THE THIRD CHURCH

By AYLWARD SHORTER

THE PHRASE 'Third Church' was coined two years ago by Walbert Buhlmann in a book which Karl Rahner declared 'the best Catholic book of the year'.[1] Already the Church in the Third World accounts for half the world's catholic population, and Buhlmann predicted that, by the year 2000, it would be approaching three-quarters. Even more important for the future of the Church, Europe is no longer at the centre of world history, as it had been ever since the birth of Christianity and the move of Peter from the near east to the centre of the Roman Empire. The western empires are no more; and we smile today at the easy assumptions of the Kipling era: the 'white man's burden' and the image of the world as one, vast boarding-school for the sons of english gentlemen, in which the british administrator was a kind of perpetual prefect and the non-western races, eternal juniors.

It has been difficult enough to slough off the scales and coils of political imperialism, and it is no easier for western Christians to wear the new image of the Church. To continue the school metaphor, it would not be unfair to say that the Church of the missions was scarcely even thought of in such terms. To judge by the contents and illustrations of mission magazines, the impression was more one of a perpetual kindergarten, a perpetuation of the poorhouse-orphanage with which so many catholic missions in the nineteenth century began. At the Second Vatican Council, western christendom awoke to a new reality. Bishop Butler has compared our contemporary ecclesial situation with that of apostolic times; for just as the Church of the Jews was painfully transformed into the Church of the Gentiles, so the old, familiar Church of the Latin Rite is being transformed no less painfully into the Church of the Nations, the Third Church.[2] We have grown up with the idea of the Church as a world-wide organization, in which unity of faith was accompanied

[1] Walbert Buhlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Slough, 1976).
[2] Bishop B. C. Butler: 'Dear Thomas', in the London *Tablet*, 31 July 1976.

by an extrinsic uniformity, a cultural unity which was often the expression of a kind of Roman, ecclesiastical nationalism.[3] By contrast, Vatican II has taught us that the Church is not an organization, but a community of people who live their faith in the Risen Christ. *Lumen Gentium*, the foundation document of the Council, has introduced us to the concept of 'particular Churches', and has declared that 'it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists'(23). These are not far-flung administrative units of some western-based multi-national corporation. They are the Catholic Church in a particular place; and the Catholic Church does not exist except in particular places.

Particular Churches, however, are not independent Churches, nor are they heterogeneous, nationalist or tribalistic Churches. They are only the Catholic Church in the measure that they exist in communion with other particular Churches, and especially with the privileged, particular Church of Rome. The communion of the Catholic Church is visible and structured, and, as Brian Hearne recently pointed out in *The Ecumenical Review*, there is no doubting the reality in third world countries of the papacy as a striking, personal sign of this communion. The Petrine ministry has real meaning for the Third Church, confirming the faith of all.

Vatican II heralded the advent of the Third Church; and new structures came into existence in the wake of the Council, which enabled the voice of the Third Church to be heard and the vibrations of its new life to be felt. The triennial Synod in Rome has given their bishops an important forum for sharing their pastoral experiences and their theological understanding with other particular Churches. Equally important have been the various international congresses held in third world countries, and the meetings of third world theologians. Not only have local episcopal conferences come into being, but regional groupings of episcopal conferences have been formed, so that particular Churches are able to influence one another 'horizontally'. Further, there is not only the continuing missionary presence in the Third Church, which is a kind of link-system in itself; there is also the growing participation of the Third World in missionary work, which extends beyond any local situation. Increasingly, third world priests, religious and lay-people undertake short-term pastoral and professional tasks in western countries.

[3] This and the succeeding paragraph are based on Brian Hearne C.S.Sp., 'Conciliar Fellowship and the Local Church', in *The Ecumenical Review*, XXIX (1977), pp 129-40.

These developments have brought western Christians into contact with the freshness and optimism of particular Churches in the Third World, with their poverty, their preoccupation with the practical questions of daily living, and with the youthfulness of their populations. The exercise has contributed powerfully to the developing self-image of the Catholic Church as a whole, and third-world Christians have themselves helped to define the terms according to which the Church can be said to be taking root in their countries. Who, other than they, are better qualified to describe the expectations and objectives of evangelization? And, who, better than they, can judge of its success?

There are still a great many Christians who think of the Church rather as a great multi-national corporation with a western-made product or formula to sell, but packaged locally in a wrapper adapted to the language and taste of the consumer. The image belongs to the ecclesiology of adaptation, one of the dominant ideas behind the documents of the earlier sessions of the Council. It dominates the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy and all the post-conciliar liturgical documents and instructions. Adaptation is the keynote; and this means, in practice, translation. Everywhere in the Church, people are wrestling with the work of translation, quibbling over alternative renderings and fighting a battle of words. Adaptation has been the great red herring of contemporary Christianity, in that it has scarcely risen above the level of a problem like that of putting 'snap, crackle, pop' into Swahili.

The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, was a product of the Council's final session. It represents a considerable advance in theological thinking about the Church. Not only does it devote a whole chapter to 'Particular Churches', but it elaborates in that chapter (and elsewhere in the document) a new and more profound concept of adaptation.

> . . . just as happened in the Incarnation, the young Churches, which are rooted in Christ and built on the foundations of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance. They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the Saviour, or contribute to the right ordering of christian life (*Ad Gentes*, 22).

The adaptation here envisaged is not a verbal one, but a cultural one — an 'incarnation'. It takes over 'all the riches of the nations',

and borrows 'everything which could be used'. To achieve this, the Council goes on to recommend in this passage the stirring up of a theological investigation in each socio-cultural area; and in a section addressed to the Christians of particular Churches, it introduces the stimulating image of the 'seeds of the Word' (11). The cultures of particular peoples are no longer seen here as a remote and extrinsic preparation for the Gospel, but as containing authentic christian values which are destined to flourish within the visible Church. This truth imposes upon Christians the duty of identifying those seeds, and of making sure that nothing is lost. It must be admitted that this is a concern which is very different from the common understanding of adaptation, as it has been acted upon in most church communities. Instead of looking forward to the new, particular Church that is coming into being, most people hark back to the 'sending' Church: a particular Church of a different culture, and translating its texts and documents with a verbal correctness that so neutralizes and sterilizes them as to rob them of meaning.

At the 1974 Rome Synod, the african bishops created quite a stir because of the vehemence with which they rejected the notion of adaptation:

> ... the bishops of Africa and Madagascar consider as being completely out-of-date the so-called theology of adaptation. In its stead, they adopt the theology of incarnation. The young churches of Africa and Madagascar cannot refuse to face up to this basic demand.

The bishops went on to explain what their notion of incarnation implied. Incarnation demands, quite frankly, pluralism; but pluralism does not mean division. The Church in Africa must be open to the aspirations of african peoples. They must be accorded greater responsibility for their own evangelization and development: a responsibility which is truly dynamic and creative. This vehement african statement called forth a reaction at the Synod's ending from Pope Paul VI, which amounted almost to a rebuke; but evidently, the new wine matured in curial cellars. A year later, the same Pope's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* appeared, which constitutes the most balanced official statement yet made about the nature of the evolving, contemporary Church.

Evangelii Nuntiandi is another instance of officialdom catching up with and giving expression to a developing, living reality. In many ways, it is as good an incarnation theology of the Church as could be hoped for. Evangelization is far from being an exclusively verbal

exercise or a question of translation. On the contrary, the gospel that is proclaimed is a Person who radically alters, and radically fulfils our way of life. Evangelization of particular cultures or ways of life is the basic activity of the Church; and this is neither a uniform nor a superficial activity:

> Evangelization is to be achieved, not from without, as though by applying a coat of colour, but in depth, going to the very centre and roots of life. The Gospel must impregnate the culture and the whole way of life of man. . . . This work must always take the human person as its starting-point, coming back to the inter-relationships between persons and their relation with God (20).

Evangelization is complete only when the evangelized himself becomes an evangelizer; or rather, it is a process that is never complete, because cultures (like the Church itself) are a dynamic, developing phenomenon.

Evangelii Nuntiandi goes on to explain how the 'substance' of the message — its fundamental meaning — must be 'transposed' into particular cultural idioms.

> The individual Churches — which are involved not only with people but also with their aspirations, their wealth and their poverty, with their manner of praying and living and their outlook on the world — must make their own the substance of the evangelical message. Without any sacrifice of the essential truths, they must transpose this message into an idiom which will be understood by the people they serve and thus proclaim it.
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> The Churches must make this transposition with all the judgment, care, reverence and competence which the nature of the task demands in fields relating to the sacred liturgy, to catechetics, to the formulation of theological principles, to the secondary ecclesial structures and to the ministry. When we speak of idiom, we must be understood to mean not an anthropological and cultural adaptation (63).

Prayer, preaching, theological formulation: all are bound by space and time and by the exigencies of a particular culture. Even the Church's laws and dogmatic definitions are similarly circumscribed, and can only be interpreted authentically according to the contexts which called them into being. We are sometimes tempted to draw a parallel between theology and the physical sciences, because we admire the effective way in which scientific paradigms are universally accepted by the world of science and put to use in the laboratory.

We see an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and models shared by the members of the scientific community; but we forget that this paradigm, effective though it is, employs the symbols and images of a particular cultural tradition; and, moreover, that its lifetime has a limited duration. Aristotelian physics yield to Newtonian, and Newtonian to that of Einstein, for example. Even more dubious for the parallel between theology and science is the manner in which scientific disciplines create a kind of arcane language, in which the initiates speak to one another in the pages of learned journals.

Theology has always been pre-paradigmatic, because theologians have never been able to agree on a single paradigm. Moreover, the cause of their disagreement has been and is precisely because theology is about human life and community relationships. The starting-point has to be, as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* points out, the human person. Christian theology, therefore, like the humanities, cannot avoid being affected by the cultural relativism of human kind; and a theology which exists only, or primarily, for the theologians themselves is a theology in decline. Theology must be 'theology as if people mattered'. All this is not to say that human beings do not share the same basic life-experiences of birth, growth, marriage, sickness, death, eating, drinking, joy, pain and so forth; or that the mental structure of *homo sapiens* does not ensure a universal system of logic, with the universal practice of making and using symbols when speaking of experience in general, and religious experience in particular. All it means is that such experience is grasped and expressed according to different symbol-systems and traditions.

The fact that there can never be a universal theological language does not spell the disintegration of the Church. Those who think it does are dooming the work of evangelization to failure from the start. On the contrary, it is theological meaning which matters, the meaning which is grasped differently according to particular, local contexts. As Bernard Lonergan explains, our unity as Christians in the Church Universal lies essentially in the moral sphere. We have a living encounter with the object of our faith, the risen Christ himself. God's language, which is the true language of theology, does not consist in words, but in the Word. We acquire our vision of Christ, as Cardinal Newman saw, through action, through relationships and through the sharing that takes place in our community. Christ is known and proclaimed in a real, historical tradition of people who relate to one another, who serve one another and who

act as living links between the particular Churches in carrying out Christ's mission. Through this mission, Christ is revealed both to and in the particular human traditions.

The communion of the particular Churches in faith and love takes the form — in the words of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* — of a mutual 'invigoration'.

> When there is due consideration for the needs of the particular Church, the Universal Church will certainly be invigorated; and this must be accepted as important and urgent, because it is in accordance with the inherent desire of peoples and communities for an ever-increasing recognition of their own natural predispositions (63).

The invigoration process, like the process of evangelization, is not merely a verbal phenomenon — a question of translation. It is a mutual experiencing, a sort of cultural and ecclesial bilingualism, in which particular Churches reveal themselves to one another. Christians of particular Churches influence one another through the contagion of example; and, as we have already seen, there are innumerable structured links between the Churches which channel this mutual influence. Missionaries, above all, are guarantors of this mutual invigoration, and ultimately of the Church's Universality. They are personal links or bridges between particular Churches which possess this bilingual facility. They feel within themselves both the enrichment and the tensions of a Catholicity which is diversity-in-unity.

Let us consider some examples of particular Churches in the Third World invigorating the Church Universal. In the realm of theology, one of the most striking concepts in recent years has been that of Liberation. The idea in its present form arose first of all in South America; but it was not long before it made an impact in the United States in the form of a 'Black Theology'. Thence it was taken up in South Africa by the apostles of 'Black Consciousness'. Recently, it has been finding an echo in Europe itself by its application to the situation in Northern Ireland. 'Liberation theology' is an emphasis or a starting-point in contemporary theology, which is certainly stimulating discussion all over the world.

Perhaps the catechetical example is even more striking. It was Josef Jungmann and the German Church who gave us 'Salvation History' in the place of the 'Penny Catechism'. At the Catechetical Congress of Eichstatt in 1960, Johannes Hofinger gave this approach a definite formulation. However, the actual teaching method was

still the so-called 'Munich method', which begins by arousing the interest of the student and ends by seeking an application to the student's life. It was not until catechetical congresses were held in third world countries that the question began to be asked: 'Can we preach the same doctrine everywhere in the same way?' Thus the individualistic character of traditional catechetics came under question. At Bangkok in 1962, at Katigando in 1964, at Manila in 1966 and at Medellin in 1969, the foundations of a catechetical revolution were laid. Henceforward, the religious education class would begin and end with the life-situation and human aspirations of the student. The student would make his own discovery of Christ in his life and in the life of the community to which he belonged. This discovery he would make through the community process and the experience of personal relationships. Not only was the Munich method turned upside down; it had ceased to be the verbal proclamation of a teacher and had become 'process-catechesis'. In 1971, the Roman Catechetical Directory and the Congress that followed upon its publication canonized the new method.

However, matters did not end there. The Rome Synods of 1974 and 1977 carried the Church's thinking still further. The Roman Catechetical Directory emphasized that catechesis aims at creating an adult fellowship, a community of Faith, and that adult catechesis should be given within the 'frame of small groups'. The 1974 Synod developed the concept of the particular Church still further. A number of third world episcopal conferences were encouraged to recognize the reality of the Church's presence in basic communities. Since 1976, the bishops of seven countries in Eastern and Central Africa forming a regional association (AMECEA) have committed their Churches to a programme of building small christian communities. At the 1977 Synod, they shared this experience with their brothers from other continents. While european and north american bishops expressed concern for the integrity of doctrinal content in catechesis, the third world bishops voiced their fear of a catechesis that is uncommitted. In the Third World, catechesis is only credible if it goes hand in hand with total, human development.

In the field of social justice and of the religious life, has there been any more inspiring example in recent years than that of Mother Teresa and her new congregation? Her apostolate in Calcutta caught the imagination of the world. It was a living instance of the concern which the Church should have for the deprived and the destitute. Perhaps, a great deal of Mother Teresa's success is due to

the fact that her formula is 'by the Third World for the Third World'. It is not a western formula. It is interesting, for example, to see the immediate attraction her congregation has exercised on Africans since the first indian sisters came to East Africa a few years ago. Older congregations do not seem to present young people with the same challenge, the same capacity to go to the roots of social injustice. And Mother Teresa is not without a message for the spiritually poor of Europe and North America.

In the field of liturgical creativity, the constraints of post-conciliar directives have been keenly felt in third world countries. A number of recent initiatives, like the new Eucharistic rites in Africa and India, are encountering obstacles. Nevertheless, the contagion of example is at work among the particular Churches, and the strong desire for more authentic forms of worship cannot be suppressed indefinitely. This observation leads one naturally to a consideration of the implications of all we have said for the parent Churches in Europe and North America. Frequently, one has the impression that western Christians are turning despairingly to the Third World for a solution to their own particular crises of faith and values. This is an encouragement for third world Christians, but it can also be a snare. Perhaps it betrays an impatience for an 'instant' return on spiritual investment. As *Evangelii Nuntiandi* stressed, the Universal Church will not be invigorated unless and until due consideration is shown for the needs of particular Churches. Without such consideration, invigoration will begin to look like exploitation.

The chief point on which western Christians have to examine their consciences is: 'Do I take the Third World seriously?' This was the message of a speech made during the 1977 Synod by Cardinal Otunga, the Archbishop of Nairobi. He made the insistent plea: Take us seriously, so that we can take ourselves seriously.[4] This is the most valuable thing that western Christianity has to give; and, as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* emphasized, it is an important and an urgent task. Third-world Christians need recognition for their own aspirations, and they need encouragement in carrying out the thorough evangelization of their own particular cultures. This is the first priority: allow them to be themselves. And the corollary is: expect them to be different, and effectively different.

The missionary, as we have said, constitutes a personal link between particular Churches; and it is on the missionary, therefore,

[4] Cf *African Ecclesiastical Review*, 1978, no 1, for a report on the 1977 Synod.

that the main burden falls, both of giving recognition to third world aspirations and of representing Christians of the third world to his own Church of origin. Missionaries are sent on behalf of the Church, and that Church is now the Third Church. They are ambassadors of reconciliation and witnesses of the communion that exists between particular Churches. Equally then, they are witnesses to an alternative vision of life; one which has wider horizons than those of national frontiers or individual cultural traditions, and therefore offers a continual challenge and a continual invitation. Missionaries, too, are signs of a sharing and caring Church, instances of the loving concern of one particular Church for another. As such, they are greatly appreciated, especially when the local Christians are experiencing a time of trial, as they are, for example, in Uganda or Rhodesia.

If missionaries represent the Universal Church, it follows that they are committed to universal human values, and that they reflect the concern of the international community for human rights. Not only must they champion human conditions of life and work, respect for human life and dignity and integral human development; they must help men and women to take control of their lives. Kindness is not enough. People must be helped to stand on their own feet and, we repeat, to be taken seriously. The paradox is that while we are witnessing the birth in these years of the Third Church, from the point of view of politics and economics the world is still a white world, and a white world is an unjust world. Africans and Asians tend to see it as a vast 'white minority-régime'. Christian social justice demands a critique of this situation. More, if the Church is to be taken seriously in the third world countries, it demands a revolution, White missionaries, more than anyone else, bear the responsibility of heading that revolution, and of awakening consciences in western Christendom.

The coming of the Third Church makes great demands on us all. Its most radical demand is that of psychological proximity: a predisposition of the heart in favour of people different from ourselves, even an ability to think them better than ourselves. In the end, it is only the limitless charity of Christ that enables us to overcome our innate racism, our fear of involvement, and our incredulity that there are opinions other than our own. Yet, our name of 'Catholic' is empty of all meaning if we cannot remove such spots and wrinkles from the bride of Christ.