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## What sort of church to construct?

*Raymond Facelina, C.M.*

Once upon a time....It's a true story I'm going to tell you. It happened in 1965. That is to say three years after the country came to independence and at the end of the Second Vatican Council. The two events are important and likewise the date for the Church in Algeria.

1965 was the year when the first President of the first Algerian Republic was overthrown by a coup which broke out without any violence in the country. BOUMEDIENNE succeeded BEN BELLA. Algeria opted for socialism as a doctrine and a political model.

1965 was the end of Vatican Council II. The archbishop of Algeria, Mgr Etienne Duval had just been made a cardinal. Now, the church in Algeria which comprises four dioceses (Algiers, Oran, Constantine, Lagouat) has less than 10,000 faithful. It is a minority international community comprising, on the one hand, stable elements like the long-time Christians who remained after independence, and especially priests and religious; and on the other hand, mobile elements fluctuating with the ups and downs of international agreements for cooperation. More than 200 churches or chapels out of use due to lack of christian communities, had been put back into the hands of the local communes or, when they were the property of the diocese, affected to social activities. So this was a minority international Church dispersed throughout a country which was mainly Muslim and politically socialist. The migratory flow of (technical) cooperation brought to Algeria French, Russian, Chinese, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Polish, North Korean, Cuban, English, technicians; and Arab, Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, French co-workers, as well as industrialists. Amongst these were some Arab or other Eastern Christians....The highly structured Church had therefore few faithful. The Algerian Christians, mainly of Berber origin (Kabyles) kept a very low-profile.

In three years the Church completely changed its appearance. In July 65 there took place in Algeria a priestly month for the clergy of the four dioceses. We queried our presence as Church in this new environment. We had studied the documents of Vatican II : Church, Religious Liberty, the Church's Missionary Activity, Non-christian Religions, etc. Revelation, the Ministry and Life of Priests....

The Cardinal frequently intervened. While enjoying all the rich nourishment provided by Vatican II, he was at the same time, like all of us, rather impoverished in the face of this new mode of presence of the Church confronted by changes in the country which affected Christians. What was to become of the Church? Then, in a spirit of hopefulness, he threw at us this phrase: *"Let's stop looking at ourselves. The Church hasn't to make people come to her. She is sent to the world. She is the Church of Christ, her centre lies at her periphery!"* (sic). Copernicus must have turned in his grave! But these words of the Cardinal were a prophecy of hope and of faith. He wanted to make us understand clearly that mission precedes Church and that the institutional Church was eschatological, and not centred on itself. The Church is essentially missionary;

otherwise it doesn't exist. What needs to be propagated therefore is not the Church but the Gospel with a view to the building up of the Kingdom: the Church is sent out. (1)

The fourteen years which I spent at Strasbourg in Alsace, in ecumenical dialogue as delegate of the bishop and thus representing the Catholic Church, have made me sensitive to the divergent approaches of the Churches regarding important points in ecclesiology, especially those which relate to the foundation of the Church, to authority in the Church, to ministries in the Church. The approach of the Protestant Churches (2) deriving from the Reformation (Lutheran and Reformed) is not the same as that of the Catholic Church and still less of the Orthodox Churches. The question "*What sort of Church to construct?*" In the context of ecumenical dialogue would bring us -- if we were in a theological meeting--to hear and receive other points of view than our own and would lead us likewise to take more account of the different approaches of other Christian churches. One can legitimately wonder if theological reflexion can be carried out at the present moment without an ecumenical perspective.

I therefore take the question "*What sort of Church to construct?*" as the *expression* which synthesises other questionings regarding the models of Church judged unsatisfactory and as the *easpiration* towards other models which would be better adapted to the present-day world. So here we are on institutional territory and therefore on what concerns the visibility of the Church or its spread. 3

I propose a three-fold approach:

- I. Models of Church in the Catholic Church**
- II. "Christianising " our Catholicism**
- III. "Catholicising" our Christianity**

I'll try to put some meaning into these titles which are deliberately provocative in their formulation.

## **I. Models of church in the catholic church**

It is up to you in the group- work and discussions to continue these reflexions and especially to share your personal, national and continental approaches. If there is so much talk about the irreversible necessity of *inculturation* of Christianity or of the Church, even of communities, it is that the individual churches experience a deep constant, feeling of the necessity for them to incarnate the Faith of the universal Church locally in the cultures which fashion and provide means of expression to the peoples among whom they have been sent.

This explains in part the multiplicity of the models of the Churches in the Northern hemisphere and in the Southern. But account needs also to be taken of the status of each church according to the region where it is located and the situation it is granted:

In some countries, the Church is present in the *Power mode*. This is where the church is a majority; the church formerly called Christianity. It is recognised and asserts itself. This it is able to do: it has effective powers and laws therefore which are publicly acknowledged. It possesses goods, patrimony, influence, power. But, for the Church isn't power dangerous?

In some countries the Church is present in the *Liberty mode*. This is where the church is separated from the State. It has freedom to think, to act, to celebrate, and even the liberty to

speak in matters of civil legislation which it respects and which respects it in a cohabitation sometimes regulated by a concordat. Isn't liberty for the church enviable?

In some countries the church is present in the *Poverty mode*. This is where the Church is in the minority, in areas unfavourable to its activities, or in high-risk countries. The Church which is present in the poverty mode possesses neither power nor liberty. It is sometimes obliged to be clandestine and always discreet both internally and regarding its external mission....This is the case in countries where other religious currents enjoy a majority and priority, recognized as "State religion". The Church which is present in the poverty mode seems due to become more and more the mode of the Church. But for the Church isn't poverty viable?

Dangerous, enviable, viable: the Church's mode of presence is also conditioned by the world and the society in which it exists. It cohabits, peacefully or otherwise, with other religious stances: Buddhism, Islam, but also other religious groupings, other spiritual currents and even sects, and it coexists in a world which is globally unbelieving and societies, formerly Christian, which don't yet renounce their Christian roots, but which have become massively indifferent. As a result of all this, the Church -- by the very fact of its being and its sending by Christ -- which has a universal outlook tending to embrace the totality of human existence up to and including eternal destiny, achieves little or no success in taking hold of the real life which goes on in society and thus of the lives of people in general.

The Church is out of kilter and often wrong-footed not only with regard to new questions in social ethics or bioethics, but also with regard to serious problems concerning birth, death, illness, and their regulation, and the mentalities and behaviour even of their own faithful. Christian morality, referred to as traditional, common sense wouldn't suffice to provide guidelines. Reducing these questions and their ramifications to individual "cases of conscience" has a risk of giving formal authority to inhuman responses or making privileged a particular cultural approach or that of a majority in an opinion poll.

From these slippages there results certain dis-harmonies with regard to the 60 - 80 period and especially the previous period where the Church (and the Christian churches) had greater presence, expansion and influence. One of these disharmonies is certainly that of the claims of individualism which is running through society in the North and which is not balanced out by the Church since religious and moral matters have become "privatised".

The Church therefore finds itself situated in a world which has been taken in hand by man. The world has become an autonomous world, with its own consistency, energies and objectives; the world has its own energy which it directs throughout the cosmos. People have taken the world into their own hands, including humanity's destiny. This grasp which men have taken on the world leads to denying, ignoring, eliminating the presence of God, and even the possibility for God to intervene in the world and in the affairs of men. Men's projects and God's project follow different trajectories which no longer meet.

And so asking the question "What sort of Church to construct?" means feeling very strongly the urgent need for a harmonious re-adjustment within the faith and in the mode of the Church's presence. It means suffering from this lack of focus with regard to the image of God, of Christ, of the faith, of Church doctrine and of the Church itself. This impression of vagueness, lack of focus is reinforced by the fact that, in spite of the advances of the ecumenical movement, Christians and the churches are divided while claiming to come from Christ. It is a divided Christianity which is made a spectacle to the world by the divided churches. And - my

experience with ecumenical work permits me to say so -- the divisions are sometimes greater within the same church than between separated churches.

This vagueness affects the understanding of the Church which Christians and Catholics Christians can have. Christian identity is at stake and there is doubt about Catholic identity in our Church. It is therefore a question of permanently rediscovering the spiritual and moral vigour of a Christianity capable of re-fashioning man. The Protestant churches are also faced with the same questions (4), and their presence also has an effect on the behaviour of Catholics. I shall cite just a few points for dialogue if not for confrontation in the Catholic Church: Christian faith with or without a Church? who has authority in the Church? the place of ministries? the person of the minister? the sacraments; the place of women and their accession to ministry...since some churches are doing it, like the Anglicans...

## II. "Christianising" our catholicism

By using that expression I intend to say that the basis for participation in the Church is baptism, and that one is first of all a Christian even if one can be so only in a Church. And I add that if we have a problem in believing in the Church, this comes not so much from the vagueness, the doubts, some heavy-handedness and even certain counter-witness offered by the institution or the services of its organisation. It comes from the fact that our faith in Christ is not full enough. For, either Christ founded his Church or he didn't build it. If we believe that Christ built his Church, whatever is not going well in it comes from us, from those who went before us, but also from us; there is the possibility of reforming, renewing, purifying. It is therefore legitimate to aspire to having new modes of the Church's presence to the world and in the world while holding firmly that it is through Christ and in his Spirit from God, and that it is sent into the world to lead people to God.

The Church reforms itself only when it rediscovers the fundamental traits of the unique Church of Jesus Christ which gives structure to authentic faith. (5)

If the Church appears to be the agent responsible for the Christian mission, it is not its origin. The authentic mission springs from the action of God carried out in and through Jesus Christ, the envoy par excellence of the Father.(6) It is in the same movement that, in their own turn, Christians are sent.(7)

Every christian interpretation of the missionary action of the Church should be referred to the Mission of God which precedes it and which judges it and which one grasps through considering the *Sending* of Jesus of Nazareth into the world.

Announcing the Gospel means pointing to Jesus as the Christ, as the unique being in whom all people are called to recognise their own humanity and to keep making their way towards a new humanity...like Nicodemus(Jn 3). The Church has no mission in the world except by reference to the existence of Jesus and to the vocation which He incarnated in the world.

"Christianising our Catholicism" means then that the Church doesn't have to take on its own Gospel with a view to expanding itself, but has to announce the Gospel of Christ, the Gospel of the Kingdom. This Gospel doesn't become clear except in connexion with this particular man Jesus of Nazareth, put to death under Pontius Pilate "whom God has made Lord and Christ". (8) To speak of Jesus Christ dead and resurrected, whom God has made Lord and Christ is to announce God's Envoy and discern that in Him the Kingdom of God is close at hand.

(9) The Church is the community participating in the mission of Jesus Christ, the Envoy of the Father. There's no ecclesiology, no missiology without christology and hence without meditation and saturation in the Mystery of the *Trinity*. (10)

Why does the Gospel of St Luke at the end of the first century (80 - 90) recount for us the admirable episode of the disciples of Emmaus? if not to "christianise" the shaky faith of the Church? Here's a very personal reading of this story on which we'll never have finished meditating. Here it is:

*It's the first day of the week. Two disciples are very sadly returning home. They are having a discussion. Jesus joins them on the road but they are unaware of him. They "recount" the events concerning Jesus. They share their shattered hopes with Jesus. A blockage concerning Jesus of Nazareth confronts them. Jesus then opens their spirit to an understanding of the Scriptures and of God's project concerning Him. Arrived at their stopping place they invite Jesus to remain with them. He enters, He remains, He shares the meal with them. He takes the bread, says the blessing, shares the bread. Then their eyes are opened; but He has disappeared from their sight. Up they get, full of joy. At full speed they return to Jerusalem. They rejoin the group gathered around Peter. They get no time to speak. The disciples confirm for them the Good News: "He is risen, He has shown Himself to Simon".*

*And they tell how their hearts were burning within them on the road while He was explaining the Scriptures and how they recognised Him in the breaking of the bread.*

The disciples -- you and I -- do not see how to construct the future. They are flattened, crippled. It is the Risen Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth. The same, and yet other. In heading for Emmaus they are turning their backs on the future, they are blocked into what they already know. Christ will open them up to what they need to learn. And St Luke's Church shows us the sign-posts for "Christianising" our faith. (12)

- 1 The Word of God which must be taken hold of on the basis of the Resurrection: "It was necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into Glory". That's the *doxologia*.
  - 2 The Faith received and transmitted: Spirits slow to believe the full message.. The *homelia*
  - 3 The breaking of the bread: that's the *eucharistia*.
  - 4 The returning to the community. That's the *ecclesia*.
  - 5 The sharing of the same Faith in community: that's the *koinonia*, the communion.
  6. The discovery leading to joy: Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. They were "partisans for Jesus", they become disciples (that's the *sequela christi*) and discover that only if 2 or 3 are gathered in *His Name*, the Christ is in their midst.
- After Emmaus Luke gives us the Ascension and Pentecost. With the sending out in the *Holy Spirit* there'll have to be a "Catholicising of our Christianity".

### **III. "Catholicising our Christianity"**

Cf Acts 10-11. It is midday. It's hot. Peter who is lodging with Simon the tanner at Joppe (Jaffa) feels hungry. The meal isn't ready. Peter goes up on the roof and takes a little siesta. Peter falls asleep. Peter dreams, and in the dream, cooking gets mixed up with theology.

There is a three-fold coming down and going up of a table garnished with foods forbidden by Jewish Law. Peter refuses to partake of what is impure. His dream, which becomes a nightmare, concludes; they are calling him. Strange visitors are looking to speak with him. Peter welcomes pagans into Simon the Tanner's house. He offers them hospitality. Next day he accompanies them to Caesarea where the centurion Cornelius, a Roman, an enemy, has made an appointment with him, also based on a dream. Then it is that Peter understands the meaning of his own dream: "God makes no distinction between men"...While making very clear his own position in the face of Jewish traditions (especially because of the brothers of the Jerusalem Church who also accompanied him) he announces the Paschal Mystery of the Risen Christ. Then, the Holy Spirit having "gone ahead", Peter baptises Cornelius and his household.

It's on his return to Jerusalem that Peter runs into trouble. The "official" Church submits him to interrogation: explain yourself! Why did you enter the house of the uncircumcised, why have you eaten with them? Peter has to justify his behaviour (Acts 11, 1-17). His argumentation focussed on 3 points:

- 1 The call to the pagans.
- 2 The announcing of the Good News (Kerygma).
- 3 The coming of the Holy Spirit.

The conclusion had to follow: Baptism.

And Peter in his turn challenged the Church: "If God has given them the same gift as ourselves for having believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to make obstacles to God?" (Acts 11,17).

These words pacify them and they give glory to God who, to the pagans also, grants the repentance which leads to life. (Acts 11,18).

This passage is wonderfull in many ways.

It renders the Paschal Mystery very concrete:

- the movement of the pagans into faith in the risen Christ,
- the movement by the Church, still locked into Judaism, towards its universal dimension,
- the movement of the Church itself towards a greater understanding of the Mystery of Jesus,
- the movement of the Church to a greater acceptance of the role of the Spirit.

The universality of the Christian Faith is not that of the Church -- nor of the Churches -- but it is that of Christ through his Spirit. The universality of the Gospel is not separable from the person of Jesus: as the Father has sent Jesus, Jesus sends the Church (Jn 20,21). The mission of the Church is similar to that of Jesus and is an element in the same economy of sending which carries out God's love for the world.

Mission carries the Church forward: it becomes de-centred from itself; it re-centres itself on Christ, it concentrates "on its periphery" on the pagans.

Journeying leads the Church to deepen its rootedness in Christ, the unique saviour and universal mediator. The de-centering that the Gospel of Christ brings about for the missionary Church is not a rush forward to anticipate the realisation of the Kingdom of God, but a seeking for a new and concrete solidarity, and a reciprocity with men and women in the daily happenings of each particular situation.

Christ the Evangeliser of the poor bears witness to the Kingdom through proximity to little ones, the poor, the excluded. Missions find their authenticity in a similar solidarity because they are the expression of charity without which, St Paul says, Faith and Hope, however great they may be, are only wind and noise (1Cor 13).

But the Mission also bears witness to its universal dimension by stating that the Gospel is not "politically" neutral. There must be a correlation between the word which is spoken, embracing the sharing of life and the announcement of the Good News which creates a new world involving the fight against injustice and the liberation of oppressed people like sinners.

The Mission is not centred on the Church. It is the "MISSIO DEI". It is trinitarian. It mediates the love of God the Father for all people and peoples whoever they may be or wherever they may be in all the situations in which they can be found. The Mission is the Epiphany, the actualisation of God's presence in the world.(13) It is at the service of the presence of God the Holy Spirit who breathes where he wills, without our knowing either whence he comes or where he is going (Jn 3,8). The Mission is the expression of the life of the Holy Spirit on whom no limits are set. The Mission therefore concerns the world here and now which is everyone's world, away beyond the limits of the Church. The world such as it is and with people such as they are, whom God loves, and to which the Church is sent in the footsteps of Christ to be "salt of the earth", "the light of the world" (Jn 3,16).

### **What sort of church to construct?**

The Church-communion split off from the Church-institution?

The Church-institution? or the prophetic Church? But an institution without prophecy grows dry with paralysis; and prophecy without institution degenerates into adventurism...

The Church of the Poor? or the Church dispersed? The hierarchical Church to which one runs the risk of opposing the Church of the people of God. The altogether charismatic Church? I don't know. What I do know is that Christ is the One sent by the Father and he sends his Church out through the whole world; and that the Church is the Church of God for men and women, and the Church of men and women is for God. Its mission expresses the "extraverti" character of the love of God. Its mission concerns all people and all of each person, and means healing, serving, "reconciling", pardoning a divided and wounded humanity.

*"Fear not, little flock! I have overcome the world", Jesus says. And he also says: "Go out into the whole world. I am with you to the end of the world".*

Let's not be afraid of mentioning God to people, to the world as Jesus did, in the concrete situations into which we are sent. When we go off for a mission we are heading towards "a meeting with grace". God through his Spirit moves ahead of us and himself builds his Church.

Translator : Stanislaus Brindley CM



(1) Cf. R. Facelina, "Théologie en situation. Une communauté chrétienne dans le Tiers-Monde" (Algérie 1962 - 1974). Etude pour le 5ème Colloque du CERDIC; Strasbourg, Cerdic-publication 1974, p 327 ff.

(2) M. A. Chevalier, "Jésus a-t-il voulu une Église ?", E.T.R., 1990, 4.

(3) Cf. G. Delteil et P. Keller, "L'Église disséminée. Itinéraire et enracinement, Lumen vitae", Cerf, Laba et Fides, 1995, p. 329.

(4) D. Bonhoeffer.

What is the specific place for the Church? It is impossible to give a concrete answer at the first attempt. It is the place of the Christ present in the world...That's why people would be unable to indicate it or to occupy it in advance. God qualifies it by the grace of his presence. All people can do is to recognise this. The Church does not possess the right to proclaim this or that historical place as being God's place... While waiting for God to make his choice, it avoids taking over favourable-looking places: it must try to leave space for God's action.

(5) Cf. J. Florkowsky, CM. "L'Église en France, aujourd'hui", BLF spécial 1987. Semaine Vincentienne 26-30 octobre 1987.

(6) Cf Jn 3,16; 5,24; 6,29.

(7) Cf Mt 28,19; Jn 17,18

(8) Cf Acts 2,36.

(9) Cf Mt 3,2

(10) Cf. St. Augustine, "The faithful know what the Body of Christ is, if they don't neglect to be the Body of Christ. Let them become the Body of Christ if they wish to live by the Spirit of Christ. Only the Body of Christ lives by the Spirit of Christ" (in Joan. Tractatus, 26,13).

(11) Cf. St. Augustin: "Before Jesus Christ every perspective is blocked; after Jesus Christ is risen, all becomes retrospectively clear".

(12) Note the liturgical structure of the passage: Word of God + homily + sacrament =LITURGIA.