Article Review

Cardinal Kasper on Ecumenism

INGOLF DALFERTH


The book gathers together ten recent articles and addresses by Cardinal Walter Kasper, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The papers are said to have been revised but they often overlap in theme, content and argument, even verbally. Nonetheless they will command interest because the Cardinal here not only speaks his own mind about the present state and foreseeable future of ecumenism but also outlines the official ecumenical policy of the Roman Catholic Church.

The ten papers range from a theological account of the ‘Binding Nature of *Unitatis Redintegratio*’ to an analysis of the challenge of contemporary pluralism for the Church, with particular emphasis on actual problems and central ideas of Roman Catholic ecumenism such as ‘The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue’, ‘*Communio*: The Guiding Concept of Catholic Ecumenical Theology’, ‘Open Questions in the Ecclesiology of Sister Churches’, ‘The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification’, ‘The Renewal of Pneumatology’, the Petrine Ministry, and ‘Spiritual Ecumenism’. The ecumenical situation is described as difficult but not hopeless. Kasper emphatically rejects the widespread ‘atmosphere of mistrust, self-defence and withdrawal’ that has ‘emerged within confessional compartments’ in recent years (p. 1). But although he admits that after a century of ecumenical dialogue ‘no major progress has yet been accomplished’ in the central ‘question of ecclesiology’ (p. 2), his message is one of cautious hope – not the least because for him there is no alternative to ecumenism.

The main reason offered for this is his account of the contemporary situation of Christianity. In a world characterized by the ambiguities of globalization, ecumenism has become an indispensable ‘response to the signs of the times’ (p. 14). Its aim is the ‘re-establishment of the visible unity of the Church’ (p. 41). It ‘starts with common Christian experiences and ... with common Christian challenges in our more or less secularized and multicultural world’ (p. 160). Its method
is patient dialogue that assumes that ‘what unites us is much greater than what divides us’ (p. 14). It seeks not merely doctrinal consensus but ‘spiritual empathy’, i.e. ‘a sympathetic and intimate understanding’ of the other ‘from the inside, not just with the mind but also with the heart’ (p. 160). And it hopes that the ‘mutual enrichment’ and sharing of the gifts of the Spirit will result in ‘the fuller expression and realization of the one Church of Jesus Christ in all the churches and ecclesial communities’ (p. 67).

The critical distinction between the Church of Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and the various churches and ecclesial communities, on the other, is the most important operative principle in Kasper’s ecumenical program. It places it squarely not only in the continuity of Vatican II but also in that of Dominus Iesus and accounts for Kasper’s characteristic oscillation between a refreshing ecumenical openness and a learned but cautious and hesitant theological conservatism. For sympathetic and open-minded as Kasper’s account of ecumenism may look at first sight, it turns out to be fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies at a second glance. To mention but four: (1) It operates with a problematic view of ‘visible unity’. (2) It fails to address the implications of the Roman Catholic activities in Eastern Europe for its self-avowed ecumenism. (3) It restricts the role of Protestant churches to ecclesial communities that are called churches only in an improper sense. (4) It starts from a highly one-sided and oversimplifying account of contemporary society and culture. Let me briefly comment on these points in turn.

(1) In line with Roman Catholic teaching, Kasper states the aim of ecumenism to be the ‘re-establishment of the visible unity of the Church’. But this assumes an idealizing view of the history of Christianity that is far from historically accurate. There have indeed been divisions and separations in the history of the Church. But there never was a time when the Church was visibly one in the sense assumed by Kasper, i.e. sharing a ‘unity in faith, sacraments and church ministries’ (p. 3). On the contrary, unity in doctrine, liturgy and church order has always been an achievement in the light of diversity and sometimes deep-seated differences. For Kasper it is an ontological and biblical truth that unity has priority with respect to diversity (pp. 68–69). But it is misleading to ground the unity of the Church on the ‘classical ontology [of] the unum’ and ‘a transcendental qualification of being’ as ‘the foundation of diversity’ (p. 69) and to mistake the Christian confession of ‘belief in the una sancta ecclesia’ (ibid.) for a description of the historical reality of the Christian churches in New Testament times. On the contrary, it has always been a challenge to discover (in Kasper’s own words) ‘the one Church of Jesus Christ in all the churches’ (p. 67, emphasis added), and hence necessary to distinguish carefully between the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ constituted by God’s Word and Spirit in and through word and sacrament (the one true Church) and the visible unity of the churches that results from our frail human attempts to manifest the (soteriological)