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This is a big book in a small number of pages. I share the judgement of the Foreword by Bill Rusch, an American Lutheran and long-term colleague of mine on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, that this is ‘one of the most important works I have read recently’. Although the title is off-putting, presumably the choice of the translator and publisher rather than of the author, what we have here is a collection of essays which first appeared in German over a number of years from 1987–2002 and which not only give a fascinating insight into the mind of the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity but also make a positive contribution to a number of issues critical for the renewal of the church.

Anything written by Cardinal Kasper will be stimulating, but this particular collection of essays is of particular contemporary interest. His famous debate with a fellow German theologian Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, on the local and the universal church, is the subject of a charmingly entitled ‘Friendly Rejoinder’. This theme is likely to be the central topic for the third round of the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission dialogue recently announced. It is also a vital question within the Anglican Communion and thus a good example of the way in which discussion between churches and discussion within churches often face the same questions.

Another example, also represented in this book, is the role of canon law both as necessary tool for the social organization of the church and as a reflection or embodiment of some essential ecclesial characteristics. Kasper starts from the negative view many take of canon law, and is concerned to stress its theological and specifically its soteriological purpose. The mission of the church ‘is to testify to the kingdom of God and his righteousness and mercy, which have been made manifest in Jesus Christ’. This sets the framework for a neat little essay designed to show how canon law whose ‘fundamental orientation [is] to the salvation of human beings’ can help build ‘an ecclesial legal culture inspired by the Bible’.

Though, like most of the essays in this selection, this one was written before the author became president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity
(PCPCU), and does not directly address the ecumenical dimensions of canon law, its potential is considerable. The guild of canon lawyers has become increasingly ecumenical in recent years, with further impetus now created by the turmoil within the Anglican Communion and its threats both to the internal fellowship of Anglicans and to their prospects of reconciliation with the greater part of the Christian world. The haphazard and untidy growth of the Anglican Communion occurred without any thought to the legal and other structures necessary to maintain its common life. Recent problems associated with provincial autonomy (and thus the subject of the essay already mentioned) have highlighted the need for Communion-wide principles of law as well as a more theological approach to the canon law of individual provinces. All concerned either with these matters or with the wider question of how concrete historical structures serve the gospel of salvation will find much to reflect on in these few pages.

Elsewhere, Kasper deals more directly with ecumenical issues. One of the most intractable problems is that of the apostolic succession. In a subtle and eirenic approach, he explores the theological significance of the apostolic succession and its relationship to Jesus’ handing over of himself both once and for all and ‘so that he may remain with us always’. He points out directly that ‘the apostolic succession is entirely at the service of the apostolic tradition’ and stresses that episcopal ordination does not establish a ‘pipeline’ to the apostles but draws the ordinand into the ‘fellowship of bishops’. Similarly, he cuts through the rather sterile debate about how far the apostolic succession is a guarantee of apostolicity.

Starting from the Bible and the Fathers, he tries to show how the original intention of the Reformers was to return to the sources and paints a sympathetic picture of the exceptional actions to which they felt driven. He also shows how at a later stage some sought to justify these on the basis of a new understanding of the relationship between the church and the gospel and thus paved the way for the exceptional to become normal. Kasper admits that the Council of Trent was not able to respond adequately to the challenge because of the medieval breakdown of the inseparable link between successio, traditio and communio.

He continues by maximizing the common ground between the Second Vatican Council and Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and points to the possibility of the reality existing apart from the sign. He refers to the cautious formulations of the Council which ‘at least hint at a possibility that the una sancta could recognize more than one exclusive form and conception of apostolic succession’. Nonetheless, the remedy to the apparent impasse does not lie in abandoning the sign, but in re-establishing the unity of res and sacramentum. In this, something is definitely to be hoped for from the more pneumatological approach of the Orthodox churches which often shed new light on western problems.

In the same spirit he explains that the expression defectus ordinis ‘does not mean a total lack but a defect in the full form of the ministry’. In language