PLURALISM AND THE
UNITY OF THE CHURCH

By JAMES QUINN

IN RECENT years the word pluralism has taken on a new lease of life. The 1964 edition of *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* lists two usages. The first is ecclesiastical: 'the holding by one person of more than one office at once, esp. ecclesiastical livings'. The second is philosophical: 'a philosophy that recognizes more than one principle of being (opp. to *monism*) or more than two (opp. to *monism* and *dualism*)'.

The 1972 edition adds another usage: 'a (condition of) society in which different ethnic, etc., groups preserve their own customs'. A 'plural society' is 'one in which pluralism is found'. The word has thus taken on a sociological meaning.

In this last sense the word found its way into the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It appears twice: surprisingly enough, not in the Declaration on Religious Freedom, but in the Declaration on Christian Education. There one finds a reference to state monopoly of schools, which, the Declaration affirms:

> . . . goes against the inborn rights of the human person, against the advance and spread of culture itself, against the peaceful association of citizens, and against the pluralism that is present in very many societies today (6).

The following section speaks of pluralism in the context of moral and religious freedom:

> . . . the Church gives high praise to those civil authorities and civil societies which take account of the pluralism of present-day society and provide for due religious freedom by giving help to families, so that in all schools children may be educated in accordance with the moral and religious principles proper to these families (7).

This makes no judgment on the value of pluralism as such. It accepts the fact of pluralism in the sphere of morals and religion, with its implications for religious freedom. But another question has very recently come into public debate: the question of pluralism

within the Church. The purpose of this article is to attempt to explore the relation between pluralism and the unity of the Church. Can we apply the analogy of pluralism in human society to a similar pluralism within the Church? Can we assign a legitimate and honoured place to pluralism in christian theology? If we can, what are the conditions for a healthy pluralism, and what are its limits? Do we need in consequence to redefine our ideas on catholic unity?

The subject is by no means an academic one. It was a main theme in the Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation within the Church (*Paterna cum benevolentia*), dated December 8, 1974.[1]

We can begin by recognizing that the Church is a pluralist society in the sense of a 'society in which different . . . groups preserve their own customs'. Even in the religious sphere, the Church does not change society into a monolithic cultural system. The Constitution on the Church speaks of the organic unity of a Church in which churches of different rite 'enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical usage, theological and spiritual patrimony' (23).

The Decree on Ecumenism shows that diversity can throw into greater prominence the essential catholicity of the Church:

> While maintaining unity in necessary matters, all in the Church, according to the gift given to each, should preserve due freedom: in the various forms of the spiritual life and of discipline, in the diversity of liturgical rites, and indeed in the theological elaboration of revealed truth as well; and in all things they should seek charity. In this way they will manifest more and more fully the genuine catholicity and the genuine apostolicity of the Church (4).

There is then within the Church scope for diversity, not only in secular attitudes to politics, culture and conventions, but also in liturgy, canon law, spirituality and in different systems of theology as they seek to explore divine truth. The question must now be faced: Can the Church be a pluralist society in other and more fundamental ways?

To answer this question, we must examine the kind of unity that is proper to the Church. We are dealing with a unique kind of society, with a unique role in the world. We may describe it as a very complex society, containing and transcending a number of tensions within its own unique unity.

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[1] *Osservatore Romano*, english ed. (Dec 26, 1974). Cf also Mgr Philippe Delhaye, 'Reflection on the Problem of Pluralism in the Church', *ibid.* (Feb. 27, 1975).

The Church is a divine mystery, and at the same time a pilgrim Church, sharing the joys and sorrows of humanity. It is at once one and many: an assembly of individuals who yet form one supernatural communion. It is at once universal and local: the Church of Corinth, and also the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ. It is the Body of Christ, incarnate in the world, and at the same time it is a kingdom of the Spirit, its true life accessible only to faith.

The Church is a community of faith. It is the guardian of a unique set of beliefs, which it proclaims with the consciousness of a providential guidance preserving it from error. It is the custodian of the deposit of faith, the unalterable teaching which it has received from the apostles; at the same time, it hands on that deposit of faith, enriched by its own understanding of it, not by adding to it but by penetrating ever more deeply into its riches.

The Church sees its gift of infallibility as a gift to the whole Church. Yet its infallibility is expressed through the special ministry of pope and bishops. It possesses a primacy of authority, yet admits a primacy of conscience for the individual: in the intention of God, the individual conscience should be guided by the authoritative voice of the Church, but the individual has the personal responsibility of making that voice his own.

There is thus a necessary tension within the Church between the claims of this world and the next, between the Church of today and the Church of the apostles, between the local Church and the universal Church, between the rights of the individual and the rights of the community, between the Church as institution and the Church as vehicle of the Spirit.

What we have here are tensions, not in opposition but in equilibrium. There is here a pluralism, not of subversion or co-existence but of peaceful and fruitful harmony. Yet in this rich complexity of the Church's life there is always a danger of over-emphasis on one aspect to the detriment of another. But we must always remember in these areas that what threatens unity is not pluralism as such, but only our failure to maintain this kind of pluralism within the dynamic tension of the Church's unity. The pluralism of the Church's being is no more a threat to its unity than the pluralism of persons is a threat to the unity of the Blessed Trinity, or the unfathomable riches of the mystery of Christ a threat to his essential oneness.

What of pluralism in matters of faith and morals? Perhaps we may clear the ground with the aid of a previous set of articles in

The Way.[2] When we speak of 'faith' in this context, we are speaking of dogmatic faith, not precisely of 'theology'. Theology in this context is a systematized explanation of the faith. And at this point we are dealing with faith as the established faith of the Church. Can we allow different interpretations of what has already been proclaimed as the faith of the Church?

There is an important distinction between faith and its formulation. This was pointed out by Pope John XXIII in his opening speech at the Second Vatican Council. His main point was pastoral, not theological. He wanted the Council to 'incarnate' the teaching of the Church in a language and style suited to the contemporary world. But he insisted on the need for fidelity to the meaning of the age-old truths of the faith.

In view of the importance of this statement, we give a fairly literal translation of it, following the text in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*:[3]

> It was not necessary to call an Ecumenical Council simply to engage in such discussion. But at the present time there is need for the whole of christian doctrine, no part subtracted from it, to be received in our times by all with new zeal, with serene and peaceful minds, handing on that careful way of conceiving and formulating words that shines out especially in the acts of the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council.
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> It is necessary that, as all sincere supporters of the christian, catholic and apostolic reality (*rei*) ardently desire, the same doctrine should be more widely and deeply understood, and that minds should be more fully imbued and formed by it.
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> It is necessary that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which faithful obedience is to be given, should be studied and expounded in the way that our times demand. For the deposit of faith – the truths which are contained in our holy doctrine – is one thing; the manner in which the same truths are to be proclaimed, yet with the same meaning and the same import, is another.
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> Very great importance will have to be assigned to this manner, and, if need be, patient work spent on it; that is, those ways of expounding matters must be introduced which may be more in accordance with the teaching office (*magisterio*), the character of which is especially pastoral.

'With the same meaning and the same import': this phrase is

borrowed from St Vincent of Lerins[4] and reflects his teaching on the
linear development of doctrine. (The phrase has mysteriously dis-
appeared from the version of the speech given in the Abbott-
Gallagher edition of *The Documents of Vatican II*.[5]) The 'meaning and
import' of statements of the faith are unalterable; the formulation
may be changed. For beyond both formulation and meaning is a
reality of revelation: statements of the faith are statements about
reality.

The content of faith, the reality it communicates, is expressed in
words. Indeed, if there is to be any communication of the faith, it
must necessarily be through words. Like scripture, the teaching
authority of the Church, the *magisterium*, uses words to express the
reality of faith. Like the teaching of scripture, the teaching of the
magisterium is not imprisoned in words. It does not lose its vitality
with any shift of language. Words may change in meaning, or in
shade of meaning, but what they were intended to express remains
unalterably true. The content of faith does not become relative
because the words in which it is expressed change in meaning. The
change in meaning in the formulation of a truth does not make that
truth false, nor does it call in question the legitimacy of the *magiste-
rium*.

In raising the question of a re-formulation of truths, Pope John
had a pastoral aim: to communicate to the world of today the age-
old and unchanging faith. But now new questions are being asked,
not in regard to the formulation of the faith but in regard to the
magisterium itself.

Behind this questioning there are more fundamental questions.
Can truth be known in any but a relative way? Can truth be ex-
pressed in any but a relative way? Can we read the mind of the origi-
nal teachers so as to uncover precisely what it was that they intended
to teach? These are the questionings of a mentality which despairs
of man's ability to get in touch with objective and ultimate truth.
If we accepted this attitude of philosophical scepticism, there would
be little room left for any *magisterium* at all. Ultimately, it is destruc-
tive of faith itself.

Another, more theological, question is this: Can the *magisterium*
speak without consulting the whole body of the faithful? In particu-
lar, is there not a place in the Church's exploration of the faith for
the critical work of professional theologians?

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[4] *Commonitorium*, ch 23 (PL 50, 667).   [5] (London/Dublin 1966), p 715.

Vatican II reminds us of the infallibility of the whole Church:

> The universal body of the faithful, who have an anointing from the
> Holy One (cf John 2. 20, 27), cannot be deceived in believing, and
> manifests this special characteristic that it possesses through the
> supernatural 'sense of the faith' of the whole people, when 'from the
> bishops to the last lay people among the faithful' it shows forth its
> universal consensus on matters of faith and morals.[6]

The whole Church is the subject of infallibility, the recipient of
the gift of infallibility. But the Council also teaches that the charism
of infallibility is vested in the college of pope and bishops, who declare
infallibly what is the infallible faith of the whole Church.

Suppose, however, that the Church is not united as a whole on
a matter of faith or morals: can the faith of the Church remain
intact in the possession of a faithful remnant? It has happened
before, and no doubt will happen again. But the Church was able
to declare its mind infallibly, even in a situation where the Church
seemed divided against itself. In a pluralist Church – in the sense
of a Church whose members are divided in their attitude to funda-
mental doctrine or morality – the *magisterium* is still able to express
its mind, and in fact its charism of infallibility is all the more urgent,
for the sake of the unity of the Church.

What then is the position of theologians in the Church? Obviously,
there is need for scientific investigation into the truths of the faith.
But we must remember that the Church is not a democracy or
meritocracy or a country where theologians are kings. It is hier-
archical: the sacrament of Orders confers on the bishops the char-
ism of guidance in the faith, and so of supervision of the work of
theologians. This does not make the work of theologians any less
essential, but it puts it into its proper context. If theologians claim
a charismatic role as prophets in the Church, they must respect the
position of the bishops as the divinely appointed judges of the faith.
Speaking of the special gifts received by the faithful for renewing
and building up the Church, the Constitution on the Church
reminds us that:

> Judgment as to their genuineness and due exercise belongs to those
> who preside over the Church, and to whom in a special way it per-
> tains not to quench the Spirit but to put all things to the test and to
> hold fast what is good (cf I Thess 5, 12. 19–21).[7]

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[6]   *Lumen Gentium*, 12.   [7]   *Ibid.*

There is need therefore to preserve the proper balance between two aspects of the Church: the sacramental and the charismatic. Or we may describe it in terms of the balance between the institutional life of the Church and the freedom of the holy Spirit, who constantly breaks in to renew the vitality of the Church, but always with due respect for the divinely appointed guardians of the faith.

The word 'institution' is ambiguous. This single word is used to indicate two important dimensions of the Church's life. There is the institution of the Church *as Church*. This is its God-given, essential endowment, without which it would not be the Church at all: the gospel, the sacraments, the essential gifts of the Spirit . . . We may call this the *ecclesial* dimension of the Church, the Church as *ecclesia*.

There is another dimension of the Church's life, the institution of the Church *as a religious society*. In the course of its history, the Church develops an institutional life seen to be appropriate to its mission in the historical conditions in which it finds itself. Alongside its essential life – its ecclesial life – and intertwined with it, it develops a liturgy, a spirituality, a system of canon law, and systems of theology which seek to offer legitimate (though not exclusive) insights into the unchanging reality of revelation. We may call this the *ecclesiastical* dimension of the Church, the Church as a religious organization capable of change.

The function of the ecclesiastical organization of the Church is to preserve, promote and manifest the essential life of the Church, the ecclesial. It is open to change and adaptation. It is less absolute than the ecclesial.

In recognizing that the ecclesiastical structures of the Church are time-conditioned and alterable, we may be tempted to see them as completely expendable. We may imagine that, the less structured the Church is, the more it will be able to reveal the freshness and vigour of the Church of the apostles. We may think that, by simplifying the institution of the Church at this level, we are making it more convincingly a Church of the Spirit, a Church in which its essential nature will shine out with greater clarity. We may even be tempted not simply to adapt but to dismantle completely.

There is a delicate interplay between the ecclesial and the ecclesiastical. There is also a delicate interplay between community structures and the human spirit, even at the natural level. We are not disembodied spirits. We need structures – the right structures – so as to be able to establish our identity more clearly. We rightly

resist community pressure to conform, but we are dependent in greater or less degree on community support if we want to lead a fully human life. Human structures in society and in the Church – often the slow growth of centuries, incarnating the accumulated wisdom of the ages – must not be radically altered or destroyed: they must be prudently adapted. Vatican II speaks of *accommodata renovatio* – 'renewal by adaptation' – when it treats of the renewal of religious life.

It would be wise for the Church to pause and consider the effect of change on the attitudes and values of the faithful. Has faith been deepened by a more casual and less structured approach to liturgy (where rubrics, though unimportant in comparison with true liturgical understanding, have their relative but very human value)? Have vocations to the priesthood and the religious life been fostered and strengthened by a new sense of freedom in seminaries and houses of formation? Has family life been enriched by a more secular style, with less emphasis on the formalities of prayer and devotion? Change is necessary, but change must be proportionate to its object, and it must take account of human nature and its needs.

We all stand in need of a strong feeling of community identity. Granted the 'givenness' of the ecclesial, it must be 'incarnated' in suitable forms of ecclesiastical structure, and in a community way of life. The Church is not a Church of the Spirit alone: it is the Body of Christ living in the world. It must be 'earthed' in the real world of humanity. If it is active in history and among men and women of different generations, it develops in the course of history what we may call a 'commonwealth of ideas', a body of attitudes, a common mind, an identifiable way of life.

There is here a double problem The first is to ensure that this 'commonwealth of ideas' is enabled to mature into a common belief: the *sensus fidei* must be allowed to become explicit as 'the mind of the Church'. The second problem is to give full freedom to theologians in their exploration of the faith of the Church as it develops from probability to certainty. At this stage there may well be room for a measure of theological pluralism, a provisional pluralism that will eventually give way to a full unity of faith. It would not be right to cut off all development as unnecessary: that would be to deny the human spirit its natural desire to grow in knowledge and understanding. To limit the commonwealth of ideas to already established positions would be to deny a future to theology, and to fuller understanding of the faith. Equally, it would not be right to allow

unlimited freedom of speculation, especially in regard to already
established positions or positions asserted, though not defined, by
the authority of the *magisterium*. This kind of unrestricted pluralism
would be a denial of the *magisterium* itself.

If there is to be a due measure of theological pluralism in this
context, we must look for a set of norms by which to judge the
movements towards a greater freedom and flexibility in the Church
today. The one overriding norm would seem to be, not a set of rules
or guidelines, but the spirit in which one views the unity of the
Church.

Not all pluralism – even legitimate pluralism – enhances unity.
(Indiscriminate flexibility in the liturgy, for instance, can damage
the sense of true catholicity.) If we can discover how far, and under
what circumstances, legitimate pluralism enhances unity, we shall
be in a better position to see the criteria for judging the legitimacy
of pluralism within the Church.

Pluralism enhances unity in the Church when the Church's
unity – its catholicity and apostolicity – is seen more clearly precisely
through pluralism, not simply by contrast with pluralism; when
there is a tension, not of subversion or even co-existence but of
mutual support, between pluralism and unity. In matters of
doctrine, the pluralism of 'comprehensiveness' weakens rather than
strengthens unity of faith: it is unity of breadth rather than of depth,
an elastic unity that depends more on a formula than on an inner
cohesiveness. On the other hand, true catholicity of doctrine
enhances unity because it shows the power of the Church to contain
the whole gospel in all ages and in every place. The vast congrega-
tion filling St Peter's square at the Papal Mass on Easter Sunday
highlights the supernatural unity of faith by the very diversity of
race, language, class and age.

The principle of unity in theological pluralism would seem to be
the spirit of unity, an acceptance of the *magisterium* as the guide to
truth in the past, in the present and in the future. St Ignatius of
Loyola, living at a time of questioning and turmoil in the Church,
gave sound advice on the need for a right attitude to unity within
the Church. At the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises he laid
down a principle of interpretation that in these ecumenical days
has often been applied to the dialogue between separated christians.
It is also highly relevant to the dialogue within the Church, and in
particular to the dialogue between the faithful and the *magisterium*:

> . . . every good christian will be more inclined to put a good construc-
> tion on another's statement than to fault it. If he is unable to find a
> good interpretation he should ask what he means. If his meaning is
> unorthodox, the other should put him right, in a spirit of love. If this
> is not enough, let him use all the means proper to get the proposition
> rightly interpreted.[8]

The first of St Ignatius' rules for thinking with the Church is
concerned with the spirit of obedience which should be the first
instinctive response of catholics to the *magisterium*:

> We should put away completely our own opinion and keep our minds
> ready and eager to give our entire obedience to our holy Mother the
> hierarchical Church, Christ our Lord's undoubted Spouse.[9]

St Ignatius warns his followers of the danger of taking sides with
factions within the Church. A factional and divisive spirit is
corrosive of unity. Divisions in regard to the interpretation of
doctrine or of legitimate practice can reveal the 'party mind', for
which the faction means more than the whole body of the faithful.
It is only within the context of 'a spirit of unity' that divisions can be
reconciled and the truth advanced.

We have said that the Church as a religious society develops its
own way of life over the centuries, and that this is something valuable
that should not lightly be abandoned except in favour of a more con-
temporary style that will 'incarnate' the gospel in a more suitable
way. There is a corresponding truth in regard to the unity of chris-
tians. The grand strategy of work for christian unity must always be
the total commitment of the churches to this essential ideal. But
what of tactics? I would like to suggest that there has been too
little regard among some ecumenists for the true base from which
all ecumenical work must begin: the 'denomination'. The way
forward may well be a renewed stress on the denomination, not in
the old exclusive sense of entrenched positions and 'no surrender',
but in the sense of a renewal of each denomination from within,
through a general renewal of the 'commonwealth of ideas' and
way of life within each domination.

There is an understandable reluctance on the part of denomina-
tions to die or to be absorbed into a way of life that is perhaps alien
to their traditional practices. In fact, each denomination remains a
denomination for instinctively sound reasons. Each feels that the

[8]   Exx 22.   [9]   Exx 353.

Church is a community of people who know and love each other, not in a disembodied way but in a real fellowship of mind and heart. Each feels that the life of the Church has to be incarnated in a christian way of life: the old-fashioned concept of Church discipline. These instinctive reasons for remaining a denomination are in fact so many facets of the one true Church.

Each denomination should explore its own *tupos*, a favourite word of Cardinal Willebrands in describing the ethos and identity of each church.[10] The pattern of spirituality, scholarship, liturgy, canon law, and even 'theology', should be studied and developed by each denomination, not in splendid isolation but along with other churches. It is in this area that pluralism is legitimate.

But, of course, denominationalism is not enough. Nor is federation between churches. There must also be a true unity of faith, ministry, authority and sacramental communion. Pluralism in these areas is not enough. But the way forward is not by discarding the inheritance of spirituality received from the past, but by preserving it where it is legitimate, in order to enrich the commonwealth of christian thought and experience. Christian unity does not come about by stripping the churches of the accumulated treasures of the past, but by bringing a rich and vital christian practice to the common treasury of spirituality.

Is there not a similar lesson for the Church itself? Among the many voices raised in the seemingly interminable discussions since the close of Vatican II, one voice has been conspicuously absent. It is the inarticulate voice of the great and silent majority of ordinary catholics. What would they like to say if only they could express what is in their hearts?

Perhaps what they are longing for above all else is not intellectual respectability or liturgical flexibility or the freedom of a mature conscience (however desirable these things may be in themselves): it is a sense of identity. They are not looking for a return of the old rigidities, but for a new sense of identity comparable with the old familiarity of belonging to the Church as securely as to family and home.

Older catholics – and especially parents – are seriously disturbed by the apparent rootlessness of many younger catholics. This rootlessness may be partly sociological in origin. But we are forced

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10   Cf Sermon at Great St Mary's, Cambridge, 18 January 1970 (*Tablet*, 24 January, 1970, pp 92ff); Lecture in the Great Hall, Lambeth Palace, 4 October, 1972 (*Tablet*, 7 October, 1972, pp 963-6).

to ask ourselves: How far is it due to the failure of the young to identify themselves with the Church as an institution, and whose fault is that?

These younger catholics tend to reject the life-style of an older generation, within society and within the Church. They have not as yet discovered – though they are perhaps beginning to discover – a christian life-style that they can make their own. Meanwhile, the older generation feel that their own roots are being pulled up. They are not being served by those who offer only intellectual problems and intellectual solutions, nor by the 'intermediate communicators' who simplify the faith and, in simplifying it, destroy its mystery.

An urgent task faces bishops, priests, parents, theologians, educators and the whole catholic (indeed, the whole christian) community: What is to replace the full, rich, integrated community life of an older generation, so as to be an acceptable life-style for the next century?

If nothing is done, the catholic (and christian) community will merge more and more into the shapelessness and anonymity of the society in which we live, a society shaped by events rather than shaping them to its own human purposes. The key issue in this great pastoral problem may well be a very simple one: the future of christian family life. The problem of pluralism and the unity of the Church has its parallel in the christian home: How can the christian home be at once truly catholic and truly human, faithful to the two worlds which meet in Christ, in the Church and in the christian family?