

Three Parables from Stavanger The WCC's Faith and Order Commission's Plenary Meeting

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I.

"This is not just one way alongside other ways but the only way." Says who? In this ecumenical day and age – August of 1985, to be exact – who would still have the audacity to announce that his way is the only way, least of all the only way to bring together, to "renew" the human community? Clue: the speaker was speaking in Stavanger, Norway. Ah, then must it not have been one of those Norwegian Lutherans, outspoken as they are about the "one way" of Jesus, who still dominates their prayer-house piety (in, with and under the same Lutherans' medieval cathedrals and high-church liturgies) and whose Name still animates their overseas missions? Yes, the speaker was Lutheran and, as a select few Norwegians are, a bishop – and a he. But this Lutheran bishop was manifestly not a Norwegian but a South African black whose diocese centers in the seething township of Soweto. His audience in Stavanger, the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order, included theologians from every Christian tradition and from all over the world, including the "Third" one, and a hearteningly visible increase of women.

At the end of the two-week meeting, in preparing to write this

report I asked the other commissioners at our supper-table which one event they would single out from the proceedings as their favorite. Out of the five of us, two (three including myself) chose the address by Bishop Manas Buthelezi. That was repeated in a little survey I did on the plane out of Stavanger. I am not going to try to explain why Buthelezi received such high marks. The truth is, this favorable reaction, my own as well, leaves me a bit puzzled. By contrast with the stirring sendoff from WCC's new secretary-general, Emilio Castro, (who also rated high in my polls) Buthelezi's manner is soft-spoken, almost shy. But then, someone might suppose, was he not assured of automatic approval because of today's worldwide sympathy – especially in any WCC gathering! – with his South African blacks? Actually there was in his address not a single reference to apartheid. Of course, there was no need of that. The tragic context from which he spoke was known to everyone of the 200 in that room. His fellow bishop from Soweto, Desmond Tutu, also a member of the commission, was unable to attend. (But he sent a promising, young proxy, Father Winston Ndungane.) Daily the Norwegian media were reporting the latest death tolls from South Africa. Anything Buthelezi would have said, so it might seem, was bound to stir approval, and the more militant the better. Then why my puzzlement at his ovation?

Answer: militancy was not at all what Buthelezi was advocating. Radical? Yes. "There is no renewal which is as radical as that of transforming rebellious humanity into a community of children of God," "the way of reconciliation in Jesus Christ," "the theology of the cross," "that we should love our enemies... while they still behave as enemies," "the experience of suffering unprovoked violence" and transforming that "into a medium of redemption."

That is what Buthelezi was calling "the only way." Compared with what? He did concede that there are other "possible methods" for

getting the process of the world's renewal started, like "liberation politics." The trouble is, the compliment is not reciprocated. "In liberation politics the idea of reconciliation has been discredited." Whose fault is that? The Christians', who "are reluctant to take the way [of the cross] seriously and apply it." No wonder that way "does not make political sense these days." On the other hand, "if a society is fundamentally unjust and there is rebellion, suffering will result." But such suffering, rather than being "redemptive," will instead "be part of the treadmill of perpetrating injustice." "There may be other ways [than the cross] but this is the only one which invests the Christian church with Christian identity; otherwise the church will be just one of the political parties."

Buthelezi's preference for "reconciliation," I happen to know at first hand, has not always convinced even his closest colleagues in his diocese or in the South African Council of Churches, in which he is a presiding officer. I could not help but wonder whether it was they, some of the dearest and most notable Christian leaders against apartheid, whom he had in mind by his antitheses. Perhaps not. He did mention that the Christian way of self-emptying, "the freedom of agape," is not guaranteed to bring "recognition by the world" but rather "may parade the scene as an unsung hero."

What was noteworthy, I thought, is the way in which this very pastoral theologian, whose own political record against apartheid has likewise been heroic, is struggling to say something more. I can only guess what that is: that the other "possible methods" are not only possible but may be God's way as well; conversely, that the way of the cross, just because of its uniqueness, is tremendously political. The first of these two points Buthelezi only intimated, the latter was suggested by his political rhetoric in describing the cross. It is, he said, "resistance" of the most daring sort. "Only 'tough guys'

reinforced by the grace of God in Christ can truly love.” The challenge, in Lutheran jargon, is to see a “theology of two kingdoms” as a theology of both kingdoms.

II.

“Thanks to the drafters,” said Dr. Beth Nordbeck of Lancaster Theological Seminary, and one of the gifted, articulate newcomers to Faith and Order. The drafters she thanked had just presented their group’s report on “The Integrity of Creation in Light of the Apostolic Faith.” As Buthelezi’s address and its reception provide a parable of a larger truth at Stavanger, namely, Faith and Order’s investment in “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community,” so Nordbeck’s remark is also significant of something more, this time of that other Faith and Order project, “Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today.” Actually, the little report on the integrity of creation is only a spinoff from the commission’s much more ambitious, sixty-page study of the apostolic faith. Yet it might be a straw in the wind, especially in view of Nordbeck’s sort of response.

One of the things for which she was thanking the drafters, as did others in the audience, was “the freshness of their language and their sensitive attention to gender language relative to God.” Really, though, had they been all that successful? True, they had steadfastly avoided personal pronouns (of either gender) and generally had accomplished that by replacing active verbs with passive. That is not a bad ploy even theologically, making us rather than God the subject of the sentence, but then as the ones being done to and done for, all prior doing still being God’s. Nevertheless, “the apostolic faith” in light of which the integrity of creation was here being discussed connotes something controversial within Faith and Order these

days. "The apostolic faith" means the faith confessed not only in apostolic Scripture but also, and far less unanimously, in the so-called Nicene Creed. That creed, in addition to allowing less theological pluralism than Scripture might, fairly bristles with masculine names like "Father" and "Son," all of which surfaced inevitably in the creation group's report as well. Then why did it receive the compliments it did?

Might it be that the report's "freshness" lay not only in its language or, as some said, in its "style" but in its explicit theological argument: that the very Creator, precisely as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their mutuality, refutes every theological alibi for domination and unilateralism against other creatures, human or non-human? Stated affirmatively, the Trinity in the ancient creed grounds all creation at its Source in a most participatory, interdependent, familial brand of care.

Thereby hangs an implication. In adopting the Nicene (more exactly, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan) Creed as the centerpiece of its project on the apostolic faith, the Commission on Faith and Order seems to have incurred two kinds of resistance from within its ranks. First, there are commissioners from Reformation churches (only some of which are "non-credal") who on principle are wary lest any creed be accepted uncritically and be allowed to upstage Scripture. Second, there are "Third World" commissioners, including those from minorities in the First and Second Worlds, who question the relevance of a fifth century creed for today's very different social and spiritual needs. Both pockets of resistance tend to perceive that creed as the sacrosanct, paternalistic preserve especially of the Orthodox, most especially the Greeks and Russians. (The USSR delegation did not show up at Stavanger.) Now would it not introduce a kind of "freshness" to that atmosphere if the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, of all things, turned out to be a treasure trove of radical biblical

theology with the timeliest of Christian significance for today's revolutions? Maybe the patriarchalists are enthroned upon a volcano.

III.

"There we were sitting right in front [in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome] and he [Pope John Paul II] seemed to be speaking directly to us." The genial Argentinian monsignor from Rome, Jorge Mejia, was recounting this story during a Stavanger coffee-break. In June, the pope had assembled his entire Curia in Saint Peter's before they all scattered for the summer. Since this is the twenty-fifth anniversary of Rome's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, the hour-long papal address was devoted entirely to the modern ecumenical movement. Mejia was eager to convey to us how encouraging John Paul's words had been and how he had seemed to direct his encouragement "directly to us," the oft embattled Secretariat, of which Mejia is a member.

The question naturally arises, what plans might the Roman Catholic Church have for the ecumenical movement? "Do you think," I asked Mejia, "that the pope might use the holy year 2000 to invite all Christians to an ecumenical council?" My question was answered with a question (and a knowing smile), how did I think such an invitation would be received by non-Roman Catholics? Other Roman Catholics at Stavanger, perhaps because they were not from headquarters, could afford to be less subtle. Subtlety is still in order, of course. There has been open speculation about the World Council of Churches itself convoking a worldwide council by the year 2000. Indeed, our own WCC commission is inviting all churches, not just commissioners, to a World Conference on Faith and Order four years from now. Will the Vatican be doing something similar? How might efforts by WCC and RCC, if any, be kept from competing, or better, be combined?

One Roman Catholic at Stavanger found it remarkable how the Vatican is going about formulating its official response to our Faith and Order document, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, namely, by first soliciting opinions from all its national conferences of bishops and other local and regional groups throughout Roman Catholicism. That, I gather, reveals an openness, a grass-roots collegiality unusual in past Vatican treatment of ecumenical documents of a doctrinal nature. And speaking of grassroots, the Roman Catholic Church is likely to have more and more of them. At Stavanger I heard (again) this demographer's prediction: by 2000 two-thirds to three-fourths of all Christians will be Roman Catholic; of those Roman Catholics a similar proportion will be south of the Equator, hence mostly poor; of those in turn the same proportion are just now being born. In short, by 2000 the vast majority of Christians will be Roman Catholic, Third World, twenty years old and younger. Furthermore, probably well before 2000 the Roman Catholic Church will have completed its "bilateral" dialogues with such other large Christian bodies as the Orthodox, the Lutherans, the Anglicans, and would conceivably be ready to consolidate those gains into some entity more united.

We were told that Norway is so long that if the country were swivelled around 180 degrees with Stavanger (down south) as the pivot, the northernmost point would end up near Rome. To paraphrase Monsignor Mejia, how do you suppose that would be received by those Nordic Lutherans?

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