Walter Kasper on the Catholic Church

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The Catholic Church: Nature – Reality – Mission, following more than twenty years after Jesus the Christ and The God of Jesus Christ, is the third volume of a trilogy, their Christological unity indicated by their German titles: Jesus Der Christus (1974), Der Gott Jesu Christi (1982) and Die Kirche Jesu Christi (2008). Life had intervened in the interim, first by Kasper’s service as bishop of Rottenburg-Stuttgart (1989–1999), followed by eleven years with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (1999–2010) where he was its cardinal prefect from 2001. This interim period also included his work as theological secretary of the Extraordinary Synod (1985) which had identified communio as a central theme and guiding principle of the Second Vatican Council. His life in and for the church had interrupted his theological work on a systematic treatise on the church, fortuitous for an ecclesiology that not only reflects development since the Second Vatican Council, but also aims to be an existential ecclesiology relevant for both the individual and society. He comments that an ecclesiology for today must perceive the crisis of the Church manifested by decreasing church attendance, decline in participation in the sacraments, and priest shortages in connection with the crises of today’s world in a post-Constantinian time (p. 33). Nor can the church be restricted to a private sphere...
or merely concerned about its own life, but must be public and universal. Otherwise it contributes to the secularization of public life.

Kasper’s Theological and Social Context

The Catholic Church contains the sort of discussions that one expects from a standard ecclesiology, such as the Trinitarian foundation of the Church, its relationship to the kingdom of God, its identity as people of God, body and bride of Christ, temple of the Spirit, and the marks of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, the ministry, the laity, etc. Kasper’s book is uniquely his insofar as it is clearly influenced by his own social context and ecclesial experience: his emphasis on the church as communion reflects his involvement in the 1985 Synod; his discussion of ministry, especially the episcopacy, is influenced by his own vocation and situation within the church; his emphasis on a dialogical church reflects his experience on the Roman Catholic – Lutheran commission that produced theJoint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) as well as his work in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Just as central to his ecclesiology, although more theological than existentially contextual, is the theme of eschatology where he reverses the traditional narrative, noting that ‘ecclesiology results from the dynamic of the impending eschatology’, rather than from ‘the so-called delay of the Parousia’ (p. 90). Finally, his social context as a German European is evident, both in terms of his interpretation of Lutheran theology and in the lack of a robust global and third-world account of ecclesial inculturation within his ecclesiology.

This contextual location of his theology is accented by the autobiographical first chapter, which narrates the influence of the Catholic Tübingen School on his ecclesiological vision through theologians such as Johann Sebastian Drey (d. 1853) and Johann Adam Möhler (d. 1838), mediated through the teaching of Josef Rupert Geiselmann (d. 1970). More contemporary influences also included Heinrich Fries (d. 1998) and Gottlieb Söhngen (d. 1970). On account of these influences, Kasper’s ecclesiology shows a predilection for living historical as well as pneumatological and Christological approaches to the church and a distaste for what he calls the ‘hierarchiology’ of late medieval theologians (p. 7). Finally, Kasper’s work is influenced by the later philosophical works of Schelling, which gave him access to the modern philosophies of Kant, Fichte and Hegel and to post-idealistic figures such as Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche. This theological lineage resulted in Kasper’s positive evaluation of modernity in all its diversity – significant for a positive theology of the church.