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Unity, Catholicity and Identity. The Unity Statements of the WCC and Their Reception in the Document *The Nature and Mission of the Church*

Risto Saarinen

In its statement on church unity, the assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), meeting in Porto Alegre in February 2006, urged the member churches to give priority on the ecclesiological issues of unity and catholicity. These issues also play a significant role in the new WCC text on ecclesiology, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (NMC). I will proceed in this paper in three steps. First, I will discuss the so-called unity statements of the WCC and their reception in NMC, focusing on the issue of *catholicity*. Second, I will argue that these statements, as well as NMC, reflect certain tensions present in the models of *unity* employed in ecumenism. Third, I will briefly describe some contemporary Protestant positions, with a view on how the more recent concept of *identity* relates to the classical marks of unity and catholicity.

Catholicity

The WCC has adopted four unity statements which aim at spelling out the nature of the unity sought in the ecumenical movement. The first and probably most important of these is the New Delhi 1961 statement:

"We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people."[1].

The New Delhi statement connects unity and catholicity with the help of the concept of place. A lived communion is presupposed in "each place". The different places need not be identical with one another, but they are nevertheless united "in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all". Thus a fellowship emerges which comprises "all places and all ages". Catholicity in the sense of universality and commonality is thus embedded in the unity statement of New Delhi, although the actual model is spelled out with the concept of place.

At the same time, the concept of place may pose problems for this unity statement. New Delhi presupposes a territorial concept of one church at one place. Differences can be tolerated if other churches remain in another territory and under another jurisdiction. This model, let us label it as "catholicity among places", may be helpful for the Orthodox churches as well as for some territorial churches of European Protestantism. For some other churches the model is, however, both too easy and too difficult at the same time. The problematic ease can be seen in the case of the so-called Porvoo Communion. In Porvoo, Scandinavian Lutherans and British Anglicans are in communion and thus participate in the same catholicity in different places. In fact, however, because of geographical distance both ccontinue to preserve their status quo. This is a too easy solution for the problem of unity.

The difficulty can be exemplified with the relationship of Finnish Lutheran and Finnish Orthodox churches. We have peaceful co-existence and good co-operation in my home

country. But, according to New Delhi, the Finnish Orthodox should actually join the Lutheran church in order to obtain the "unity of all in each place". This is, however, impossible. The basic problem of "catholicity among places" is that in today's world churches are no more territorially divided but they co-exist in the same place.

The second unity statement of the WCC was launched in Nairobi 1975. Interestingly, the notion of place has disappeared and catholicity is defined as follows: "The one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship, each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity ..."[2]

The Nairobi statement is more straightforward but also more vague than New Delhi. It does not spell out what it means to be "truly united". Common decision-making structures are probably presupposed in the notion of conciliarity. But the local churches, spoken of in plural, continue as autonomous bodies which may co-exist in the same territory. This is not an obvious conclusion, since one can read "truly united" to mean the same kind of local merger as in New Delhi. But it is also possible, and more probable, to read Nairobi so that the conciliar fellowship is already the true unity, within which "each local church" continues its existence.

Since each local church possesses full catholicity, no universality needs to be presupposed. Let us label this idea as "catholicity of each local church". In practice, the concept of place is in Nairobi replaced with the phrase "local church". The problem of different local churches in the same territory is simply avoided through employing the view that each local church in communion with others already possesses the fullness of catholicity.

The third unity statement of Canberra 1991 enriches the previous statements through introducing the language of *koinonia*/ communion more strongly than its predecessors. The statement speaks in classical terms of "one, holy, apostolic and catholic church". It holds that a full communion "will be expressed on the local and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action" The unity statement further says that churches are bound together at all levels of their life.[3] The Canberra statement no more holds that each local church would be per se catholic, but it leans towards a concept of catholicity which comprises the universal level more strongly than Nairobi. The concept of catholicity in Canberra thus lies somewhere between New Delhi and Nairobi.

The fourth and most recent unity statement of Porto Alegre 2006, titled *Called to Be the One Church,* is by far the longest text. The concept of unity is in many ways similar to Canberra 1991, but particular topics are formulated more extensively. The paragraph on catholicity reads as follows:

"The catholicity of the Church expresses the fullness, integrity and totality of its life in Christ through the Holy Spirit in all times and places. This mystery is expressed in each community of baptized believers in which the apostolic faith is confessed and lived, the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are celebrated. Each church is the Church catholic and not simply part of it. Each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it. Each church fulfills its catholicity when it is in communion with the other churches. We affirm that the catholicity of the Church is expressed most visibly in sharing holy communion and in a mutually recognised and reconciled ministry."[4]

The new unity statement is not only the longest, but also in many ways the most balanced formulation of catholicity in the history of the unity statements of the WCC. As the Canberra statement, the Porto Alegre text finds that the dilemma of local and universal catholicity needs to be solved so that both aspects are adequately respected. Each church can call itself "catholic", but at the same time the reality of catholicity is fulfilled in the universal

communion. Let us label this view "we-and-others catholicity".

In the four unity statement we can see an elegant, though somewhat accidental, tendency leading to the gradual disappearance of the view of spatial catholicity. In New Delhi, catholicity is given through the concept of place. In Nairobi and Canberra, the concepts of "local", or "local and universal", still define the spatial component. But in Porto Alegre, the spatial component has disappeared (it only occurs in the phrase "all times and places"). Churches are no more in "each place" nor are they called "local churches". They and their catholicity are defined without spatial concepts. Each church may be everywhere, as is proper in the age of internet and globalisation.

In Porto Alegre, a new ecclesiological document, NMC, was launched. This statement contains an important passage on catholicity. It is formulated with the help of two earlier Faith and Order texts, namely *Confessing the One Faith*, and *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*.[5] At the same time, NMC broadens and deepens the Porto Alegre unity statement. The relevant passage reads as follows:

"The Church is catholic because God is the fullness of life ʻwho desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4), and who, through Word and Spirit, makes his people the place and instrument of his saving and life-giving presence, the community in which, in all ages, the Holy Spirit makes the believers participants in Christ's life and salvation, regardless of their sex, race or social position." (§12)

In NMC, as well as in its predecessors, the emphasis is stronger laid on God as giver and guarantee of catholicity. An attempt to spell out the Trinitarian dimension of catholicity is also undertaken. No reference to concrete place or locality is made, but universality is highlighted. The concept of place appears as a non-local attribute of the church: God makes God's people, i.e. the church, "the place" of salvation. The church is not a concrete place, but it is nevertheless a concrete gathering of God's people and a "place" in this sense. In addition, the issue of equality among all humanity is mentioned. Through its emphasis on universality and equality rather than on the catholicity of local churches, NMC in its way exemplifies "we-and-others catholicity".

Can Protestant theologians recognise their own tradition in these documents? The Reformation movement in Germany adopted the Nicean faith and taught the catholicity of the church. The Reformers did criticize Roman church for being too external. As a consequence of this criticism, Lutheran confessional writings sometimes translate catholic with "common" and "Christian" (*allgemeine, christliche*). This is done in order to spell out that catholicity cannot be an external or formal sign and criterion of true church, but it remains an article of faith, a hidden reality. If the church is made an "external government" *(politia externa*), it will easily become a particularist organ and thus loses its universal character. A catholic church consists of human beings who are scattered around the whole earth but who have the same faith, same Christ, same Holy Spirit and same sacraments. It should be noted that although Protestants criticize the externalist view of catholicity, they do not move to a consistent internalism or spiritualism. Sacraments and other external signs remain necessary.[6]

In principle and theologically speaking, the theocentric and non-spatial way of expressing catholicity in the most recent WCC statements should be compatible with these basic features of Protestant ecclesiology. The statements presuppose that the true, catholic church is scattered around the globe. "We-and-others catholicity" may therefore be a more fruitful model for Protestants than "catholicity among places" or "catholicity of each local church".

In reality, however, things are more complex. Protestants may be theologically global, but in church practice we remain bound to our local and national circumstances. Protestant

churches are very autonomous bodies within their national and "spatial" boundaries. The criticism of external forms is not only used to downgrade superficial formalism, but also in order to withdraw from binding international and inter-church agreements and structures which are interpreted in terms of problematic external government. In reality, Protestants therefore often tend to favor the model of "catholicity of each local church" because it is a complacent solution to the problem of Christian universality.

Unity

For a deeper understanding of unity and catholicity, let us turn briefly to the models and realisations of unity found in the ecumenical movement. I will not, however, go through the ecumenical history for a second time. Instead, I will raise the issue of various inherent tensions found in the models of unity. These tensions are probably familiar to most of us and they can be expressed in different ways. My intention is to present them in such a guise that they may shed light to the issue of catholicity.

In the work of the WCC, three different but related ecclesiological tensions influence the drafting of texts and the ongoing renewal processes of the ecumenical movement. The so-called unity statements can be described as attempts to cope with these basic tensions. The *first tension is found between two principles, "no models of unity" and "unity statements"*. The famous *Toronto Declaration*, a text which until today states the requirements of membership in the WCC, holds: "Membership in the WCC does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity."[7] A member church need not adopt any models concerning the nature of unity. In reality, however, member churches have approved the above-mentioned unity statements which clearly contain visions of church unity.

Thus New Delhi 1961 says that unity "is being made visible as all in each place ... are brought ... into one fully committed fellowship". Nairobi 1975 speaks of "conciliar fellowship" and Canberra 1991 of "the unity of the church as *koinonia*". Porto Alegre 2006 repeats this language and affirms the Nicene creed, but says also that the church "is called to manifest its oneness in rich diversity". Until Canberra 1991, the development of unity statements may be regarded as attempt to overcome Toronto 1950.

In Porto Alegre, however, the sheer length of the statement and the use of expressions like "rich diversity" may prompt the question whether the churches again retreat to the non-affirmation of any specific view of unity, as it was stated in Toronto 1950. This doubt is strengthened by a closer lecture of the commentary document, NMC. In the NMC, the biblical insights spelled out in §14-17 offer a platform in which no specific model of church unity is preferred but a plurality is affirmed. It is said that the "canon of the New Testament testifies to the compatibility of unity and diversity" (§16). Moreover, "to honour the varied biblical insights into the nature and mission of the church, various approaches are required." (§17). The biblical part of the NMC tends to exclude any preferred models and to affirm a variant of ecclesiological pluralism. This feature corresponds to the "no models" minimalism of Toronto 1950 rather than to the unity statements mentioned above.

The *second tension exists between the identity of the WCC as "fellowship of churches" and the nature of unity as communio/ koinonia*. If the WCC is, again according to Toronto 1950, regarded as mere instrument of ecumenism, we should make a clear distinction between instrumental fellowship (i-fellowship) on the one hand and the "real" *koinonia* or communion of churches (k-fellowship). Again, the unity statements attempt to bridge the difference between i-fellowship and k-fellowship. Many Christian World Communions, e.g. the Lutheran World Federation and the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, define themselves as

communions in the sense of k-fellowship. The WCC cannot do this, but it nevertheless attempts to formulate the "real" unity which it serves as instrument. In this process, however, the theological character of the organisation becomes debatable. This point has often been made by the Orthodox churches, most recently in the crisis that led to the constructive work of the so-called "Special Commission on Orthodox Participation".

In NMC, the second tension can be seen between §24-33 and §34-42. In the former part, the concept of *koinonia* is presented in strongly biblical and trinitarian terms as a participation in God. This language avoids the difficulties present in the distinction between i-fellowship and k-fellowship, since the communion among humans and institutions is not spelled out in any concrete terms. The language of participation in God, however, clearly assumes that a "deep" communion, a k-fellowship, is meant and implied.

The latter part (§34-42) continues with the topic of mission. Here, however, the tone changes significantly. The task of the church is presented in strongly instrumental terms, as advocacy, care and proclamation. The reader now gets the impression that the communion occurs in terms of i-fellowship, as a strategic alliance for the sake of something else than the unity. Thus the tension between different meanings of fellowship/ unity is not resolved.

The *third tension is related to the second and concerns the tensions and differences between the terms "church", "communion" and "fellowship"*. Especially in European Protestantism it is common to enter a communion, *Kirchengemeinschaft*, in which each church remains an autonomous body. This is more difficult, though not totally impossible, in Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology, given that the church is defined as communion. Again, the unity statements attempt to formulate a careful balance between the autonomy of a participating church and the theological nature of *koinonia*.

One controversial way to express this tension is to speak of different "ecclesial densities" pertaining to different bodies.[8] Thus the WCC would have less ecclesial density than a confessional world communion, which in turn has less density than an individual member church. Although such quantitative terms have their obvious theological problems, various unity statements choose their terminology in order to express the shades and aspects of unity which do not conflict with the legal autonomy of a member church. Thus the unity statements in fact do employ the idea of "ecclesial density" in order to cope with the third tension.

In NMC, §57-59 employ the phrases "growth in communion" and "not yet full communion". These are clearly quantitative terms which presuppose a "more" and "less" of communion. But if we look at the trinitarian passages §24-33, the quantitative language disappears and Christians are in communion with God and with one another.

What do we learn from this brief identification of some tensions within the ecumenical language of unity? Although the issue of unity is vital for all churches within the ecumenical movement, the concrete will to proceed in the search of unity is often lacking or the time is not found to be ripe. The hesitations, tensions and even contradictions present in the ecumenical language are not symptomatic of the lack of common sense and clarity among drafters, but they reflect the hesitation of the churches. The church wants to proceed towards unity, but it also wants to preserve its identity and autonomy. This is an understandable phenomenon which can be found in many other areas of human life.

We find similar tension or oscillation in the concept of catholicity. Whereas New Delhi promotes visible unity, Nairobi is more inclined to leave local churches in peace. The communion language of Canberra was again more binding, whereas the "rich diversity" language of Porto Alegre in turn moderates the nature of unity.

An important concept relating unity with catholicity is that of identity. Both Protestants and Orthodox have a Christian identity, and in that sense they have the "same" identity as

Christians. But the word "same" must be left to quotation marks, since it is obvious that their confessional self-understandings differ and may often be more important for their real identity. Unity implies the idea of having the same identity in a rather strong sense. Catholicity, too, employs the idea of identity. The Orthodox in Finland, Russia and Greece are in communion and in that sense participate in their "catholic" church. Today's Lutherans belong together with 18th century Pietists and 16th century Reformers. All of them belong to the same catholic church which streches through the ages.

With the help of the concept of catholicity, we often distinguish between insiders and outsiders. Although we can ecumenically speak of "we-and-others" catholicity, the historical meaning of this term has not seldom been almost the opposite. Catholic Christians are those who are not non-catholic and not heterodox. In this sense the concept of catholicity safeguards one's own identity and furthers unity within one's own group through time and place. For obvious reasons, this is not the meaning of catholicity promoted in the ecumenical texts. In order to discuss the issue of identity in more detail, we must turn to other theological treatises.

Identity

I will exemplify current Protestant discussion on unity and catholicity with two recent voices. In his discussion on catholicity, Hans-Peter Grosshans pays attention to the issue that the Nicean predicate of catholicity does not yet say much, if anything, about the content of the identity of the church. This does not mean that catholicity would be a superfluous predicate. To be catholic presupposes that the church has an identity.[9] But the predicate of catholicity does not yet define, for instance, the relative importance of particular doctrines and rites. The eucharist certainly belongs to a catholic church, but the mere predicate of catholicity does not yet state that this is the case. What the predicate of catholicity constitutes, however, is the requirement of sameness or integrity.

In other words, in order to be catholic, the church has to remain the same during different ages and different places. If this requirement is fulfilled, we can say that our church is the same as the church of Luther or Calvin or Augustine, but "different" from the church of Marcion or the Mormons. The predicate of catholicity is thus a necessary prerequisite of the possibility of doctrinal identification. But it does not yet give concrete criteria of this identification. For Grosshans, the very concept of Reformation, as re-formation, as re-receiving the identity-giving form, is a central aspect of this catholicity. Put in this way, catholicity is an indispensable feature of the Reformation churches.

Grosshans holds that the content of this identity is the being of the church as the body of Christ. It is Jesus Christ who gives the church the content of its identity. If we look at both Porto Alegre and NMC texts, they are compatible with this basic tenet. According to Porto Alegre, "the catholicity of the Church expresses the fullness, integrity and totality of its life in Christ". In keeping with this, NMC says that in the catholic church Christians are made "participants in Christ's life and salvation" (§12). The Christological being of the church is not lacking in earlier ecumenism, but it is important that the new texts explicitly bring this reality together with the issue of catholicity.

Grosshans pays a lot of attention to the spatial dimension of the church. Too often Protestants have left this issue to the Catholics, making merely the internal aspects of catholicity explicit in their ecclesiology. For Grosshans, church is the "earthly space" for the truth of the gospel.[10] The concept of space thus becomes transferred to the description of the church itself. It is not a local concept, but it nevertheless underlines the importance of having

an existence in time and place. This move has an interesting parallel in NMC. In it, as we have seen, God "makes his people the place and instrument of his saving and life-giving presence" (§12). The concept of place now appears as an attribute of the church.

Calling church "a place" may be a fruitful way of avoiding both the absolutisized spatial catholicity which remains bound to the actual territories, and the assumedly non-spatial catholicity which may be idealistic even in the age of internet and globalisation. Church does not remain committed to a territory, but the church in itself offers a place or an "earthly space" for something that is not local, namely, the gospel. In such place it becomes possible to identify the concrete church as the church catholic.

Another inspiring recent voice is that of Kevin Vanhoozer. He offers a more Calvinist blend of Protestantism, but one with a high respect of the doctrinal traditions of all churches. His point of departure is the authority of biblical interpretation as the criterion of the identity of the church and thus of its catholicity. Vanhoozer aims at grounding Protestant authority structures in a manner which surpasses private interpration but nevertheless remains true to the principle of *sola scriptura*. Like Grosshans, he sees the issue of identity as crucial for the interpretation and proclamation of the gospel message.

Following Paul Ricoeur, Vanhoozer distinguishes between two kinds of identity. Whereas the so-called idem-identity, "hard identity" or "what-identity", requires unchanging communal interpretation, the so-called ipse-identity, "soft identity" or "who-identity" can be more flexible. In ipse-identity, we do know who you are even though you sometimes adjust your views and react to new situations. Ipse-identity is not pluralism, but a non-identical repetition of central practices. Protestant biblical interpretation can avoid both legalism and privatism with the help of conceiving its teaching and church practices in terms of ipse-identity.[11]

Remaining the same, and in that sense catholic, can be labeled as the "ecclesial performance of scripture".[12] In this sense scripture determines the range of catholicity and ipse-identity of the church. Vanhoozer refines this basic idea with another distinction, namely that between "cultural-linguistic" (PII) and "canonical-linguistic" (PI) performance. Roughly, PII emphasizes that our understanding of the scripture is conditioned by ecclesial (and other cultural) traditions, whereas PI stresses the autonomy and primacy of canonical scripture.

Vanhoozer prefers PI, arguing that PI and PII relate to one another as the events of "receiving" and "using" a text. According to PI, the believers have the possibility to become guided by the canonical text so that they sometimes can even criticize traditions on the basis of scripture. It is indeed possible to listen and to receive a text before using it.

Vanhoozer is not hostile to the concept of tradition but claims that his approach nevertheless affirms the importance of historical traditions. Even *sola scriptura* presupposes an interplay between scripture and tradition. Remaining the same, in terms of ipse-identity, must leave room for some conscious and unconscious changes. The believer can, however, remain confident that the canonical scripture is capable of leading the church through the ages. Vanhoozer affirms the Christological core of scripture and holds that the church is kept together by the content of the word of God rather than any formal or legal structure.

Looking back at the Porto Alegre and NMC texts on catholicity, we see that they both mention the word of God and the proclamation of the gospel. In Vanhoozer's terms, scripture is not only relevant as the doctrinal content which the principle of catholicity formally safeguards. The principle of catholicity is also itself being upheld by the canonical norm of scripture. This is, in brief, how a Protestant theologian understands canonical scripture to be the norm and guarantee of the unity and catholicity of the church. In order to keep the church "the same" and in this sense catholic, scripture is the most important criterion. Canonical scripture is not merely another instance of tradition, but it has the ability to judge tradition, at

least to an extent. At the same time, *sola scriptura* neither promotes private interpretation nor implies rigid literalism.

The ecclesial performance should be consonant to the canonical intentions of scripture. The ecclesial performance may vary in different times and places and it can be and should be re-formed. It would probably be an exaggeration to claim that the performance should constantly be reformed, but in any case the chain of catholicity is based on non-identical repetition. And yet, this chain builds an ipse-identity in which we can know who the Christians are. We may be to an extent uncertain of "what" the church finally is and even of "what" is precisely teaches. But we do know who represents the church and who are (and were) God's people. In this sense the church has both unity and catholicity.

Endnotes:

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1. *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, ed. G. Gassmann, WCC: Geneva1993, 3.

2. *Documentary History*, 3.

3. *Documentary History*, 3-4.

4. The text is available at www.wcc-assembly.info.

5. *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, WCC: Geneva 1998. See *Confessing the One Faith*, 4th ed. WCC: Geneva 1996, §240 and *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, WCC: Geneva 1998, §12.

6. See Apology of the Augsburg Confession, in *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. R. Kolb and T. Wengert, Fortress: Minneapolis 2000, 175-176.

7. Toronto Declaration III, 5, in: *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Text and Voices*, ed. M. Kinnamon and B. E. Cope, WCC: Geneva 1997, 465.

8. For this phrase, see *From Federation to Communion, The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, ed. J.H. Schjorring et alii, Fortress: Minneapolis 1997, 236.

9. Hans-Peter Grosshans, *Die Kirche - irdischer Raum der Wahrheit des Evangeliums*, Ev. Verlag: Berlin 2003, 179-182.

10. Grosshans, 298.

11. Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, Westminster: Louisville 2005, 127.

12. Vanhoozer, 167. For the following, see pp. 167-185.