is only to alert people and announce what the Lord entrusted to her or him. The effectiveness of her or his preaching is not up to her or him to worry about.

Thus, the duty of the prophet is finished. Now it is the turn of the denominations and churches to let their ears hear and repent structurally and organizationally, and so to say redesign their community life and the tracks and forms of their thinking.

This article is based on the central message of the Princeton Agreement,

¹⁶ FORD David F., *Epilogue: Christian Theology at the Turn of the Millennium*. In FORD David F. (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*. Oxford, 1997. 727.