

STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES IN THE LIGHT OF ECCLESIOLOGY

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Introduction

I assume that most of the participants in this conference are familiar with the organizational and programmatic structures of the Church of the Nazarene. In light of the challenges of current realities, I invite you to think about the need and the possibility of renewing these structures. This work does not attempt to analyze all the programs and or how to renew them. Rather, it is an invitation to all of us to reflect theologically on this need based on a series of ecclesiological considerations.

The theologian Battista Mondin, analyzes the ecclesiologies of the last half century- Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox- and classifies them according to various "trends" or ecclesiological perspectives.

The largely Catholic trend is concerned about the dual mystical and institutional nature of the church. Two Protestant theologians (Barth and Bultmann) contributed a kerygmatic approach. Brunner, a Protestant, contributed to what Mondin calls a "communal" trend. Theologians of the three major Christian confessions have emphasized the sacramental side of ecclesiology, but from very particular perspectives.

The pneumatic trend appears in the writings of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant theologians (Küng, Tillich and Moltmann). Finally, according to Mondin, in Catholic ecclesiology there is a story line, by which, from the perspectives of its various authors, they study the church as a historical phenomenon that is embodied in specific situations, as part of the history of the People of God which began in the Old Testament. ¹ Mondin omitted from his catalog of contemporary ecclesiology the "Pastoral Theology" of liberation theologians whose leading exponents are, in my opinion, J. L. Segundo and the Boff brothers.

The great diversity of perspectives indicates that ecclesiology is a complex issue. No one can claim to have the last word on the subject. One of the blessings of being part of the universal church of Jesus Christ is that we can learn from and correct each other. Through the incarnation, the Church of Jesus Christ is revealed in all its fullness in the majority of the peoples and

cultures of the world in a variety of ways. And we, fallible human beings, who participate in an ecclesial dimension of this diversity, interpret the church as we experience it.

As Nazarenes in the twenty-first century, our church experience is very varied due to different factors. How can we understand the Church of the Nazarene and its structures in different parts of the world? And how can we carry out a critical, yet humble process of renewal? Perhaps this reflection can help us following some tracks.

I. *Biblical tracks*

We do not find a systematic ecclesiology in the New Testament. Neither can we discover a single ecclesiology. What we have are images, paradigms, concrete references and mystical and structural dimensions. Behind the text we find ecclesiological clues that can help us.

According to the evangelists, Jesus specifically refers to the church only twice (in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17). But it is in Matthew 16:13-23 that we find a very clear ecclesiological statement. From this passage we deduce that:

The church is based on our profession of the divine lordship of Jesus Christ. On this foundation (as long as we do not move from this Christological confession with all that it implies), the church is invincible.

The church has received, in stewardship, the keys of the kingdom and anti-kingdom. Although this Kingdom (divine lordship) encompasses much more than the church as an institution, the church proclaims the Kingdom, and is its most concrete manifestation.

The confession on which the church is based has as its central axis the incarnation, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ. This means that the church assumes, to the extent of its possibilities, the mission of Him who became man, died and rose again and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

It is from these fundamental tracks that we must develop our ecclesiology. When the church forgets its Christological confession, or misconstrues it substituting a *theologia crucis* for a *theologia gloriae*, the proclamation becomes a satanic instrument (as in the temptations in Matthew 4:1-11, which Jesus rejected, because it impeded his mission). Most notable is that the apostle who makes the most sublime Christological confession can so quickly become an instrument of the enemy and with the best intentions!

A. *Images of the Church*

St. Paul the Apostle and others, paint on this great Christological canvas great images that allow us to understand new dimensions of the church in relation to the mission of Jesus Christ. ² During the passing of the centuries, these biblical images, as the various colors of a beautiful picture, have helped the church to maintain the correct perspective of the Kingdom of God. However, they have also been used, often with great sincerity, for purposes that are contrary to God's Kingdom. The various ecclesiastical movements born from the crises within the church chose one or other of these images (like someone who just paints in a single color) to describe his particular ecclesiology. In fact, these images represent rich facets, partial and complementary, of the multifaceted reality that is the Church.

Küng and others point out that there are significant differences between the images of the Church offered by Matthew and Luke, and the image in the Gospel of St. John, Ephesians and Colossians, as well as between the images of the great ecclesiastical epistles of Paul (1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Thessalonians), which are among the earliest Christian documents and the image of the church found in the pastoral epistles, which are later documents.

B. *Realities of the church*

Is there an essential ecclesiological reality, a theological structure or any principle of church organization that is universal? Returning to the words of Hans Küng: "The *essence* of the church is expressed in changing historical forms ... The true essence of the true Church is expressed in the historical form. To understand this we must take into account two important points: 1). the essence and form (of the Church) cannot be separated; 2). Essence and form are not identical. One must know how to recognize and distinguish between them." ³ In the Acts of the Apostles although we cannot find either a systematic or a complete ecclesiology of the first years of the church, at least we can discover some clues that can help us to understand the historical essence of the church of Jesus Christ

1. The future of the church depends on the obedience of the disciples - in the power of the Holy Spirit- to the "Great Commission" (1:8). It also depends on how they interpret the commission and implement it.

2. The church was born in the fire of Pentecost and in the heat of evangelistic preaching. The three thousand people who answer the divine call are immediately *ekklesia theou*.
3. The church grew integrally, as Luke points out in Acts 2:41-47. The key to understanding this passage is in v.42. Everything else is either explanation or consequence. Luke uses several verbs to refer to the communication of the gospel in the early church, but mostly he refers to the proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom of God through the entire life of believers.

We cannot, of course, idealize the early church. To begin, there is no such thing as a church in the New Testament. A rigorous exegesis allows us to perceive glimpses of *different models of understanding the church* as pastoral reflections were written by authors who participated in Christian communities, which were rooted in different realities. Küng observes:

The different images of the Church ... are due not only to the individuality of the various authors with their respective traditions, but also to their different theological attitudes, and the communities with which they were identified, as well as different missionary situations to which the various epistles were sent. Our knowledge about this is only very fragmentary.⁴

E. Schillebeeckx points out that Mark reflects a theology of ministry that is based on service (*theologia crucis*), to counteract, perhaps, an emerging *theologia gloriae* that loomed in certain ecclesial communities. Matthew may have an ecclesiastical vision a little more patriarchal. Corinthians reflects a charismatic theology, without much differentiation in leadership, while Luke describes the development of new leadership structures, mostly in the churches founded by Paul.

In Ephesians we begin to get the first glimpses of a rudimentary charismatic structure resulting from a crisis of authority in the churches to which the apostle writes his letter. Paul highlights four ministries: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers

In Acts we see a collegial body of elders (*presbyteroi*) emerging alongside the apostles. In the Pastoral Epistles *diaconal* functions appear (Acts 6:1-6) as well *episcopal* functions (which in the Greek context have a civil-administrative burden). The bishop appears here synonymous with the *Presbyterial Body*. We see here the beginnings of an inevitable institutionalization. This process is reflected in Hebrews and the Epistles of Peter (1 Pet. 4:11 cf. Heb. 5:1-6). Little or nothing is known of the ecclesiology of the communities that were founded

by the other apostles. Behind the Johannine writings we can perceive a presbytery structure that appears to be fully collegiate.

Schillebeeckx insists that this process does not necessarily mean that the institution absorbs the charismatic. What is perceived is the gradual monopoly of the charisma of the many by the charisma of the few. In the course of centuries this "gradual centralization of ministry at the expense of the baptism of the Spirit" would have a range of side effects. He points out that instead of the variety of Church models that had previously existed, a new model was being adopted in which a hierarchy of teachers gradually began to appear; the theologians explained what the bishops taught and laity only listened to what the teacher had taught them which had been explained by the theologians. The people of God ceased to be the subject of faith.⁵

II. Historic tracks

Structure is necessary but carries risks. We will focus our attention on certain ecclesiastical processes which are historically demonstrable, that occurred during the first four centuries of the church.

1. Church communities that resisted structure (as, perhaps, the Johannine communities), soon disappeared. They were absorbed by other churches, joined heretical groups, or simply died. Schillebeeckx says:

In historical terms, we can infer from this situation that a community that lacks a good and realistic institutionalization of its ministry (that is the flexible development in accordance with the changing circumstances) runs the risk of losing forever their apostolate, the Christian character of their origin, inspiration and orientation and, ultimately, their own identity. On the other hand, the ecclesial communities which were gradually being structured ran the risk of distorting the faith when adapting uncritically to current world structures. The ecclesiological gap occurred so gradually that most Christians in the early centuries didn't even realize that it was happening.⁶

2. This process is inseparable from the *theological tensions* that shook the church during this period. These controversies, in turn fed on the philosophies and ideologies prevailing at the time. Trinitarian discussions and Christological controversies impacted ecclesiology. Docetism was reflected in disembodied and dualistic ecclesiology that was gaining ground in the Christian communities from the fourth century under the influence

of Neo-platonism and Gnosticism. Christological adoptionism was outlined in the charismatic ecclesiology of the Montanists or in some of the Gnostic sects.

3. The process of ecclesiological distortion reflects also a similar *political process* within the Roman polis. Structurally, the church was contextualized without exercising discernment and prophetic criticality. Schillebeeckx shows how the different models of ministry in the church often reproduce the political structures of the Roman province where a particular church was to be found. ⁷
4. From the sixth century onwards *monastic movements* appear in Western Christianity, as an attempt to revitalize it. Each movement began with a vow of poverty, austerity and dedication to the contemplation of God, but they gradually became institutionalized and little by little corruption entered through the acquisition of lands, relics, power and prestige. Every few centuries a new revitalization movement appeared to take their place.
5. The countless movements that arose within and outside the church during the millennium and a half before the Reformation were often *reactions from the grassroots* to the nefarious power of official Christianity. Many of these groups were considered heretical. However, a careful study will show that factors of cultural-political reaction cannot be excluded from the complex factors that led to these heresies. ⁸

During the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries various grassroots movements appeared in Protestantism which directly or indirectly, may be considered as protests against the established church order (such as the *pietatis collegia* of PJ Spener between German Lutherans and the *gezelschcapen* of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands). These and Zinzendorff's Moravian cells served as the inspiration for the Methodists "classes" and "bands" that John Wesley founded within the Anglican Church. These, while they remained within their respective official churches, represent a new alternative movement, the *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* (small churches within the bigger church). A modality that has resurfaced within the Iberian Catholic Church and in several renewal movements within the North American and European Protestant churches.

III. Sociological Tracks

Let us explore four veins that social science provide for us which can help us to get a better understanding of our church history and ecclesiastical phenomena of our times, particularly in developing countries.

1. In the context of the *institutional model* of the development of social movements, alternative church groups tend to appear at the beginning of a process and afterwards, as protests against extreme institutionalization of the same movements. You can say that all socio-religious movements can be seen as a reaction to a previous situation that the protesters perceived to be too institutionalized.
2. Another significant phenomenon is the tension between *institution* and *charisma*, *authority* and *freedom*. In ecclesiastical terms, we can see that church movements often begin as "communities" and later appear in the reactions to massification which is so characteristic of large churches. It is a curious fact of history that the more we approach the period of the Reformation, and after the Reformation, we find that the "community" church very quickly degenerate into the "closed communities" (or sects).
3. Another rich vein comes from the science of communication. Charles Kraft applies the concept of "dynamic equivalence" as used in the translations of Scripture to ecclesiology and methodology of evangelism. He calls this approach "incarnational". Kraft says:

Throughout the Bible we find a God who cares about communicating with his creatures and breaks down all barriers which prevent clear social communication ... The church is essentially about communication, the communication of the Good News of the Kingdom of God.⁹

The message being communicated consists of *contents* or *meanings*. These are presented in particular *forms* (language, words, socio-cultural structures, etc.). The aim of communication is to transmit, as closely as possible, the meaning of the sender to the receiver. The goal of the contextualization of messages is to pass the meaning of the transmitter to the receiver in a credible and creative way.

Applying these principles to the church, Kraft says that "a contextualized church, in the same way as an updated translation, must be perceived by whoever is the observer as an

original production of their own native culture, and not as something imported and poorly adapted from another land." ¹⁰

4. Welch and Dillinberger provide us with another important clue that helps us to understand the loss of vitality in the church:

The movements of the Spirit lose their vitality due to inertia or because they are suffocated by strange forces that develop inside or infiltrate from the outside. When this happens, a movement barely survives or eventually dies, or resurfaces. The churches themselves do not escape this historical pattern. The only thing that justifies their existence against such a historical destiny is that the concern for the gospel frequently becomes the source for their revival. ¹¹

Eugene Nida makes a valuable application to this problem from the perspective of physics, adapting the first law of thermodynamics to social communication. The phenomenon of *entropy* (cooling of natural systems) can be seen also in the social and ecclesiastical movements.

The dissipation of energy that is characteristic of social entropy is due to several causes, including: (a) too much organization and planning, and little flexibility in the face of new opportunities; (b) the loss of the power of information when the message becomes conduct and then habit; (c) syncretism when the movement incorporates related ideas, which are foreign to their system, or adapt to opposing ideas that come from other cultures and/or ideologies; (d) at the same time, the movement suffers because it cannot adapt quickly enough to the rapid socio-cultural changes; and (e) they feel dissatisfaction with the original goals of the movement, either because they are now perceived as too limited, or because they lost their validity, or simply because they didn't achieve them.

You can seek for the "reduction of entropy, or the "system overheating" in two ways. Nida adds: 1) The movement in decline can be plugged in to another one which is more successful or appropriate, in which case the movement which is at a standstill or dying risks being absorbed by the more vital movement; 2) the safest way, is the revitalization of the movement through the infusion of new energy and information, or new applications of information which they already have. For the Christian church, the most important "information" or energy is the dynamic of the Holy Spirit. ¹²

My personal impression is that in various regions of the world, evangelical churches (in some cases including our church), go through an entropic process of loss of vitality and an identity crisis. The causes are many and can be categorized in the list of negative factors that Nida presents. In order to reheat their systems, we need to observe that:

A considerable section has tied its wagon to the star of success and dominant ideologies in the United States. Through books and audio visual materials, ecclesiastic concepts and models are propagated which try to imitate and often impose themselves in different regions. It involves an effort to revitalize what exists, resulting in an apparent momentary success, without much impact on producing permanent results with quality.

A small group has been linked to movements that appear to be successful because they attract crowds. In the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas, for example, the influence of a television network is so strong that it has become the source of theological information for many evangelicals and the inspiration for some leaders. Through this and other means, the invitation to pastors to participate in workshops and seminars to "learn something" believed to be missing in their churches, is extended. This is an attempt to revitalize which results in confusion and fragmentation.

A small group has been tied to the chariot of sociologism. With a deep interest in renewing the church dedicated to exploring possibilities for strategies that are the result purely of sociological analysis either from other countries or the immediate context. Unfortunately the result is "analysis paralysis"

All reveal the need for a new outpouring of the Spirit, and correct biblical, theological and sociological information, so as to allow the church once again to walk as God wants.

III. Pastoral tracks

The churches that are heirs of the Reformation urgently need to develop an ecclesiology that responds to the challenges we face today in different regions of the world. Let look at some clues about pastoral work in the Protestant tradition, as well as Latin American theology that may serve to guide our search for a coherent and conscious ecclesiology.

1. The Vision of the Reformation

What are the signs of the true church today? From the Reformed perspective Calvin says:

Here's how to know the visible Church: wherever we see the Word of God being preached sincerely and where the sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ, there is no doubt that there is Church. Where lies destroy the fundamental points of Christian doctrine, there is no church.¹³

Is this categorical statement relevant today (it was originally intended for the Church of Rome) against the distortions and abuses of basic Christian doctrine in the Protestant movement? How do we discern the truth among so many "gospel truths" that are advertised? What is the true church of Jesus Christ in the world?

The spirit of prophetic critique and creative protest has been called the "Protestant principle". It is a principle of continuous reformation (*ecclesia reformata semper et reformanda*). This implies criticism and protests against all absolutism (political or religious); always in the light of new understandings of divine truth and taking into account our fallibility and sinfulness.

When we are faithful to this principle we open ourselves to divine judgment and, therefore, we practice self-criticism. This force of Protestantism is also its great weakness, because it allows uncertainty and confusion. So the *Protestant principle* opens the door to proclaim many "truths", and it also forces us to be critical even of our own "truths".

2. The Wesleyan vision.

The study of the church in Acts revealed to Wesley a dynamic concept of the church. The Spirit guided the church, providentially, towards forms of government and to ministry which strengthened the extension of the gospel. This fitted exactly Wesley's own experiences with the revival in Bristol and elsewhere, where he had been led to innovations.

Wesley believed that the restoration of the church began with the Protestant Reformation. However, according to him, the Reformation was inadequate and incomplete. Wesley recognized that the reformers had purified the church in doctrine

and worship, but for him, these were not the essential issues. Purifying the church of Romanism was not enough because the people were not reformed in their hearts, which is necessary to achieve social change. His vision is strongly missionary and pastoral. The theologian José Miguez Bonino says:

We find, then, in Wesley classical Protestant ecclesiology with Catholic elements heavily underlined. But everything has been placed in the context of evangelization and missionary passion. In the social and religious crisis of his day, Wesley calls the church to enter the new era that opens like a force of evangelization. His church is not in a position to answer that call and the conflict cannot be avoided. But not only this: the missionary emphasis introduces a tension in his own definition of ecclesiological elements. While not fully aware of it, Wesley puts the whole of what constitutes the church as such – the correction of the doctrine, the sacraments and especially the ecclesiastical order – in the service of the proclamation of the gospel. In a sense, he proclaimed in practice an instrumentality of the church and its mission.¹⁴

3. The Latin American Neo-Catholic vision

Today, ecclesiastical self-criticism is fiercest from Latin American Catholicism. As our church practice is historically rooted in that continent, we cannot ignore what liberation theologies told us. We disagree with the Catholic theological starting point and question the uncritical use (in some cases) of Marxist analysis. However, this does not detract from the implications of their theological-ecclesiastical critique for our Protestant practice.

The element that infused a profound ecclesial theology in Latin America was the Christian Base Communities (CBC). The theologians who reflected from their experience in the CBCs produced works with challenging ecclesiastical contents, which also challenges our evangelical ecclesiology. I insist on making this application because the CBCs are actually a *Protestant phenomenon* within the Catholic Church which could be even *more Protestant than the Protestants today*.

The best known Latin American theologian writing on ecclesiology is Leonardo Boff. He owes his popularity to the controversy revolved around his book: *Church: Charisma and Power* that even earned him, Vatican discipline and the title in his homeland of "the new Martin Luther". (It is interesting that the Pope Francisco, the

Argentinian and longtime friend of Boff gives much value to what Boff says and vice versa!)

In this book, Boff describes various models of church from the respective pastoral practices and analyzes these pastoral practices from the perspective of theological practices. His ecclesiological concern lies in the struggle for justice on behalf of the rights of the poor and oppressed and judges the Roman Church as a violator of the rights of its own members. He then asks can a church like this be converted?

Boff proposes the CBCs and their ecclesiology are a genuine charismatic alternative to Rome which offers them the possibility of conversion. He presents an alternative theological and structural vision of the church saying that the Church is "the sacrament of the Holy Spirit." He insists that charisma should be the organizing principle for the church. This raises the problem of how to discern between true and false charisma. Boff concludes that the unifying principle of the church is the Holy Spirit, so all that divides, scatters, and instills hatred, cannot be divine charisma.¹⁵

The meaning of the CBCs, and their implications for Protestant ecclesiology can be summarized by saying that the CBCs are: (1) a new way of understanding reality (from the bottom to the top), from the perspective of the poor and destitute; (2) a new approach to the study of the Bible from this new perception of reality; (3) a new way of being a church-community rather than a pyramid, centrifugal rather than centripetal; and (4) a new approach to announce the Gospel of the Kingdom and denounce of all the bad news of the kingdom of darkness.

The CBCs confront Protestants with the greatest sociological ecclesiological and pastoral hermeneutical challenge. They challenge the Nazarenes to develop an ecclesiology that is consistent with our biblical faith and Wesleyan heritage that is embodied in the reality of poverty and marginalization in which the majority of our people live.

Conclusion

These tracks have implications both for cultural contextualization of programs and structures of the Nazarene Church as well as for their full socio-historical incarnation in our

regions. From them we can develop an analysis and evaluation especially when thinking about the core values of the church, and ask ourselves:

- (1) Do our structures and programs reflect a "*theology of the cross*"?
- (2) Do our programs reflect our concern for holistic mission?
- (3) Do we find in our church realistic structures and flexible developments according to changing circumstances?
- (4) Is there an institutional development of the charisma of all believers (resulting in a strong insertion of lay people with theological training in the secular world)?
- (5) Is there enough critical thinking before adopting programs "packaged" in other contexts?
- (6) Could the current organizational structures be contributing to static institutionalism which can degenerate into a self-centered religion?
- (7) Could institutionalism generate the emergence of alternative groups within the church?
- (8) Are the organizational structures and programs of our church today perceived by outside observers as an original production of our lands?
- (9) Do they all provide the full socio-historical incarnation of the church?
- (10) Our church is heir of the Reformation and has a well-defined Wesleyan theology. Will it be necessary to check if our ecclesiology, which informs the development of denominational structures, addresses the challenges we face today such as: poverty, marginalization, alienation in all social strata, trading in guns, institutionalized violence, drug trafficking and the trafficking of people, alcoholism subsidized by the State, corruption in high places of government, prostitution and destruction of the family as well as all individual sins we already know and have traditionally attacked?

END NOTES:

¹. Battista, Mondin, *As novas ecclesiologías*, Sao Paulo: Ediciones Paulinas, 1984, pág. 5.

² For example: The church is the temple of God, holy and set apart just for Him (2 Cor. 6:16, Ephesians 2:21). It is a building well-founded and built by Him (1 Cor. 3:19-22; Ephesians 2: 19-22). It is also the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17, 11:27-29, 12: 12-15, 27, Eph. 1:23, 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 12, 16, 5: 23, 28-30; Col. 1: 18, 3:15). The church is an experimental plant and is planted and watered by the apostles and their followers (1 Cor. 3:5-8). The church is a family, united internally and with their Lord by ties of faith (Gal. 6:10, Eph. 2:19; 3:15). The church is God's chosen people (Romans 9:25, 26, 2 Cor. 6: 16, Eph. 2:14, Titus 2:14, Heb. 4:9, 1 Pet. 2:9-10;

Rev. 18: 4; 21:3). The church is betrothed to the Lord, and shall remain faithful and pure just for him (1 Cor. 11:3, Eph. 5:22-27).

³ K ung Hans (1976). *The Church*. Garden City (NJ): Doubleday, pp. 23-24.

⁴ K ung, pp. 37-38.

⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx (1985). *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*. SCM Press, pp. 74-85.

⁶ Schillebeeckx, Op Cit p. 90.

⁷ Schillebeeckx, Op Cit p. 71.

⁸ Williams, George Hunston (1962). *The Radical Reformation*. Philadelphia: Westminster, p. 678.

⁹ Kraft, Charles (1979). *Christianity in Culture*, Orbis Books, New York, pp. 89-93.

¹⁰ Kraft, Charles, Op. Cit. pp. 97-98.

¹¹ Dillinger y Welch, El Cristianismo Protestante, p.210.

¹² Nida, Eugene, en Charles Kraft (1979). *Readings in dynamic indigeneity*, William Carey Library, Pasadena, p. 290.

¹³ Calvino, *Instituci n de la Relig n Cristiana* (Libro Cuarto). Vol II, Rijswijk (Holanda): Fundaci n Editorial de Literatura Reformada, p. 903.

¹⁴ Jos  M guez Bonino, en Jos  Duque, (ed). (1983). *La tradici n protestante en la teolog a latinoamericana: primer intento: Lectura de la tradici n metodista*, DEI, San Jos , Costa Rica, p. 279.

¹⁵ Leonardo Boff (1984). *Iglesia: Carisma y Poder, ensayos de eclesiolog a militante*. Editorial Sal Terrae, Santander, Colecci n Presencia Teol gica.