

FIRST PLENARY: THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF CHURCH RENEWAL

Listen to this from Isaiah:

But Zion says,
"The Lord has forsaken me; my God has forgotten me."
Can a woman forget the infant at her breast,
or a loving mother the child of her womb?
Even these forget, yet I will not forget you.
Your walls are always before my eyes,
I have engraved them on the palms of my hands.
Those who are to rebuild you make better speed
than those who pulled you down,
while those who laid you waste depart.
Raise your eyes and look around you:
see how they assemble, how they are flocking back to you.
By my life I, the Lord, swear it,
you shall wear them proudly as your jewels,
and adorn yourself with them like a bride;
I did indeed make you waste and desolate,
I razed you to the ground,
but your boundaries shall now be too narrow
for your inhabitants-
and those who laid you in ruins are far away.
The children born in your bereavement shall yet say in your
hearing
"This place is too narrow; make room for me to live in"
Then you will say to yourself,
"All these children, how did I come by them,
bereaved and barren as I was?
Who reared them
when I was left alone, left by myself;
where did I get them all?
The Lord God says,
Now is the time: I will beckon to the nations
and hoist a signal to the peoples..."

Isaiah 49:14-22a

How did Isaiah, that long ago, know that this was going to happen to the Church in our time? I do not understand, but we must be clear about one thing: we do not belong to ourselves. We loosely use the name of "movement." But any "movement" is the Holy Spirit's doing. You and I make up just one tiny but necessary aspect of the great movement of Spirit in our time, which a thousand years from now people will remember as one of the moments in history itself. We do not belong to ourselves.

We belong first of all to the God and father of all mankind and this we must never forget. We belong, secondly, to our Lord and savior, even God's only son who is Lord both of the world and the Church. And lastly, we belong to the Church of Jesus Christ, that unbelievable manifestation along the roadways of history of God's everlasting people. We belong to the Church.

The only way that I can with any comfort entertain hearing the word "movement" is in terms of the ever on-going dynamic, the movemental dynamic, within the Church of Jesus Christ. There are times when that dynamic is, and must be hidden, latent, impotent. There are moments in history, in which in this form of that or another, it must show itself with courage and confidence and strength before the total dynamic of the people of God. Therefore if we attempt with any seriousness to articulate to ourselves our inclusive objectives, our practical strategies, our tactical systems and our operating designs, we have to project as clearly as we are able where the Church is going. For where the Church is going there must we go, even if we have to, at times, take the Church as a whole by the hand and help to lead her where she is going. But we go where the Church goes. This keeps me firmly anchored in the realities of history. For there is no sentimentality in what I have been saying.

Where is the Church going to go in the next thirty-five years? The first thing I would say is that she is going to bring to fruition her new marriage with the movemental Church. This excites me, and they tell me that the first thirty-five years of a marriage are the hardest.

Recently, I was in Calcutta, and I was overwhelmed with what I saw. Calcutta came within a hair's breadth of being one of those ancient cities that no longer exist. Everybody predicted that Calcutta was going completely to pieces. It came that close to final death. Yet when I was there this last time, I could hardly believe it: I saw the beginning of life. You and I are going to behold in our lifetime the resurrection of a dead city.

This to me is the story of the Church. You cannot exaggerate that moral malaise that had attacked the Church in our times. And although, during the next thirty-five years we are the ones who always affirm the church, let there be no romanticism at this point: the Church was sick unto death. So today it is with a sense of deep glory that I perceive within that Church all across this globe Christ breathing. You almost want to get on a horse and go to every Middlesex village and farm and cry out, "She lives, she lives, she lives," to celebrate the one who was on the verge of the grave returning again.

The movement's responsibility in this marriage if you please, is to take this bit of life and coax it back into health. Someone reminded me yesterday of those strange pictures, which, looked at one way reveal one kind of picture and looked at another way disclose an entirely different one. It is as if, when you look at the Church one way, you see an old hag, and when you look at it another way you see a gorgeous young lady. Our job is to take the old hag and tantalize her back into the glory of vital youth once again. That's our responsibility within this marriage during the next thirty-five years.

That marriage is not going to be easy. But we have a fantastic and very specific role to play here as we tantalize her back into health. First of all, we have to be her servant. I say with a deep pride down inside that I am the servant of the Church. You and I long ago had to decide that we did not want to "be somebody" in the Church. If you had not decided that, you would not be here now unless you have been deceiving yourselves. That

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decision is made, and the task now is to concretize that decision for the next thirty-five years by doing whatever is necessary to help the spirit to flow through her once again. We are the servants of the Church.

The second thing, of course, is that we are the sign within the Church. We must ourselves as a movement be what we intend the Church to arrive at in thirty-five years. That is our job now. The Church needs that sign.

Last and most important, we have to be at this moment in history the spirit within the Church. This is why the singing that you do addresses me so deeply. I have been thinking a great deal recently about what I call representational roles in history. Take the movement as a representational role. I am well aware that most people in this world can never have the luxury that I have. I have the luxury of dwelling with a group of colleagues twenty-four hours a day who spin spirit out of everything they do. That's a luxury. If you ask me if I am a wealthy man, my answer is, "You do not know how wealthy I am." And because of this, that last fat lady, who will never have the chance to grasp the return of the awe in our times or understand the land of mystery and the unbelievable happenings to human beings in this kind of awareness, has to live out of my spirituality.

There are going to be a lot of people who turn aside from this and then criticize the Church for not having the spirit. But we--you and I--are the spirit for the next thirty-five years. And all of this is for only one purpose: that the Church herself, in a symbolic thirty-five years and throughout the full mass of humanity, may be the servant and the sign and the spirit. That day will come. And then the Church, which in principle this day is renewed, shall in actuality be renewed, having returned concretely and unto death to her role as servant and sign and spirit before all of history.

The second way I would talk about what is going to happen in the Church is the reactualization of universality. One of the tragic things I have experienced as I traveled to different parts of the world is the awareness that universal community is anything but universal. You see, the Church is universal. And that is not a nice "quality" to be sought after. That is its essence, and whenever it is not universal, then it is flagrantly denying its very essence. The most universal community on our planet today is the economic community. That breaks my heart. Roman Catholicism in the past has done the most in practically, concretely manifesting the universality of the Church. But now even Roman Catholicism is losing that sense of the universal.

How would you expect anything different than racial hatred, and national hatred, and male-female hatred, and older-younger hatred in a world in which there is no longer a sign that blasts into the consciousness of mankind that we are all one? To read it in a philosophy book is not enough. What is going to happen, I believe, is that the Church will discover and build a new practical form that will symbolize to herself and to the world the universality of her community and therefore the fact that mankind is one.

The only way that I can with any comfort entertain hearing the word "movement" is in terms of the ever on-going dynamic, the movemental dynamic, within the Church of Jesus Christ. There are times when that dynamic is, and must be hidden, latent, impotent. There are moments in history, in which in this form of that or another, it must show itself with courage and confidence and strength before the total dynamic of the people of God. Therefore if we attempt with any seriousness to articulate to ourselves our inclusive objectives, our practical strategies, our tactical systems and our operating designs, we have to project as clearly as we are able where the Church is going. For where the Church is going there must we go, even if we have to, at times, take the Church as a whole by the hand and help to lead her where she is going. But we go where the Church goes. This keeps me firmly anchored in the realities of history. For there is no sentimentality in what I have been saying.

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fanned out from each one of these centers. They showed up in England. They showed up in India. They covered the known world. On other occasions I have mentioned Cyril and Methodius who came of course a bit later and singlehandedly took responsibility for the whole of Russia for the well-being of mankind. It has been a long time since the Church thought tactically. The Methodists had such a man about a century ago. His name was Taylor and he went to India. He designed a scheme which he called "crossing the Rubicon," in which Methodism established schools in all the key cities of India. His design looks almost like our grid of India. Then they sent him to Latin America, where his scheme was to go into each one of the great seaports and build a school and then go into the interior and get people into the school. In Africa the scheme was to build a series of strong points just south of the Sahara Desert to stop the Muslim tides from penetrating into Africa.

I am not saying that these particular tactics were good or bad. I am just saying that the Church in the past has thought tactically because it knew what it was about. In our time the Church is again clear on what it is out to do and it can once more think tactically. It is out to bring about the reconstruction of civilization and the great resurgence of the human spirit. That is why it can begin to think tactically. But the Church is not going to learn once again to believe in herself enough and to believe in humanity enough to work tactically if she does not have an illustration. And you know who that illustration has to be. It has to be a body of people filled with the Holy Spirit who are hard-headed realists, born out of the agape that comes only from a fresh vision of God himself. The Church is going to move in this direction.

The fourth area that we have to look at if we are going to see where the Church is going is what I call a re-metamorphosis in pluriformity. The present manifestation of the pluriform dynamic of the Church is denominationalism. Denominationalism will always be with us, although we will not always call it denominationalism. It is being realigned, and I do not think anybody can yet prophesy what its shape will be. D. T. Niles talked with me, shortly before his death, about the "pluriformity" of the Church. And I pressed him. I said, "All right, all right, now what is that form going to be?" He said, "I don't know. But I think it is going to come out of the many experimental movements within the body of the Church, such as the lay centers in Germany, the Taizé experiment, the East Harvard experiment, and your experiments. In some way, out of the ashes of many of these experiments, the new pluriformity of the Church is going to find its manifestation."

As this takes place, it seems to me that we are at first going to experience ecumenism overcoming pluriformity and then see it move in turn to a new kind of pluriformity--but one determined now primarily by specific missional jobs that have to be done. Those of you who know the history of the pluriformity that brought us into being are also aware that in the early days it was utterly missional. Then, considerations of status entered, and we became especially proud that we were Presbyterians or Methodists or Anglicans, rather than seeing the particular mission to mankind that caused us to enter into one discipline rather than another. Once again, we have to be a sign to the Church if she is going to find the new forms of particularity within her universality.

Finally, in these next thirty-five years, the Church is going to find the means for the resuscitation of primal community. Since many of you are engaged in the Local Church Project, I do not need to say much about this. But one of the things I believe came out of Summer '71 in the social process triangles and the seventy-seven proposals was the awareness of the need to recover the primal, foundational sense of community. And never think that is the family. A family does not know it is a family unless it is in a community that is prior to the family. Never forget that or fall into sentimentalism towards the family. How could we even grasp ourselves as married if there were not a community that was prior to the family? That is what I call primal community. Each local congregation in a hunk of geography is the catalytic overlay that enables the people in that geography to become an authentic primal community. This is why the Church cannot be renewed unless it is renewed on the level of the global Church.

Anybody starting out to change society had better know this. If you do not have awakened primal communities, you had better stay home. If the Local Church Project does not come off across this world, we are wasting our time here. For even though we fill up this room, when you send us out on this globe, we are not a mosquito speck. I am talking about a real recovery of authentic human existence. I covet for the last fat lady the kind of primal community that I am blessed with. There is no silly sentimentality here born out of some psychologistic "we have to learn to like each other and accept each other." This is way down underneath that, in the realm of a sense of identity, a sense of meaning, a sense of selfhood, a sense of participating in Being itself. That is what comes out of primal community. And then you can say, "I do not care whether you like me or not," at the same time that you want to be liked just as much as the next person, who cannot say what you have said. The Church is going to find a way to move in this direction in the next thirty-five years. And if the movement is going to be the servants and the sign and the spirit, we have to form within ourselves this kind of fellowship, this kind of spiritual collegiality--not because it is fine (although it is fine), but as a sign to mother Church herself of what she has in the past known and, indeed, has never at any time in history quite forgotten.

This is our task. It is not abstract. It is not ethereal. It is concrete and hard and long. If you and I have not developed a spirit screen of prayer, meditation and contemplation, the detachment of fasting, the engagement of watching, and some sign of radical chastity, we will not make it on the march. You and I have had to say "No" to religious exercises because they no longer generated the power to stand when all around are falling. But in what we have ahead, we are going to learn anew to pray and to fast and to symbolize the unique chastity of our calling.

-- Joseph W. Mathews