

THE CHURCH: [gleaned from Denis Edwards' - *The God of Evolution*]

If you look closely enough you will see two elements which are paradoxical, but which definitely characterise the Church in the Modern World. The two qualities are: CONTRACTION and EXPANSION.

1. **Contraction:** the emphasis has shifted quite dramatically in the last 25 years; and this with the rediscovery, the remembering, that Jesus did not preach or teach the Church, he preached and taught the Kingdom. This means that his vision was much wider, much more inclusive than a church-based teaching. This is not to say that the church has no place, but to make sure that the church gets its proper place.

We must not confuse Church and Kingdom. The two are very different realities, but they have a profoundly intimate connection. The Kingdom is the whole of creation brought into the proper ordering of God: creation as it was meant to be in the mind of God. The church is the MEANS Christ chose to foster the Kingdom. The church belongs to the Kingdom; it is not correct to say that the Kingdom belongs to the church. GS defines kingdom as "the risen Lord at work through his Spirit in all humankind" #3.

The contraction which took place is at two levels: Doctrinal = The purpose of Revelation is to show how immediately God is really present to us, and the nature and quality of this presence can never be captured once and for all in any formulae. For centuries there has been theological debate, writing, teaching... until we have reached the stage where the people of God are asking for simplicity. Cut out all the words, ideas and theories and give us the essential. There is a definite appeal for contraction - a movement towards quality and away from quantity. There is the desire to focus on the essential Mystery, the Paschal Mystery, the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus and how this is made present today. That is the first level.

The second level: Spiritual = In the Paschal Mystery, Jesus achieves for each one of us - each one of us personally - a sense of the real presence of God: Father, Son and Spirit. God is given to us as *an experience of intimacy*. This means that it is crucial for our understanding of "church" - that it means nothing else than: a living awareness of the presence of God as Father, actually communicating the life of God to us through the Son in the power of the Spirit.

This tells us that a vital quality of Christian life is that it is contemplative - the quality which is crucial for any experience which could be called intimate. This experience is meant to reach its peak in the celebration of the Eucharist - "the summit and source" of the life of the church. It is in the Eucharist that we allow Christ to become body given and blood poured out for us - that we allow God what God desires most - to wash our tired feet; and precisely through this celebration to become Eucharist for others - body given blood poured out - to serve.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this is: the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ - is the local church! Not the Basilica of S. Peter, not the Diocesan Cathedral - but the place where each one actually lives and moves and strives for salvation. The local church is a reality in which every single one of us receives life and the purpose of life directly from Jesus Christ, through the medium of ministry and sacraments.

This means that the basic characteristic of the local Christian community is "communion and sharing", a movement towards at-one-ment, [atonement] or reconciliation between us and those who also live in our locality. It is a communion of people who are all equal, but not the same - like the Father, Son and Spirit. We are all equal in dignity, but with differing functions.

All the great Councils of the Church have had specific characteristics attached to them: Jerusalem - an expansion of missionary enterprise around the Mediterranean; after the Christological Councils - OSB in Europe; After Lateran IV - the Mendicants in Middle and far East; after Trent - SJ in "new world". What happened at Vatican II was intended to be the emancipation of the Laity - though it still has to filter through - in an increasingly secularised world.

This emphasis builds the church from below as well as from above, with the laity in dialogue with the hierarchy. Here again the paradox is apparent: more and more priests are moving out of "church" work, and more and more lay people are moving into it.

What is more and more obvious is that the current priest-laity structure is proving to be inadequate to meet people's needs. There is now a persistent search in every local church for new and appropriate ministries to meet local times and local needs.

Alongside the traditional parish structures in these modern times, there has been the emergence of what have been called: Basic Christian Communities. In such communities the people receive regular training with regard to providing for the needs of the local church, support for family life, a great diversity of neighbourhood service. These communities have proved helpful in restructuring local parishes. The desperate situation of our towns and inner cities is crying out for the emergence of structures which are capable of producing communion and compassion.

2. **Expansion:** For the first time in history the church is physically present everywhere. The local church in each place is to take responsibility for mission.

Apostolate of presence: there is a huge diversity of people to be evangelised. As well as the vast variety of ethnic mix, there is also the quality level: some are eager, some are not! Some are lost, others are confused, many are angry. In our pluralistic world the kind of presence needed is not one of power and influence, political, financial - it is a presence which must be universally relevant, trusting, compassionate, religious and evangelical.

The Gospel certainly does have a secular dimension. In a world in which we are becoming more and more aware of global responsibilities [GS.55] the church must be involved in the liberation of human beings - this involves the struggle for peace with justice; something which must be tackled in 2 ways:

The issues which determine the quality of people's lives do not present themselves in the religious sphere, but in their secular aspect. [They don't happen inside the church building but outside it]. Human freedom can never be separated from its social conditioning - though it cannot be reduced to this. Because of the Beatitudes the church belongs with all who suffer in whatever way - and to the prosperous, to convert them to the Beatitudes!

The church is obliged to inject Hope - the experience that living is worthwhile. The church's pursuit of human values and their emancipation for all [peace with justice] calls for a poor church.

One important discovery, consequent upon greater secularisation, is that human beings are religious by nature - meaning that the fulfilment of this need is to be addressed from within the human being and not simply through attending religious ritual celebration: a.v. to point out that our religious celebration must

answer these deeply experienced needs. We cannot put together religious answers without listening to the human questions.

Millions live in prosperity and artificiality, and mental stress is growing; as is break-down and burn-out. Personal relationships become difficult, there is anxiety about absence of meaning, increased fear of death. These experiences often give rise to a vague religiosity, cocktails of Eastern religions, Christianity, Pentecostalism... It is here that the church has to provide hope to the distressed and the upset [often the more well-to-do].

Today knows 2 forms of insecurity: the physical insecurity of the materially poor - those who do not have enough to live in a dignified way; and the spiritual insecurity of the jaded rich. One needs food, the other needs love, and each needs the other for salvation. We must be faithful to the grace of work which is sensitive to the proper place of prayer - overcoming the discrepancy between contemplation and involvement.

The church professes to recognise "in those who are poor and suffer, the image of her poor and suffering founder" - LG.8. The church regards poverty as crucial for her own way of life. If the Good News is not delivered in credible fashion, its proclaimers should be resigned to not being taken seriously! Wealth is a fact of life - it is, therefore, of major concern, and the realisation of peace with justice calls for its wider spread, not its elimination.

Obviously, people who are now prosperous but have memories of degrading poverty, are not going to accept poverty as an ideal. People in poor situations will not accept it either - this would effectively remove all their motivation. The church has a lot of work to do to reflect a proper vision and understanding of this Gospel value.

Jesus became poor by choice. He renounced his divine wealth. The conclusion would seem to be: a person will embrace poverty because of the love for other people - we see it all around us - even in little things [children giving up pocket money for Children in Need]. It is in coupling together these central mysteries - Christ - Eucharist - People of God - Kingdom - that we discover that we cannot, in fact have empty arms open in welcome - if they are already full!