

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

What is 'a Church in the Proper Sense'?

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Professor Nicholas Lash, emeritus Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge

Professor Nicholas Sagovsky, Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey

Report by Mark Woodruff

The phrase which has caused so much difficulty in ecumenical dialogue and progress towards visible unity, contended Professor Nicholas Lash, far from being 'nothing new' is an innovation not supported by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, as understood from its texts, the known history of the time, or background history of those involved in formulating and authorising *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Instead, Nicholas Lash identified the labours of those who had been working for decades to undo both the liturgical and the ecclesiological consequences of the Council. This has been characterised as a 're-receiving' of the ecclesiology and teachings from prior to Pope John XXIII which are now claimed never to have been altered or considerably developed.

The authorisation of the old form of the Roman Missal is a case in point and its acclaim as part of a 'reform of the reform' – it seems to be forgotten that Pius XII's edition was itself the product of a century's liturgical and ecclesiological *ressourcement* whose natural outcome was the revised (some would say restored) liturgy of Pope Paul V. There is a bald claim that the old form was 'never abrogated' in 1963 and again in 1969 (it was not how it felt at

the time) and this goes to the heart of current opinion in parts of the Vatican on the Roman Catholic Church's self-understanding: those who claim that Vatican II represents a profound process of change and redirection in the life, thinking and orientation of the Catholic Church stand accused, in a highly-charged term, of standing for a harmful 'rupture', which needs to be countered lest it undermine the unity of the Church (that is, the Catholic Church) and the uninterrupted continuity between the 1950s and the present day, of which the great Council is a renewing and confirming expression, as it is subordinated to a resurgent Curia, rendering the local bishops, conciliarity and subsidiarity, subject to 'the Magisterium' of the papacy. Professor Lash identified the re-write of history behind this as Orwellian. Besides, the unique papal 'the' in 'the Magisterium' was unknown before the 1850s, cannot be expressed in Latin, and misses the point that *magisterium* is nothing more than a university term for the authorised office, exercise and capacity of teaching - something shared in the Catholic Church by all the bishops as successors together to the apostles in communion the Pope's unique Petrine ministry as Bishop of Rome. A good deal of the exploration centred on what was really meant by '*subsistit in*' – the conscious decision to use another term to describe the mutual co-inherence of the Catholic Church and the Universal Church of Christ, but also the distinction between the two (see Kasper's *May they all be one*, Continuum 2004, Ch 4., pp. 64-66: "*Dominus Iesus* goes beyond the Council's words and says that the Church of Jesus Christ is 'fully' realised 'only' in the Catholic Church" – but Benedict XVI is confirming the revised view, with obvious new consequences not only for Catholic understanding of Anglican, Reformed and other ecclesiology, but also for the Orthodox Church and the other ancient eastern Churches too).

This is not simply about how the Catholic Church is structured and organised in practice. What seems to be at stake is Vatican II's pre-eminent definition of the Church as People of God. If this is relativised, or even qualified by putting

into the context of currently more congenial 'models', from which it was once assumed the fathers of the Council had 'moved on' in overwhelming number and conviction, there are momentous consequences for how the nature of the Catholic Church works out in practice – authority and its acceptance, the relation between the pope and the other bishops, the role of the lay people, the culture of worship and hence the formulation of belief and proclamation. But it could also shift the entire basis for relating to other Christians, and the Churches to which they belong, and indeed the understanding of 'the Church in the modern world'.

Nicholas Sagovsky's response cited the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral as the agreed basis for communion among the Anglican Churches around the worldwide. All continue to subscribe to it, but each of the points – The Old & New Testaments, the Nicene and the Apostles' Creeds, the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion, the historic episcopate – had become destabilised by a variety of interpretations and practice, each claiming authority and authenticity, so that by no means all could agree on what the points contain. Originally devised as a basis on which all could agree towards the reunion of the whole of Christendom, it was meant to be more than a mechanism for internal Anglican relations. Now it is set aside as the nature of an authentic Anglican Church seems to rest currently solely on matter of sexuality. Nick Sagovsky called for a renewed awareness of the 'proper Church' as one in which was seen its cohesion in the Holy Spirit at the celebration of the eucharist, in a re-conversion to proclamation and mission about Christ, and 'a hundred small miracles' in which the power of God is genuinely seen to be at work in his Church, his people.

Professor Lash's address was based on a chapter in his new book, Theology for Pilgrims, DLT, £14-95.