

## The universal Church as the network principle of the local churches

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What does the Church have in common with Starbucks? A comparison between the Church and the coffeehouse company is inevitably misleading, as indeed any comparison appears 'lopsided', depending on the individual perspective, because the use of analogies naturally refers to a single *tertium comparationis*. Be that as it may, the purpose of such a comparison at the beginning of this article is to serve as a provocation and a challenge in order to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking and encourage a new look at the role of the universal Church in its dialogue with the local churches.

People travelling to New York, Rio de Janeiro, Hamburg, Manila or Chiang Mai are bound to come across a Starbucks coffeehouse somewhere. It is one of the symbols of a globalising world, interpreted by some as evidence of American / European cultural imperialism and welcomed by others as a valued institution that is available internationally. Irrespective of the assessment arrived at, which will inevitably comprise a subjective element, the astonishing fact is that Starbucks customers can be sure of enjoying the same experience anywhere in the world. No matter whether they are in a Starbucks café in Europe, America, Asia or Australia, they will find an identical product presented in the same setting. Starbucks cafés always have the same look, the colour scheme in the rooms is similar, the furniture is identical, the uniform worn by the baristas is standardised, and even the background music sounds the same in Seattle as it does in Seoul. A multinational group, Starbucks is a successful global player similar to Coca Cola, Microsoft, McDonalds, etc.

Starbucks is seen as a symbol of globalisation. Given that the Catholic Church has been around as a global player for much longer than Starbucks and co., it should not feel upset by a comparison with this multinational company or being questioned as to a) whether it

might not itself benefit from a certain degree of uniformity in this age of globalisation; b) how much unity (which the Church asks for again and again in the second epiclesis of the Eucharistic prayer) in diversity is appropriate at the beginning of the third millennium; and c) how much unity can be established in diversity. Let me make it clear right away that we are not talking here about uniformity or separatism, but about viable cooperation, true to the spirit of the Gospel, between local churches that see themselves as comprising the one Catholic Church. In the age of globalisation, greater significance inevitably attaches to communication between local churches that are gaining steadily in self-confidence, in a positive sense. The issue is one of a lively exchange between the churches in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Australia and Oceania, North America and Europe. Fashioning unity in diversity within the Church ultimately means overcoming all forms of religious monadism in the local churches, not stewing in your own juice but looking beyond your own nose in order to find out more about matters of life and faith experienced by other men and women in different, but possibly comparable, cultural contexts.<sup>241</sup> It is also important to heighten awareness of the fact that the relationship between unity and diversity is all too often seen solely from an internal perspective. A Church that regards itself as having a mission, however, must also consider this relationship in terms of how, for all its potential heterogeneity, it can preserve the homogeneity it needs – and, indeed, can be perceived from outside as exhibiting a certain homogeneity. Uniformity / external discernibility, on the one hand, and the Church as a global learning community, on the other – that is what is needed to experience the universal Church today in an awareness of one's own Catholicism, which can be construed as generous and extensive. It is a question, therefore, of the relationship between the local church and the universal Church, of unity and diversity, of dissociation and distinction. Ultimately we are talking about nothing less than a viable, contemporary, ecclesiological understanding of Catholicism.

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<sup>241</sup> Shortly before his death Cardinal Franz König (1905-2004) said that intra-Church dialogue was essential for a successful dialogue between the Church and the world: "Dialogue between the Church and the world can only be successful if it is accompanied by an intra-Church dialogue. Regrettably, interest in this intra-Church dialogue appears to be waning nowadays." (quoted from: Waldenfels, H., "Dialog in Freundschaft", in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 137 (2012) issue 1, 1-2, 1.

The purpose of this contribution is to give some thought to how the relationship between local churches and the universal Church can be conceptualised. I shall, therefore, begin by examining Joseph Ratzinger's ecclesiology and then explore the theological discussion between Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper on this issue. Finally, proceeding from the 'missiological axiom' of contextuality, I shall contribute to the debate by making a proposal for a sustainable interpretation of the universal Church.

### **The Church as the Body of Christ in Joseph Ratzinger's ecclesiology**

In 1954, Joseph Ratzinger published the doctoral thesis he had submitted in Munich three years previously. Entitled *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche*<sup>242</sup> (*The People and the House of God in Augustine's Doctrine of the Church*) it involved an inclusive use of the metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ. I refer to this early work by Ratzinger at this point by way of an introduction to the significance of the Body of Christ metaphor within the ecclesiology of the later Council theologian, since it reveals programmatic aspects of the ecclesiological work of the man who is now Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>243</sup>

In his doctoral thesis Ratzinger only touches on the image of the Church as the House of God, because he deems it to be nothing more than a means of visual illustration. By contrast, he examines in great detail the People of God concept in Augustine's doctrine, which he considers to be a central ecclesiological concept. However, Ratzinger does not regard the People of God metaphor as adequate to appropriately describe the multi-dimensional character of the Church. He says that the metaphor can only be properly understood if it is interpreted in the context of the Body of Christ metaphor. Still a young theologian at this time, he saw the Church as the People of God "only in and through the Body of Christ"<sup>244</sup>. He explains this interpretational reference by

<sup>242</sup> Ratzinger, J., *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche*, St. Ottilien 1954. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Weggemeinschaft des Glaubens. Kirche als Communio*, Augsburg 2002, 68f.

<sup>243</sup> Cf. Heim, M.H., *Joseph Ratzinger – Kirchliche Existenz und existentielle Theologie. Ekklesiologische Grundlinien unter dem Anspruch von Lumen gentium*, Frankfurt 2004, 232ff.

<sup>244</sup> Ratzinger, J., *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche*, o cit. 14.

pointing out that the unity of the Church in Augustine ecclesiology is systematically derived from the Body of Christ mystery and not primarily from the constitution of the individual Church members and their fellowship.<sup>245</sup> Ratzinger stresses that in Augustine's deliberations on the Church as the People of God the sacramental nature of the Church is conceived as being beyond pure realism (which focuses on the constitution and realisation of the Church) and beyond pure idealism (which focuses on the ideal of the Church). While conceding that Augustine detaches the idealistic notion of the *ecclesia sancta* from the *ecclesia catholica*, Ratzinger refutes the accusation levelled against the *doctor ecclesiae* by Donatists and, in modern times, by liberal Protestant theologians that Augustine advocated a dual concept of the Church, because according to Augustine it is not up to the Church "to expel sinners, because it is not its task to cast off the fleshly body but the task of the Lord, who will bring them back to life and give them their true salvation figure."<sup>246</sup> Ratzinger also finds theological confirmation of this in the works of Augustine. Hence the Church is a *corpus permixtum* that cannot be clearly divided into the sinful and the holy. Nevertheless, he refutes the proposition that the Church is consequently a non-specific, ideal being. The Church is manifest in the *communio sanctorum* in the context of the Eucharist.

Traces that are crucial to an understanding of the Body of Christ ecclesiology can be found in Ratzinger's exposition on the interpretation of the Church as a sacramental community. He points out that Augustine concurs with the interpretation of the early Church, according to which the Church experiences sacramental union in the form of the Eucharist and thus itself becomes the Body of Christ. Accordingly, those who are associated with the Church in the Eucharistic communion are the members of the one Body of Christ.<sup>247</sup> He thus opposes any form of salvific individualism and defines the Church as a salvific communion<sup>248</sup>: "Hence the union of man with

<sup>245</sup> Cf. Wenz, G., "Die große Gottesidee 'Kirche'. Joseph Ratzinger über Katholizismus, Orthodoxie und Reformation", in: *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 56 (2005), 450.

<sup>246</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *o cit.* 146.

<sup>247</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 208.

<sup>248</sup> Ratzinger thus makes a clear distinction between Augustine's interpretation of salvation and the Lutheran interpretation, which reveals traces of salvific individualism.

Christ does not happen simply between the believer and God; the path to the Spirit of Christ is never a direct one, but can only ever be through entry into the body of Christ, into the Church. This is the real way in which man becomes one with Christ: by becoming one with the Church.<sup>249</sup> This thesis is a recurrent feature of Ratzinger's later work; the Church can only be understood in its sacramental dimension, since it represents the sacrament of the existence of God in the world. He takes up the understanding of the early Church here in that the contradiction between empiricism and idealism as an erroneous alternative is overcome, reference being made instead to sacramentality as the essential characteristic of the Church. Essentially, the Body of Christ ecclesiology is not about a form of mystical introspection<sup>250</sup> but the Church's experience of faith; it is about celebrating in the Eucharist the sacramental presence, i.e. the experienced real presence of Christ.<sup>251</sup>

Ratzinger thus locates the Body of Christ experience in the conduct of the liturgy, in which the Church prays to Christ and with Him to God. "The Church service is where the essence of the Church assumes a real appearance; without that manifestation there can in reality be no talk of the essence of the Church."<sup>252</sup> He thereby lays a foundation (and one that is critical with respect to the ecumenical dialogue) of his official theological understanding. As the Body of Christ, the People of God are bound to the sacramental structure of the apostolic succession, as this symbolises the unity of the Church. However, Ratzinger qualifies this by stating that "account again needs to be taken of a dual function: that of unity with the Roman successorship and that of the catholicity of the entire communication community."<sup>253</sup> In doing so he points out

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.* 210.

<sup>250</sup> Cf. here the interpretation of mysticism / pietism, which does not see belonging to the Body of Christ in ecclesiological terms but rather as the mystical identification with the only-begotten Son or, going beyond that even, as included in God (because Christian mysticism in many respects just about accepts a Christological mediation but rejects an ecclesial-pneumatological mediation).

<sup>251</sup> Cf. Heim, M.H., *o cit.* 255.

<sup>252</sup> Wenz, G., *o cit.* 452.

<sup>253</sup> Ratzinger, J., *o cit.*, 319. Cf. the thoughts of George Augustin on the ecclesiocentricity of Christian theology. Responding to the deliberations of Hans Urs von Balthasar, according to which there is an inseparable practical, theoretical and ethical unity between Trinity, Christology and the Church, Augustin emphasises the dual relatedness of the Church:

that in the work of Augustine “in accordance with the overall situation, the call for unity with the entire *catholica* comes more to the fore than unity with Rome.”<sup>254</sup> Summing up his thoughts on the sacramental nature of the Church he notes: “As the communion of the sacrament it is tangible. However, its tangibility is not that of the empirical, but of the sacramental which, as the sign of the covenant, is always more than a mere fact, a mere thing. As the sacrament, the Church is never without an institutional form, but it can never be reduced to its tangible legal structure. To comprehend the nature of the Augustine *Civitas Dei* one needs to grasp the difference between the idealistic and the pneumatological, between the sacramental and the empirical. Only then can one approach the special reality, a description of which has been attempted here.”<sup>255</sup> Benedict XVI has repeatedly drawn attention to this distinction, most recently during his visit to Germany in 2011.

### **The relationship between the universal Church and local churches**

The ecclesiological foundation on which Joseph Ratzinger stands, expressed in the reflections formulated in his doctoral thesis, constitutes the basis for his later theological thoughts and activities. This is evident from his dispute with Walter Kasper about the relationship between the universal Church and the local churches as well as the status of the “divine idea of the Church”.

In June 1992, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published the document *On Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communio, Communionis Notio* as a contribution to ecclesiological clarification. The background to this was the observation that, in the interpretation of the understanding of *communio*, there had been a foreshortening of the conciliar concept of *communio*, especially with

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“The question about the grounds for, and the nature of, the Church can only be answered by reference to Jesus Christ. On the one hand, there is the question of the relatedness, the relativity of the Church to Jesus and, on the other, the relatedness of Christ to the form of the Church. The true form of the Church only manifests itself when it is seen in its dual transcendence: in its unique relationship with the universal experience of mankind and its unique relationship with Christ.” (George Augustin, *Gott eint – trennt Christus? Die Einmaligkeit und Universalität Jesu Christi als Grundlage einer christlichen Theologie der Religionen ausgehend vom Ansatz Wolfhart Pannenberg*, Paderborn 1993, 359).

<sup>254</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *loc. cit.*, 319.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII.

regard to the ecclesiastical concepts of the People of God, the Body of Christ and the sacrament.<sup>256</sup> It had also been ascertained that, not least in the interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* 23, numerous theologians had a tendency to advocate “self-sufficiency” on the part of the local churches and to see the universal Church merely as the product of the association of individual local churches. In its document the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith pointed to the “ontological and temporal transience” of the universal Church in its essential mystery prior to the particular churches<sup>257</sup>, which was regarded by many theologians as a misinterpretation of the statements made by the Council.<sup>258</sup>

The intention of the document, which was to counter any detheologisation of the concept of the Church, met with a fundamentally positive response. This applied not so much to the reflections of the ecclesologist himself as to the general understanding of the Church in the public perception. “Accordingly, the Church is seen primarily as a ‘provider of religious services’, to which certain religious, teaching and social skills are attributed, but whose theological mystery remains largely concealed and forgotten.”<sup>259</sup> To this the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith counterposes in Article 5f an understanding of the Church that cannot deny its theological origins – particularly with respect to the ecclesiological foundations already touched on in Ratzinger’s dissertation: “Ecclesial communion, in which each

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<sup>256</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, J., *Weggemeinschaft des Glaubens. Kirche als Communio*, o cit., 69: “At this juncture the close connection that exists between the term *communio* and the understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ becomes apparent. Fitting into this same context are related images, such as that of Christ as the true vine. All these Biblical terms illuminate once again the origins of the Christian community of Christ. The ‘Christian community’ cannot be explained in a horizontal, essentially sociological manner. The relationship with the Lord, the origin in Him and the dependence on Him are the condition for its existence. Indeed, one might even say that the Church is by its very nature a relationship, one that is inspired by the love of Christ, which in turn establishes a new relationship among people.”

<sup>257</sup> The term ‘particular church’ is often used as a synonym for ‘local church’. Medard Kehl proposes that the term ‘particular church’ should be replaced by the term ‘individual church’, particularly in view of the relationship between the universal Church and the particular church. Cf. Kehl, M., “Der Disput der Kardinäle. Zum Verhältnis von Universalikirche und Ortskirchen”, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 128 (2003) issue. 5, 222.

<sup>258</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 219.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 222f.

individual is introduced by faith and by Baptism, has its root and centre in the Blessed Eucharist. Indeed, Baptism is an incorporation into a body that the risen Lord builds up and keeps alive through the Eucharist, so that this body can truly be called the Body of Christ. The Eucharist is the creative force and source of communion among the members of the Church, precisely because it unites each one of them with Christ himself. 'Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another. Because the bread is one, we, though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread' (1 Cor. 10,17). Hence, the Pauline expression *the Church is the Body of Christ* means that the Eucharist, in which the Lord gives us his Body and transforms us into one Body, is where the Church expresses herself permanently in most essential form. While present everywhere, she is yet only *one*, just as Christ is *one*.<sup>260</sup> This line of argument shows that the statement made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith bears clear traces of the hand of Joseph Ratzinger.

### **A Church as the head of the churches?**

Elsewhere the document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith deals with the relationship between the universal Church and particular churches and, in doing so, refers to the image of the Church as the Body of Christ.<sup>261</sup> The Deutero-Pauline interpre-

<sup>260</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as communion*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 107, Bonn 1992, 8-9, no. 5f.

<sup>261</sup> In the following dispute reference is made, in particular, to Article 9 of the document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which reads: "In order to grasp the true meaning of the analogical application of the term *communion* to the particular Churches taken as a whole, one must bear in mind above all that the particular Churches, insofar as they are "part of the one Church of Christ", have a special relationship of "mutual inferiority" with the whole, that is, with the universal Church, because in every particular Church "the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active". For this reason, "the universal Church cannot be conceived as the sum of the particular Churches, or as a federation of particular Churches". It is not the 'result' of the communion of the Churches, but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular Church.

Indeed, according to the Fathers, ontologically, the Church-mystery, the Church that is one and unique, precedes creation, and gives birth to the particular Churches as her daughters. She expresses herself in them; she is the mother and not the product of the



tation of the image of the body and its members is taken up and the following explanation offered: "As the very idea of the Body of the Churches calls for the existence of a Church that is Head of the Churches, which is precisely the Church of Rome, "foremost in the universal communion of charity", so too the unity of the Episcopate involves the existence of a Bishop who is Head of the Body or College of Bishops, namely the Roman Pontiff."<sup>262</sup>

This formulation articulates the priority of the Church of Rome over the other churches, which is apparent in the choice of words. Yves Congar has established that in the history of the Church there are certain key terms used to describe the supremacy of the Church of Rome: "caput, mater, cardo, fons, fundamentum. They express the same thought: the Church of Rome is the head, whose members receive life and instruction from it; she is the mother and the others her daughters, who are raised by her (disciplina)".<sup>263</sup>

Without wishing to question the primacy of the Bishop of Rome at the heart of the College of Bishops, Walter Kasper criticised the position taken by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith because it meant, firstly, that the biblical and patristic metaphor of the

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particular Churches. Furthermore, the Church is manifested, *temporally*, on the day of the Pentecost in the community of the one hundred and twenty gathered around Mary and the Twelve Apostles, the representatives of the one unique Church and the founders-to-be of the local Churches, who have a mission directed to the world: from the first the Church *speaks all languages*.

From the Church, which in its origins and its first manifestation is universal, have arisen the different local Churches, as particular expressions of the one unique Church of Jesus Christ. Arising within and out of the universal Church, they have their ecclesiality in it and from it. Hence the formula of the Second Vatican Council: *The Church in and formed out of the Churches (Ecclesia in et ex Ecclesiis)*, is inseparable from this other formula: *The Churches in and formed out of the Church (Ecclesiae in et ex Ecclesiis)*. Clearly the relationship between the universal Church and the particular Churches is a mystery, and cannot be compared to that which exists between the whole and the parts in a purely human group or society." (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *o cit.*, 10-11 [(italics in the original)]).

<sup>262</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as communion*, Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls, no. 107, Bonn 1992. (Italics in the original).

<sup>263</sup> Congar, Y., *Die Lehre von der Kirche. Von Augustinus bis zum abendländischen Schisma (HDG III, 3c)*, Freiburg 1971, 57f.

Church as the body and Christ as its head was being used<sup>264</sup> to draw structural and pragmatic consequences and, secondly, to identify the theological concept of the universal Church with the empirical Church of Rome.<sup>265</sup>

Ratzinger refutes Kasper's accusation, which indeed cannot be explicitly substantiated in the document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (although it probably can implicitly by the use of metaphors coloured by theological history) and emphasises the "temporal and ontological precedence" of the universal Church over the particular churches.<sup>266</sup> He justifies this position by stating that the Early Fathers took up the rabbinical theology of the pre-existence of the Torah and transferred it to the Church, which did not come about by accident in the course of history but was part of God's plan of salvation. Responding to the objections levelled against such a precedence Ratzinger writes: "They strike me as only being possible if one no longer can or wishes to perceive the grand divine idea of the Church – perhaps out of sheer desperation at its inadequacy on earth. If that is the case, the Church appears to be a product of theological enthusiasm and all that remains is the empirical structure of the churches with their cooperation and conflicts. But that, in turn, means that the Church ceases to be a theological issue. If the Church can only be perceived in the form of human organisations, all that remains, indeed, is hopelessness."<sup>267</sup> Later Ratzinger will go on to state that in

<sup>264</sup> Kasper writes: "The formula ('the Church in and formed out of the Church') is altogether problematic if the one universal Church is implicitly identified with the Church of Rome, de facto with the Pope and the Curia. If that is the case, the letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cannot be regarded as helpful in clarifying the communion ecclesiology, but must be interpreted rather as a farewell to it and an attempt to usher in a theological restoration of Roman centralism. This process does, indeed, appear to be under way. The relationship between the local church and the universal Church is out of balance." (Walter Kasper, "Zur Theologie und Praxis des bischöflichen Amtes", in: Schreier, W. / Steins, G., (eds.), *Auf neue Art Kirche sein. Wirklichkeiten – Herausforderungen – Wandlungen. Festschrift für Bischof Dr. Josef Homeyer*, Munich 1999, 44.

<sup>265</sup> Cf. McDonnell, K., "Walter Kasper on the Theology and the Praxis of the Bishop's Office", in: *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 711–729. Kehl, M., *o cit.*, 226.

<sup>266</sup> Cf. the correspondence between Bishop Johannes Hanselmann and Joseph Ratzinger on the Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as communion, published in: Ratzinger, J., *loc. cit.* 210–219.

<sup>267</sup> Quoted from: Kehl, M., *o cit.* 227.

the rejection of an inner priority of the divine idea of the Church over the particular churches he ultimately sees a reduction of ecclesiology to an abstract concept in which the universal Church is identified solely with the Pope and the Curia without any attempt to lend it more weight.<sup>268</sup> Kasper in fact agrees with Ratzinger that is possible to talk of a founding of the Church in God's eternal will for salvation. However, he queries whether any statements can be derived from that regarding the relationship between the universal Church and the local churches.<sup>269</sup> In a later reply Kasper takes the matter further by posing the fundamental question as to whether the whole issue (whether the pre-existence of the Church in the divine will for salvation applies only to the universal Church or to the local churches as well) is not a matter of speculation.<sup>270</sup> In principle, however, he recognises the theological premise of the "divine idea of the Church" emphasised by Ratzinger.

### **Contextualisation versus perennial principle**

Whenever the relationship between local churches and the universal Church is discussed, a problem of some complexity is likely to arise as soon as the nature of the relationship is equated with the question of a dichotomy between a sociological and theological understanding of the Church. This is not solely because a sociological examination, which is inclusive and therefore Catholic in the best sense, cannot run counter to a theological point of view, but because it adds a specific perspective to theological analysis. The main objection to a mixing of the theological with the sociological is that it distracts from the essential and ultimately core question of revelation theology that is crucial for an understanding of the universal Church and local churches: whether the Christian faith was incarnated and inculturated in a unique way

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<sup>268</sup> Cf. Ratzinger, J., "The Local and The Universal Church", in: *America* vol. 185 no. 16 of 19 November 2001, 7-11.

<sup>269</sup> Kasper writes: "Who says that pre-existence can be understood solely from the universal Church and not also from the specific Church 'in and formed out of' local churches? Why should not the one Church pre-exist 'in and formed out of' local churches? This thesis of the pre-existence of the Church therefore offers no proof of the primacy of the universal Church." (Kasper Walter, "Das Verhältnis von Universalkirche und Ortskirche", in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 218 (2000) issue 12, 795).

<sup>270</sup> Kasper, W., "Leserbrief mit Bezug auf den Beitrag von Joseph Ratzinger, 'The Local and The Universal Church'", in: *America* vol. 185, no. 17 of 26 November 2001, 28f.

into a specific historical and cultural situation or whether the faith of the Church continues to reveal itself in a specific manner to this day in ever new contexts and life situations.

The fathers of the Second Vatican Council dealt with this issue in depth. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Divine Revelation they came to the following conclusion: "In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations."<sup>271</sup> Two emphases are crucial in this passage. Firstly, the Council Fathers stress that the revelation should serve the salvation of all nations. God's will for salvation cannot be reduced to a chosen people or denomination. Secondly, they point out that the purpose of revelation is that it should be handed on. In this section the Council Fathers move away from a legal and judicial understanding of the revelation, which links the revelation exclusively to the Church, and replace it with a historical and sacramental understanding.

The Council Fathers address the pneumatological dimension of the revelation a few sections later in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, where they write: "Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."<sup>272</sup> Earlier on the Council Fathers had stated that the Apostles were cognisant of the entire revelation: "Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God."<sup>273</sup> Ultimately, however, this is not intended to make any statement on whether the revelation of God does not also continue beyond the historical life of Jesus and the reception of the revelation in the early period of the Church. An intensive discussion took place in the Council Hall on whether this passage should contain a statement about material sufficiency. Material sufficiency means that the entire

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<sup>271</sup> Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil, *Die dogmatische Konstitution über die göttliche Offenbarung "Dei Verbum"*, in: Rahner, K./Vorgrimler, H.(eds.), *Kleines Konzilskompendium. Sämtliche Texte des Zweiten Vatikanums mit Einführungen und ausführlichem Sachregister*, Freiburg i. Br. 1982, 370-371, no. 7.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 373-374, no. 11.

<sup>273</sup> Rahner, K./Vorgrimler, H.(eds.), *loc. cit.*, 371, no. 8.

divine revelation is contained in the Scripture. Although numerous Council Fathers were in favour of the traditional Church teaching on material sufficiency being included in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, the majority of the Council Fathers, following an exhaustive discussion, gained acceptance for their option that the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation should make no mention of material sufficiency. The understanding of revelation was thus freed from its exclusivity and reinterpreted in an inclusive sense. Needless to say, there was agreement among the Council Fathers that God reveals Himself in a special way in the biblical scriptures. However, this fact does not exclude God in His indescribable majesty from revealing himself beyond the biblical work in other scriptures or other religions. Karl Rahner has attempted to build a bridge between the traditional exclusive understanding of revelation and the inclusive understanding of revelation, which is reflected in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, by stating that the revelation in which God revealed himself as God was in itself completed, but that its completion was a “positive, not a negative statement”. Such a broadened understanding of revelation initially has consequences for the concept of faith and truth, which cannot be understood in the interpretation of a *philosophia perennis* or a *theologia perennis* as a fixed concept of faith or truth. Thus the “primary task that theology sets itself with respect to the mission [...] remains accommodation to our own contemporary spirit”<sup>274</sup>.

Accordingly, God incarnated himself into a very specific historical situation, and the faith of the Church, too, inculturated itself in a specific time and a specific context, that of Graeco-Roman antiquity. It was in this world that the Word became flesh and lived among us. However, the experience and revelation of God are not limited to the Church, whose dimensions are perhaps too limited for divine relations. Moreover, the Church, seen from the point of view of revelation theology, is naturally not a sociological factor; it cannot be restricted to either the constituted Church or a Church in a specific

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<sup>274</sup> Ratzinger, J., “Theologia perennis? Über Zeitgemäßheit und Zeitlosigkeit in der Theologie”, in: *Wort und Wahrheit* 15 (1960) 179-188, 187f. This statement on accommodation and/or inculturation of the faith establishes the requisite tension with the much-discussed call for “desecularisation”, which Benedict XVI referred to in an address given on 25 September 2011 in Freiburg at the end of his visit to Germany.

time. The Church would limit the understanding of its own faith if it were to undertake such a constriction.

The revelation of God is greater than the Church; the Church is greater than its sociological manifestation; the Church is greater than its individual local churches – and thus greater than the traditional local Church of Rome. Admittedly, the Church in Germany, in particular, can be grateful that a critical mirror is held up to it time and again by the Church of Rome, as was the case during the recent visit by the Pope. This often goes hand in hand with awkward questions, such as whether the Church in Germany does not live an altogether conformist life in middle-class mediocrity.

The essence of the universal Church must be worked out time and again in these theologically strained relationships and articulated in an appropriate manner. However, it is important, too, to determine not just the essence, but also the function of the universal Church, in particular. It is in the best sense an “extra nos”, but this “extra nos” is seen primarily in material terms. However, especially with regard to the relationship between the local churches and the relationship between the universal Church and the local churches it could be helpful to define the universal Church in more distinctly functional terms. The primary task of the universal Church would accordingly be to ensure that the local churches engage in dialogue with each other, to facilitate their discussions and to enable the experiences and reflections of the local churches and their Christian faith to fall on fertile ground. The universal Church would, therefore, be the communion principle of the Church that strives to take up and hand on the revelation of God at all times.

It is the synods that firstly reflect the modal principle of a universal Church interpreted in this way. They provide an opportunity for local churches to come together, engage in an exchange of views and enhance the unity of the Catholic Church by virtue of their distinctive characteristics. They reflect the richness of the universal Church. They can also articulate what has not yet been considered and discussed. The Second African Synod and the document “Africae munus”, published in 2011, have recently shown how fruitful this synodal principle is for the universal Church. In the light of an understanding of revelation that is not considered to be complete and of a resulting

universal Church principle conceived of in formal and modal terms, the primary task of the universal Church would be to initiate and facilitate active processes of communication in the universal Church and subsequently to document and comment on these processes in a manner that should also be critical of any zeitgeist, conformist middle-class tendencies or any overly confined, homespun system of meaning.