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Dismembered Body:

The Ecumenical Joints of Christ

It seems that the crucial question which Christianity faces today is the ecumenical question: how can there be so many vivid and blessed Christian communities who are not in communion with each other? What is at stake now is the credibility of Christianity, the vivacity of the Christian message in our days. It has become more or less obvious that the core of the challenge is our picture of ourselves, how we see our being as the Church. In theological thinking, quite some metaphors are used to depict and describe the phenomenon called the Church. One of them is the Biblical metaphor of Body.

I. THE PHENOMENON OF A METAPHOR

Apart from the theological differences, the history of the many schisms within the Church is marked by the struggle of temperaments and political conceptions as well. In the rhetorical field, however, it is also marked by the war of choices between poetic expressions: metaphors, allegories, metonyms or analogies. The paradigms of ecclesiology are poetic expressions, usually metaphors. They try to describe the Church in different ways, evoking the not-so-obvious sides of the Church by comparing Her with other phenomena.

If it is so, first we have to define metaphor, its infiniteness and its limits. The role of metaphor is to condense two distant pictures into one name in order to evoke their hidden parallels. In a way, metaphor is infinite, since we can find more and more parallels between the two pictures or phenomena. On the other hand, not all of the parallels make sense, so we have to limit our usage of the metaphor to keep it meaningful.

A metaphor can be exploited or cultivated. We are responsible for helping the maximum amount of meaning to emerge from a metaphor, and at the same time to avoid its implied traps. How to unwrap and how to avoid – there is a fundamental disagreement about this question among Christian thinkers, and only our wisdom can help us to discern. It is of the utmost importance to find and use the appropriate metaphors for the ecumenical approachment. Our metaphorical definition can create, but also disperse and destroy its object.

We are all responsible for the right choice of metaphors in ecclesiology as well. The most commonly acceptable metaphors for the Church are naturally those of the Bible. We do not mention now all the other metaphors for the Church, although it is worth to examine all of them and unwrap their possible meanings. In this essay, we only deal with the metaphor of the Church as Body, since we suspect that we have not drawn all of the consequences from this metaphor as yet.

II. A BIBLICAL METAPHOR ENRICHED

“Truthing in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him, Who is the head, into Christ, from Whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when

each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

This sentence is one of the basic texts which compare the Christian existence with being a body. Since the creation of the world we have been thought that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and our created icon portrays the Creator Godself. Then we learn in the redemption story that the Word became flesh to dwell among us, in order that we would be able to embody the Word and dwell fully in the world. The image of God, the Body of Christ and the enlivening Spirit are constitutive elements of our being-in-the-world.

1. GENETICS

Baptism and the outpouring and emanation of the Holy Spirit implanted a common DNA into us. As the science of genetics improved, it is high time to improve our understanding on the common genetic map of Christianity, in existence and functioning for proper inheritance.

The common DNA of a body can be found in each and every cell in the body, and the challenge now is to try to draw this genetic map of Christianity where our common mission and vocation, our common history and destiny, our common motivation and emotion would be depicted.

2. BLOOD-CIRCULATION

There seems to be an ecumenical consensus that we are already one in Christ, embodied in His Body through baptism, even though this unity is not yet visible and realised. Baptism creates a belonging to the Body, and we members become organically embodied in the whole. There are different members of the Body of Christ, who could not recognise each other as members of the same body, and they have been trying to block the blood-circulation among themselves.

The ecumenical adventure seeks to walk over the bridge between *already* and *not yet*. One of the things which we must do as committed ecumenical Christians is to restore the blood-circulation within this one body. Obviously, if the blood-circulation stops somewhere in a body, it is not only the limbs which die, but at the end of the day the whole body gets infected and starts to agonise – some more sensitive members have felt this agony for a thousand years and a half, some for a thousand, others for five hundred years.

5. JOY AND PAIN

All members of the Body are organic, interconnected and mutually dependent. The joy of a member is the joy of all, and the pain of a member hurts all the others. If one part of the body aches, it is difficult for the whole body to concentrate on its main calling. If one of the members is not in a living contact with the others any more, it dies, and the dead part may infect all the other members. When we amputate certain members, the whole body becomes paralysed, truncated and incomplete. This state of affairs, the pain of truncatedness, can be a driving force for us, Christians.

The joy of a member is the joy of all. The joy of the coming fullness of the Body will be overwhelming: the Body of Christ will shine like the sun and its clothes will become white as the light. It will be like the transfigured Body on Mount Tabor, where for a while His fullness was present as an abundance. This future joy can be a driving force for us, Christians, people of vision, to eagerly await the day of our unity. This day will not be the end, as the transfiguration was not the end but a station, a glimpse of eternity. From this event we shall return and fulfill our vocation and mission on the Earth.

EXCURSUS: VEGETABLE AND ANIMAL BODY

We know that the relation of vegetables to life is much broader and flexible than of animals and humans. So, the Church would be a vegetable-like body, the parts of which can be replanted and which can start a new life on their own? Some of the Christians imagine the Church exactly like this. It seems that focusing on the Church as a human-like body emphasises the fact more prominently that the Body is created and sent to the world once and for all. The people who belong to Christ, belong to each other necessarily and inseparably.

There are animal bodies – like that of the earthworm – which you can slice and they still keep on being alive, or even start a new life individually. Even though this understanding of the body-metaphor may provide some very meaningful insights, it seems more convincing to concentrate on the Church again as a human-like body. In case of human beings, the separated parts can not live alone, only a maximum of one of them (most of the churches would like to think that they are this surviving one), but still this part is incomplete without the others. In contrast with the way of dialogue, “an exclusive claim is like a bit of rock in a handful of peanuts. It may break a few teeth but will never provide nourishment to the body” (Stanley J. SAMARTHA).

Since there is only one Christ, there is only one Body of Christ, and each member belongs to this Body through baptism. The metaphorical possibilities of a vegetable body or an animal body do not explain the inherent interwovenness of all Body-members, and the longing and belonging of each to their unifying force, Jesus the Christ.

4. BECOMING AND ACTING

The Body not only exists and belongs together, it also acts and functions together. The real meaning of ecumenicity and catholicity is that we consider all the members when deciding on an issue or when conducting our business. We can recognise that the members of the Body are not only the churches and denominations, but also the spiritual movements, monastic orders, theological schools. The renewal movements in the Church are meant to clean the Body and also to heal and recreate the sick members, all of us. There are life functions, which only a certain member can provide for the others. We are prophets for each other, as persons and denominations.

For a Magyar Jesuit, ÖRSY László, ecumenical dialogue is the effort to promote and sustain the healing process within the one body. The kenosis (self-emptying) of Christ is the eternal model for the functions of the members of the Body. Death is the door to resurrection, as well as kenosis is the door to genuine unity. This kenosis should not touch our

Christian or ecclesial identity, rather our temporary popular identity, the dimension of historical contingencies. These accidentals could be abandoned and offered as a pleasing sacrifice to God, the Triune community of dialogue.

IV. NOURISHMENT: THE BODY OF CHRIST AND BLOOD

The Eucharist is the source and peak of the life of the Church. The Eucharistic celebration is the meeting point, where the Body of Christ, the Church, shares the Body of Christ, the Eucharist. That is how the organic unity of Christ upbuilds itself. This process evokes the ancient symbol of Christ as a pelican, feeding his children with his own blood.

Under two species, only the blood of Christ can renew the body of Christ. The martyric blood of Jesus is the seed of the Church. Blood has a twofold meaning: it means suffering and pain and martyrdom, but it also means blood-circulation, soul, and – ultimately – life.

Eucharist and Church – the two metaphors are each other’s analogy. We are what we eat, our food assimilates us. (There are saints who fed themselves only with the Eucharist for years.) We can claim that sharing in the Eucharist is the starting point for sharing in Church-life. We can also claim that ecclesial unity is necessary first to share the Eucharist with each other.

But we have to be aware that this snake which bites her own end would not turn out to be a vicious circle, where no progress happens. Centripetal ecumenism (where we concentrate on our Christian doctrines in order to reach unity) and centrifugal ecumenism (when we act together as Christians, and our united effort creates a community from us) have to go hand in hand (these terms are from a Magyar theologian, OROVA Csaba).

Truthing in love, loving in truth. In this essay, we followed the fly of some ideas which emerged from the metaphor of the Church as Body. We discovered some paths which remain unexplored in the realm of this metaphor, and we found some obvious limits and borders which we should not transgress, because they lead nowhere.

As we said in the beginning of our journey, we are responsible for our own choosing of appropriate metaphors, but also for our consistency and our intention to walk all along the way our chosen metaphor provides, striving and “pushing the neon” as far as it makes sense. May the Body of Christ upbuild itself, joint together in love, for the nourishment of all.

Suggested Readings:

BÉKÉS Gellért OSB, *Egyház a Lélek erőterében* (Church in the Field of Spirit). Pannonhalma, 1999.

Alan D. FALCONER, *Towards Unity through Diversity: Bilateral and Multilateral Dialogues*. One in Christ 1995/4.

ÖRSY László (Ladislaus ÖRSY) SI, “*Kenosis*”: *The Door to Christian Unity*. Origins 1995/5.

Konrad RAISER, “*That the World May Believe*”. *The Missionary Vocation as the Necessary Horizon for Ecumenism*. Unpublished lecture at the SEDOS Seminar, Ariccia, 19 May 1999.

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