

# Communio Ecclesiology and the Cross

## Limits and Possibilities

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Brazilian anthropologist Roberto Da Matta has used the metaphors of "house" and "street" to characterize Brazilian culture as a constant movement between the outer space of the streets and the intimacy of the home.<sup>1</sup> Instead of the frozen separation between the public and the private,<sup>2</sup> Da Matta's metaphors allow for a fruitful way to address the overlapping features in the relation between civic spaces and those of intimacy. Even while remaining distinct there is a constant negotiation between these spaces. These metaphors to describe a culture, stands in clear contrast to the reality of globalization in which a dramatic integration of worldwide relations is concomitant with a radical fragmentation of isolated territorial spaces, often not larger than a computer terminal from where one can "navigate" in the world wide web. The streets have become spaces of displacement, and the houses increasingly inaccessible from the streets, protected by walls, fences and security systems. Those who cannot "web-in" become the excluded ones, the subaltern people of the world. And to these is also denied the possibility of keeping the movement and exchange between the "house," or realms of intimacy, and the "street," or spaces where to exercise one's civic rights. They are the homeless, the (illegal and also legal) immigrants, the landless peasants, the street children, the shut-ins, the imprisoned, the institutionalized, the children and women abused in their homes, among others. Globalization has meant for many the denial of alternation of living contexts between civic spaces and realms of safety and shelter. And without such contextualizations, globalization becomes imperialism.<sup>3</sup>

If Da Matta's metaphors are inept to describe this new situation, I take them to be very helpful to address in an analogous way the basic character of the church as an alternative "economy" placed in (and as) this very transition between the civic spaces and the intimacy of the home, calling us out and gathering us in. I am suggesting that the church, in its very catholicity, be understood as a movement between "house" and "street" that bridges the cleft between globalization and fragmentation. Further, they are a more promising and also biblical way to describe the church than the abused opposition between enlightened liberals with their ecclesiology of private spaces and free associations, on the one hand, and the orthodox, neo-orthodox, or radical orthodox proposal of the church as a public in itself to be distinguished and even separated from other publics (like the State, academia, civil society, etc.), on the other. What I am intimating here-and this should be my main argument-is that *communio ecclesiology*, while attempting to address the same limitation of the public and the private by creating a third category situated somewhere between those two, runs the risk again of being a static and abstract conception of the church always drifting toward one of the two options mentioned (liberalism or orthodoxy). Already in the Hebrew Scriptures the Tent of the Tabernacle provides an image for the Christian church precisely by being this "house" on the way, neither the intimate space of the home, nor the utter exposure of the street, yet both at the same time: the presence of the divine, yet in dynamic transition. To phrase it differently, what the *communio ecclesiology* does not do sufficiently is to convey the idea that the church is always a conjunctive reality-it is always the church *and*, the church *but*, the church *however*...

Evangelist Luke, in the book of Acts, often refers to the Christian community as those of the "Way" (*hodos*: road, way, street, path; cf. Acts 9:2; 19:23; 22:4; 24:22). But the same evangelist when referring to the gathering of the actual congregations often describes them as the church in the "house of ..." <sup>4</sup> The house and the street are complementary images that in tension suggest movement and at the same time also a sense of homely calm and ease. Exposure and also a haven, risk and comfort, wanderlust and refuge are often the biblical notions attached to the church, which, as opposed as they are, also complement each other.

That the church might be described by these metaphors suggests, on the one hand, its gregarious character, the search for a space of healing, safety and rest. Nevertheless, it is simultaneously called to break away from this very safety and move out of the familiar spaces and comfort zones. This is indeed already indicated by the very word *ek-klesia*. New Testament authors borrowed the word from the civil and political sphere. *Ekklesia* means an assembly of citizens called away from everyday routine, gathered to deliberate issues that pertain to civic and political life in order then to reenter it with a different attitude. *Ekklesia* means a moment of discontinuity with the quotidian, but not as an end in itself; it suggests the possibility of a retreat in which deliberations are taken in order to return to the *polis*.

This is the reason why it is not wrong, but incomplete to call the church a communion of salvation (*communio salutis*) or the place of salvation (*locus salutis*). It is necessary to say also that it be a community in transit (*communio viatorum*). As such the church proclaims a world that it itself does not know, but in which it believes, and for which it sacrifices itself in fulfilling its vocation of being witness (*martyria*) to this other world. Protestant ecclesiology, particularly its Lutheran version, expresses it incisively by presenting only two constitutive practices as sufficient for the church's being (*esse*). These are the announcement of another world (the Word), and the foretaste of its reality (the sacraments), even if further components might be necessary for its well-being and function (*bene esse*). But these are *adiaphora*, not of the essence, and they are changeable depending on context and circumstance. The minimalist ecclesiology that Protestantism inherited from the Lutheran Reformation preserves in its core precisely these two functions of the church: the Word proclaimed that provokes and unsettles, and the sacraments that comfort and heal (baptism that *brings* us into communion and the Eucharist that *renews* and restores it). Communion ecclesiology has been able to give expression to this vision of the church by centering it in the doctrine of the (economic) Trinity, sustaining simultaneously that God is transcendent and also radically immanent. God is the other that addresses us unconditionally but also closer to us than we are to our own selves so that we can taste, savor, and feel the divine in the very stuff of this world. These two affirmations (utter transcendence and radical immanence) held together are at the core of the doctrine of the Trinity.

However, there is still often something else missing in this elegant and minimalist definition of the church. The doctrine of the Trinity as a basis for constructing an ecclesiology often runs the risk of defining it in analogy to the being of God manifested by the relations of the three persons. <sup>5</sup> But this being of the church conceived according to Trinitarian immanent relations is too stable; too harmonious. It easily misses a mode of reasoning that has been also present in the Christian tradition, for example, by the Eastern notion of *stasis* (uproar, dissention) in the relations of the Trinity, <sup>6</sup> by Maximus the Confessor's notion of the work of God being accomplished through opposites, <sup>7</sup> and by Luther's *theologia crucis*. Unlike the claim that the

Trinity is the communion of persons that in it grounds Being, this tradition entertains the possibility of non-being, negativity itself, being rooted in the divine. It is only with this understanding of the Trinitarian communion that we avoid a vision of the church triumphant without the recognition of its brokenness and its mission, inserted as it is in the midst of a damaged world, being a part of a defiled creation. (Luther, for whom the visible church was an earthly régime, could even call it *magna peccatrix!*)

When Luther wrote *On the Councils and the Church* (1538) he listed 7 marks of the church, among others that apply to standards of sanctification. But these belong to the second Table of the Law and thus are subject to change. Apparently he expanded the minimalist definition of the church that both he in 1522<sup>8</sup> and Melancthon in the Augsburg Confession (art. VII) from 1530, but in fact in the first six marks he only unfolds the implications of what Word and sacraments mean. He lists first the Word and then the sacraments as Christ instituted, according to the Scriptures (Baptism and the Last Supper). Next, Luther mentions also the Power of the Keys, which includes penance and absolution (which, by then, the Reformers considered not a sacrament in itself, but a return to the promises of Baptism). After these marks he adds ministry, with the understanding that there must be an instituted order to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments. As the sixth mark, Luther mentions prayer that includes public worship, which is only to reinforce that Word and sacraments are not a private affair. Up to this point the Reformer restricts himself to the definition of the church as being made up by Word and sacrament adding only the necessary means for their dispensation (which implies absolution, ministry and worship). These define the *esse* of the church. However, there is a further external sign, which had not appeared explicitly before neither in his nor in Melancthon's writings about the church: cross and suffering. This seventh sign reveals the church as this community that, even when confessed to be one and holy, still lives under the sign of the cross, in transience, in trial, in weakness, in infamy, in vulnerability, in doubt and even forsakenness, attesting that in these realities, as in the Cross of Christ itself, there is God. Word and sacrament function as the formal criteria for the being of the church; the cross is the material criterion that marks the church's existence between the house and the street. If the Word does not confront, provoke and promise; if the sacraments do not comfort and heal, then there is no cross. And the "church" is an empty shell, the Word is dissolved in bare words and the sacraments into a void ritualism.

If Cyprian defined the church as the place of salvation (*extra ecclesia nulla salus*)<sup>9</sup> it might be so in at least two senses that the Greek word *soteria* or the Latin *salus* have. One is to heal, cure, and provide refuge. In this sense we are describing the house-function of the church. In the other sense the word can also mean to deliver, to rescue, and to liberate. This would describe the street-function of the church. The idea of a salvation into another world (which would be a third sense of the term) is only a derivative and eschatological mixing of the distinct senses that the word "salvation" has. But if we follow the etymological sense of the word we can say that the church is the community of salvation insofar as, and only insofar as, it manifests itself in the places of perdition as a community that both heals and liberates. Where this happens there is the church. The church happens! *We believe it; we do not believe in it (credo ecclesiam, as the Nicene Creed formulates). We believe it to be the place of salvation, of healing and deliverance, when the evidences of our time point to the cross of our forsakenness.*

The time of the church in Lutheran ecclesiology is symbolized by this void that extends itself from the moment of Jesus' death (God's *apousia*, absence) and his return, and presence (*parousia*). It is not of dramatic events, great discourses and certainties. It is the time of weakness and hope, the hope against all hope, as Paul describes it in Romans 4:18, and Brazilian bishop Dom Helder Câmara applied to the church calling it an "Abrahamic minority." This is also what Luther meant in calling the church the community of the cross. It is the community that lives precisely in this time, in the Shabbat (which Luther in his Genesis lectures defined as the creation of the church), the distinctively Christian Shabbat that stands between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Intriguingly, that was a time in the gospels that the apostles were silent! That was the time in which we know only of a practice of resurrection exercised by the women that witnessed Jesus' burial. This was the practice of those women that witnessed the burial of the beloved and then went to the "street" to buy spices and oil. And after preparing spices and oils at home, and observing the Shabbat they go to anoint a putrescent dead body, only to be themselves surprised and scared to find the tomb empty and that very body alive. (Needless to say that the church is also often scared in facing novelty, as was Mary in face of experiences of redemption and resurrection; it is always easier to administer grief than the unexpected.) This is the practice of resurrection, which prefigures the community of those who in proclamation and communion hope against all hope. This is the practice that keeps history open, open to revisit even its past of victimization and suffering. This is the task of the church: not to allow history to end in calamity, and not to allow the past to be closed.

Allow me a brief digression. In 1937 the Jewish German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote the following in an article published in a journal edited by his friend and colleague Max Horkheimer: "The work of the past is not closed for the historical materialist. He cannot see the work of an epoch, or any part of it, as reified, as literally placed on one's lap."<sup>10</sup> Horkheimer writes to Benjamin a sharp criticism in which he says: "The supposition of the unclosed past is idealistic ... Past injustice has occurred and is closed. Those who were slain in it were truly slain. ... In the end, your statements are theological."<sup>11</sup> Benjamin answers back establishing a discussion that has been called possibly the most significant theological debate of the 20th century:

The corrective for this sort of thinking lies in the reflection that history is not simply a science but a form of empathetic memory [Eindenken]. What science has "settled," empathetic memory can modify. It can transform the unclosed (happiness) into something closed and the closed (suffering) into something unclosed. That is theology, certainly, but in empathetic memory we have an experience that prohibits us from conceiving history completely non-theologically."<sup>12</sup>

This empathetic memory is capable of opening the closed past in a labor of love and mourning. It keeps memory alive, it preserves the Shabbat against all evidence, against all science. Horkheimer played the role of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. He left the tragedy closed behind; Calvary was no longer redeemable. Benjamin like the women in the gospels kept the empathetic memory, against all evidences, in a practice of resurrection that carried them to the Easter Sunday. After having witnessed the place where the body of the beloved was laid, they were those who witnessed the empty tomb and first met the resurrected one. This is what makes them the prefiguring of the church. They were the witnesses of a decisive affirmation of the Christian faith: the resurrection of the body. If it were not for them Christianity's great promise

could have been only the belief in an apparition. But to keep this practice and the memory alive there must be a labor of love and mourning. Wendell Berry expressed this well in one of his poems

I read of Christ crucified,  
the only begotten Son  
sacrificed to flesh and time  
and all our woe. He died  
and rose, but who does not tremble  
for his pain, his loneliness,  
and the darkness of the sixth hour?  
Unless we grief like Mary  
at His grave, giving Him up  
as lost, no Easter morning comes.<sup>13</sup>

I believe that the ecclesiology of Juan Luis Segundo, in the first volume of his *Theology for the Artisans of a New Humanity*, after more than three decades of its publication needs to be revisited.<sup>14</sup> There he defines the church as the community of those who know. Although such an affirmation can suggest a Gnosticism lurking behind, Segundo could not have been more faithful to the gospel. The church is comprised of the followers of Jesus who, unlike those represented by the parable of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25, will not be surprised to know that Christ is to be met among those who in this world are lowly, excluded and shaken. But this knowledge as much as it is a promise it is also the acknowledgment of the transience of the church, the consciousness that its end does not belong to itself, as the end of Jesus did not belong to those faithful women. What the church knows and understands is embedded in the practice of those women; it is the belief against all evidence that no gesture of love will ever be lost.

This was well expressed not by a theologian, but Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, the main author of the Carta 77, which represented the voice of protest against the political régime in Czechoslovakia (that included then the play writer and later elected president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel) who later died under police interrogation. In his posthumously published *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, we find an image apt to define the church: the community of those who are moved and shaken, but they are those who also understand. Patočka has called this the "solidarity of the shaken" which is, he continues,

the solidarity of those who are capable of understanding what life and death are all about. That history is the conflict of *mere life*, barren and chained to fear, with *life at its peak*, life that does not plan for the ordinary days of a future but sees clearly that the everyday, its life and its "peace," have an end. Only one who is able to grasp this, who is capable of conversion, of *metanoia*, is a spiritual person. A spiritual person, however, always understands, and that understanding is no mere observation of facts, it is not 'objective knowledge'... The solidarity of the shaken is built up in persecution and uncertainty.<sup>15</sup>

In the transit between house and street and in the *cross*-ing of the divide between globalization and exclusion the church of the crucified God finds and founds itself. The Reformers' vision of a

church that denounces this and announces another world while celebrating its foretaste is indeed a contribution to the ecumenical movement.

### Endnotes:

1 Roberto Da Matta, *A Casa e a Rua: Espaço, Cidadania, Mulher e Morte no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1985), pp. 55-80.

2 For the classical distinction between the private and the public see Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung." In *Ausgewählte kleine Schriften* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1965), pp. 1-9.

3 I owe this expression to a conversation with my colleague Antje Jackelén.

4 See also Paul's (according to Luke) use of the complementary use of *demósios* (public) and *oikos* (house) in Acts 20:20

5 John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1985)

6 The classical text is in Gregory Nazianzen's "Third Theological Oration" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. by P.Schaff and H. Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 301

7 See Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols., trans. David Smith (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 3:11-18. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 159

8 WA 7:720, 34-36: *Signum necessarium est, quod habemus, Baptisma scilicet, panem et omnium potissimum Evangelium: tria haec sunt Christianorum symbola, tesseræ et characteres.*

9 This expression is often quoted outside of its *Sitz im Leben* Cyprian was opposing a papal disposition that that accepted the baptism of those who belonged to heretical communities.

10 Walter Benjamin, *Ausgewählte Schriften II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955), p. 311.

11 Cited by Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action, and Fundamental Theology: Toward a Theology of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), p. 206f.

12 Ibid. p. 207.

13 Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems* (San Francisco: North point, 1985), p. 210.

14 Juan Luis Segundo, *The Community called Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973). The original Spanish publication is from 1968.

15 Patocka, *Heretical Essay in the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), p. 134

