

CONFLICT WITHIN THE CHURCH

By JON SOBRINO

THE CHURCH'S essential conflict is that to which it is committed when it is faithful to the gospel, namely, conflict with the world of sin. This was the case at the very beginning when differences of opinion rapidly grew into confrontation and persecution. The New Testament recognized that such conflict and persecution is real and necessary (1 Thess 3,2-4) and explained this need theologically in terms of Jesus's own destiny (Mt 10,24 ff; Jn 15,18.20) and that of the prophets (Mt 15,11 ff). The theological presupposition behind such conflict is that the gospel is good news, but that it is also a two-edged sword (Heb 4,12), a sign of contradiction (Lk 2,34), a way of choosing between true and false gods (Mt 6,24).

Nevertheless, my own task here is to examine conflict within the Church from the point of view of the Church's internal unity. From the viewpoint of unity, conflict is understood as something that endangers or destroys the Church. In this context, conflict becomes a negative influence and something harmful to the Church. But it can also be something good if such conflict is the (disagreeable but necessary) historical way to seek greater ecclesial unity, based on greater truth and greater holiness. From this second perspective, our fundamental presupposition when we speak of conflict within the Church is the same as that for conflict outside the Church: the gospel divides the Church as well.

Historically speaking, there have obviously been opposing tendencies within the Church from the very beginning, and for a variety of causes. In his own time, clashes arose between Jesus and his disciples (Mk 8,31ff) and between the disciples themselves (Lk 22,24-27). In the early Church there were clashes between hellenist and hebrew converts to Christianity (Acts 6,1), between Peter and Judeo-Christians (Acts 11,1ff), between Paul and the corinthian Christians (I and II Cor) and between Peter and Paul (Gal 2,11), to quote but a few examples.

Down the ages, including during the time when ecclesial norms

were taking definite shape, conflict and confrontation existed within the Church, leading both to separation from the ecclesial community (schism and heresy) and equally to deeper commitment. At the present time, especially since Vatican II, various opposing tendencies have emerged and many which were previously latent have come to the fore. There are now tensions, challenges, protests, prophetic denunciations; in Latin America we hear of an 'alternative magisterium' and a 'people's Church', in opposition to the official Church. (This is not an appropriate place to analyse these.) Such tendencies are likely to clash head on with certain elements in the Church, but in fact—and perhaps this is what is most typical of present-day conflict—they cut right across church structures, as they are found in bishops, priests, religious and lay people.

Given the fact of conflict, the value we attribute to it overall is going to be varied, and this in turn is going to generate further conflict. For some, any clashes are of necessity an evil whose ultimate root is sin, as the old adage says: *Ubi peccatum, ibi multitudo* (where there is sin, there is division). For others, conflict arises from fidelity to the gospel and they recall that the saints had often to clash with the Church. On the whole, only subsequent history is able to show if, in a given instance, such conflict has been good or bad for the Church and for unity, even though in the origins of conflict elements of sin or of holiness were present, or even a mixture of both.

Diversity within the Church as a condition for conflict

Diversity within the Church, as in any other social grouping, makes for complementarity and for mutual enrichment, as well as for conflict and division. Let us now look at this diversity within the Church, not just as a fact of life, but as a desirable, necessary good, without which it would not be Church.

The early Church's decision to go out to the Gentiles suggests a basic option to become a universal Church, without setting up limits to this universality. In this way the universal fatherhood of God and the universal Lordship of Christ were proclaimed in deeds. But at the same time, both geographically and historically speaking, great variety was introduced into the Church: a variety of peoples, races, cultures and social classes. With this variety came the possibility of accepting different human—as opposed to theological—structures, of being a Church of men and women, of celibates and of married people, of poor and of rich, of people at

the centres of power and of people on the edges.

The Church's decision to set up organizational and hierarchical structures also introduced a diversity of function and charism and so a division between the hierarchy and the faithful, between the 'teaching' and the 'learning' Church.

Together with these forms of diversity which the Church in fact sought, there exists another element which is equally central to the divine purpose: the difference between God and the Church. Between the Church and the word of God there is a source of diversity which cannot be ignored and which the Church has recognized by claiming that it is itself the depository and the servant of the word of God and not its master.

God is greater than the Church seen as a whole and greater than its members and each of its structures. His will can find expression in the signs of the times, through his prophets, whether within or outside the Church, and within it, in any place whatsoever. For this reason, theological diversity is possible.

The Church's brave acknowledgment that it is genuinely a universal Church in cultural, social and theological terms, and its constant refusal to become a closed and selective sect, of necessity make ecclesial conflict a real possibility.

Diversity exists within the Church, is sought by the Church and demanded by the Church; without it the Church would cease to exist, and yet the lure of uniformity is always with us. Diversity of its essence enriches the Church, but historically speaking conflict and disunion will be the result. They are the consequence of another basic choice on the Church's part—and this is obvious but should nevertheless be stated—namely the decision to admit people who while structurally limited (that is, capable of sin) are also open to growth and to holiness.

Because of these limitations, both believers and Church structures alike find it hard to draw so much diversity together. As sinners we tend to absolutize our own diversity or, and this is more serious, to define our identity by opposing the self-identity of others. As part of created reality, believers and their structures feel they are somehow to blame for so much diversity. As saints we must uphold such diversity so that God's will may be done and the Church grow by this very means.

Given such diversity, conflict is inevitable. And given this actual human potential—both holy and sinful—for making something of such diversity, conflict can clearly be both the expression of evil

and the expression of good, however difficult it may be at times to separate these two elements and however painful the experience of conflict may be in any one instance.

Present-day sources and outbreaks of conflict

Any contemporary analysis must take account of certain subjective roots of conflict which are and always have been present. Nevertheless the basic source of conflict nowadays is God's revivifying will for the Church, expressed by the Vatican Council and by Medellín. Vatican II and Medellín represent a total shift of emphasis, one which Karl Rahner sees as on a par with the early Church's decision to go out to the Gentiles. This breakthrough of itself, even before we explore any of its specific formulations, presupposes historical changes of such scope that the different ways in which people have reacted are understandable. These range from outright or veiled refusal to enthusiastic acceptance. For similar reasons, people have understood or implemented their teachings more or less slowly.

Vatican II and Medellín obviously desire unity for the Church. But their discussion of the Church goes back to fundamental issues which precede unity and out of which it has to be constructed. Nevertheless these developments have understandably caused serious conflict on account of their statements about the Church's mission towards the world and its make-up as people of God.

The Church's identity is tied to its mission; and this in turn, as salvific service of the world, is made all the more concrete in preferential service of the poor. Here is a copernican revolution: the Church exists to serve and not in order to be served; to proclaim and initiate the kingdom or reign of God, without itself being this reign in any adequate sense; to incarnate the love of God—both clinging to this love and searching for it, at times outside the visible ecclesial framework. To integrate this shift of emphasis into the whole life of the Church is not easy—Karl Rahner has said it will take a century. The problem lies not simply in theoretical difficulties or in the need to acknowledge the extent to which we do not really understand, after centuries of claiming to understand everything, but also in the conversion that is entailed. What emerges is that the Church sees that the way to re-appropriate its own life is to lose it. This breakthrough has without question or doubt caused serious internal conflict, depending upon how ready people have been for such conversion.

In addition, our desire to implement the Church's mission focusses upon those situations in the real world which cause greatest conflict and division: poverty and oppression, people living and people dying; dramatic, irreconcilable realities which seek some sort of solution. If the Church were always to react in a uniform way to these problems, there would be no such thing as ecclesial division, although it would obviously have to ask if its reading of the situation were the correct one. What in fact happens, however, is that, just as the Church goes out to a divided world, so this world penetrates the Church and divides it. In this way, although universal directives from the Church offer a coherent picture of what to do and how to do it, different members of the Church—lay people, priests and bishops—react differently and even in opposition to each other, when faced with the sin of the world. Some demand pluralism so that nothing should stand in the way of what is required by the serious situation in question and of an option for the poor. Others feign not to notice a world which is thereby abandoned to its own poverty. This, clearly, is the principal source of conflict within the communion: the Church's attitude to a divided world. And this conflict will not go away, because its root—the option for the poor—is desired by God. God asks—and the Church's documents repeat his demand—that the Church intervene in the world of sin and that it should make its fundamental option within this world.

When the Church begins to serve the world by making a real option for the poor, then it is committed to conflict with the powers of this world: the Church suffers persecution and martyrdom. This fact causes fresh conflict in turn between those who see in persecution and martyrdom a mark of authenticity, or at least something which must not be refused if we are to be faithful to our mission, and those who subtly or noisily disparage the need to take this risk. Either they see in persecution a weakening of the Church's structures and claim that these must be preserved in order to be even more efficacious in the future, or they operate out of the fear very naturally provoked in them by the threat of persecution and martyrdom (even when they do not admit that this is happening). And so people begin to question whether priests should engage in political activity, to discuss the stance taken by those who have been martyred and the dangers of ideology and so on. Obviously these questions require theological and ecclesial treatment, but, more often than not, the way in which they are raised speaks of a

fear of persecution as much as of generosity in the Church's service.

For as long as the world is in a state of conflict and the Church serves this world, then conflict within the Church will always be a real possibility. God himself has given the Church a mission which can only be fulfilled within the context of conflict; the Church has to make choices, whether to serve the God of life or whether to serve the false gods of death. Sin becomes the ultimate cause of conflict, not because of the subjective sinfulness of those who make up the Church and who seek to defend or impose their own point of view, but because the much more objective sinfulness of a sinful world penetrates the Church.

Where the Church is understood to be the people of God, preference within the Church is given to the whole rather than to the various parts. (I am not speaking here of the theological preference which has to be given to the poor.) For this reason a theoretical change in how we experience Church membership is called for. In practice this means that within the Church a climate is developing which increasingly values the need for complementarity in functions and charisms, a communal search for the will of God, the faith of the whole people 'from the bishop to the least of the lay faithful' (*Lumen gentium* no 12), dialogue, communion and sharing as the way to relate to each other and to avoid tension, and the need to respect popular opinion in the Church.

All of this has led both to a new experience of Church and to serious problems. In this setting, the Church's direction and unity are ultimately guaranteed by the Spirit, although the hierarchy may have responsibility for direction and unity. Growing used to this more Spirit-oriented style is not easy and it means losing certain securities and not attributing more importance to certain earlier structures than they deserve. It means accepting our ignorance in the presence of the Spirit, owning our radical need for faith in God's astonishing Spirit. It means growing accustomed to true freedom in the Spirit, which rules out both authoritarianism and uniformity—even when these are conceived of as a liberal interpretation of freedom. It means a frank recognition that the superiority claimed by some over others in the Church's history (hierarchy over faithful, celibates over married people, men over women, Christians at the centre over those at the edges), is not a fruit of the Spirit, but of socially determined conditioning, and so of sin.

In this new climate the focus of internal conflict and ways of resolving it cause fresh conflict within the Church. For some people all conflict is dangerous and evil because it goes against the Church's prestige and efficacy; for others it is an expression of the sincerity with which they dialogue and one of the historically determined ways in which the Church makes progress. Some, especially when the conflict goes on and on for a period of years, recommend strong measures on the part of the administration to quell it. Others are prepared to go on talking patiently. Some imagine that solutions are always simple because there is in the Church but one God, one Lord and one Spirit. Others see this formulation as the major problem because, although verbal profession of the faith and understanding of the words we use can be comparatively easily presented in a homogeneous form, it is only with great difficulty that unity in the reality of faith can be achieved. Unity *in* God, *in* Christ and *in* the Spirit is what we have to work for: they are our destiny rather than in any sense our starting point.

At the present time Vatican II and Medellín and the Church's more or less successful attempts to face external and internal problems continue to be the root reason for conflict within the Church. This is exhibited in many different individual clashes coloured by limited vision and human sinfulness.

Certain individuals, even though those who will say this explicitly may be few, have rejected Vatican II and Medellín and have in fact blamed them for the Church's degeneration. Others have exaggerated the emphasis that was envisaged, selected those findings that fit in with their own perceptions, underlining the extent to which the faith and the Church are historically conditioned, but without giving sufficient importance to what is transcendental or traditional. Such polarisation obviously causes conflict and is a result of personal failing. But the greatest conflict of all lies in trying to be faithful to the thinking of Vatican II and Medellín without that compromise which whittles away at their insights.

The following would be indications of this kind of compromise at the level of the relation between the Church and the world. First of all, the Church might set about judging the sin of the world and of given individuals as it were from the 'outside', without acknowledging its own historical tendency to be sinful. Secondly, the Church might give up on the task of being present

in the real world, either in the name of its 'spiritual' mission or because commitment such as this endangers the Church and might deprive it of the chance of exercising a better and more lasting service of the world. Thirdly, the Church might back down on the importance of opting for the poor, of showing preferential love, of its essentially saving mission and of the risks that these entail. God's saving will is universal, his liberation whole and not selective. Fourthly, the Church might decide out of hand that certain situations and societies are better missionary territory than others because the Church 'fits in' better. An example of this would be if an option were made to serve western society. To sum up, the compromise would be that the Church might stop existing in order to serve the world and shore up its defences, returning to past securities. Indications of such compromise at the level of the Church itself would be these. Firstly, a return to the pyramid model of Church which, while we do not call into question the legitimacy of a structured hierarchy, effectively ignores the even more basic reality of our nature as the people of God and threatens to impose hierarchical absolutism. Secondly, ignoring or relativising the particular calling of a local Church or community, its specific contribution in terms of culture and also of faith, hope, charity, of pastoral, liturgical and theological creativity. Thirdly, giving up on solidarity, on mutual support, on give and take, on teaching and learning from each other and from different church communities and from different elements within the Church. Fourthly, abandoning or undervaluing that dialogue by which we search together for the truth, for light on different problems and relevant interpretations. And finally, the creation of a climate of mistrust in which the very fact of trying to air our ecclesial problems honestly arouses suspicion and active hostility.

Clearly it is difficult to know exactly when one has acted in the spirit of Vatican II and of Medellín, and so we need discernment, periods of reflection and even of disputation. But what is not so difficult is to observe the overall pattern of what it is that motivates us: some seek fidelity, others commitment. Within this tension lies the deepest root of conflict within the Church.

A spirituality of conflict

By 'spirituality of conflict' we mean living out conflict in a christian way. Put even more concretely, this means nurturing certain attitudes which are inherent in belief, but which become

much more central when one is actually in a situation of conflict.

When such conflict is a reality within the Church, the first christian demand is not to avoid it. This suggests the importance of recognizing and not glossing over the fact that the Church is at one and the same time holy and sinful, *casta meretrix*. Likewise strength is needed to engage with what is unpleasant, painful and at times unjust within this situation.

This concrete commitment can generate, and in certain instances, demand appropriate christian action. It calls for a love of truth which is committed to obey God before human beings; for faith in God alone, whose Spirit will lead the Church to its ultimate destiny and without whom none of us can resolve our problems. It calls for a utopian belief in church unity which, although difficult to achieve within time, can nevertheless lead us to work for an increase of unity.

Secondly, although conflict is inevitable, we work to resolve it. This suggests a spirituality which seeks to know what the roots of conflict are; that is to say, which seeks the truth rather than to defend its own understanding of truth, and which presupposes that unity within the Church will be based on truth rather than on a reliance on administrative procedures. As to any method to be used in confronting conflict in order to resolve it, what is called for is a spirituality of honest dialogue, open to arguments used by the 'other side' and to the possibility that these carry some truth. Moreover it opposes the use of naked power, even though this may be the power of authority, and of social power including reasoning power (especially when this is used as a form of pressure rather than to promote understanding). None of these is in any way a final solution to conflict. This spirituality has holiness as its goal, holiness as the ultimate and most definitive means by which truth may flower within the Church even though, as the history of many of the saints reminds us, this may take years to happen.

Conflict, as well as needing to be resolved, must be fruitful. This implies a spirituality of creativity which is always seeking to be complemented and enriched by what at first seems like opposition; which desires that structural tensions within the Church be fruitful, above all the tension between institution and charism, uniting efficiency and truth so that efficiency be based more in truth and the truth achieve more form and therefore be more efficacious.

Thirdly, of its very nature conflict confronts us with other

people's limitations and sins. A spirituality of conflict would nevertheless make any individual look at his or her own limitation and sin. In this way conflict undergoes conversion, at times because of personal conversion. What is implied is that *the* truth should be sought rather than *my* truth. With genuine humility goes the certainty that subsequent history will clarify the question. This calls for sufficient openness to allow oneself to be judged by events, to change opinion if this seems important, in everything to be prepared to let go and not to cling dogmatically to what is perceived—even with the best will in the world—to be the truth.

How we judge the truth will ultimately depend on our openness to the Spirit of God. The gospel however, does suggest certain criteria: the proclamation of good news to the poor, taking up their defence and destiny. By this means the Church will become more like Jesus in his life and in his death, more credible to the poor, to those who are favoured by God, and so grow in a holiness whose ultimate test is persecution and martyrdom for love's sake.

Ultimately conflict, like any other created reality, is subject to the demands of love. That we speak of a spirituality of love goes without saying, but to speak of a spirituality of love under duress is even more useful. Within and without conflict, someone who belongs to the Church must have great love for God and for Jesus, for the poor and for the kingdom of God. Because of this evangelical love, Christians have to be ready for conflict and they cannot opt out of this, even though it makes for stress.

For conflict of its very nature raises questions about loving one's adversaries and even one's enemies. This love does not mean never opposing people, but it does forbid us to define anyone strictly as 'enemy' or to deny them any other existence. Ultimately the Church is subject to love, especially when the sins and scandals that cause conflict exist within her. Love for the Church, even under duress, is a long way away from any romanticism or triumphalism, but such love is essential, however great the strain. Out of love for the Church her faults must be denounced when they are serious or scandalous. There will be moments when, with Guillaume d'Auvergne, Bishop of Paris, we will have to say, 'Should we not name this dreadful spectacle Babylon, rather than city of God?' But out of love and joyfully, we should also rejoice when the gospel of Jesus becomes incarnate in named and recognized saints, in those many saints who are unrecognized, in privileged moments of heroism and in the everyday living of charity. In each

instance the gospel of Jesus is still being proclaimed; in this way we ourselves received it. And it is within the Church, by means of and in spite of so many deficiencies and sins, that each of us lives out personal faith by relying upon the faith of other believers. For this the Church must always be grateful, and—although reason does not understand love—this has to be the fundamental reason why we love her. For this reason the claim is not an empty one, that within the Church conflict can come from love and that this conflict can and must be lived with love.

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