Reviews


At the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 14–23 February 2006, a document on ecclesiology was adopted by the Assembly entitled ‘Called to be the One Church’. It delegates to the recently published study document of the Faith and Order Commission, ‘The Nature and Mission of the Church: a Stage on the Way to a Common Statement’. This statement was the refinement of an earlier document entitled ‘The Nature and Purpose of the Church’ about which the Churches had been consulted between 2001 and 2004. During that consultation process the papers contained in this volume were produced. They cover three of the areas which it was considered the previous document had not adequately addressed.

One consultation dealt with the question ‘Does the Church have a Sacramental Nature?’ Another addressed the question of ‘Authority and Authoritative Teaching’ and the last took up the issue of ‘Ministry and Ordination in the Community of Women and Men in the Church’. This volume, *One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Ecumenical Reflections on the Church*, has made available the papers presented at these consultations. Therefore, it is possible to read the papers in conjunction with the successive documents on the Church produced by the Faith and Order Commission, and to trace the theological developments from one document to another. The Commission’s aim was to produce a document on the Church which would serve the same purpose as its very well known and fruitful document ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’.

Mary Tanner, at one time Moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, presented a paper at the final consultation in which she offered some very serious criticisms of the first document, starting with its failure to take koinonia/communion as its undergirding theme. While the final document does have a similar structure to the very successful Lima document, it remains to be seen whether or not the very good papers presented during these consultations have in fact sufficiently changed the final document to make it a fruitful instrument to serve the churches as they deal with the questions of ecclesiology.

However, most people will not be reading this collection in relation to either of those documents and it does not need to be read in conjunction with them.
It is a very good collection of papers in itself. Not all are of equal weight, but there are many very good papers which offer an overview of the perspective of a particular ecclesial tradition or of recent ecumenical dialogues. At the end of each of the three sections of the book there is a small summary report of the papers and the discussion which is itself quite helpful, but only really if one has read the papers. This is so often true of ecumenical documents when they summarise very briefly an enormously rich and sometimes profound discussion. By reducing the reflection to short, concise sentences, they inevitably fall short of what they are trying to summarise.

The first set of papers on the sacramentality of the Church contains a helpful overview of the way this matter has been addressed in bilateral dialogues by Antti Saarelma from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The paper by Donna Geernaert ‘Church’s Koinonia/Church as Sacrament’ provides a very solid Roman Catholic reflection on the question. She rightly draws attention to the fact that ‘sacrament’ is used analogously of the Church and notes that the most oft-quoted text of the Second Vatican Council about the Church as sacrament (*Lumen Gentium* I) speaks of the Church as ‘a kind of (veluti) sacrament … a sign and an instrument’ (p. 65).

This is something which Timothy George, who writes on ‘The Sacramentality of the Church: An Evangelical Baptist Perspective’ himself acknowledges, suggesting that ‘perhaps concerns raised by Baptists, Evangelicals and other Protestants may be addressed in ways that benefit our common ecumenical quest’ (p. 36) if this is truly the Catholic approach to the sacramentality of the Church.

Emmanuel Clapsis discusses the whole question from an Orthodox perspective in his usual very irenic way. He is well versed in Western theology and familiar with ecumenical dialogue so that his discussion of the question from an Orthodox perspective includes a very direct engagement with Western theological thought. He emphasises that in their ‘sacramental’ ecclesiology, there is no disassociation of Christ from the Church for the Orthodox. The Church is understood fundamentally as an ‘asymmetrical divine–human reality’ (p. 22). Christ through God’s Spirit is the primary mystery of God’s presence in the world; and the Church, through Christ and as a divine–human reality, becomes itself a mystery of God’s presence in the world.

Barbara Schwahn, from the Evangelical Church in Germany, draws attention to this same question of the relationship between the Church and Christ, arguing that ‘when it is a common ground that a Church, because of its sacramental nature, always refers to Christ, who can make us new, and that no Church has salvation itself, then diverse ecclesiologies with different foci can and have to be mutually recognised’ (p. 49). Not all Churches would share her conclusion that diverse ecclesiologies have to be mutually recognised once it is seen that the Church always refers to Christ.