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# THEOLOGICAL OBSERVER

## PROTESTANT-ROMAN CATHOLIC SEMINAR

Strasbourg, France — "The Church and Its Unity" was the general theme of a Protestant-Roman Catholic seminar sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation's Institute for Ecumenical Research located here. The specific purpose of the seminar, held from August 18 through September 6, 1966, was to bring about an exchange of ideas between Protestants and Roman Catholics after the close of the Second Vatican Council.

In a discussion of the Second Vatican Council's constitution "On the Church" (*De ecclesia*) Father Yves Congar of Strasbourg laid stress on the change that had taken place in Rome's presentation of the doctrine of the church. In his opening lecture he dealt with such topics as the mystery of the church's nature as an entity that is both divine and human, the source of the church in the redemptive activity of the triune God, and the dialectical (already — not yet) character of the church. In a second lecture he traced the history of the doctrine of the church from the days of the New Testament to the present. In his third and fourth lectures, devoted to basic problems of ecclesiology, he delineated the relationship which he sees existing between the people of God and the hierarchy in the church.

Professor Kristen-Ejnar Skydsgaard of Copenhagen entered into dialog with Father Congar by means of a parallel series of lectures presenting the Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of the church. Developing aspects of a theology of history that are relevant to the current ecclesiological discussion, he laid stress on the value of the description of the church as "the people of God" as one that conveys the idea of continuing movement within history. The children of God, both those who lived in the eras of the Old

Testament and the New Testament, as well as all Christians who have lived up to the present moment, were all part of the wandering people of God. Today's Christians, too, find themselves involved in the movement of history. The recognition of this fact, Professor Skydsgaard maintained, leads to the hope that the barriers which at present still seem insurmountable may in the course of time be overcome by the changes God himself effects in His people within history.

A major contribution to the discussion was a paper in which Professor Einar Molland of Oslo summarized salient features of modern research in the understanding of the ministry in the New Testament and its development in the early church. His lecture provided the historical perspective for the consideration of current issues.

Vilmos Vajta, research professor on the Institute staff, focused the attention of the seminar participants on the relation between priest and laity as this finds expression in the documents of Vatican II. His presentation revolved largely around the meaning of what he termed the *participatio* of both priest and laymen in the threefold work of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King. Professor Vajta was frank in asking if Rome, even at the Second Vatican Council, had grasped the full significance of the thinking of the Reformation in regard to the vital relationship between pastor and people.

During the second half of the conference discussion centered on Vatican II's document "On Ecumenism" (*De oecumenismo*). Frederick Kantzenbach, also a research professor at the Institute, presented a detailed analysis of this document. He welcomed its positive approach toward other Christian brothers in recognizing them as "church" and as members of the body of Christ through Baptism in the name of the triune God. Nevertheless,

he held, the limits and difficulties of this document as an ecumenical endeavor cannot be overlooked. One such difficulty, in his opinion, is the Roman Church's view that she herself is the center around which future unity must revolve. Other churches are judged by Roman Catholics in the light of what they regard to be the full reality of the church of Christ as it finds expression in their own church body. The Biblical theology that permeates the presentation in the constitution "On the Church" and the forward steps evidenced in the document "On Ecumenism" did not, Dr. Kantzenbach stated, overcome the basic Roman Catholic identification of the body of Christ with the Roman Church. Employing the methodology of comparative theology (*Kontroversiologie*), Professor Kantzenbach entered into the difficult task of assessing the extent of change in Rome's position and of evaluating his own position as a Lutheran over against the contemporary Roman Church.

The Roman Catholic presentation on the unity of the church was made by Father Gregory Baum, director of the Ecumenical Center of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. In Father Baum's judgment, not only the historical development of the document "On Ecumenism" but also the contents of this document manifest an advance in the dogmatic position presented in the constitution "On the Church." In his opinion, however, the Roman Church faces the temptations of pathological introversion and confessional nationalism. Father Baum warned the church against any preoccupation with the problem of her unity that would isolate her from the world in which she exists. He therefore deemed it absolutely necessary to draw into the discussion another document of Vatican II, namely the decree "On the Church in the Modern World." This approach brought with it not only new possibilities and perspectives but also new problems. Father Baum was candid in recog-

nizing areas of difficulty in the dogmas relating to the teaching office of the Roman Church, a field that is the special concern of his personal research. He shied away from seeking future unity by any comparative-theological (*kontroversiologisch*) approach. His presentation stressed two needs: the need of a new climate in which dialog can take place and the need to develop teachings from the experience of Christians in the life-situations of today.

Other presentations were made by Father Maurice Nédoncelle of the faculty of Catholic theology at the University of Strasbourg (who discussed Cardinal Newman as "The Theologian of Abuses in the Catholic Church") and Professor André Benoit of the Evangelical faculty of the University of Strasbourg (who discussed St. Irenaeus and his theology of unity).

The seminar participants, numbering more than 30 persons from 15 different countries, engaged in the general discussions that followed the lectures. Each day they also divided into three discussion groups to give closer consideration to these topics: "The Inner Trinitarian Relationships and Their Significance for the Unity of the Church Today," "The Historicity of the Church," and "The Problems of Church and Ministry." While the majority of participants were Lutherans and Roman Catholics, representatives of the Reformed and Anglican communions were also present.

The seminar reflected an important aspect of the work of the ecumenical institute of the LWF at Strasbourg, namely its desire to provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas on the working methods of theologians interested in ecumenical dialog. The institute is planning a second ecumenical seminar for the summer of 1967 to deal specifically with the relation of ecumenical research to theological education and mission work.

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