

The Theology of Convergence

Introduction

The ICCEC is part of a growing movement which recognizes that for the church to be truly catholic in its faith and practice, it needs to integrate the three major spiritual streams of the Christian tradition: the evangelical, the charismatic, and the sacramental. For too long these streams have been kept separated; some have even tried to hold on to only one and repudiate the others.

It is largely through the charismatic renewal in virtually every denomination and communion since the 1960s that Christians are coming to recognize another kind of ecumenism that goes beyond the type promoted by World Council of Churches or the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). The old ecumenism is based on shared belief—or at least an attempt to discover shared belief. The new ecumenism, however, is based on shared spiritual heritage. If the Spirit of God is at work among “us” as well as among “them,” who are we to question the spiritual condition of the “others”!

It is in the context of the work of the Holy Spirit in the various churches that we can understand the convergence movement. If the charismatic, evangelical and sacramental traditions are all touched by the same Spirit, then there must be a deeper unity among them which we have failed to see before. Perhaps for too long, we have put asunder what the Spirit of God has intended to come together. Convergence is an attempt to bring together these three spiritual streams that have flowed for the most part separately throughout much of church history.

In order better to appreciate the challenges and goals of the convergence movement, let us begin by briefly outlining the characteristics of each of the three streams.

The **sacramental stream** focuses on God’s work in and through the created order. The Apostles’ Creed begins with: “I believe in God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth...” The world is related to the Almighty God as its creator. This means that creation is good. Creation, coming from the hand of God, is also the vehicle of the revelation of God: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the earth shows forth his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). The universe is a sacrament, a vehicle of divine revelation. The supreme revelation of God in the world is the Incarnation,

when the Son of God is united with human flesh. Here is a man who also is God. In Jesus the material and spiritual find their supreme unity and manifestation. This is why Jesus Christ could be called the “Primal Sacrament” of God. Not only is the Father the creator of a sacramental universe, he is also the sender of Jesus, the “Primal Sacrament” through whom God continues to communicate his grace *especially* through the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, using ordinary water, bread and wine, and more generally through other created things.

The **evangelical stream** focuses on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the events his life, death and resurrection which effect the reconciliation of God and sinners. According to David Bebbington in an oft-quoted work the evangelical stream is marked by four chief characteristics:

- **Biblicism:** The Bible is the standard of faith and practice.
- **Conversionism:** All people need to be converted from sin to new life in Christ, that is, be “born again.”
- **Crucicentrism:** The death of Jesus Christ on the Cross is the sole basis of new life.
- **Activism:** The Christian faith must be expressed in action, especially in mission and evangelism.

These four characteristics have more or less marked the evangelical movement for the last two hundred years. The lasting contribution of the evangelical movement is its insistence that the gospel, that is, the story of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Spirit and coming again, needs to be proclaimed in all its concrete particularity. It cannot be reduced to abstract principles like peace and justice—something the modern church is always tempted to do in order to make the gospel more acceptable to its cultured despisers. Peace and justice are legitimate implications of the gospel but they are not the gospel itself.

The **charismatic stream** focuses on the *dynamic* work of the Holy Spirit. It takes everything that is true in evangelicalism and transposes it to a higher key. It acknowledges that the Holy Spirit is the Gift from the Father; he distributes his gifts or charisms to members of the body of Christ. The Spirit’s presence in the church unites the church to the Father through Jesus Christ. What marks the Pentecostal-charismatic way of life is a deep sense of the personal presence of God. God is not purely predictable; He comes with surprises. Only persons are capable of springing surprises, whereas creatures ruled by instinct are quite predictable. The divine

presence is often identified as the presence of Jesus. The result is a holy (and sometimes reckless) boldness in word and deed.

One will not fail to notice that the three streams correspond to the three Persons of the Godhead. In seeking to bring together the charismatic, evangelical and sacramental, *convergence theology is essentially seeking to be faithful to Trinitarian theology*. It attempts to reflect faithfully on the way the persons of the Trinity are related to each other.

But convergence is not just about an abstract Trinitarian theology; rather, it is *an active pursuit* of the triune God. This pursuit is what we find in the liturgical celebration. The liturgy unites Word (Christ) and Sacrament (the Father) together in the power of the Holy Spirit. The liturgy is the point of integration of the three streams because it is in the liturgy that the work of the triune God is celebrated. In short, the theology of convergence is the theology of the liturgy; and the practice of convergence, the practice of the liturgy and vice versa. To the extent that we are able to practice the liturgy faithfully, to that extent we are able to bring about convergence and actualize our Trinitarian theology.

The liturgical celebration is essentially a Trinitarian celebration.

In the liturgy, the Father is the source of the unity of the Godhead. The liturgy, as we shall see, always points to the Father. He is the One in whom the Son and Spirit are united and from whom their own personhood is distinguished. Thus it is in the liturgical celebration that the evangelical and charismatic streams find their true unity. The lack of theological coherence, the capitulation to fleeting fashions, in the evangelical and charismatic churches today, is largely due to the fact that there is no coherent ecclesiology (as many of their own theologians readily admit). And there is no coherent ecclesiology because there is no liturgy to give shape to the church and to unite both the evangelical and charismatic dimensions. This will become apparent when we examine the traditional liturgy. We find that it is, quite simply, the *practice* of Trinitarian theology.

The Christian tradition recognizes the shape of divine revelation to be essentially Trinitarian. It begins with the one true God of Israel, whose faithfulness to the covenant with his people culminates in the coming of Jesus Christ (“in the fullness of

time”) and the sending of the Holy Spirit (“when the day of Pentecost had fully come [sumplērousthai],” Acts 2:1). The two sendings are climactic events in salvation history; they are the pivotal events of the Trinitarian narrative. The coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the church is to elicit a response from the people of God: “Because we are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal 4:6). This response that recognizes God as “our Father” (cf. the Paternoster) is the foundation of Christian worship. *Worship may be defined as the Spirit-inspired response of the church to the revelation of the triune God in which praise and adoration is rendered to the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.* There is, then, in the very act of responding to God’s revelation an implicit acknowledgment of a theology of a most primary kind, that is, the knowledge of who God is. It is this primary theology (*theologia prima*) that finds expression in the liturgical celebration, so that the liturgy could be described as, in Alexander Schmemmann’s words, the “epiphany of the Church’s [Trinitarian] faith.”¹

The Trinitarian Persons

The liturgy attempts to be faithful to the Trinitarian revelation. The liturgy enacts a Trinitarian theology and draws us into a vital relationship with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. This is why Christian worship in all the major Christian traditions is thoroughly Trinitarian. Protestant churches are at least familiar with the doxology (“Praise God from whom all blessings flow...”) and the *Gloria Patri* (“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost”). In the Eastern liturgy, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are far more frequently named than in the Western liturgy. It begins with “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The *Trisagion* (Thrice Holy) is used repeatedly in different parts of the liturgy:

Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.
Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.
Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever
and to the ages of ages. Amen.
Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.

¹ *Church, World and Mission* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1979), pp. 135, 142-43. The works of Schmemmann have been especially influential in focusing attention on the primary theology of the liturgy. E.g., *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2000); *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1996)

Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us

In the Roman liturgy, a regular hymn of adoration to the Trinity is the *Gloria in Excelsis*. It begins with “Glory to God in the highest.” The Father is addressed as “Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father.” Next Jesus Christ is praised: “the only Son of the Father,” the one “who takes away the sins of the world” and is “seated at the right hand of the Father.” The hymn ends by specifying the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

For you alone are the holy one
You alone are the Lord
You alone are the most high, Jesus Christ
With the Holy Spirit
In the glory of God the Father.

The Trinitarian economy is most clearly expressed in the Eucharistic prayers. Although the Western churches, both Catholic and Protestant, have multiplied the number of Eucharistic prayers in recent years,² they all follow a basic pattern. They begin with prayer *to the Father* whose works of creation and sending his Son for the world’s salvation are recounted. This is followed by the remembrance of the work of Jesus Christ culminating in the words of institution. The Spirit’s coming is invoked over the bread and wine. At the end of the Eucharistic prayer, the doxology once again praises the triune God in their specific relations to each other:

Through him [Christ], with him, in him
In the unity of the Holy Spirit
All honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father,
Forever and ever. Amen.

The Monarchy of the Father

The liturgy specifies the way in which the persons of the Trinity are ontologically *ordered*. This order in the Eastern Orthodox Church is understood in terms of “the monarchy of the Father.” Orthodox theology speaks of the generation of the Son and the procession or spiration of the Holy Spirit *from the Father*. In the Eastern Church

² *Common Worship* provides eight Eucharistic prayers.

the Father is the One “without origin” who “causes” the personal otherness of the Son and the Spirit, and the phrase “the monarchy of the Father” is used to express this idea. The phrase faithfully reflects the New Testament data where only the Father is explicitly referred to as God and is always the initiator, the one who sends the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is a certain “order” in which the three Persons move.

Zizioulas describes their movement in the following way:

It is clearly a movement with *personal initiative*. It is not that the Three, as it were, moved simultaneously as ‘persons in communion’; it is the *one*, the Father, that ‘moved’ ...to threeness.”³

A consistent doctrine of the monarchy of the Father helps to preserve the ultimacy of divine personhood. But as far as convergence theology is concerned, the monarchy of the Father explains why the liturgy must set the context for understanding and preserving the evangelical and charismatic dimensions of the church’s life. In other words, just as the Father is the “source” from whom comes the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the evangelical and charismatic streams cannot exist independently, but must always be framed within the liturgy where the Father is the ultimate focus of our worship.

Many modern Western theologians, however, have rejected the concept of the monarchy of the Father, driven mostly by modern egalitarian interests. They have instead argued for the *simultaneous* “co-emergence” of the Three, conceiving of the communion of the triune persons as one of *mutual* co-inherence. The one God refers to the *unity* of the persons. Relationality itself thus becomes the ultimate reality.⁴ The problem with these conceptions of oneness is that they fail to give a proper account of the nature of Christian worship. When Jews and Christians pray to the one God, they are not praying to a “substance” or a “relationship” but the *person* who in the Christian liturgy is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is seen in ancient doxologies where praise is rendered *to* the Father, *through* the Son and *in* the Holy Spirit. It was only later, in order to combat Arianism, that the doxology was changed to a coordinated formula: “to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.” Further, all Eucharistic prayers ancient and modern, as we have seen, are addressed to

³ Zizioulas., *Communion and Otherness*, p. 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-37.

God the Father who sent his Son, and in the *epiclesis* the prayer is again to the Father to send the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Spirit in the liturgy

If the Father is the *source* of the unity of the triune God, the Spirit effects the unity. The Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son; he is also the bond of love between the church and the triune God. This is why, historically, we find a very close relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit and the church.

This can be seen, for example, in the third article of the Creed where the Spirit and the church occur in close proximity to each other: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints....” In some early baptismal creeds, the question posed to catechumens was: “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit *in* the holy church?”⁵ A comparison between the doxology at the end of the Eucharistic prayer in the Roman Mass and the *Eucharistia* of Hippolytus shows how closely the Holy Spirit is identified with the church in ancient liturgies.

Roman Canon	Hippolytus, <i>Eucharistia</i>
<i>Through him, with him, and in him, all glory and honor be to you, God, the Father almighty</i>	<i>Through him Be glory and honor To the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit</i>
<i>In the unity of the Holy Spirit</i>	<i>In your holy church</i>
<i>Through all the ages of ages</i>	<i>Both now and forever.</i>

Notice that where the Roman Canon has “in the unity of the Holy Spirit” Hippolytus has “in your holy Church.” This has prompted Jungmann to comment that “the ‘unity of the Holy Ghost’ in the modern Mass is only another way of saying the ‘holy Church’ She *is* the unity of the Holy Ghost.”⁶ It is in the church that the Spirit’s distinct personhood is revealed (cf. the Farewell Discourse, John 14-16).⁷

⁵ Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21.17. See Gregory Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome* (London: Alban Press, 1968, 1992), p. 37. For a critical discussion of the difference between the Latin version (“Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy church”) and the others, see Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *On the Apostolic Tradition* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), pp. 115-116.

⁶ J. A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origin and Development*, vol. II, trans. Francis A. Brunner (NY: Benziger Bros., 1955), p. 265. Emphasis author’s.

⁷ See the commentary on the gospel of John by Raymond Brown in the Anchor series.

Protestantism, however, has generally been apprehensive about making the link too close for fear that it will lead to pretentious claims about the church's special possession of the Spirit. Such fears are understandable in light of the Reformation which began as a protest against such unwarranted claims from both the medieval church and the enthusiasts. It has often been said that ecclesiology in the Roman Church has tended to focus on its institutional life, hierarchically ordered around its single head, the pope. But this cannot be said of the Eastern Church. Far from becoming triumphalistic, its doctrine of the church existing in *epicletic* relation to the Spirit recognizes the church's total dependence on grace. The church must constantly empty itself in order to be filled with the Spirit. There needs to be deep humility if the church is to experience what Nikos Nissiotis calls, a "perpetual Pentecost."⁸ This is why, according to Nissiotis, the *epiclesis* is the only point in the Orthodox liturgy when the congregation kneels.⁹ The liturgy, according to Zizioulas, is "pneumatologically conditioned."¹⁰ If this is so, it will keep the church from seeing itself as a dispenser of grace. Rather, the church must place itself always at God's disposal.

This attitude must be consciously cultivated especially in liturgical worship. The danger of the liturgy is that because it is objective, a "given," if you will, there is a tendency to let it run on its own steam. But we need to recognize that the church is totally dependent on the action of the Holy Spirit if she is to do anything of lasting value to the kingdom of God. It is at this point that the early Pentecostal movement could teach us something. It was born out of fervent prayer and "tarrying meetings." Their key words were "surrender," "letting go, and letting God, "empty yourself." The modern church must recover this spirit of the early Pentecostals. (We will have more to say something about this in the next talk.)

Theologically, the Spirit is the gift of love from the Father poured out on the church (Rom 5:5). As gift to the church, the Spirit enables the church to return love to the

⁸ Nikos A. Nissiotis, "Called to Unity: The Significance of the Invocation of the Spirit for Church Unity," in *Lausanne 77: Fifty Years of Faith and Order* (Geneva: WCC, 1977), p. 54.

⁹ Nissiotis, "Called to Unity," p. 55. Nissiotis is obviously referring to the divine liturgy other than Sunday, since Canon 20 of the Council of Nicaea explicitly forbids kneeling on Sunday. Kneeling, or more accurately prostration, occurs in several places in the presanctified liturgies during Lent. Kneeling is also excluded during the 50 days of Pentecost and the 12 Great Feasts. I am grateful to Fr. Daniel Toyne of the Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church in Singapore for the information.

¹⁰ John Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of God the Trinity Today: Suggestions for an Ecumenical Study" in *The Forgotten Trinity*, ed. Alasdair Heron (London: British Council of Churches, 1991), pp. 27-28.

Father through the Son.¹¹ The Spirit draws believers into a filial relationship and enables them to cry out, “Abba, Father!” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) This Spirit-inspired response of the church to the revelation of the triune God in which praise is rendered to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit is, as we have already noted, the foundation of Christian worship. The liturgy schematizes or enacts this dynamic.

It is in the liturgy that the Holy Spirit accomplishes the union of the church to the Father through Jesus Christ. Now, worship is something done by the people of God. The *leitourgia* is “the work of the people.” But it is also the Spirit in the church that enables the church to worship. In the liturgy we encounter the supreme paradox: it is the work of the Spirit and the work of the people at the same time.

The Work of the Spirit in the Work of the People

But how is the work of the people the work of the Spirit? To understand this dialectic, we could begin with Luther’s “marks” of the Church, as a number of “evangelical-catholic” scholars have done in recent years.¹² Luther identifies seven marks of the church:

- the preached word
- baptism
- Lord’s Supper
- the keys (church discipline)
- church offices
- worship
- cross-bearing or discipleship

He understands these marks as the works of the Holy Spirit: “the great holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit effects in us a daily sanctification and vivification in Christ, according to the first table of Moses,”¹³ and adds, “I would even call these

¹¹ This “return model” of the Trinity has been developed by David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God* (NY, Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1999), pp. 38-41.

¹² E.g. Reinhard Hütter, “The Church as Public: Dogma, Practice, and the Holy Spirit,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3.3 (Summer 1994): 334-361; Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds., *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, eds., *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹³ These marks relate principally to God (the first table of the Law) and are therefore the more primary. Luther also recognizes “holy possessions” according to the second table of the Law but they are secondary and not determinative of the church as church. Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church,” *Luther’s Works*, 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 166. Henceforth LW.

seven parts the seven sacraments....”¹⁴ Luther calls them “holy possession” (*Heilthum* or *Heiligthum*).¹⁵ David Yeago notes that in the medieval church *Heilthum* refers to a miracle-working relic; so these marks are a “‘miracle working holy thing’ through which the Holy Spirit fashions a holy people in the world.”¹⁶ These marks also constitute the church as church, as can be seen in a point Luther makes repeatedly, but phrased in various ways, when elaborating on each of them: “Wherever you see this done, be assured that God’s people, the holy Christian people, are present.”¹⁷ Thus Hütter calls the marks the “core practices” of the church; that is to say, they are utterly definitive of the church. Without them the church ceases to be church and becomes another social organization. All these marks are related either directly or indirectly to the worship of the church, thus establishing the inseparable link between the Spirit and the liturgy.¹⁸

But in what sense are these core practices the works of the Spirit? The point of convergence between the core practices and the work of the Spirit is to be found in their being radically constitutive of the church. In line with the Eastern tradition that we have noted above, Hütter believes that the Spirit’s work in the church creates something “completely new,” thus indicating a decisive break with world-history.¹⁹

Creation is redeemed insofar as the triune God draws it into this communion. The eschatological goal is participation in the communion of the Father with the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the triune God has begun to draw creation into his communion in a *completely new fashion* transcending its original state. This end time is already present “in the Spirit” now in the economic mission of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit through the communion of the ecclesial body of Christ.²⁰

¹⁴ LW, 41, p. 165-66.

¹⁵ LW, 41, p. 149.

¹⁶ David S. Yeago, “‘A Christian, Holy People’: Martin Luther on Salvation and the Church” *Modern Theology* 13.1 (Jan 1997), p. 110.

¹⁷ LW, 41, pp. 150, 151, 154.

¹⁸ Yeago, “‘A Christian, Holy People,’” p. 110.

¹⁹ Hütter notes that it is this break with universal history that Pannenberg could not let go of, because he needs to keep Spirit within world history in order to establish the truth-claims of Christianity on a universally accepted basis (*Suffering Divine Things*, p. 121)

²⁰ *Suffering Divine Things*, p. 124. Emphasis mine.

This distinctive work of the Spirit corresponds to the nature of the core practices which are also constitutive of the church as church. If the Spirit is constantly forming the church as the “public of the Spirit” i.e. a community defined by its own distinctive and authoritative (though not coercive) dogmas, the core practices are the “creatures of the Spirit,” the means by which this public or *polis* is constantly being shaped.²¹ The Spirit creates new things (*poiesis*) but the new things develop on existing dogma rather than contradict it.²² The Spirit makes possible the living tradition. As Lossky puts it, tradition “is the life of the Church in the Holy Spirit.”²³ The process is implied in Acts 15:28: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to us...*” The Spirit’s new work of defining the ecclesial *polis* was very much bound up with the decision of a church council!

Historically, Protestantism tends to see both the work of the Spirit and human work as somewhat mutually exclusive, as seen in the age-old debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. More divine work means less of human work and vice versa—a kind of zero sum game! This is why it is not able to develop a fully sacramental theology. Only when we give full weight to both the work of the Spirit and the work of the people can we develop a fully sacramental theology. We will take up this issue again when we consider the practice of convergence in the next talk.

Conclusion

The liturgy not only actualizes a Trinitarian theology, but also in the act of worshipping the triune God forms us into the kind of people we are meant to be. Only as the church is shaped by the liturgy is it able to have the means to be the light of the world, to continue the mission of the triune God, to resist the “spirit of the age,” to proclaim boldly to the world the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, to discern what is true peace, true justice, and true equality. As one Orthodox theologian puts it,

In worship, Orthodox Christians derive their personal and collective identity, their motivation, inspiration and enthusiasm, their vision and vitality for

²¹ Hütter, “The Church as Public,” p. 358.

²² Hütter, “The Church as Public,” p. 359

²³ *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), p. 188.

political and social action and for service to God and neighbour for the salvation of the world.²⁴

This statement does not only apply to Orthodox Christians but to all who are concerned about the convergence of the sacramental, evangelical and charismatic streams. The liturgy is the key to bringing these three streams together. We need more than anything else to strengthen the liturgical life, to cultivate a liturgical spirituality. How this is to be done will be taken up in the next talk.

²⁴ Michael J. Oleksa, "The Holy Spirit's Action in Human Society: An Orthodox Perspective," *International Review of Mission* 79. 315 (Jl 1990): 337.