Editorial

Catholic Ecclesiology and the Conciliar Tradition

This issue of Ecclesiology contains a fine essay by Susan K. Wood on ‘Continuity and Development in Roman Catholic Ecclesiology’. I hope that it will prove a useful resource in ecumenical conversations and teaching and for private reflection. There is a great deal in this account that can be welcomed and endorsed by catholic Christians who are not Roman Catholics (or, more correctly – in view of the position of Eastern Catholics – not in communion with the pope). I take it that a catholic Christian is one who believes that Jesus Christ did not come simply to offer a moral example or to enunciate inspiring ideas that could circulate freely around the world and which could be taken up by individuals at whim, and who could then, if they were so moved, club together to form little churches according to their own predilections. But rather, I think, a catholic Christian is someone who believes in ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church’, where this credal confession is interpreted to mean that Jesus Christ instituted in himself, through his death and resurrection, a structured community, a divinely ordained society, to which he gave authority to continue his mission until the end of the age. Is that not the essence of catholicism?

Christ’s clear intention that his Church should continue his mission has been fulfilled, though very imperfectly and along with much that Christ must weep over and judge – and therein lies the acute challenge that ecumenical ecclesiology wrestles with. His clear intention that the Church which is charged to carry forward his mission should be visibly one has not been fulfilled – and therein lies the deep perplexity that ecumenical ecclesiology wrestles with. This too Christ must weep over and judge. These mysteries that we ponder give fresh meaning to Pascal’s dictum, ‘Christ will be in agony until the end of the world’.

The themes by which Professor Wood structures her account – the church as perfect society, the church as the mystical body, the church as a sacrament of salvation, the church as the people of God, and the church as communion
with the Holy Trinity and with all the faithful – will resonate with all who hold to such a view of the foundation of the Church of Christ. Such catholic Christians are to be found, I believe, in all the major traditions of the Church. Where they will tend to part company with the specifically Roman Catholic account of catholic Christianity is on the point of papal authority as enunciated in modern Roman Catholic teaching, which inevitably figures prominently in Professor Wood’s account, especially in the second half of the paper. But that is certainly not the end of the conversation, as the impressive ecumenical dialogues on this topic bear witness. If the irenic spirit of Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical Ut Unum Sint of 1995 were to prevail all round, there would still be much to play for with regard to universal primacy.

However, in approaching that delicate theme, there is a significant dimension of the Church that is often lost sight of, that of conciliarity. The conciliar tradition of theological and canonical reflection came to fruition in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, at a time of unprecedented trauma for the Church of the West, when the papacy itself was split, and has continued to shape all major traditions that derive from the medieval western Church.

The ‘Great Schism of the West’ (1378) was momentous both for its contemporary impact on the unity of western Christendom and for its long-term ecclesiological significance. Just as it posed insoluble dilemmas at the time, so it continues to generate searching theological reflection on the nature and unity of the Church and on its sources and structures of authority. When in 1378 the Cardinals rejected the pope (Urban VI) whom they had recently elected and crowned and proceeded to elect and crown another (Clement VII), they split the Latin Church down the middle. Unity was pivotal in the medieval world view; it was the fundamental attribute of the Church. But if you had two rival systems, each with its pope, cardinals, bishops, priests and lay people, you had not one Church but two – which was and is theologically inconceivable. The first attempt to heal the breach, at the council of Pisa in 1409, made matters worse: the existing rival popes refused to stand down when their intended successor was elected – so now there were three. No wonder that the Schism caused medieval churchmen and scholars acute ecclesiological vertigo!

A new Companion to the Western Schism, from the publishers of this journal, reinforces this impression. As one contributor to this volume puts it, the

---