The Church and the World in Conversation

The City of God and “Interurban” Dialogue

Michael J. Himes

Despite the admirable call in Gaudium et Spes for more meaningful conversation between the church and the secular sphere, the author finds that much of the thinking and writing since Vatican II has remained “intramural.” Much more significant engagement is required if the People of God are to fulfill their mission in the proleptic realization of the Kingdom of God.

World—Kingdom—Church

“...What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian famously demanded (De praescriptione haereticorum 7), and although he assumed the answer to his rhetorical question was, “Nothing whatever,” the evidence of the past two thousand years has been, “Quite a bit.” The very posing of Tertullian’s question betrays his indebtedness to the classical rhetorical tradition which was the mainstay of Greek and Roman education and shows that he, like all of us, was a product of the cultural world in which he lived. And yet his question cannot be dismissed so easily. To be sure, Tertullian represented one extreme position in the attempt to understand the relationship of Christians to the world around them.

The opposite extreme can be seen in Justin Martyr, writing a generation earlier. Because Christ is the incarnate Logos of the Father, Justin argued, anyone who lives in accord with the Logos is a follower of Christ. Thus, he held, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus were really Christians although some had con-

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sidered them atheists as it were among “the foreigners,” Abraham, Elijah, Ananiah, Azariah, and Mishael (1 Apology 46). If not a baptism of the whole of classical culture, Justin’s claim was, at least, that its best representatives were (to use an anachronistic term) “anonymous Christians.” Clearly second-century Christian thought embraced a wide range of opinions on the proper relation of faith and culture, unsurprisingly since this same range is found even in the New Testament documents.

The most striking example is the Fourth Gospel. There we read, on the one hand, that God loves the world so deeply that God sends the Son to save it (John 3:16) and, on the other hand, that the world does not recognize the Son (1:10) and actually hates both the Son and those who belong to him (15:18). In the first case, the world is the object of God’s agapic love and so clearly good and blessed. In the second case, the world is the enemy that rejected Christ and persecutes his disciples. Is the world good or evil? The word translated in these passages as “world” is kosmos, a word with multiple connotations in Scripture. It can simply mean “everything,” the totality of creatures, the sum of all the things that God makes in the Genesis creation accounts. In this sense, it is equivalent to the creedal phrase for what God brings into being, “heaven and earth.” So, in Acts we read that God has made “the world [kosmos] and everything in it” (Acts 17:24). Used in this fashion, “world” can be a neutral term designating the theater in which the drama of salvation is played out. When emphasis is placed on the divine agape as the ground of creation, “world” becomes that which is called into being by God’s self-gift, as in John 3:16. When speaking of the eschatological fulfillment of creation by God’s loving act however, the New Testament writers seem reluctant to use kosmos. The “world” carries with it the overtone of that which passes away. Its destiny is to be transformed into something else, the kingdom of God (Kittel, 3:886). This is why the word can take on the negative meaning of that which is not (yet) the kingdom and so that which stands in opposition to the Son and his followers. Indeed, the world is subject to a hostile power, the “prince [archon] of this world.” The world must be convinced of how misled it is (John 16:8-11), and only then can the power of its prince be broken and the world be transformed into the kingdom. The “world” is a term for the time being, the period when the kingdom of God is growing. That growth goes on often unnoticed (Mark 4:26ff.), sometimes misunderstood (Luke 17:21), but powerfully and inevitably.

Thus the world is creation as it now exists, and the kingdom is creation as it will be when transformed by God’s grace into what God has called it to be. These

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moments in the drama of creation overlap, of course. The kingdom is at work even now within the world, both as its judgment and its salvation. In a familiar image, it is “already but not yet.” This New Testament theme was taken over by Augustine in *The City of God*, in which the earthly city and the heavenly city exist simultaneously now and forever. The earthly city eventually is revealed to be what it always was: hell, which Augustine insists will perdure forever (Augustine, Bk. 20, *passim*). At present, the two cities exist side by side, and sometimes citizens of one can even collaborate with citizens of the other on proximate goals, although they are opposed on ultimate goals (Augustine, Bk. 19, 26). Only when God’s judgment is made manifest will the citizens of each city be clearly distinguished from one another. In the framework of *The City of God*, what the New Testament calls the world is our current situation in which the two cities coexist and sometimes are confused with one another. Although Augustine’s categories do not precisely correspond to those of the New Testament, it is clear in both that the *kosmos*, the world, is the current state of creation, which is loved by God or it would not exist at all, redeemed by the sending of the Son, in which the Spirit is at work transforming all things into what they are called to be, and the *basileia*, the kingdom, is creation come to full stature, fully mature in the image of Christ himself (Eph 4:13). But what then is the *ekklesia*, the church?

First, since the church is not the kingdom, it is, like the world, for the time being. The kingdom, like Augustine’s city of God, lasts forever; the church does not. It passes away when the kingdom is complete, or perhaps better, it dissolves into the kingdom when its mission is fulfilled. While it is true that the gates of the netherworld will never overcome the church (Matt 16:18), it is also true eventually, when the kingdom is complete, it will no longer be needed. So when the new Jerusalem is revealed in all its splendor, it contains no temple because the Lord God and the Lamb are themselves the temple (Rev 21:22). But second, the church is not simply an aspect of the world. It is, after all, the body of which Christ is the head (Eph 1:22f.; Col 1:18), and the body of Christ is surely not simply of the world. The church seems to be a *tertium quid*, neither the world nor the kingdom. Tertullian’s question needs further nuancing, for if Athens is the world and Jerusalem is the kingdom, then asking what the world has to do with the kingdom does not take into account what either may have to do with the church.

**Church and World in Conversation**

With this in mind, the oft-quoted first paragraph of *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, is more interesting theologically than it appears on first reading. The church is “a community composed of people united in Christ who are directed by the Holy Spirit
in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s kingdom and who have received the message of salvation to be communicated to everyone.” Yet they share “the joys and hopes and the sorrows and anxieties of people today, especially of those who are poor and afflicted,” so that “there is nothing truly human which does not also affect them” (GS 1; Tanner, 2:1069). The paragraph picks up the theme of the church as pilgrim people which is the image developed at length in the second chapter of Lumen Gentium. Since the goal of the pilgrimage is the kingdom, the church cannot simply be identified with the kingdom. And because the church “feels itself closely linked to the human race and its history,” it is related intimately to the world but apparently cannot be identified with the world either. Gaudium et Spes also envisions the church as a tertium quid, united with the world and on the way to the kingdom but neither simply the one nor the other.

Conversation is a demanding activity. As Charles Taylor has written,

A conversation is not the coordination of actions of different individuals, but a common action in this strong, irreducible sense; it is our action. It is of a kind with—to take a more obvious example—the dance of a group or a couple, or the action of two men sawing a log. Opening a conversation is inaugurating a common action (Taylor, 189).

Conversation, then, cuts in two directions. It is not only the way the church relates to the world but, if it is true conversation, the way the world relates to the church. This is implicitly recognized in Gaudium et Spes when the bishops of Vatican II wrote of the need to read “the signs of the times.” If it is to witness to
the truth, the church “has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the
times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a
manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual human question-
ings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related”
(GS, 4; Tanner, 2:1070).

The church does not set the agenda for a monologue. It listens to the world's
concerns, it reads the signs of the times, and tries to respond in a way that is
intelligible and pertinent to the world in which it finds itself. There is an obvious
problem, however. Gaudium et Spes might be understood as implying that the
conversation between the church and the world is essentially one in which the
world poses questions and the church reaches into the deposit of faith to provide
answers. A question-and-answer session is scarcely conversation at its richest. It
would be dangerously triumphalist and historically naïve to think that the world
presents problems that the church resolves. Conversation is a much less control-
lable process. David Tracy has made this point:

Yet what is authentic conversation as distinct from idle chatter, mere debate,
gossip or nonnegotiable confrontation? As the classical model for conversation
in the Western tradition, the Platonic dialogue, makes clear, real conversation
occurs only when the individual conversation partners move past self-
consciousness and self-aggrandizement into joint reflection upon the subject
matter of the conversation. The back-and-forth movement of all genuine con-
versation (an ability to listen, to reflect, to correct, to speak to the point—the
ability, in sum, to allow the question to take over) is an experience which all
reflective persons have felt. Authentic conversation is a relatively rare experi-
ence, even for Socrates! Yet when conversation actually occurs—in a chance
meeting, a discussion with friends and colleagues, a particular seminar session
—it is unmistakable (Tracy, 101).

Authentic conversation is not governed by either of the participants; it is
governed by the question under discussion. This is why the conclusion of a con-
versation can never be predetermined. The church not only teaches the world, it
learns from the world. And it can never tell in advance what it may learn. The
Catholic Church was not in the forefront of the nineteenth-century struggle
against slavery in the English-speaking world. It came late to that great effort
and learned much from other Christian communities who were corporately ear-
lier and more energetically engaged in abolitionism as well as from individuals
and groups whose immediate inspiration was not Christian at all. At the present
moment, Catholicism is not exactly “at the cutting-edge” of feminist concerns, al-
though these are often manifestly matters of justice. The church has not taught
the world in these cases; it has had to learn from the world. A striking instance of
this is the adoption of the language of rights in Catholic social teaching, especially
in papal documents (Hollenbach, 87–100). The language of human rights is not the product of the church; it has been learned by the church from the tradition of Western social thought since the Enlightenment. The church has come to see rights-language as an especially appropriate and useful way to express the dignity of the human person as the image of God, but it learned the language from the world.

In its conversation with the world, the church is not only the benefactor but may be the beneficiary. Of course, the church proclaims the gospel of God’s self-giving love that can never simply be deduced by the world. The Good News is always news, i.e., it must be proclaimed if it is to be believed, and the church is the locus of that proclamation. Often, however, the church hears the news more fully in the process of proclaiming it, and very frequently it learns implications of its preaching by listening to the world. The mission of conversation of which Gaudium et Spes speaks is a two-way street, and the subject matter of the conversation controls its direction, not either of the conversation-partners. If I may adapt familiar terms in Catholic ecclesiology and employ them in a new way, the church is always both ecclesia docens and ecclesia discens, both a teaching church and a learning church. Unquestionably, it has a uniquely important proclamation to give to the world, but it also learns from the world. Further, what it learns is not only improved techniques of evangelization and catechesis; it learns—or ought to learn—substantively about what it is to be a creature which in turn illumines the Gospel for the church as well as the world.

**Usefulness of the Image of Sacrament**

How, then, is the church to be described in its relation to the world and the kingdom? In Lumen Gentium, having related the church to the central mystery of the faith, the Trinity, and thus demonstrated that the church is part of the mystery of salvation and not merely the bearer of the mystery, Vatican II insisted that the church can only be spoken of “through a variety of images” (LG 6; Tanner, 2:851). The council fathers then briefly mentioned some of the scriptural images for the church (sheepfold, field, building, family, spouse, mother) before centering on two: the body of Christ (LG 7; Tanner, 2:852ff.) and pilgrim people (LG 9ff; Tanner, 2:855ff.). I suggest that for purposes of understanding the relationship of the church to the world and to the kingdom, another familiar Catholic theological category is most helpful: sacrament.

It might be wise to recall how recent the notion of describing the church as a sacrament is. Fifty years ago most Catholics, including those educated in seminaries, would have found the notion of Vatican II’s statement that the church is “a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of
all humanity” (LG 1; Tanner, 2849) puzzling at best. “Sacrament” was a univocal term referring to seven public celebrations within the liturgical life of the church. To use the term to describe the church itself was startling for many. It is easy to forget now how odd Edward Schillebeeckx’s description of Christ as the primordial sacrament of our encounter with God (Schillebeeckx, 13) or Karl Rahner’s claim that the church is the fundamental sacrament (Rahner, 11) seemed when many English-speaking Catholics first read them a year before Lumen Gentium was issued. In what way can we say that the church is a sacrament, and how does that help in understanding its conversational relationship with the world?

One way to describe a sacrament is as a person, thing, or event that makes what is always true effectively present to someone. Grace, the self-communication of God outside the Trinity, is omnipresent. The agapic self-giving of God is the ground of creation, the reason why there is anything rather than nothing, the cause of the being of all that is. Horribly, it is possible not to accept the self-gift of God; that is what is meant by “damnation.” It is impossible, however, not to be the object of God’s self-gift, the divine agape. Not to be loved by God is not to be damned, it is not to be at all. The opposite of being loved by God is non-being. Grace is therefore omnipresent. What is always and everywhere true, however, can go unnoticed for precisely that reason. When someone or something makes that which is always present effectively present by embodying it in a striking and communicative fashion, it is a sacrament, a sign that effects what it signifies.

The church is a sacrament, a “sign that God in his merciful love identifies himself in Christ with the world,” a sign which is “definitively triumphant” (Rahner, 18). This last claim is of particular importance because it is so often overlooked in preaching and popular piety. The ultimate destiny of creation is not an open question. The human race does not have an open option to move toward grace or toward damnation. As Rahner insisted throughout his career whenever he wrote on the mystery of engracement,

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God himself has taken part, acted, given the drama the dénouement he himself wanted: salvation, grace and eternal life. The individual human being cannot, as long as he is a pilgrim and faced with decision, yet say whether and how this one divinely effected consummation of the whole of history will end in blessedness for him. But because he cannot tell that about himself or any other individual, speaking generally, he must not have the impression on that account
that history as a whole is still at the disposition of mankind, with God awaiting the decision. History as a whole is already decided, and by God (Rahner, 16).

The world is engraced but often the world cannot see that it is. The world is definitively loved, although the world may not recognize the fact. The Fourth Gospel told us that nearly two millennia ago (John 3:16 and 1:10). The church is the community of those who accept that they are loved and engraced in faith and give thanks for the fact. It is the public expression of grateful receptivity; that is why its fundamental and constitutive act is always Eucharist, quite literally "thanksgiving." It is the community with and in the world that acknowledges and celebrates what is true of the whole world, although the whole world does not know it. It is the sacrament of what the world really is and what it will be when the world is transformed by God into God's kingdom. It is the world publicly and openly being transformed, and as such, it is both still world and already kingdom. It is a tertium quid. As sacramental embodiment of the kingdom, it has something to say; as sacramental revelation of the truth of the world, it has something to say and something to hear. It is a locus of conversation.

Conclusion

In the forty years since Gaudium et Spes was written, for many reasons some good, some unfortunate, so much ecclesiological attention has been focused on the inner working and administration of the church, its structure of authority and ministry, that the nature of the church's relationship to the world has tended to be eclipsed. Thus, at present, much theological ink is spilt on the notion of the church as communio. That is an immensely valuable and important image for the church, one with long patristic roots and patient of quite different interpretations. (It makes a great difference whether communion is treated as primarily vertical and hierarchical or primarily as horizontal and collegial.) The communio theme, however, frequently serves as a way of talking about intra-ecclesial issues. The image of church as sacrament, announced in the first paragraph of Lumen Gentium and presupposed by the identification of conversation as the way in which the church relates to the world in Gaudium et Spes, necessarily turns attention extra-ecclesially. In their preoccupation with the internal structures of the church and the fear of compromising the church's uniqueness by admitting any identification of it with the world, some may say that Gaudium et Spes was too optimistic about that ambiguous realm that Scripture calls kosmos. But the very title of the document reminds us that it deals not with optimism but with hope, the hope that allows us to maintain that the destiny of the world has been decided in the Incarnation. That is what we believe; what it means we are still discovering in our conversation.
References


