

AN APOSTOLIC VISION FOR THE CHURCH

THE APOSTOLIC MINISTRY AND THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Introductory notes for discussion
Giovanni Traettino

READING:

"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ **There is one body and one Spirit**, just as you were called to **one hope** when you were called; ⁵ **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**; ⁶ **one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all...**

¹¹ **So Christ himself gave the apostles**, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach **unity in the faith** and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him **the whole body, joined and held together** by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph 4:1-6,11-16).

PREMISE¹

THE FRAMEWORK FOR OUR MEDITATION:

THE UNITY OF GOD: "I believe in one God, the Father almighty..."² **The Church as an icon of the Trinity.**

GOD'S PURPOSE:

"...he made known to us the mystery of his will according to **his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ**, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Eph 1:9-10).

GOD'S DREAM: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, **so that they may be one as we are one...** ²⁰ My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ **that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us** so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, **that they may be one as we are one** – ²³ **I in them and you in me** – so that

¹ I owe this premise to Jorge Himitian, *El Proyecto Eterno del Eterno*, Buenos Aires 2006.

² Nicene Creed.

they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:10,20-23).

PAUL’S METHOD: Unity of the spirit – Unity of the faith – Unity of the Body

1. THE MAIN VIRTUES THAT PROMOTE UNITY:

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”
(Eph 4:1-3)

2. THE THREE LEVELS OF UNITY:

“³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace...
¹³ ...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ... ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:3,13,16).

3. SEVEN REVEALED PRINCIPLES BY WHICH THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH IS ESTABLISHED AND CONFIRMED:

seven basic concepts to understand and build the unity of the Church

“⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6)

4. THE FUNCTION OF THE MINISTRIES

“**So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,** ¹² **to equip his people** for works of service, so that **the body of Christ may be built up** ¹³ until we all reach **unity in the faith** and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the **whole measure of the fullness of Christ**. ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him **the whole body, joined and held together** by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:11-16).

THE APOSTLE’S MISSION

The *commission* given to an apostle is essentially defined by his **being sent** (Greek ‘apostello’; cf. the Heb. ‘sjaliach’).

His *sending* or *commissioning* has to do with:

- The revelation** of God’s mystery³ – Knowledge – The plan.

³ “...he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment” (Eph 1:9-10). “For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles... ³ ...the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3:1-5). - As Jorge Himitionian has written: “The apostle Paul states that the mystery hidden for centuries in God was revealed to the apostles and prophets of his generation by the Holy Spirit; and that through them it was made known to the saints (Col 1:26). He calls this mystery (or secret) “the mystery of Christ” (Eph 3:4); “the mystery of his will” (1:9); the mystery of Christ and his church (5:32). The

- **The proclamation** of God's mystery⁴ – Preaching.
- **The realization** of God's mystery⁵ – The task of co-ordination.

In other words, obedient understanding (his *thinking* illuminated by an intimate, personal dialogue with God, by investigation and reflection in *prayer*); faithful transmission (the *word* of the 'apostolic witness', especially in preaching and teaching); and building God's mystery on the ground (through recovery and restoration, from which derives the *continuation* of 'apostolic service').

This *commission*, received "not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1; see also Eph 4:11: "**It was he who gave some... others...others**"), is the subject of his revelation, his burden and responsibility. The content and heart of this commission constitute the foundation which, before and above anything else, he is called to lay in the lives of people and churches.

THE APOSTLE AND UNITY

But what is the *specific contribution* of the apostolic ministry to and for **building** the *unity* of the *church*?

It is great in every way, because it has to do with the revelation, proclamation and realization of 'God's mystery' and with the responsibility, which belongs primarily to apostles, of "laying a foundation" (1Cor 3:10-11⁶).

The apostolic ministry is the ministry of unity par excellence.

THIS IS BECAUSE UNITY HAS TO DO WITH:

a. **the foundation** of the life (*identity*) and the very nature (the *inner* nature and structure) of **God** (2 Tim 2:19: "**God's solid foundation** stands firm"), revealed and manifested **in Christ** ("the image of the invisible God", Col 1:15). Father, Son and Holy Spirit > One.

"Christianity is an imitation of the divine nature" – St Gregory of Nyssa.

b. **the foundation of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.** In it the Son of God became one with the man Jesus of Nazareth: the divine nature and human nature in a single Person!

c. **the foundation of the union between Christ and the church**, that is, the foundation of the action and manifestation of God in history by means of the **Church** (an "extension" of the Incarnation!?) > 1Cor 12:12: "outōs ò Christòs"; Eph 1:22-23: "the

Epistle to the Ephesians is without question the one containing the highest level of revelation concerning the church. In it, Paul communicates the vision of the church as God conceived it in own mind and heart before the creation of the world; the church that God intended within himself, according to the pure desire of his will" (in *El Ministerio Apostolico y la Unidad de la Iglesia*", AFI 2002).

⁴ "...to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things" (Eph 3:9); "that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel" (6:19); "pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains" (Col 4:3).

⁵ "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care" (1Cor 3:10)

⁶ "For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light" (1Cor 3:9-13)

church ...the fulness of him who fills everything in every way"). Christ and the church > One.

"The Church is an image of the Holy Trinity" – Vladimir Lossky;

"The Trinity is the Church before the Church" – St Gregory of Nazianzus.

It is illuminating to consider the Church's progress as "moving from the Trinity towards the Trinity" ("...the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name", Eph 3:14-15). In this sense,

BECAUSE:

- unity is at the heart of the nature and the revelation of God (Father/Son/Holy Spirit)

("I and the Father are one", "...we will come to him and make our home with him... so that they may be one as we are one"; the dogma of the Trinity: "One God in three persons who are equal yet distinct..."). **The unity of God!**

The Trinity is revealed as a unity of persons in a relationship which is differentiated (*structured > episcopè*) and unbreakable (*Alleanza!Berith-Diathèke!*) of love (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*). This unity has to do with God's own identity. This unity precedes and is the basis of the unity of and for the Church, which proceeds from it and is nourished by it. Therefore, unity is not and cannot be optional. Certainly it is a pluralistic unity, but still unity. Relationship-based unity, certainly, but still unity. Unity cannot be optional because it is about God's own nature, and therefore the nature of the Church. (In this sense, too, "the Trinity is the Church before the Church").

- unity is at the heart of the nature and the revelation of the Church, which is the reflection and image of the trinitarian life of God ("The Church is an image of the Holy Trinity" – Vladimir Lossky). **The unity of the Church.**

The Body of Christ, the Church as a **covenant of** relationships, as a **fellowship** (cf. the Trinity) in which unity and plurality are inseparably bound together.

- unity is at the heart of the objective of a universal "bringing together" which is God's ultimate goal in history.

"...he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment (eis oikonomian tou pleromatos ton kairon) – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (**Eph 1:9-10**). "For from him and through him and for him are all things" (**Rom 11:36**). **The ultimate unity of the Universe.**

Therefore, precisely because *unity is so radical and central to the foundation* of God and of the Church ("the pillar and foundation of the truth", 1 Tim 3:15) and of the final "summing up" of all things in God, it necessarily follows that the apostolic ministry (both individual and collective), as a foundational ministry, must be, and cannot fail to be, a ministry of unity. Indeed, **the ministry of fellowship and unity par excellence**. As the catalyst and co-ordinator of the other Ephesians 4:11 ministries, as the central and ultimate reference point of *koinonia*, *diakonia* and the *episcopè* of the churches and of the Church, as the continuer of apostolic service in the church (historical continuity), as the one ultimately responsible for

faithfulness to the truth of the 'original apostolic testimony' (*i.e.*: Old and New Testament). **The apostle as guarantor, continuer and builder of the unity of the church.**

BUILDING UNITY

The authority (*exousia*) conferred on the apostle (remember the Hebrew *sjaliach* and the rabbinical principle by which he who is sent is equivalent to the sender!) is closely related to the *commission* he has to carry out and for which – as a 'commissioned representative' and '**plenipotentiary**' – he is responsible before God.

However, this authority is authenticated and established not only by his faithfulness to the Word, but also by his fellowship with and submission to the **council of the apostles**. See for example the so-called "Council of Jerusalem" (Acts 15); but also the apostle Paul's attitude when, three years after Damascus, he goes to stay with Peter for 15 days (Gal 1:18), and after fourteen years of intensive ministry, goes back to the most highly respected apostles – James, Cephas and John – to share with them the content of his preaching and receive their affirmation and approval (an interesting precedent for the development of the practice of 'recognition!'), and they reassure him that he has not "*run his race in vain*" (Gal 2:2). Or again, the humility shown by Peter in accepting correction and reproof when necessary (Gal 2:11-16). Paul's boldness (to tell the truth, sometimes rather rough-edged) is often praised; less often Peter's humility, "gained" from his experience of great weakness.

PERSONAL EPISKOPÈ

The building process is carried forward (the theme of *continuity* = fellowship and truth) with the two elements which make up the apostle's work:

- episkopè* (Acts 1:20) and
- diakonìa* (Acts 1:25).

That is, the two essential functions of:

- a. government* (through guidance, oversight, discernment, connection), and
- b. service*

which in practice are delegated to the *offices* (not to be confused with *ministries*) – apostolically appointed (the '12'/the New Testament), in continuity with and in the footsteps of the Old Testament – of:

- a. elders* and
- b. deacons*

who are, so to speak, 'the right arm' and 'the left arm' of apostolic action in the government of the local churches.

COLLEGIAL EPISKOPÈ

While there is a **personal** and, so to speak, **individual dimension**, both in the *calling* and in the *commissioning* of the apostle, it is undoubtedly true that the apostolic commission is not exhausted by its personal dimension, but also, by its nature and because of the purposes of its action, requires for its correct functioning a "**collegial**" dimension. There is an *episkopè* and a *diakonìa* belonging to the individual apostle (with geographical boundaries and limits in time). But there is also an *episkopè* and a *diakonìa* belonging collectively ('*in solido*') to all the apostles in mutual relationship and fellowship (Acts 15:28: "*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*"). In the New Testament there is a clear indication, and in any case a clear understanding, of the collegial nature of the apostolic ministry; of apostolicity as a service for the unity and 'catholicity' of the Church (*in time* >

unity, historical continuity; *in space* > the geographical dimension – universality, and *in truth* > faith, doctrine, the Word, restoration...)

THE KOINONIA OF THE APOSTLES

Thus **the koinonia of the apostles** is necessary to the connection, co-ordination and organic (and increasingly and in future also organizational = *visible!*) unity of the local (in their trans-local dimension), national and continental fellowships (that is, the international, universal, 'catholic' dimension) over which they preside (*episkopè*).

This allows recognition of a space for the exercise of individual ministry, but always *in the bonds of unity and truth* with the collective *episkopè*, the sphere and responsibility of collegial apostolic government. **The apostolic nature of the Church is ultimately the responsibility of the apostles in a mutual fellowship of love and truth.**

Koinonia and unity among the apostles are necessary as an authoritative *service (diakonia)* to the universal Church, so that it can grow in love and truth (from the truth in love to the truth in unity) in our individual churches, and in the whole Church, with a view to the 'fulness' already expressed in Christ, and which remains God's necessary goal for the entire Church.

EXPERIENCE – *My/our experience along the road towards Unity and Reconciliation*

WHY DO YOU (still) BELIEVE IN THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH? *This calls into question my experience!*

- **The level/time of faith: *Ephesians 4 – John 17 – Revelation 21*** > "There is one body" – "that all of them may be one" – "God's dwelling place among the people"
- **The level/time of history:** *Our experience – "History has short legs"*
- **In between: the space/time for reconciliation** – *The tension between what we are and what we should be:*
 - *The process of reconciliation is a faith process ("We welcome them from a distance")*
 - *Once again, it has to do with "Your kingdom come on earth...". As it is in heaven, so it shall be on earth! Where are the Catholics? Where are the Evangelicals? The real question is: Where are the Christians?*
 - *The need for a spirituality of reconciliation*
- **Today's Word is an expression of the time of faith**
- **Our experience of embarrassing divisions: the time of history**
- **In between: the space, the pain and suffering of reconciliation**

This space is where our progressive experience of fellowship and reconciliation (even before it becomes an experience of co-operation) is situated: our witness to the will of God and of faith! This is where we are inspired and motivated; where we experience the joy of fellowship and the impact and the wounds of history.

A WORD OF HOPE – A special *kairos*: the 20th century

The century that recently ended was a century of great tragedies, but also of great testimonies of reconciliation: **men and movements** on the frontiers of the future! Jorge Himitian has spoken of "an important turning-point".⁷

- **Some movements:** the biblical movement, the movement for Christian unity, the movement leading to Vatican II, missionary movements, movements to rediscover the foundations of Christian life on both the Catholic (Cursillos, Neocatechumenate, Focolarini) and evangelical sides. In this context, a special role belongs to the **pentecostal and charismatic movement**; on both the evangelical and Catholic sides!

THE ORIGINAL VOCATION AND DESTINY OF THE PENTECOSTAL/CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

- The Pentecostal/Charismatic movement is rooted in a number of different traditions: Afro-American oral culture, the *Holiness* church movement, *Roman Catholicism*, *evangelicalism*, the *radical/critical* tradition and the *ecumenical* movement (Walter Hollenweger).
- The Pentecostal/Charismatic movement demonstrates an extraordinary ability to influence and bless all Christian denominations. One might say that it is the heart-cry of a church that has become impoverished on the one hand and dried-up on the other; a church that has lost its first love. A cry expressing hunger and thirst for the Presence, hunger and thirst for God: a church crying out, like Moses, "*If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here*" (Exod 33:15). It is the heart-cry of an impoverished church, joining with the cry that goes up from the destitute of the earth.
- God's broken heart meets the broken-heartedness of the Church (God's groanings in us), and a river of Presence comes forth from the heart of God. A river of Presence bursts forth from our wounded hearts now indwelt and filled, overflowing with the Holy Spirit. At the root of this cry and of these groanings is the same Holy Spirit who is "*set on life and peace*". **Not just life! Peace too! Life and peace for mankind, life and peace for the church, life and peace for the universe.**
- **Therefore I believe that the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, as well as a movement for the revival and renewal of lives, is also a movement for unity and reconciliation within the church.** This is because it is united in its causes and its inspiration, and united in its objectives and its hope. Therefore it is qualified to step forward as an instrument of **life** and **reconciliation** for the church, because it is the very invocation of **life and peace**! It is the same river flowing from the heart of God that touches all the coasts of the Christian archipelago.

THE APOSTOLIC FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL

WHO WE ARE

⁷ "In our generation an important turning-point has been reached. The numerous divisions which have taken place from the Reformation onwards as diverging lines have begun to weaken and bend to become converging ones. Today there is a very precious rapprochement between the various sectors of the church. The aggressive, bellicose attitudes of the past are being laid aside. There is dialogue, openness, reflectiveness, fellowship, interchange, reconciliation... At the same time there are dangers, some of them serious. For example: a unity without holiness, without truth, without the purity of the faith. This produces a human ecumenism, in which what one believes or how one lives is not important. Obviously this is not the unity that God is seeking" – Jorge Himitian, *art. cit.*

A group of apostles in relationship with common values and vision for reconciliation and edification of the Body of Christ

THE NATURE OF APOSTLESHIP

1. **Revelation** - Revelation of the mystery of Christ and of the Body of Christ..
2. **Authority** - First translocal ministry with authority to a network of churches/ministries
3. **Recognition** - Recognition from other apostles.

MISSION STATEMENT

- To develop peer level fellowship
- To enrich and inspire one another
- To encourage cooperation to accelerate unity in the Body of Christ
- To support and protect one another
- To provoke the Church to accomplish its whole mission in the World