

Ecclesiology and Spirituality

Entry in the forthcoming *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*

Christians profess faith in the triune God whose very being is disclosed as life-giving relationship. This God brings into existence humans who find their fulfillment in vulnerable companionship and common labor. From the very beginning of human history, in the Judeo-Christian telling of it, humans were made for communion with God and one another.

Biblical Foundations for the Relationship between Church and Spirituality

The biblical antecedent to the creation of the Christian Church, the calling forth of Israel as a covenantal community, manifests God's determination to engage not isolated individuals but "a people." For the people of Israel, covenantal living meant a communal living in fidelity to *Torah*. The spirituality of the Old Testament is a spirituality shaped by the demands of faithful covenant living, and the consequences of infidelity to that covenant.

Baptism, Church and Christian Living

Early Christian reflection on the meaning and shape of Christian community occurs in the emerging theology of baptism. Early Christians understood themselves to be forged, through faith and baptism, as a new people of God. According to what was likely an ancient baptismal catechesis found in 1 Peter, baptism inserted one into a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own" (1 Pet. 2.9, New American Bible) where the priestly life of the community lay not in any ritual action but

in everyday holy living. St. Paul also assumed a thoroughly ecclesial understanding of baptism. Baptism initiated the believer into the “one body” (1 Cor. 12.13), the Church. Individual believers did not *make* a church; initiation into the Church through faith and baptism *made* the believer. By faith and baptism believers were drawn simultaneously into both communion (*koinonia*) with God and communion with the members of the Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 10.16-17; 2 Cor. 13.13). This new form of Christian living was given shape by the cross and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6.3-11), the “paschal mystery,” which served as the very grammar of the Christian life. During the Reformation, Martin Luther would develop this theme in his *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*. The Christian life, Luther held, was to be a daily living out of the death to sin and resurrection to new life effected by faith and baptism.

The new ecclesial relationship established in baptism unfolds along three axes. Vertically, if you will, believers are baptized into communion with God in Christ by the power of the Spirit. Baptism initiates believers into the life of worship. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the sacramental “character” imparted by baptism was nothing other than a participation in Christ’s priesthood, empowering the believer to participate fully in the worship of the Church (ST III, Q. 63. a. 3). This relation is inseparable from the horizontal dimension of Christian living in which faith and baptism establish a communion of believers grounded in communion in Christ. These two dimensions must be conjoined with a third dimension, the movement outward toward the world in mission.

This mission is no extrinsic task imposed upon the Church from without, it is the very *raison d’être* of the Church. Indeed the Church’s mission derives from its Trinitarian origins. Salvation history reveals a God who sends forth the Word and Spirit

in mission as the very expression and fulfillment of God's love for the world. God's Word, spoken into human history from the beginning of creation and made effective by the power of the Spirit, in the fullness of time, became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. The origins of the Church, in turn, are inextricably linked to Jesus' gathering a community of followers whom, after his death and resurrection, were empowered by his Spirit to continue his mission to serve, proclaim and realize the coming reign of God.

Eucharist, Church and Christian Living

Early Christian understandings of the Eucharist reinforced the relationship between baptism, Church and spirituality. Paul saw the Eucharist as a deepening of the experience of two-fold communion with God in Christ and communion within the community of believers (1 Cor. 10.16-17). At the same time, the Eucharist was a ritual re-enactment of the paschal mystery (1 Cor. 11,23-26). To celebrate the Eucharist was not just to be spiritually nourished by the Bread of Life, it was to be transformed. In this spirit St. Augustine could, centuries later, exhort believers to recognize the transformative power of the Eucharist: "Be what you see, and receive what you are (*Sermon, 272*)."

Many Christian traditions have preserved an ecclesiology and spirituality nourished by the celebration of the Christian liturgy. Eastern Christianity celebrates the divine liturgy as a sacramental foretaste of the heavenly banquet in which all the saints live in perpetual praise of God. Eastern liturgical spirituality sees the celebration of the liturgy not as an escape from the world but an opportunity to see the world with transformed vision.

The Church as a Community of Disciples

The word “disciples” appears in the New Testament over 200 times and it indicates the dominance of an understanding of the Church as a school of discipleship in which Christians are formed through the proclamation of the Scriptures and the engagement of such distinctive ecclesial practices as the communal “breaking of the bread” and the giving of alms. As a community of disciples the Church is not its own lord; to be a member of the Church is to be in the company of disciples who, by definition, are dependent upon their master, Christ. It means also being in a community that is *in via*, “on the way.” The journey of Christian discipleship leads one to follow and emulate “the master.”

The Second Vatican Council employed a similar image, that of the “pilgrim” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Chapter 7), to describe the Church. The Church is conceived, not just as a Church of pilgrims, but as a “pilgrim Church,” a community which “will reach its perfection only in the glory of heaven (# 48).” The twin images of discipleship and pilgrimage highlight the way in which the Christian life is marked by confident assurance that we are not traveling through this life in vain but are being “led” by the Spirit of God, and the humble recognition that as pilgrims and disciples we have not yet arrived. The Church is always both holy and yet a Church *semper reformanda*, ever in need of reform and renewal.

The Church and the Reign of God

When we look to the gospels, it is striking how seldom Jesus makes reference to any “church” that would come after him. By contrast, Jesus’ preaching is filled with references to the kingdom or reign of God. Jesus did not present the reign of God as a

future time of divine judgment. His preaching of the coming reign of God could only be understood in the context of his own ministry to the sick, the possessed, the poor, the outcast and the oppressed. These deeds were themselves recognized signs from the Hebrew Scriptures of the end times. Yet for Jesus, God's reign was not just a future expectation but a divine reality present in his own person and work. If the Church is to remain faithful to Christ's own mission it can never exist merely for its own sake but only as an instrument in service of Christ's mission to proclaim and realize, by grace, the coming reign of God.

Contemporary Perspectives

Contemporary Christianity is more sensitive to the diversity of theological understandings of the Church found in various Christian communities today. Pentecost becomes the powerful symbol of the Church animated by the Holy Spirit who unites believers within the body of Christ, not by imposing a stifling uniformity in the spiritual life, but by allowing believers to discover a spiritual unity "each in their own language (Acts 2.8)."

This diversity is seen by many as good and wholly appropriate in the light of a contemporary stress on the diverse inculturations of the Gospel in the lives of particular churches. The mutually constitutive relationship between ecclesiology and spirituality is nowhere more evident than in the way diverse ecclesiologies conceive the relationship between Church and world. Ecclesiologies that are heir to an Augustinian pessimism are more inclined to see the spiritual life as a call to gospel fidelity and prophetic witness with little expectation of genuine social transformation. Such ecclesiologies can, but need not be, sectarian in focus, viewing the Church as an "oasis of grace" in a hostile and

fallen world. Ecclesiologies that are heir to a more Thomistic anthropology or an Enlightenment optimism are inclined to define the spiritual life in terms of a more or less critical, yet dialogical, engagement with the world.

Finally we might note that past Catholic-Protestant polemics about the relationship between charism and institution in the life of the Church have largely given way to a recognition of the complementarity of charism and church office. There is a growing recognition in ecumenical dialogues that office without charism becomes arid and legalistic; charism without office becomes chaotic and sectarian. The contemporary challenge is to overcome this historical opposition in favor of understandings of the inseparability of institutional and spiritual dimensions of Christian ecclesial life.

For Further Reading

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