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In this issue:

- Letter from the Director* p. 2
- Protestant and Catholic Fundamentalists. A Case Study: Political Zionism and the State of Israel*
by Thomas Stransky p. 3
- The Church: A Reconciled Community Through the Eucharist?*
by Mar Bawaï Soro p. 11
- Le radici sono nell'eterno. Il rinnovamento, dono del giubileo*
di James F. Puglisi p. 18

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A Center conducted by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

Director's Desk

This Spring and Summer were busy months for the Centro as we welcomed many groups and new students who came to use our library facilities and to participate in various activities sponsored by the **Centro Pro Unione**.

Together with S.I.D.I.C. Centre and the Vincent Pallotti Centre we sponsored a very well attended conference given by an old friend of the Centro, Fr. Thomas Stransky, csp, rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. The title of Tom's talk was "Protestant and Catholic Fundamentalists. A Case Study of Political Zionism and the State of Israel". We are pleased to offer the full text of his talk in this issue. The Centro wishes to offer its congratulations to the Tantur Centre which celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary of foundation this past May. The Director was present at this celebration and participated in an informal consultation on ecumenical education that followed the conference.

We are also pleased to offer in this issue of the *Bulletin* the text of the conference of Bishop Mar Bawai Soro of the Assyrian Church of the East given during the 1997 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Celebration which was sponsored by the Anglican Centre in Rome, the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas and **Centro Pro Unione**. During this celebration, presided over by Canon Bruce Ruddock (Director of the Anglican Centre), Rev. Paul Robichaud, csp, the new pastor of Santa Susanna (the American Catholic Parish in Rome) preached a wonderful homily. The third text which is contained in this issue is a talk given by the Director at the Istituto "Mater Ecclesiae" on the occasion of the first year in preparation for the celebration of the Great Jubilee 2000.

The **Centro** hosted several groups during the Spring. These included the ecumenical commission of the diocese of Stockholm, Carroll College from the USA, a group of Russian Orthodox monks and nuns, a group of liturgists who met with Canon Donald Gray, Rector of Westminster Abbey during his visit to Rome. Canon Gray has been very involved in the formulation of the ecumenical venture of a common lectionary for English language countries. Most recently we received a group of 52 students in visit from the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, Switzerland. In addition many individual students and scholars have used our facilities for research.

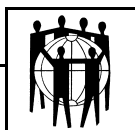
The **Centro** was invited to be a participant at the Second European Ecumenical Assembly at Graz: "Reconciliation: Gift of God and Source of Life". Sr. Alessandra, sa and the Director were present for the Assembly at the end of June. The **Centro** was responsible for the Forum on Intercommunion which was moderated by the Director.

We were also very pleased to collaborate with S.I.D.I.C in the successful International Symposium on "Good and Evil after Auschwitz. Ethical Implications for Today" held in Rome, September 22-25 at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

From December 1997 to December 1998, the Friars and Sisters of the Atonement will celebrate their centenary of foundation. Rev. Paul Wattson and Mother Lurana White co-founded the Society of the Atonement in the Episcopal Church in the USA in 1898. To mark the beginning of this celebration, the **Centro** has organized an international symposium: "Petrine Ministry and the Unity of the Church: «towards a patient and fraternal dialogue»". You will find the full program at the end of this *Bulletin*.

With this issue I will say good-by to our readers as a new director has been named in the person of William Martyn, sa. My thanks go to all who have supported this ministry. From all of us at the **Centro** we wish you a Blessed Christmas and a New Year of "Peace and Goodness!"

James F. Puglisi, sa
Director





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Centro Conferences

Protestant and Catholic Fundamentalists A Case Study: Political Zionism and the State of Israel

by

Thomas Stransky, Paulist
Rector, Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem

(Conference given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Thursday, 6 February 1997)

Who are Christian fundamentalists?

Many observers and critics find it hard to describe accurately and to evaluate dispassionately those Protestants who proudly call themselves fundamentalists, and those Catholics who insist to be the only “faithful” members of what they judge to be a quasi-heretical Church since the Second Vatican Council. In fact, other Christians had been rather indifferent to what fundamentalists believe, argue about, and practice until two phenomena appeared quite visibly during the last three decades:

1) Many, too many members, especially young adults, of the mainline Protestant churches and of the Catholic Church are leaving these churches and joining fundamentalist Protestant churches and para-church organizations or are forming Catholic separatist groups.

2) Fundamentalists are beginning to exercise clout in political elections and in domestic and foreign legislative policies — the move from personal piety to social critique and political activism. Either one does not want or must oppose their votes and platforms, or one eagerly seeks to recruit these Christians into coalitions with specific agendas and tradeoffs. Here the old adage holds: “politics makes strange bedfellows”.

The best example of this is the Protestant fundamentalist stance towards the State of Israel since its founding as a sovereign modern state in 1948, and now during the fragile Israeli/Palestinian “peace process”. In fact, as I strive to learn by what traits christian fundamentalists describe themselves by their own written and spoken words, I offer the thesis: *Christian fundamentalists would have to rewrite almost their entire theological and popular literature, if they have not seen in the history of political Zionism and the State of Israel so many “divine signs” to point to as proofs that they alone are correctly interpreting the Scriptures.*

During one night last September in Jerusalem, without notice the new Israeli prime minister Benyamin Netanyahu opened the Hasmonean tunnel next to the ancient Temple Mount's foundation, now the Muslim's Al-haram-al-Sharif with its sacred Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque. Riots started, and the

smell of soldiers' and civilians' blood and the sight of family tears at Palestinian and Israeli graves were searing our hearts. On the very weekend of the blood, in the Holy City the well-organized International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem [ICEJ] had gathered 6,000 Christians from over 100 countries to celebrate the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles, in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy¹.

Most of these pilgrims were Protestant fundamentalists. They offered unconditional support for the State of Israel and its present government's policies, which they then judged were rightly over and against the peace-and-justice concerns of Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians. They cheerfully heard the address of the prime minister whom the ICEJ leader, Jan Willem van der Hoeven, introduced with the theological accolade: “If there is proof of a God in heaven, it is the result of the last elections” (in May). Prime minister Netanyahu returned the compliment. He called the congregants “ambassadors of truth”. Israeli TV cameras followed these christian visitors who formed the largest group to pass through the Hasmonean tunnel and its newly opened exit to the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim Quarter — in christian piety, the holiest of the Old City streets. Indeed, a clearly visible move from inner piety to outward politics, and a coalition with the Israeli government freshly in power.

And so when in Israel and elsewhere, christian fundamentalists are coming out of the closet into the public arenas, one asks the questions: “Who are they? What makes them tick”?

Most popular descriptions are accusatory: “sectarian”, “authoritarian”, “simplistic”, “closed minded”, “not really Protestant”, and “gullible as Catholics”. Or as one church leader admitted when asked to describe fundamentalists: “Whatever kind of Christians you don't like”. [One person's fundamentalist is another's liberal].

Recently offsetting these caricatures are more dispassionate attempts to describe and interpret the general fundamentalist

¹ Zech. 14:16.

phenomenon, including studies by fundamentalists themselves². These interdisciplinary studies are trying to avoid the danger of oversimplifying by reductionalisms a very complex christian movement in varied social-cultural settings. For examples of reductionalisms:

1) Blurring fundamentalism with **all** of the **conservative** movements within Christianity today, whether Pentecostal, or Evangelical Protestant and Anglican, or Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox.

2) Or placing all fundamentalists on the same couch, and reducing them to the same **psychological type** and **cognitive mindset**: a closed personality who lusts for certitude and ideological purity and for moral or ethical rigorism.

3) Or reducing fundamentalists to **a system of theological statements**, which are then juxtaposed to other christian theologies for comparisons.

4) Or treating fundamentalism as a religious-social-political movement which is **organizationally self-contained**, and is not diffused beyond institutional borders on the christian map.

All such simplifications or reductionalisms distort. They prevent our grasp of what is going on within christian communities, and in similar ways, within other world religions. I call it: **the search for and fighting for fundamental confidences in the face of modernity**.

The search for fundamentals

Communities and peoples need their own history, those memories, traditions and myths, rites and cults which express their fundamental confidence in one's world-view. That is, that ultimate commitment or overriding, indeed final authority over all other commitments; that basic pattern through which I grasp experience and judge ideas, and can make sense of reality, even the reality of confusions, ambiguities and doubts in the face of modernity.

But what is modernity? To be modern, as Marshall Berman describes it, is "to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air". Indeed, modernity disassembles those structures and symbols which have been expressing, sustaining and fostering ultimate and penultimate meanings over the long haul.

In the quest for fundamental confidences one must more and more intentionally choose from a bewildering variety of available meaning systems, including those that are not explicitly religious

or are explicitly antireligious.

Joined to this search-in-bewilderment is at least an uneasy sense that christian mainline religion in its institutional forms, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, is not capable of responding to this cultural crisis. The once powerful mainline and more liberal than mainline churches are being sidelined. The fastest growing churches in most areas of the six continents are the conservative Evangelicals and the Pentecostals, each with subgroups easily identifiable as "fundamentalist". Why?

In the sociologist Dean Kelly's description, the mainline Protestant and Catholic local churches are perceived as no longer "serious"; that is, they no longer provide ultimate meaning; no longer demand serious commitment; over-apologize for their beliefs, loyalties, or practices; and allow themselves to be treated as though it makes no difference or should make no difference in their adherents' creeds or personal and communal behavior.

If modernity does threaten, even destroys fundamental christian confidences, then only "serious" churches can be creative; that is, only they can strongly support identity in transition, and only they can erect a firm bridge between who they are and what they want to become as faithful Christians. Otherwise, there is a break down of historical continuity of the self-identity of a church and of its members.

Thus, **fundamentalism is but one expression among Christians to be "serious", to meet the needs for fundamental confidences in the face of modernity**: the struggle to find a firm foundation in life; the longing to break through the bewildering variety of religious/anti-religious/a-religious/moral/amoral claims; the search for a buttress against social instabilities and marginalizations, democratic dislocations, and perceived moral, even physical "ends-of-the world". In this disarray, the Christian hungers for God's revealed clear, not-to-be-disputed answer, and for an earthly authority to voice it.

Fundamentalists, whether Protestant or Catholic, firmly believe that God has given them that answer to modernity. Here we have one interpretation of christian faith in which **"charismatic" leaders locate with easy certitude in chosen words, doctrines and practices the actions of a strict God who is saving a religious elite from corrupt forms of christian faith and from an evil world**.

The fundamentalists seem to reduce the complexity of the world's experience to a bipolar, even a manichean-apocalyptic model: good-bad, true-false; kingdom of Light, kingdom of Darkness; God-and-we, Satan-and-others; Christ/Antichrist; Christian/"secular humanist". The human being is largely sinful. The world is far more evil than good.

In a world of such contrasts the fundamentalists believe God has given them both the tactics and message. They are convinced that God calls them to be disciplined no-nonsense crusaders on a battlefield. They proudly bear Christ's flag to carry out his clear purposes and undisputed will, even if that obedience be a scandal to liberal intellectuals and a stumbling block to peoples of other faiths.

² The following descriptions summarize, expand or update my "Fundamentalists, Protestant & Catholic. An Ecumenical Challenge?" in: H.S. WILSON (ed.), *Christian Fundamentalism Today*. The papers and findings of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches/Lutheran World Federation/Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Consultation 22 to 26 February 1993, Die Evangelische Akademie Mülheim/Ruhr, Germany, "Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed", 26 (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1994) 22-39.

Their message includes highly selective scenarios.

First, they select what in modernity is evil to characterize the entire “modern times”, and then they compare these times with a reconstructed earlier **Golden Age**, by selecting and emphasizing one or other of its traits which they regard as enfleshments of doctrinal and practical fundamentals for the present. They seek the glorious ages of their church or their founders, an imaginary past stripped of its terrors, and for which historians are hard put to find the evidence: the first generation of disciples of Jesus; or the first five centuries of the Church; or the Middle Ages in Europe; or the sixteenth century Reformation; or the nineteenth century. [To paraphrase C.S. Lewis: what we consider to be old, venerable and never-changing is usually the product of the period just before our own.] “Bring back that ol'-time religion”. “The Bible days are coming again”. “Return to Pope Pius IX's fortress church”, or return at least to the Catholic Church before the corrupting Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

Second, fundamentalists claim authority over a sacred biblical and/or church tradition which they perceive all other Christians are corroding. As ambassadors of Christ's truth they fight with an armory of absolute proof texts, and so arrange the texts as to be most effective to sustain courage in themselves and to weaken the opponents.

Third, fundamentalists fight against general or specific enemies, whether within or without the group — against all agents who assault what is dearly held as fundamental. The general titles are “modernists”, “secular humanists”, “bible critics”, and, as in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, “non-biblical” local christian hierarchs, clergy and laity who are overinfluenced by Islam and by a false political agenda. All these agents — the movements and forces, the organizations and individuals — are conspiring both to destroy the community of faithful disciples of Christ and to bless that very social order which by divine imperatives true Christians are called radically to change.

So one must keep at a distance Christians who even waver on certain fundamentals. Watch out in particular for those coreligionists who call themselves friendly messengers and plead for at least an “agreement to disagree”, or who in the Israeli/Palestinian peace process, consider political compromises as a legitimate ethical response to the resolution of conflict.

Furthermore, beware of those who falsely believe that the Holy Spirit is active in the ecumenical movement. Affiliation with the World Council of Churches or with the Middle East Council of Churches, or with Jerusalem's coalition of local churches, is a biblically prohibited alliance with apostates and unbelievers.

Basic tenets or fundamentals

Of course, major christian traditions hold that certain articles of biblical faith are fundamentals, while others are non-essential and open to free debate. In the late 19th and early 20th century the Catholic Church and the Reformation churches were facing reinterpretations of the christian faith in terms of contemporary historical, scientific, psychological and philosophical positions,

generated by the Big Four — Kant, Darwin, Marx, and Freud. The general label was pejorative: *Modernism*. Pope Pius X judged it to be “the synthesis of all heresies”³, and he required all ecclesiastics and teachers of Catholic philosophy and theology to affirm non-debatable stands in the *Oath Against Modernism*⁴.

In facing the same challenge of rectifying theological deviations in order to preserve true christians from the acids of modernism, Evangelical Protestants published a series of booklets: *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth*⁵. The series later became the symbolic reference point and label for “fundamentalist” subgroups among the Conservative Evangelicals. Listed are five pivotal “fundamentals of faith and of evangelical Christianity”, five here-we-stands which pressed the question, “Do you believe these or not”? The yes's and no's caused the schism within Protestantism which continues to this day, between most Conservative or Neo-Evangelical Protestants and others.

Gradually these Fundamentalists created narrower definitions of what the five fundamentals mean, and these explanations become the test of who is and who is not a “bible-believing” Christian. To deny all or any of these strictly interpreted fundamentals is to “betray the biblical God”.

1) **The inerrancy of Scripture:** the originally recorded words are “verbally inspired” or “God-breathed”. Whatever the Bible says on any subject, even if by passing comment, is the clear will and mind of God on that subject, including historical and scientific affirmations and prophetic discourse. The Bible in an absolute reality in itself, flawless texts that yield an internally consistent theology. The Bible is no way can be relative to the understanding of those who wrote the texts or who hear them in varying cultural and historical contexts.

The fundamentalists propose “a loving God does not, indeed cannot disclose the divine mind and will in order to confuse. All human beings in good faith and with common-sense can immediately grasp the biblical Word”. This proposition should negate the need and legitimacy of “outside” interpretation. But in fact the fundamentalist interpreter — this preacher or leader or that small church alone, this organization or that conference resolution alone — equals the right view of God and of us, and absolutizes that biblical interpretation as the only one. So the fundamentalist asks: “How can you read the same text as I do, and not come to the same understanding as I? You must be operating in bad faith, or with no faith, and that characterizes an accommodation to modernity or to the political religion of, say, Palestinian theologians and the leaders of the historic Jerusalem churches — a compromising alteration of the divine word”.

2) **The deity of Jesus:** God-man, of the Triune God, born of a virgin in Bethlehem, “like unto us in all things but sin”.

³ *Pascendi dominici gregis*, 1907 (Denz. 37th ed. 3475-3500).

⁴ Motuproprio «*Sacrorum antistitum*», 1910 (Denz. 3537-3550).

⁵ A.C. DIXON (general editor), (Chicago: Testimony Publishing, 1910-15).

3) The God-man is **The Savior**: by his death Jesus took on all the sins of all men and women of all times. Christ's blood shed on Calvary is always sufficient to cleanse every sin from every person.

This third fundamental raises the question of the salvation of unbelievers. If pressed to answer, almost all fundamentalists would claim that one remains in a state of sin and damnation until he or she personally commits oneself to Jesus Christ as the Lord and the Savior, and to a way of christian discipleship as biblically understood by the fundamentalists. Thus, some groups organize missionary activities among the Jews, in the specific hope of leading them out of different degrees of lossness and ignorance, to become "true Jewish believers"; that is, committed disciples of Jesus the Messiah.

4) **The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ**: the same body born in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem, suffered, died and was raised from the dead. And because Christ rose in his body, one day we too will rise from the dead in our bodies.

5) **The second coming of Jesus Christ**: the only hope for God's human family and for God's wounded creation is that Jesus is coming again.

Let me put this last fundamental in a wider context. The christian faith, in its judaic rootings, includes a metahistorical outlook which identifies with some precision beginnings, meantimes, and ends; creation, redemption and consummation. What God has set in motion in creation, God brings to fulfillment in the eschaton — "the last days" or "the Day of the Lord".

The future is already occurring in the meantime to color the interpretation of present events, especially the existential experiences of inflicted cruelty and pain, obvious injustices and oppressions, wars and genocidal ethnic-cleansings. In strands of Jewish and Christian eschatology "the last days" culminate decisive stages of history during which an extraordinary complex of events will happen in order to terminate an era and inaugurate a new one. In the apocalyptic and apocryphal sources (Jewish and Christian), cosmic elements play a decisive role in calculating history into periods, with the faith-conviction that the end is imminent and the Messiah is the key actor. The primary working metaphors and images are those of battles and wars, with heavy eternal stakes in the outcome.

A pronounced sub-theme is the "thousand years", called millennialism or chiliasm (*chilioi*): the belief, based chiefly on the literal interpretation of Revelations 20:1-10, that the Christ will come again personally to rule visibly upon the earth for 1,000 years⁶.

Throughout christian history one finds a compulsion to locate the beginnings of the end-times in current evil events, catastrophes and hostile powers: the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire and the persecuted Church; the post-Constantinian Arians and defenders of christian orthodoxy; the Muslim unholy triumphs against holy

christian Crusaders which climaxed in Salah al-Din's takeover of Holy Jerusalem (1187). For the 14th century John Wyclif, the pope was the Anti-Christ. Although Martin Luther identified St. John's Two Beasts as the pope and the emperor, some Catholic purveyors of the Reformation reversed the role: Luther was the Anti-Christ. As later became Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin and Ayatollah Khomeini.

In all of this name-calling and calendar-fixing, the constant problem was not to lose face in revising the predictions when events turned out otherwise, and when believers who had been stranded on mountaintops of firm hope and clear expectation were forced to return to the lights, shadows and darkness of the valleys of ordinary day-to-day life.

Today Hal Lindsay, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Richard De Haan, Rex Humbard, George Archer, Jan van der Hoeven, and a host of other fundamentalist evangelists hold a world-history vision of what is called **apocalyptic premillennialism**. Since not all the prophecies in the Old and New Testaments have been fulfilled either in the first coming of Christ or in the history of the church, there must be a future millennium, a last epoch or dispensation on earth, during which the fidelity of God requires that the remaining prophecies find their fulfillment. It is a complicated scenario and fundamentalist interpreters offer many different and controverted subplots.

But for all modern fundamentalist interpreters, the "**canon within the canon**" of **Scriptures is prophecy**, understood as revealed predictions of future historical events. The Bible is a divine jigsaw puzzle for the entire sweep of history. The fundamentalist interpreter fits the biblical pieces of prophecy together in a way that makes clear the entire movement of history, and in what is called "time-setting", discerns in some detail where to place present events in the divine calendar of the whole. They include apocalyptic events, described literally in all those biblical images which will bring history to an end.

Political Zionism/Israel

As Protestant fundamentalists interpret the five fundamentals, today, they still have a basic coherence and unity. So one asks: how does this all converge into firm stances towards political Zionism and the State of Israel, including its present peace negotiations with the Palestinian National Authority?

In every fundamentalist's list of being-fulfilled prophecies, **the State of Israel plays a central role in the cast of divine actors in God's directed penultimate and last act**. In short, God's prophesied purpose for Israel has not been fulfilled in the Church but Israel awaits a political-social-religious fulfillment in the form of a restored and perfected Jewish nation under the rule of the returned Jesus the Christ, on the Davidic throne in Jerusalem.

The Church will cease its mediation of divine grace, and the divinely saved ones will disappear ("be raptured") from history, so that Israel may resume its primary role as God's instrument during "the last days".

It will not be an easy road. All Jews "in unbelief" have already

⁶ Already articulated in the mid-100s by the Gentile Christian from Nablus in Samaria, JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 80,5.

been in-gathered in Israel; the *galut*, their diaspora, has faded away. First, Satan will control the age, filling it with natural earthquakes, floods and famines, and with devastating wars and murderous dictatorial regimes. Then a war of tribulation will destroy millions in Israel, but a remnant of the Jews will accept Jesus Christ, and so be saved. These new believers will be united with Christ who returns to earth. Christ is not alone. He comes with his army of saints, composed of the resurrected faithful saints of the Old Testament, of the Church, and of the tribulation martyrs. Together they destroy the forces of the Anti-Christ in his final rebellion, at the Battle of Armageddon which some locate on the Jezreel plain below Megiddo⁷, in today's northern Israel.

Then will come a thousand-year era of peace. "The spiritual aristocracy" of believing Christians, both Jew and Gentile, are under Jesus Christ, Davidic king and priest. Under his sovereign authority, redeemed Israel presides over all the nations; Jerusalem arbitrates all international disputes; and peoples of all nations use the rebuilt Temple. Finally, when all of them will have accepted Christ's ministry of righteous rule, the Son of God will voluntarily hand over to the Father this kingdom, and it merges with the universal kingdom — one throne through the ages of ages.

In this megadrama, **the State of Israel is a *sine qua non* condition of Christ's second coming.** And that is the primary though not exclusive reason and motivation why today all true-believing fundamentalists, must defend Israel by every means possible. God, in Christ, calls them to "comfort and support" Israel unconditionally.

God has greatly comforted these Christians themselves by the unexpected, "miraculous" victory of the 1967 six-day war, when Israeli had reunited Jerusalem and begun to occupy the biblical heartland of Judea and Samaria, then under direct Jordanian rule. The victory fired the engines of prophecy in what fundamentalist Nelson Bell called "the unfolding destiny". God was preparing Israel for the arrival of the Messiah. In 1968 Raymond Fox pressed the Jews to rebuild the Temple and reinstate the priestly sacrifices.

Later Hal Lindsay wrote *Late Great Planet Earth* — still in its revisions the biggest best-seller after the Bible, over 22 million copies. What astonishes Lindsay "is that we are watching the fulfillment before our eyes of over 500 prophecies of the end in our time. Some of the future events that were predicted hundreds of years ago read like today's newspapers". Lindsay designates 500 fulfilled prophecies, collected from Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, parts of the synoptic gospels, Paul's letters, and John's *Apocalypse*. What he calls the beginning of "the countdown": the establishment of Israel;⁸ the return of Jerusalem to Jewish control

in 1967;⁹ the alignment of Arab States against Israel;¹⁰ the rise of a new Roman Empire in the form of the European common market;¹¹ the movement of a one-world government;¹² the apostasy of the mainline churches¹³.

Thus, the political crisis in the Middle East is seen through apocalyptic scenarios. The State of Israel represents holy fighting against the Devil. Palestinians, and other Arabs, are reduced to mere pawns in the drama. Before its collapse the communist Soviet Union had represented Ezekiel's "land of Magog" to the north. After the demise of the USSR, the Evil Empire, the invading enemy of God or "the Gog of Magog" (Ezek 38:1) has moved south, shifting from the Soviet Union of Communism to the Middle East of Islam. Just prior to the Persian Gulf War in January 1991, some believed that Saddam Hussein and Iraq were agents for the final holy battle.

Many Christian fundamentalists believe that the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) and the Golan are within the God-given borders of Israel, and the Jews should be faithful to God's gift. A few christian trusts raise money to "redeem the Land" for Jewish settlements.

I use the International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem [ICEJ] as a very visible group. There are other like-minded organizations: Bridges for Peace, Root and Branch, Christians United for Israel, Wake UP Coalition, A Praise in the Earth, Zion Gate International Christian Leadership Conference for Israel, and others.

The ICEJ's platform is from Isaiah:¹⁴ "Comfort God's people, Israel". And its judgement over friends and enemies is from Genesis:¹⁵ "I will bless those who bless thee, and curse those who curse thee". At Jerusalem's 1996 Embassy Congress the participants pledged to be "christian doers of the word", and to act against the real enemy of Israel and the Jewish People, an "enemy both within and without, through a watering down of Zionist principles and through the ever-increasing threat of Islamic fundamentalism". Thus, as bearers of Christ's commission to help the Jewish State, they strongly and publicly support those Jews, in Israel or in diaspora, who are against the September 1993 Israeli/Palestinian Peace Agreement; who are for the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and on the Golan; who are against the autonomy, under the Palestinian National Authority, given to Gaza and to Jericho and other towns such as Bethlehem, and even more strongly last month, against

⁷ Rev 16:16.

⁸ Ezek 30—40.

⁹ Zech 12—14.

¹⁰ Ezek 30:4f.

¹¹ Dan 7:17.

¹² Rev 17:3ff.

¹³ 2 Peter 2:10.

¹⁴ Is 40:1.

¹⁵ Gen 12:3.

the autonomy of 80% of Hebron; and who are against the subsequent negotiations towards a final settlement of “peace for land, land for peace”.

Furthermore, true bible-believing Christians have the duty to urge that all dispersed Jews should consider permanent immigration to their homeland, Eretz Yisrael, because the *aliya* is God's call to the nations. The Embassy helped finance, for example, the Jews of the former Soviet Union and of Ethiopia to “come home”. And in Israel, it is exemplary by generous works of social assistance to the neglected poor, both Jew and Arab.

It is very understandable that most Jews worldwide welcome such practical comfort. And it is understandable why many Israeli Jews, including some, certainly not all, government officials and political parties such as the Likud, align with western christian fundamentalist Zionist organizations. These Christians are not only warm friends of the Jewish people and the State of Israel; they have political influence back home. But in this Israeli alliance with fundamentalist Zionists, placed in parenthesis is the latter's conviction that the Jews must be gathered in Eretz Israel in order for Jesus the Christ to come again, to proclaim yes-to-Him and salvation, or no-to-Him and damnation.

Who is Christian? A local clergy spokesman in Jerusalem called the Embassy folk “*unchristian*”. And Embassy's Jan Willem van der Hoeven returned the epitaph. According to an interview in the *Jerusalem Post*¹⁶, he classified “two types of Christians — the organized historical ecclesiastical churches and individuals both inside and outside the historical churches ... whose allegiance is to the Lord and His word, not to the Church”. These Christians “know what the Bible says. They read the prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah, and they know what the Lord plans for the people of Israel”.

But the historical local churches of Jerusalem Mr. van der Hoeven calls “hotbeds of Palestinian sentiment who often use the robes of Christ to help the Palestinian cause”, so that “right under Israel's nose, the churches are often vehicles of anti-Israel sentiment working to the detriment of what God has promised for His people”.

This judgement, despite my own nine-year experience in the Holy Land that most of its Christians and certainly the leaders of the local churches consistently, publicly, and with no public-relations hypocrisy, have prayerfully been pressing for a just peace with security for God's peoples of the Land — Israelis and Palestinians, and for a reconciling response to a common religious call to Jews, Christians and Muslims, first revealed to Abraham, our one father in faith: “to keep the Way of the Lord by doing what is right and just”¹⁷.

Who are Catholic fundamentalists?

With different degrees of emphasis, Protestant fundamentalist streams contain a severe judgement on Roman Catholicism. *The*

¹⁶ Sept. 27, 1996.

¹⁷ Gen 18:19.

Fundamentals, the series of booklets in the 1910s, set out to prove that “the Papal Church” is not at all christian but “a Satanic delusion”, clearly preaching and practicing what Paul severely warns about: “another gospel”. “No peace with Rome must be on our lips and in our lives”. Catholics are objects of christian mission. The plea in Revelations¹⁸ is addressed to those bible-believing Christians “who may be in the Roman body but not of it: ‘Come out of it, my people’”.

Anti-Catholicism still flows through the Protestant fundamentalist movement. We are still impolitely called “Romanists” or “Papists”. One still finds in their literature long lists of Catholic doctrines and practices whose falsities are proven by abundant biblical references. Most on the list misrepresent and contradict by non-nuance what the Catholic Church in fact teaches and practices: for example, biblical **relativism**; and mere human teaching authority **over** the Bible.

For several reasons, many Catholics have moved out and joined Protestant fundamentalist groups. Some of these groups will acknowledge in Catholics some biblical truth and authentic christian commitments. They even support Catholic leaders, including the present pope, as courageous defenders of biblical faith on such issues as right to life against abortion, the indissolubility of christian marriage, the condemnation of premarital sex and active homosexuality. On these issues many fundamentalists are willing to be in public coalition with like-minded Roman Catholics, or at least they will not refuse to such Catholics affiliation with their organizations.

I have met several practicing Catholics who ally with Protestant Zionist groups but who are unaware of that most fundamentalist basis of apocalyptic premillennialism which details God's plans for the horrific battles and the ultimate future of Israeli Jews. These Catholics join in various events in order to express their love and respect for the Jewish People, to atone for Catholic sins against the Jews, and to support the Jewish homeland of Israel. In general they are not anti-local Christians, especially not against their fellow Catholics in the Holy Land. **Not all christian friends and supporters of Israel are Zionists, just as not all christian Zionists are fundamentalist premillennialists.**

Anti-Israel Catholics

But the dominating Catholic fundamentalists, strictly described, take the opposite position. They are blatantly *anti-Jewish* and *anti-Israel*. They form a unique group among the rebellious children of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). It's a very specific Roman Catholic fundamentalism. Let me explain¹⁹.

Today's Catholics have been born and educated before, during

¹⁸ Rev 18:4.

¹⁹ The following three paragraphs summarize my “The Roman Catholic Church Today, Towards the Third Millennium”, to be published in *The Tantur Papers*.

or after the Second Vatican Council. No other church has so faced “the modern world” in every dimension of church life. Vatican II had so wide-ranging an agenda that during its aftermath of over three decades, the Church is still suffering from “future shock” — that dizzying collective disorientation caused by the future becoming present too quickly. **Too much comes too soon for too many — sudden discontinuities in the actual or presumed confidences of Catholic identity.**

This steady doze of future shock still infects a church which prides itself in its faithful developmental continuity with the past. But are not some of the Vatican II reforms in teaching and practice an intentional rejection of the past by 180 degree turns? Certainly more radical than “developmental continuity”. The most obvious of these shifts are the Church's teachings on the right to religious freedom for individual persons and communities; on the Church's ecumenical relations with other Christians and other churches; and on the Church's interreligious relations with peoples of other world faiths, such as the Muslims; and in particular, the Church's *unique* relation to the Jewish People of today.

I describe Catholic conservatives as those who place a high value on established traditional ideas, practices, symbols, and historical heritage — especially in times of rapid cultural change. One defends and preserves the biblical and doctrinal confidences of the Catholic Church's time-tested experience against real or presumed purely rational or emotional changes and the pressures of faddism. In the resolution of any doubt about mere trendiness or authentic development, the motto is Chesterton's: “We want a church that not only is right when the world is right, but also is right when the world is wrong”.

None of the conservative Catholics want to be called “fundamentalists”. For them that label smacks too much of pejorative Protestantism, or of muddled anti-intellectualism, or of self-pitying marginalization, or of militancy without humility and patience in dialogue with fellow Catholics.

Nonetheless, I suggest there are fundamentalist strains within the conservative movement in the post-Vatican II Church. Just as Protestant fundamentalists are subgroups within conservative Evangelical Protestantism, so within conservative Catholicism the Catholic fundamentalists are subgroups.

Initially for many Catholics, Vatican II became a kind of “end of the world”. It unwrapped the Catholic package, broke down Catholic identity-confidences. It caused a sudden death of a clear historical continuity and the symbols which expressed and sustained it. So the Catholic fundamentalist reaction: an evolution-in-reverse, not towards the future but towards the past, through policies and strategies of restoration. The reaction is a **retrospective utopia**, a return to a blissful Golden Age which selective memory constructs.

Whereas most Protestant fundamentalists apply the principle of literal interpretation to a selected set of biblical texts, Catholic fundamentalists apply the same principle to Catholic traditions. Traditions become pure and innocent, ever intact. They almost

replace Scriptures. So fundamentalists reduce the Catholic tradition to selected texts and interpret them wrenched from their historical contexts and the total life of “the Church of all times”, for example, the Church's relation to the Jews or to Muslims. They carefully select texts from all general councils and popes, except Vatican II and popes John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II.

These fundamentalists are indeed fighters. They are convinced that though small in numbers, they alone are saving both the Catholic Church and the world in fidelity to the Spirit-protected tradition. Thus they have every right and duty to denounce the infidelity of other laity or clergy, of the general hierarchy, including the incumbent Pope John Paul II.

Although one should draw the fundamentalist circle with blurred and porous lines within the Catholic Church, the most visible, almost caricaturized expression continues to be the Society of St. Pius X, founded by the late Archbishop's Marcel Lefebvre in Switzerland in 1970. In Lefebvre's never-mincing words, Vatican II “is the greatest disaster not only of this century but of any century since the foundation of the Church”. Lefebvre's movement represents those who declare the church of Vatican Council II to be heretical because it has incarnated discontinuities and thereby has corrupted the unchangeable tradition which had been firmly set by the definitions and canons of the Councils of Trent and of Vatican I, and by statements of anti-modernist popes, such as Pius IX (1846-78) and Pius X (1903-14).

These Catholic fundamentalists look specifically at the radical theological shift of the official Catholic Church towards the Jews of Christ's time and the Jewish people throughout the common era, and at the present Vatican political partnership with the State of Israel through diplomatic relations. They look at this and cringe with dismay, if not horror.

So they stubbornly fight to maintain what they believe God has clearly revealed and the Church had once faithfully taught:

1. The Jews crucified the Christ, the Son of God. By this act of “God-killing” (*deicidium*), and by the failure of the majority of the Jews to accept Jesus of Nazareth as also their Messiah, Lord and Savior, the Jews then and now have forsaken all rights to God's previous promises. In divine punishment, the Jews should continue, as did Cain, to wander, to be *vagabondi*, forever. God now wills and providentially sustains the dispersed existence of the Jews among the Catholics, in order to remind Christians of the unlimited blessings of God's gifts to the people of the New Covenant, the New *Qahal*, the new Israel, identified as the Roman Catholic Church. This New Covenant has completely replaced the Old Covenant.

2. To apply this classical position to present times, God has cancelled the promise of covenantal relation of the Jews, thus to their former homeland, *Eretz Yisrael*. *Klal Yisrael*, the congregation of Israel, is a fiction. The blindfolded synagogue kneels before the divinely enlightened Church²⁰, whatever

²⁰ Cf. Strasbourg cathedral's sculptural reliefs.

numbers and power the Jews may have, in Israel or elsewhere.

This tradition of the complete displacement of the Jews by the Catholic Church — and only that Church, and divine punishment of the Jews to be a permanently wandering people was dominant until the early 1960s when another counter-pressure was increasingly influencing the Church's self-understanding of the Jewish People. That new purifying tradition was articulated in the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate* (Oct. 26, 1965). The Church's decision was an irrevocable act, a *hesbon ha-nefesh*, a reconsideration of soul which began to shift 1,900 years of relationships between Catholics and Jews, and to open locks that had been jammed for centuries. The teachings in *Nostra Aetate* and their later development by official statements by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, by popes Paul VI and John Paul II, and by the 1993 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* — this all helps to lay to rest that teaching tradition and religious attitude which Jules Isaac had called *mépris*, christian contempt of the Jews. And in this century the *mépris* had been underpinning the negative Catholic stances

towards that political Zionism which culminated in the sovereign State of Israel. If that displacement/permanent wandering theology were still in any way even tolerated in the Catholic Church, in no way could Israel and would the Holy See agree to the establishment of normal diplomatic relations in late December '93.

But it is precisely this intentional rejection of traditional anti-Judaism and this intentional positive political stance towards Israel which Catholic fundamentalists claim has landed the Catholic Church into heresy.

Conclusion

I conclude. Only another lecture could outline my own response to Protestant fundamentalists and their brand of Christian Zionism; for like myself, most loving Christian supporters of the Jewish People and of Israel is not of that brand. And now I cannot respond to Catholic fundamentalists and their anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist positions.



CC

Centro Conferences

The Church: A Reconciled Community Through the Eucharist?

by

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(Conference given at the **Centro Pro Unione**, Thursday, 23 January 1997)

“As this broken bread was once scattered over the hillsides and then, when gathered, became one, so may your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into Your Kingdom”¹

I. Reconciliation: a call to conversion and spiritual exaltation

Saint Paul says to the Corinthians:

Whoever is in Christ is a new creature: old things have passed away, and everything has been made new by God, who has reconciled us to himself in Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; for it was God in Christ who was reconciling the world to his greatness, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us our own message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ; and as God is beseeching you through us, so we, on behalf of Christ, make supplication: be reconciled to God (II Cor. 5:17-20 [P' shitta]).

Paul makes known to us that the reality of the reconciliation of which he was made a minister cannot be credited to the genius or efforts of humanity, but to the initiative and activity of God, who has found in the death of his Son a way of accommodating both his love for us sinners and his wrath against sin. His message that “God has reconciled us to himself through Christ” is a metaphor of reconciliation that does not refer in any way to a change of sentiments on the part of people or on the part of God but to an inner change in the depth of humanity's relationship to God². For Paul, humanity's reconciliation with God means its justification by Him, because to reconcile means to end a relationship of enmity

¹ Didache (9:4) in J. QUASTEN & J. PLUMPE, (eds.), *Ancient Christian Writers* (West Minister, MD: The Newman Press, 1948) 20.

² C. K. BARRETT, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Harper Row: NY, 1973) 175.

and to substitute for it one of peace and benevolence³. The “ambassadorship” spoken of by the apostle is a purifying grace bestowed on individuals in the Church, a ministry which is given freely⁴.

Paul further tells us that God, who reconciled us to himself, has likewise given to us a ministry of reconciliation. But let us pause here and ask ourselves what a “ministry of reconciliation” means to us divided Christians. I believe that it suggests three things: (i) Reconciliation is the ministry that relates humanity back to God by following the example, values and principles (law) presented to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who went to the cross for us and for our salvation in total obedience to the will of His Father. (ii) Since God has canceled out our transgressions and commissioned us to aggressively promote reconciliation as ambassadors of Christ, we therefore are called to reconcile ourselves with all people and nations (Eph. 2), and to act as agents of forgiveness and mutual acceptance, both inside and outside of the boundaries of our churches (Jn. 20:22-23)⁵. (iii) This ministry of gathering people into unity with God and with one another was fulfilled with Jesus, and it continues on insofar as we, his community of faith, accept and live out the commission given us and exercise it vigorously for the sake of the unity of the Church and all humanity⁶.

The moment of reconciliation was the moment of the cross. For Saint Paul, it was realized in his acceptance in faith of the message of the cross, as well as the moment in which he received the ministry of reconciliation. The Apostle's understanding was that those who have accepted in faith this gift have received a

³ *Ibid.* 177.

⁴ P. E. FINK, SJ, (ed.), *New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990) entry: Reconciliation of Ministries 1050.

⁵ C.K. BARRETT, *A Commentary...* 176.

⁶ P.E. FINK, *New Dictionary...* 1051.

“Gospel of Reconciliation”. For those who have received a ministry of reconciliation, Paul sets forth the criteria for the fulfillment of this “ambassadorship” which is given freely by God. First he tells us that this message of reconciliation is not his own—that he does not act on his behalf but as Christ’s messenger. He is under orders, with a commission from Christ, and for this reason he is indebted to fulfill that commission to his hearers. The Apostle affirms that when he is at work in carrying out his assignment it is not Paul who speaks, but God⁷. As Saint Paul says “I live now not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). In other words, the source of this mission of reconciliation is to be found in the initiative of God, and it is carried out on his authority and in his name. But, since the message of reconciliation entrusted to Paul is the same as that committed to our Churches, and since it is effectively exercised in the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, in which Christ’s immediate presence is both the guarantee and source of its effectiveness, then we, following the model of Paul, must have the boldness to preach this life-giving Gospel, to set out men and women on a course of reconciliation—with God and, in Christ, with one another⁸. The activity of reconciliation is the ultimate objective for which the Church’s ministry is established, and her mandate to evangelize is grounded in it; reconciliation with God guides the church’s life and service to the world and calls her daughters and sons to unity and to reconciliation with one another⁹. Such detente with God and unity within the human family is possible because our Lord Jesus Christ has overcome death—the alienation between God and humanity—and has restored our fellowship with God (Romans 5).

Every activity and each relationship built and nurtured in the service of God and neighbor results in joy -- one of the chief ends of human existence¹⁰. Indeed, the good news that God has reconciled us to himself and, despite our sinfulness, has commissioned us to carry on Christ’s work in the Church becomes an occasion for spiritual exultation¹¹. The “Gospel of Reconciliation” causes us to have a joy that is far more than an emotional state or a mere heightened sense of pleasure; it is the ingredient of life brought about and sustained by trust in God through Jesus Christ. The joy of reconciled people is indeed holy because it is only when the Church achieves life as a truly “reconciled community” that her life and witness will display the proper

response of humanity to God’s mercy and unconditional love¹².

II. Disunity: a paucity of reconciliation

The gift of reconciliation which God the Father has bestowed on the Church through Jesus Christ calls for a specific manner of life and action which is to be fulfilled in pious charity in the daily lives of all Christian individuals and communities. Some important elements which provide this divine donation with a concrete manifestation are “gestures of reconciliation, concern for the poor, fraternal correction, [mutual admission of faults], spiritual direction, acceptance of suffering, endurance of persecution for the sake of righteousness and, lastly, taking one’s cross each day and following Jesus”¹³. When the Church has faithfully cultivated these virtues, she has been in a state of realized reconciliation with God, and her sons and daughters were graced and empowered to overcome divisions within the Church. But when members of the Church brought about divisions through pride and ambition, and ceased to reflect in a Christ-like way God’s commands for, and expectations of, His People, the resultant disunity began to undermine the oneness, catholicity, apostolicity and holiness of the sons and daughters of the Church. Abdiso of Soba, a thirteenth century Assyrian Church canonist and theologian, wrote the following on the question of division in the early Church:

When the light of Christ’s epiphany shone forth it scattered the darkness of error from the face of the world by the preaching of these devout [Apostles]. . . . and the inhabitants of the world learned goodness, holiness, humility and gentleness, and the lands were filled with knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Consequently, this [reality] filled Satan with envy and rage. And so, just as he has acted with Adam, he did with us so that Christians rose up against each other and divisions and controversies sprang up among them¹⁴.

Today’s divisions in the Church result from ancient wounds inflicted upon the Body of Christ, and these arose from a lack of charity and from inattention to the need for ongoing conversion and reconciliation on the part of sons and daughters of the Church. Pope John Paul, II, in his 1994 Apostolic Letter on the Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000¹⁵, speaks about the

⁷ C.K. BARRETT, *A Commentary*... 181-182.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ N. LOSSKY et alii. (eds.), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991) entry: Reconciliation, 846.

¹⁰ M. DOWNEY, (ed.), *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990) entry: Joy, 577.

¹¹ N. LOSSKY, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical*... entry: Reconciliation 846.

¹² M. DOWNEY, *New Dictionary of Sacramental*... entry: Joy 577.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice vaticana, 1994) #1435

¹⁴ ABDISO OF SOBA, *Marganitha*, Aramaic version, (Trichur, India: Mar Narsai Press, 1955) 26-27, also see the translation of *Marganitha* by Patriarch Eshai Shimun XXIII of the East (Seattle, WA: Mar Narsai Press, 1965) 32.

¹⁵ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994).

Church's continuous need for conversion as "the prerequisite condition for reconciliation with God on the part of both individuals and communities"¹⁶. The Roman Pontiff states that the Church must repent and do penance before God and man, always acknowledging the sinfulness of her own sons and daughters¹⁷. This call to repentance finds its clearest voice in the preaching of Jesus, in whose public ministry we hear the Master calling us all to "Repent" (Mt. 4:17; Mk. 1:15)¹⁸. The New Testament assuredly informs us that conversion is a fundamental moral decision, a "change of mind", which intends to commit the whole of human life to God¹⁹, so that by our turning away from sin and back towards Him we prepare the grounds for our personal reconciliation with God²⁰. Our God's provision of the forgiveness of sins gives us the opportunity to exercise our God-given freedom to stand against evil and overcome our own weakness²¹. Conversion of mind and heart, as a condition for reconciliation with God, means that we will love our neighbor, for only in this way can we truly love God. Without such love to others no one can really know, with genuine personal knowledge, who God is (1 Jn. 4:7-8). Though the Sacred Scriptures tell us that God wills to save us and His Love for us is unconditional, yet we must always seize the moment of grace and recognize it as the "here and now" without presuming that this chance of salvation will always be available (Heb. 3:12-15). To *be* converted is to live in daily fidelity to God, knowing that our conversion is a *process* that can only be realized in the course of a whole life time²². As long as divisions in the Church remain, it is incumbent on every Christian to recognize the need for ongoing conversion, and to pray for the unity and reconciliation of all Christians as the Church is doing this week here and everywhere.

The need for ongoing conversion must be recognized and publicly acknowledged by all of us, but it is often implicitly (or, sometimes, explicitly) denied by our actions. Behind every sin and the source of every fruit of evil that erects walls of alienation between God and man is willful pride. Pride is the opposite of

goodness, humility and gentleness, and it prevents us from making gestures toward reconciliation and from admitting our faults to one another. It reverses the process begun by our conversion, a process only begun in time, and which must continue in order to prepare us for eternity, and it eliminates the very possibility of holiness in our life. In pride, humanity is deprived of the divine likeness which the Creator formed in human nature. Pride produces evil through human hands and becomes a vicious habit and a serious source of sin. Not only does it emerge in individuals, but also in communities, and therefore it is a danger for the church as well. Pride is an impulse which stands as a barrier to love for God, and to the innocent and proper love for one's self and the world²³.

Yet, fortunately for us, there are those who since the turn of this century have manifested Christ's mandate to his Church by exercising a ministry of reconciliation through many worldwide, regional, national and local institutions and structures. To mention just two of these institutions that have gradually transformed the climate of inner- and inter-church relations since World War I, the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have each shown us their willingness to function as effective ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation among a divided Christianity. They, along with many others, have taught us that the human family is interconnected and interdependent and that we are all members in the same "Body of Christ" (Eph. 5:30)²⁴. Their primary objectives have been, and continue to be, the overcoming of divisions in the church and, hopefully, the replacement of walls that separate Christian sisters and brothers with bridges which transcend differences in order to make possible the renewal of the bond of communion, a renewal that will bring about the birth of a reinvigorated and united Church of the future. Since the beginning of their work, they have been courageously facing up to the divisions that exist in the church, the Body of Christ. They boldly initiated and facilitated bilateral and multilateral dialogues in order to mediate between churches which, until recent times, were alienated from one another, and often misunderstood and mistrusted each other²⁵. Where the unity of the Church was in jeopardy, or where it had been in disrepair for centuries, these ecumenical pioneers, the ambassadors of reconciliation, diligently set to work.

A recent example of the benefits to be realized through ecumenical labor in dialogue was the signing of the "Common Christological Declaration" between Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV in 1994 at the Vatican²⁶. The Declara-

¹⁶ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* §32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* §33.

¹⁸ According to Pope Gregory the Great, conversion includes four phases: (i) the recognition of the infinite goodness of God; (ii) the recognition of our own sinfulness, in the face of God's goodness; (iii) the expression of sorrow about our own faultiness; (iv) the rejection of sin. These four stages represent how we can turn away from sin and alienation towards the living God, thus, initiating our conversion. [Gregorius Magnus, "Moralia" IV, *PL* 75, col 509 ff].

¹⁹ K. RAHNER, SJ, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, (NY: Seabury Press, 1975) entry: Conversion 291.

²⁰ *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* §32.

²¹ K. RAHNER, *Sacramentum Mundi*... 291.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ M. DOWNEY, *New Dictionary of Catholic*... entry: Pride 248.

²⁴ P.E. FINK, *New Dictionary*... 1051.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Editorial, Common Christological Declaration between Catholic Church and Assyrian Church of the East, *L'Osservatore Romano*, (Vatican City) 16 November 1994, weekly edition in English, 3.

tion, which ended more than 1500 years of alienation, mistrust and misunderstanding with regard to the manner of expressing the mystery of Christ, has practical consequences, both for the life of the faithful where Catholics and Assyrian Christians live together in close proximity, and for effective pastoral collaboration. This recent example makes it abundantly clear that when discussions are centered on the Person of Christ there can be healing and reconciliation and a renewing of bonds that have been broken. This perspective of collaboration “has enriched the Catholic [and the Assyrian] Church's own life as well as that of other Churches and ecclesial communities. It has also strengthened their ability to give a common witness to the truth of the Gospel, insofar as this is possible”²⁷. The Common Declaration was also proof that dialogue can only thrive in fraternal reciprocity.

But having recognized these positive developments within the various churches, and also continuing to maintain faith in the Church's mission and to hope that she will achieve unity through reconciliation, ecumenism faces some very difficult problems. More than thirty years have passed since the conclusion of Vatican II, and the exuberance for ecumenical endeavors set in motion by the Council has waned. The downfall of the Soviet Empire has had the effect of complicating the Church's efforts at reconciliation, and has resulted in a weakening of the ecumenical hope²⁸. Individually, there are some who no longer agonize over the separation of the churches, and the principle of Christian brotherhood is being set aside with alarming frequency in favor of mutual intolerance and un-Christian competition and even bullying methods²⁹. A significant number of the bilateral and multilateral dialogues seem to be inconclusive and running the risk of being “a dialogue for dialogue's sake”. Fundamentalist movements among Christians are newly emerging and growing, and the practice of proselytism seems to be creating an increasingly divisive situation. Tensions still remain between the Eastern Byzantine Churches in communion with Rome and the Orthodox in Eastern Europe; even in Eastern Orthodoxy the resolution of the most recent painful conflict between Constantinople and Moscow over Estonia does not hold great promise of making matters better. And finally, questions of a doctrinal nature that continue to fill our churches with misgivings and opposition have added to the ecumenical outlook a kind of somber gloominess³⁰.

In spite of the best efforts of the Church and her ecumenists,

²⁷ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) Ecumenical Co-operation in Catechesis, n. 188.

²⁸ G. ALBERIGO, “Toward a Common Future”, in *The Holy Russian Church and Western Christianity*, G. ALBERIGO, O. BEOZZO with G. ZYABLITSEV, (eds.), *Concilium* (London: SCM Press, 1996) 146.

²⁹ K. RAHNER & H. VORGRIMLER, *Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (NY: Crossroad, 1985) entry: Ecumenical Movement 143.

³⁰ G. ALBERIGO, “Toward a Common...” 146.

we have thus far been unable to resolve the divisions and conflicts between our differing communities. The questions that arise, in the light of our text, are these: Is there not a connection between this sobering picture of ecumenism and a failure to understand and fully exercise the “ministry of reconciliation” with which we have been commissioned? Do not the divisions and disunity of the Church effectively negate the Church's ability to advance the mission of Christ and his Gospel to all nations?³¹ The answer to both questions is “Yes”. A resuscitation and strengthening of vitality and hope in the Church can take place only when there is a proper understanding of the nature of the Church and the character of her relationship with Christ.

III. The Christian Church: a bride seeking comfort from her Bridegroom

In 1924, Joseph H. Oldham, one of the pioneers of the ecumenical movement, is said to have made the following statement: “As Christ was sent by the Father, so he sends his disciples to set up in the world the Kingdom of God. Christ's mission was a declaration of war against death and the power of darkness; he was to destroy the work of evil. So, when Christian churches, who are the missionaries of Christ, find in the world a state of reality that is not in accordance with the truth of the Gospel which we have learned from God, their concern is not that it should be explained or understood but it should be overcome”³². This inspiring statement should not at all cause us to dismiss the benefits of dialogue and debate among Christians themselves or between Christians and the world. But Oldham's point is well taken: our attention needs also to be directed, not just toward “explaining and understanding” the evil that confronts the Church today, but also toward overcoming it. The sins of pride and disordered love of place have brought warfare and disunity within the Church for centuries, and they have proved so strong and tempting, to the extent that they have deceived many of the Church's sons and daughters and deluded them into offending God's love and the unity of his Church. The Church must seek the means to do the extraordinary, to transcend the artificial barriers thrown up because of the personal weaknesses of her children by calling upon Her Bridegroom, Christ Jesus, to be present with her and to assist her in waging war against the divisions among her people, so that she, through her Master's immanent help, may at last win her ages long struggle with sin and evil.

How then ought we to do so? I would suggest that the Church go to the texts of the New Testament and seriously consider two commands given by our Lord to his disciples during the final days of his earthly ministry, commands which devolve upon us through the mission entrusted to us by them: (i) to celebrate the Eucharist in his memory (Lk. 22:19); and (ii) to

³¹ K. RAHNER, *Sacramentum Mundi...* entry: Divisions 1537.

³² N. LOSSKY, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical...* entry: Mission 691.

go and make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:19). What other means are there by which the Church may encounter her Lord and Savior in the fullest sense of the meaning other than in fulfilling what he has directed his Apostles and us to fulfill? Since the quest for Christian unity, informed and driven by the experience of our reconciliation with God, has been impaired by our disunity, we, together as one, must call upon Christ to come and heal His Body, his Church--the People of God and temple of the Holy Spirit. Yes, Christian faithful from the various particular churches should have the courage to offer and receive together the Eucharist, in order to invite and allow God's grace to heal their communal thinking, even as they, as one people--though divided by whatever differences--gather around the table of the Lord and partake of the absolving and unifying grace of his gift of himself. Since by their contact with the Eucharist Christians come into a vital, dynamic union with the Person of Christ, to be identified with the Body of Christ is no longer a metaphor only grounded in speculative theology. As Baptism initiates us into the Church, the People of God, so the Eucharist renews and strengthens the Body of Christ and deepens our incorporation into Christ into Christ's body as his members³³.

In 1972 the Dombes Group of France, represented by Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians, stressed in their statement on the Eucharist the greatness of the benefit that Christians derive from celebrating the Eucharist as one flock of Christ. Their exact words are: "When we celebrate the Eucharist and announce the Gospel, we advance the mission and the action of the Church. The Eucharistic action is a gift from Christ; when we say 'take, eat, this is my body given up for you,' and, 'Drink you, all of it, for this is my blood, the blood of the everlasting covenant poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin,' we confess unanimously the real, living, acting presence of Jesus Christ, Son of God, in this Sacrament"³⁴. The effectiveness of Christ's presence among Christians of various Churches, who firmly believe in his real Eucharistic presence despite their confessional differences, does not depend upon their ecclesiological agreement and unity; for it is Christ himself who binds himself, by his words and in his Spirit, to those who in faith call upon him in the Eucharist. A similar observation is made by a Jesuit theologian, Fr. Francis Sullivan, SJ, in whose words we see how the Eucharist brings the cause of Christian unity among the particular churches closer than anything else. He sets forth his argument in this manner: "The one 'Church of Christ' exists not only when there is full ecclesial communion, but also when there are particular Christian Churches that are linked together in the sharing of the same sacramental and Eucharistic life and in the sharing substantially of the same faith . . . because the 'Church of God' has to be understood as the communion of all those churches in which the

Eucharist is validly celebrated, even though they are not all yet in full ecclesiastical juridical communion with one another"³⁵.

The benefits of the Eucharist are many. It is a pledge on Jesus' side to further the whole ministry of reconciliation which is distinctly his, and of which he has commissioned us as ministers in his stead on earth and among people. In the celebration of the Eucharist the church offers herself to Christ and in turn Christ commits himself to molding her in his own likeness; he makes her the instrument of bringing God's reign in the world. The Eucharist protects the Church from assaults of temptation, nourishes her sons and daughters, stirs in her joy and peace, and brings her closer to its full realization³⁶. In the preaching of Saint Paul we learn that just as the bread is one, we though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread (I Cor. 10:17). The "one body" here has the same meaning as the "Body of the Lord"³⁷. Similarly (to use an everyday non-Sacramental example), as a family meal is a ceremony of bonding wherein a healthy family is renewed and refreshed together, sharing the same food and table companions, and at the same time becoming strengthened in a shared unity of heart and mind, so too, in every Eucharist, because it takes the form of a meal, we not only recognize a Sacramental Mystery conveying Christ's presence, but also an occasion of shared life, joy and fraternal union³⁸.

The early church was quick to recognize the conciliatory powers of Christ's presence in the Spirit through the Eucharist; for this reason, the celebration of the Eucharist was often called the *agape* (love feast). The prayer that Jesus prayed after the Last Supper, "That they all may be one. As you, my Father, are in me, and I am in you, that they all may be one in us" (Jn. 17:21) became also a traditional part of Jesus' memorial, as well as the affirmation that through the Eucharist the Church maintains her unity because of Jesus' promise that "He who eats my body and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (Jn. 6:56). Thus, the Eucharist came to be seen as the food of union with Christ and with all Christians, indeed, the food of reconciliation for all humanity. For in receiving the Eucharist we are partaking of him who died "that he might gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad" (Jn. 11:52)³⁹. The early Church expressed this thought very beautifully. In her first Eucharistic and catechetical collection, which is called the Didache (dated about AD 100) she declares: "As this broken bread was once

³⁵ F.A. SULLIVAN, SJ, *The Church We Believe In*, (NY: Gill and McMillan, 1988) 62-63; also see Vatican II Document on Ecumenism (UR) §15.

³⁶ M. O'CARROLL, CSSP, *Corpus Christi: An Encyclopedia of the Eucharist*, (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988) entry: Eucharist 48-49.

³⁷ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 entry: Eucharist 595.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 607.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

³³ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967) entry: Eucharist 595.

³⁴ N. LOSSKY, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical...* entry: Dombes Group.

scattered over the hillsides and then, when gathered, became one, so may your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into Your Kingdom” (9:4). The bread had been put together from the scattered elements of which it was composed: so the pious prayer expresses the hope and expectation that we, the scattered elements of which the Church is composed, may be united into one like the Eucharist bread in the Kingdom of God⁴⁰.

The fact that there are divisions in the church stands over against the message of reconciliation that Jesus preached to the world and taught the Church in the Eucharist. Only if the church allows God to work fully through his Word and Sacraments, (especially the Eucharist) will the church again fully realize the reconciliation which God has effected in Christ Jesus and overcome the sinfulness which has brought about divisions in her. When divided churches rightly and validly celebrate the Eucharist and advance their evangelical mission in the world, they have already entered into a fellowship which should move them to restoration of full communion and to acts of reconciliation with other citizens of the world. The medicine of healing for the Church's divisions is the curative power of the Holy Spirit, moving the Church to reconciliation and to exercising a ministry of reconciliation in obedience to God, who was in Jesus Christ “reconciling the world to himself”. Only after the Church has been healed of division, and of the willful and defiant pride which is its root, will she effectively offer to the world the remedy that is inherent in fellowship with God⁴¹. To outsiders the Church proclaims the restoration of all things in Christ and therefore it is not unreasonable that outsiders should expect the absence of warring and divisions among the Church's own members, and to look for the fruits of reconciliation, renewal and peace (Col. 1)⁴². A Church which ministers reconciliation cannot, therefore, base her ministry on anything other than the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which are uniquely made present in the celebration of the Eucharist, and which are together the ultimate vehicle of God's reconciling of the world to himself through his Son. Christ's presence in the Eucharist is our reconciliation, and humanity is called through the Eucharist to be reconciled with God⁴³.

The traditional position of the Catholic Church has been that “the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship”⁴⁴. The numerous proposals that have been set forth here encompass the idea that the Holy Eucharist is what establishes Church unity by way of

⁴⁰ W. BARKLEY, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975) 105-106.

⁴¹ N. LOSSKY, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical...* entry: Reconciliation 846.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE, “Guidelines on Communion Reception”, *Origins* 26, 25 (5 Dec. 1996) 414.

communicating God's grace to the Church. The realization of unity is a gradually evolving process. The theology that sees the Eucharist as that which brings unity among Christians has had one of its strongest affirmations ever in the recent decision adopted by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. They, in the November 1996 “Guidelines on Communion Reception”, have indicated that according to Roman Catholic discipline, they have no objection to the reception of the Eucharist by members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church if these Christians ask on their own accord and are properly disposed. The U.S. bishops' statement adds “we pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer for us ‘that they may all be one . . . ’ (Jn 17:21)”⁴⁵. Since the Code of Canon Law does not create a bar to the reception of communion by the members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church (canon 844, 3), the US bishops have extended their invitation to these Christians to receive Eucharistic hospitality in exceptional circumstances (canon 844, 4)⁴⁶.

Concerning the fulfillment of Jesus' second command, namely, to go and evangelize the nations of the world, we see how this mission of the Church is both fed by the Eucharist and is its consequence. Whenever the Church is truly a Church, mission is part of its Eucharistic mandate. In the Eucharist the Church is fully itself and is united to Christ in his mission. Thus, if we do not celebrate the Eucharist together we would not be able to fulfill the mission of the Church to the world. In the Eucharist, the Church's “ambassadorship” is newly affirmed, and her orders are refreshed and renewed: the ministry of reconciling the world with the Father. Individual members of the various churches who are reconciled in the Eucharist become servants of reconciliation among other men and women and witnesses of the joy of the Resurrection. Celebration of the Eucharist carries within itself an imperative: to refuse to accept the disunity in which believers in Christ are deprived of the oneness that Jesus has with God the Father, and which he sought for his disciples.

IV. A prayerful hope

We ought today to commit ourselves to witnessing to the Gospel by pursuing charity, faith, peace and justice for all⁴⁷. Let us approach others in the same spirit of love as that which characterized the life of Jesus among us. Christ's Spirit of openness and concern for others—ultimately giving himself for the redemption and reconciliation of others—is our model, our

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ K. RAHNER & H. VORGRIMLER, *Dictionary of Theology...* entry: Ecumenical Movement 143.

mandate, and our message. In the light of the Gospel, our relations with others ought not to be that of simple co-existence or pro-existence. It must be of an attitude of dialogue, of respect, and of bearing witness to and administering the Word of God, to one another and to all humanity⁴⁸. There is in the Eucharist after all—let us not ignore it!--judgment upon the one who will not discern the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29). In his first letter to the Corinthians, after setting forth two images of Christ's body--the loaf of bread and cup of the Eucharist, and the men and women of the congregation of Corinth--the apostle Paul draws them together in order to challenge the willful and proud Corinthians on their divisiveness and lack of respect for one another. He presents the Eucharist as a moment of truth, if you will, a moment in which we will either discern Christ's body in the Eucharist and in one another and be reconciled, or fail to discern Him and be judged accordingly. And the reconciliation which comes to the faithful communicant will encompass his relationships with God and with those around him.

The holy apostle commanded the members of the Church at Ephesus to "be subject to one another in the love of Christ" (Eph. 5:21). The human mind is simultaneously repelled and fascinated by this command-- repelled because of pride and fear of loss which obedience may involve, yet fascinated by the possibilities that it offers if universally obeyed. But the Sacrament of Unity which the Eucharist is for us implies the offering up of ourselves, our pride and our fears, along with the oblation which we make, that we might receive the grace necessary to endure any

loss of face or fortune which humble obedience might entail. In discerning the Body of Christ in the Eucharist we are given insight to discern the body of Christ in the brothers and sisters who join with us in our offering. When we approach the altar and stretch out our hands to lay hold of the Lord of our life we are given eyes to see the same Lord in those who share our Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation. We are compelled by the love of Christ to acknowledge him, both in the simple forms of bread and wine, and in the weak and sinful supplicants who come with us to seek succor and release. And when we have seen him, we must submit, we must love to the point of sacrifice, we must honor and revere, and we must serve.

In the Eucharist, then, we already possess our starting point from which we, both as individuals and as communities of faith, may reach out to one another in order to fulfill the ministry of reconciliation which we have been given--first by extending ourselves to one another in humble submission, and then by proclaiming with conviction and power to the world the electrifying good news that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself". In the Eucharist, as given and intended by our Lord himself, we can achieve reconciliation with one another and thereby dispel the image of hypocrisy which so many in the world see in us. But we, as leaders and as servants, must set the example of humility and conversion. "Then will [our] light open out as the morning, and [our] righteousness will quickly shine forth. Righteousness will go before [us], and the glory of the Lord will gather us together" (Is. 58:8 [P'shitta]).

⁴⁸ N. LOSSKY, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical...* entry: Evangelization/Mission 396.



CC

Centro Conferences

Le radici sono nell'eterno. Il rinnovamento, dono del giubileo

di

James F. Puglisi, sa
Direttore, Centro Pro Unione

(Conferenza tenuta durante il Corso interdisciplinare «Il 2000, un giubileo per il mondo: riflessi antropologici di un evento salvifico» presso la Pontificia Università San Tommaso d'Aquino (Angelicum) in Roma)

Introduzione

*"Il tempo presente e il tempo passato
Son forse presenti entrambi nel tempo futuro,
E il tempo futuro è contenuto nel tempo passato.
Se tutto il tempo è eternamente presente
Tutto il tempo è irredimibile.
Ciò che avrebbe potuto essere è un'astrazione
Che resta una possibilità perpetua
Solo nel mondo della speculazione".*

È in questa maniera che il grande poeta inglese Thomas Stearns Eliot inizia la sua riflessione sul significato del tempo, delle stagioni e degli elementi. Ci si può domandare perché cominciare così anche la nostra riflessione. Per me è ovvio che il cuore del tema che mi è stato chiesto di trattare è il problema del tempo --tempo secolare e tempo cristiano, tempo e eternità. Quando ho iniziato la preparazione di questa lezione mi è venuta spontaneamente in mente la bellissima e profonda poesia di Eliot che mi colpì tanti anni fa quando ero studente all'università. Evidentemente non ve la propongo come un ricordo nostalgico, ma perché essa articola profondamente il significato dell'Incarnazione per la riconciliazione del tempo e la salvezza dell'uomo. L'Incarnazione che è avvenuta nel tempo e fuori dal tempo, come Eliot direbbe, deve essere capita come «il punto d'intersezione del senza tempo con tempo»² oppure ancora come «il punto fermo del mondo che ruota. Né corporeo né incorporeo; Né muove *da* né *verso*; al punto fermo, là è la danza, Ma né arresto né movimento»³.

Nella lettera apostolica di Giovanni Paolo II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (TMA), il Santo Padre, citando le parole di San Paolo ai Galati, dichiara che «*la pienezza del tempo si identifica con il mistero dell'Incarnazione del Verbo*, Figlio

consustanziale al Padre e con il mistero della Redenzione del mondo»⁴. Nei successivi 10 paragrafi, il Papa espone il significato salvifico dell'intervento di Dio a favore degli uomini e delle donne. Egli fa questo collegando i concetti del tempo e dell'eternità con l'Incarnazione. Propongo di riflettere sulle idee del tempo e dell'eternità, per poi localizzare le radici dell'Incarnazione nell'eterno ed infine considerare come la nostra celebrazione giubilare sia un dono del rinnovamento e non un semplice evento ripetitivo.

1. Il tempo, l'eterno e la cultura

I concetti del tempo hanno le loro fonti nell'esperienza vissuta del soggetto. La storia che conosciamo tutti, cioè la nostra, comincia nel libro della Genesi con una tentazione. È la tentazione di innalzarsi sopra il tempo per farsi simili a Dio nella sapienza. Il risultato fu la caduta fuori dal tempo. L'antropologo e teologo Antoine Vergote afferma che da questo momento inizia il desiderio di liberarsi dal tempo per liberarsi dalla finitudine⁵. Esiste una tensione tra due realtà: «il punto fermo», dove non c'è movimento, e la mobilità. L'esperienza che l'uomo fa del tempo è quella di un destino da subire. Per questa ragione l'uomo cerca una via di fuga, desiderando l'eternità, cioè il punto al di là del firmamento dove risiede Dio immobile ed eterno. Nella percezione dell'uomo, il tempo infligge delle ferite. Le sofferenze che il tempo infligge fanno nascere il desiderio di eternità⁶. I miti fondatori delle società primitive situano sempre l'evento creativo su un piano diverso di tempo e di spazio, precisamente *in illo tempore*, «in qualche parte senza spazio né tempo, perché questi appaiono sempre intrinsecamente segnati non solo dal limite e dalla

⁴ TMA, 1.

⁵ A. VERGOTE, «Réciprocité du temps et de l'éternité», *Archivio di Filosofia*, 43, 2-3 (1975) 93 ripreso in ID., *Exploration de l'espace théologique*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 90 (Lovanio: Leuven University Press, 1990) 379.

⁶ *Ibid.* 381.

¹ T.S. ELIOT, *Quattro quartetti*, «Burnt Norton», trad. di F. Donini, I grandi libri Garzanti (Milano: Garzanti, 1994⁸) 5.

² *Ibid.*, «I Dry Salvages» 57.

³ *Ibid.*, «Burnt Norton» 9.

finitudine del divenire che contengono, ma anche dalla malizia e dalla morte che li abitano; di conseguenza, la ripugnanza nei confronti del tempo è una maniera di rifiutare le sofferenze che esso comporta⁷.

La comprensione del significato del tempo è dunque un problema presente in ogni cultura. Ci sono diversi modi per esprimerlo: lo spazio-tempo continuo, la misura di cambiamento; il movimento, la durata, l'infinità, la direzione del tempo, la creazione, il libero arbitrio, l'escatologia, ecc. Il tempo rimarrà un mistero sia dal punto di vista religioso, sia dal punto di vista scientifico. Secondo una prospettiva scientifica, il tempo, sia assoluto che relativo, è di per sé legato allo spazio, perciò il tempo è considerato come estrinseco. In una prospettiva religiosa, lo spazio può essere diviso e conquistato, ma il tempo rimane indiviso e non dominato. Nello spazio due oggetti non possono occupare lo stesso spazio identico, mentre il tempo può essere condiviso --siamo contemporanei l'uno all'altro.

La percezione del tempo produce nell'uomo uno stato di insicurezza: egli comprende che il tempo significa cambiamento, decadenza e morte. È questo stato d'animo che spinge l'uomo a cercare una difesa dal tempo. Alcune religioni ricorrono alla magia ritualistica per infondere un senso di sicurezza nei fedeli [per es. nella primitiva religione egiziana]. In altre, il tempo è deificato [per es. in India, Mitraismo]. Nella religione ebraica, il tempo è la rivelazione del piano di Dio per Israele. Nel cristianesimo, infine, il tempo rappresenta l'evolversi e l'adempirsi del piano divino per la salvezza dell'uomo.

Ghislain Lafont nota che anche i sistemi atei esprimono una nostalgia dell'*in illo tempore*, per esempio "la periodizzazione catastrofica della storia sociale in Marx o in Engels, attraverso la quale in fondo la rivoluzione appare, senza che lo si dica, come la liturgia cruenta di un rinnovamento delle origini"⁸.

La realtà espressa offre "una cattiva pubblicità" al concetto di tempo che viene associato alla decadenza, alla sofferenza, al male e alla distruzione. Ci deve essere un cambiamento nel modo in cui si percepisce il tempo, bisogna cioè comprendere che il tempo non ha un significato puramente distruttivo ma anche costruttivo. Qui si tratta dei concetti di movimento e di divenire. In *La costruzione sociale della realtà* Peter L. Berger ha dimostrato che la società e la cultura dominante svolgono un ruolo determinante nella produzione dei simboli, dei discorsi e della comprensione del concetto della temporalità⁹. Per una

trattazione più completa di questa problematica si rimanda all'opera di Mircea Eliade¹⁰.

Gli antichi hanno misurato e capito il tempo secondo il succedersi degli eventi. Ne risulta un concetto ciclico del tempo. Si verifica la rigenerazione del tempo ogni volta che un evento è ripetuto ritualmente. Il rito è la simbolizzazione di un mito fondatore che di solito racconta un evento cosmogonico ed è in questa maniera che il passato è obliterato e un nuovo inizio segue. Il mito rappresenta la purificazione del tempo dalla sua ripetitività¹¹.

Per gli ebrei, gli eventi sacri come la creazione, l'esodo e l'alleanza sono punti fermi nel cammino di un popolo peregrinante. L'evento e non l'uomo determina il tempo. La tradizione giudeo-cristiana concepisce il tempo linearmente come una serie di eventi che sono in rapporto con il piano di Dio. In questo caso, la storia è progressiva ed è guidata da Dio dal primo momento della creazione al suo adempimento. Alla fine del tempo stabilito, il piano di Dio sarà compiuto. La fede ebraica, caratterizzata da un messianismo di attesa, afferma che ogni momento del tempo contiene la presenza dell'eternità. Perciò il compimento risiede in embrione in tutti momenti di tempo.

Questo è altrettanto vero per il cristianesimo che struttura la storia attorno alle manifestazioni dell'eterno nel temporale, l'evento primordiale di Cristo. Tra due punti, la creazione e la parusia, il tempo si è svelato e si svela via via come attività redentrice di Dio. Al centro, è la vita e il ministero di Gesù Cristo, storico e eterno, uomo e Dio. L'evento di Gesù Cristo introduce nel cristianesimo la tensione tra "già e non ancora", poiché con Cristo la nuova età a venire è già iniziata¹².

Collegato alla storia, è l'uso della memoria. Nella tradizione giudeo-cristiana, la memoria svolge un ruolo importante perché non è una realtà soggettiva ma piuttosto oggettiva. Il termine "zikkaron" dell'Antico Testamento vuol dire "far ricordare" a Dio la sua promessa di salvezza e la sua misericordia e "far ricordare" all'uomo le meraviglie che Dio ha compiuto a suo favore ma anche la sua condizione di peccatore. Il memoriale biblico con la sua forma letteraria, spesso narrativa, non fa ricordare soltanto eventi del passato nel presente (Se **oggi** ascoltate la voce di Dio, non indurite i vostri cuori. **Questo** è il giorno che il Signore ha fatto. **Oggi** Cristo è nato) **ma nel futuro**. Il ricordo del futuro fa nascere la speranza.

⁷ G. LAFONT, "Tempo/Temporalità" in R. LATOURELLE e R. FISICHELLA (edd.), *Dizionario di teologia fondamentale*, (Assisi: Cittadella, 1990) 1217.

⁸ G. LAFONT, "Tempo/Temporalità", *op. cit.* 1217.

⁹ P.L. BERGER e T. LUCKMANN, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (Garden City/N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967) 26-28.

¹⁰ Per esempio, M. ELIADE, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*, (Parigi: Gallimard, 1969²). Altre opere interessanti per questa questione sono: S.W. HAWKING, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, (N.Y.: Bantam, 1988); M. MESLIN, *L'expérience humaine du divin. Fondements d'une anthropologie religieuse*, Cogitatio fidei 150 (Parigi: Cerf, 1988); M. FOUCAULT, *L'ordre du discours*, (Parigi: Gallimard, 1971).

¹¹ M. MESLIN, "Mythe et sacré" in B. LAURET e F. REFOULÉ (edd.), *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie. I: Introduction*, (Parigi: Cerf, 1982) 63-84 e A. VERGOTE, "Réciprocité du temps...", *op. cit.* 392.

¹² Cfr. Ef 1, 21; 2, 7.

Ora entriamo nella sfera della fede cristiana. Essa confessa una storia irreversibile della salvezza e della perdizione e rifiuta "il ritorno eterno di tutte cose". La fede professa il carattere salvifico di eventi particolari della storia e attende la fine di tutta storia.

Permettetemi di tornare di nuovo al nostro poeta Eliot. Nelle strofe centrali del suo poema si trova questa riflessione:

*"Questi non sono che accenni
E congetture, accenni seguiti da congetture; il resto
È preghiera, osservanza, disciplina, pensiero e azione
L'accenno «mezzo indovinato», il dono «mezzo capito», è
l'Incarnazione.
Qui è l'impossibile unione
Di sfere dell'essere in atto,
Qui sono il passato e il futuro
Conquistati e riconciliati.
Qui dove l'azione altrimenti
Movimento darebbe di ciò
Che mosso è soltanto e non ha
In sé fonte di movimento..."¹³.*

2. Le Radici sono nell'eterno

Il Grande Giubileo del 2000 è il memoriale della comunicazione della Parola definitiva di Dio in Gesù Cristo, fatto carne. Comunicazione perché Dio vuole rivelarsi: ma come possiamo noi comprenderlo se Dio parla il linguaggio di Dio? Parola definitiva perché è il Logos di Dio che ha la sua fonte nel cuore eterno di Dio. Giovanni Paolo II, parlando del Prologo del Vangelo di San Giovanni nota che "il Verbo è l'eterna Sapienza, il Pensiero e l'Immagine sostanziale di Dio... egli è il principio e l'archetipo di tutte le cose da Dio create nel tempo"¹⁴. Il fatto che il Figlio di Dio sia entrato nella nostra storia a Betlemme è di un singolare valore cosmico. Il piano di Dio è di riconciliare tutte le cose in Cristo e in lui riportare tutto il creato a Dio¹⁵.

Eliot ha intuito il senso di questa Incarnazione come il "punto d'intersezione del senza tempo con tempo"¹⁶ che rappresenta una maniera poetica di esprimere la riconciliazione del tempo e del senza tempo. Gesù Cristo è visto come l'inizio e la fine del tempo¹⁷ e Signore della storia. I Padri della chiesa parlano dell'Incarnazione come della divinizzazione dell'uomo: Dio si è fatto uomo affinché l'uomo possa diventare Dio. Il Santo Padre parla di un Dio che cerca l'uomo e l'Incarnazione ne dà testimonianza: "...È una ricerca che nasce nell'intimo di Dio e ha il suo punto culminante nell'Incarnazione del Verbo. Se Dio va in cerca dell'uomo, creato ad immagine e

somiglianza sua, lo vuole elevare alla dignità di figlio adottivo"¹⁸.

L'evento dell'Incarnazione è avvenuto una volta per tutte. È il sigillo definitivo all'alleanza che Dio ha fatto con il suo popolo. L'offerta a tutti gli uomini di un nuovo rapporto con Dio in Cristo è anche un'offerta di grazia e di libertà. Queste realtà sono alla base dell'alleanza. Studiando attentamente l'Antico Testamento ci si rende conto che il cuore della sua struttura è l'alleanza conclusa tra Dio e il suo popolo. Quasi ogni pagina della Bibbia ebraica ci collega a questo evento fondamentale e al suo rinnovarsi. Anche se esiste una ripetizione ciclica delle festività (determinate quantitativamente), il loro ripetersi prevede una conoscenza della realtà stessa, cioè qualitativamente. Il risultato della narrazione degli eventi della salvezza è di esigere un cambiamento nella condotta degli ascoltatori, perciò essi sono messi in contatto con l'evento storico, per aiutarli a trovare una soluzione alla loro condizione basata sulle promesse di Dio.

Il fatto che il Giubileo si celebri con una certa cadenza nel tempo non deve farlo intendere come uno dei cicli cosmici arcani. Esso è il memoriale del grande evento della nostra salvezza, in cui il senza tempo interseca il tempo. In questo evento Dio ha rivelato che "il compimento del proprio destino, l'uomo lo raggiunge nel dono sincero di sé, un dono che è reso possibile soltanto nell'incontro con Dio. È in Dio, pertanto, che l'uomo trova la piena realizzazione di sé... L'uomo compie se stesso in Dio, che gli è venuto incontro mediante l'eterno suo Figlio"¹⁹.

Il tempo nel cristianesimo può avere una valutazione ambigua. Dal lato positivo "il cristianesimo conferisce una portata reale alle coordinate fondamentali del tempo, che sono l'origine, la fine e il mistero pasquale, mentre, dall'altra parte, questo realismo rischia di essere un po' cancellato da altre considerazioni"²⁰ (per esempio l'interpretazione pessimistica del peso del male).

Il Papa ha messo in evidenza che la "presentazione paolina del mistero dell'Incarnazione contiene la rivelazione del mistero trinitario e della continuazione della missione del Figlio nella missione dello Spirito Santo"²¹. Questa dimensione pneumatologica è importante. Si può anche dire che la presenza di Cristo nel nostro tempo è dovuta all'intervento dello Spirito Santo quando la sua ombra è scesa su Maria e essa concepì il Verbo divino. È lo stesso Spirito che rende fruttuoso ogni incontro con Dio. È lo Spirito di Gesù che rinnova la faccia della terra e rende ogni cosa nuova. È lo Spirito che raduna gli elementi diversi nell'unità del corpo di Cristo e crea la koinonia, comu

¹³ T.S. ELIOT, "I Dry Salvages", *op. cit.* 57s.

¹⁴ TMA, 3.

¹⁵ Cfr. Ef 7, 10.

¹⁶ T.S. ELIOT, "I Dry Salvages", *op. cit.* 57.

¹⁷ Apoc. 1, 8; 21, 6.

¹⁸ TMA, 7.

¹⁹ TMA, 9.

²⁰ G. LAFONT, "Tempo/Temporalità", *op. cit.* 1219.

²¹ TMA, 1.

nione dei fratelli. Non possiamo considerare l'evento di Cristo nel tempo senza realizzare che esso è opera della comunione eterna della Trinità. Quando confessiamo: "Cristo è l'unico Salvatore del mondo, ieri, oggi e sempre" riconosciamo che è l'eternità del Dio-trino che cerca l'uomo per condividere la sua comunione d'amore e di vita eterna. Il Papa conclude la sua preghiera per la preparazione al Giubileo con queste parole:

*"A te, **Redentore** dell'uomo,
principio e fine del tempo e del cosmo,
al **Padre**, fonte inesauribile d'ogni bene,
allo **Spirito Santo**, sigillo dell'infinito amore,
ogni onore e gloria nei secoli eterni".*

Il principio del rinnovamento, che è dono del Giubileo, si trova nel riconoscimento della grande grazia che è fatta a ciascuno di noi. Il dono è la scintilla di vita eterna che ci è stata data quando, con il nostro battesimo, siamo stati innestati in Cristo, scelti come figli adottivi di Dio. Questa scintilla deve diventare un rogo di calore e di luce che irradia tutto il mondo con la nostra testimonianza a questa verità. Cristo è il sole di giustizia, si rinnova quando noi diventiamo suoi testimoni e portiamo la sua giustizia. Il vero rinnovamento è l'opportunità di convertirsi ancora e di divenire sempre più membri del suo popolo pellegrino ancora in cammino, pronto ad accogliere la sua Parola, sempre la stessa, ma sempre nuova.

Permettetemi di concludere questa presentazione con le parole di Eliot:

*Al punto fermo del mondo che ruota. Né corporeo né incorporeo;
Né muove **da** né verso; al punto fermo, là è la danza,
Ma né arresto né movimento. E non la chiamate fissità,
Quella dove sono riuniti il passato e il futuro. Né moto **da** né verso,
Né ascesa né declino. Tranne che per il punto, il punto fermo,
Non ci sarebbe danza, e c'è solo la danza.
Posso soltanto dire: **là** siamo stati, ma non so dire dove.
E non so dire per quanto tempo, perché questo è collocarlo nel tempo.
L'intima libertà dal desiderio pratico,
La liberazione dall'azione e dalla sofferenza, dalla spinta
Interna ed esterna, anche se circondate
Da una grazia del senso, una luce bianca che sta ferma e si muove....
Solo col tempo si conquista il tempo²².*

²² T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton", *op. cit.* 9s.