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# Roman Catholic Reactions to Karl Barth's Ecclesiology\*

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A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, Karl Barth opened one of his lectures on the church with these words: "We must be brief in this section, which by rights ought to be very thoroughly treated. Our lecture hours are numbered. But perhaps there is no harm in that. To-day there is rather too much than too little said about the Church. There is something better: let us *be* the Church!"<sup>1</sup> This sounds like a warning, more relevant in these days than ever before; nevertheless, I like to think that Barth would not disapprove the topic chosen for this occasion. Roman Catholics are readily expected to be particularly familiar with ecclesiology, and I will admit that it has been my favourite field of study for some time. But I would not have forced the topic into today's programme, if I had not been personally convinced that it offers an excellent opportunity for an authentic confrontation of Barthian theology with Roman Catholicism.

Let us remember that, as Adolf Keller pointed out thirty-five years ago, Barthianism "is an ecclesiastical theology." It began with a church problem, the distressing anxiety of the preacher who felt he had to bring to his congregation a message which would really be the church's message to the world.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, the theology of Barth has been bound to the sphere of the church, and we must take seriously the title of *Church Dogmatics* which he has given to his *magnum opus*. In his own terms, "theology cannot be carried on in the private lighthouse of some sort of merely personal discoveries and opinions. It can be carried on only in the Church—it can be put to work in all its elements only in the context of the questioning and answering of the Christian community and in the rigorous service of its commission to all men."<sup>3</sup>

This may well have something to do with the fact that Barth was soon to open a new chapter in what was then called *Kontroversialtheologie* and is now more irenically labelled interconfessional dialogue, and could also conveniently be called mutual questioning.<sup>4</sup> It was precisely on the issues

\*A paper read to the Canadian Theological Society at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario, May 1966.

1. K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1949), p. 141.

2. Cf. A. Keller, *Karl Barth and Christian Unity* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1933), pp. 40f.; J. D. Godsey, "An Introduction to Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*," in *Karl Barth's Table Talk* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 2.

3. K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 64.

4. Cf. K. G. Steck, "Ueber das ekklesiologische Gespräch zwischen Karl Barth und Erich Przywara 1927/29," in *Antwort: Karl Barth zum siebzigsten Geburtstag am 10.*

of ecclesiology that, in his days at Münster, Barth entered the discussion with Roman Catholics. To be truthful, he did not expect too much from it, but he agreed to carry it on at the very point where understanding seemed impossible. In his famous lecture of 1927, on "The Concept of the Church," he put the question bluntly:

Can Catholics and Protestants really carry on with each other a discussion which deals not merely with an historical or practical question, but with a theme of the greatest seriousness, with a fundamental concept of Christian dogmatics? And especially can they discuss that concept, which . . . always emerges in every basic attempt at understanding between the two sides as the limit at which yes and no (*sic et non*) inevitably clash and all understanding ceases? A concept which makes suspect all understanding apparently reached previously—the concept of the Church?

Barth accepted the risk of the discussion, though with a very limited aim indeed:

It would be wise to assume beforehand that for a discussion upon such a fundamental theme (that is upon a question of dogma and particularly upon *this* question on which, if we are not mistaken, we are essentially divided in spirit), the aim ought to be defined simply as the gain of a better understanding of why and how far, under present circumstances (*rebus sic stantibus*), we cannot understand each other. Our undertaking today is therefore a real risk; for at best it can end with no more than that result. And such a result I should certainly consider success.

And Barth went on, proposing his method: "In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Catholics and Protestants still looked each other in the eye—angrily, but *in the eye*. They talked with each other, sharply and harshly; but they really talked." He deplored that Christians of both groups, at the time he was speaking, either talked past each other in an unfruitful and ineffective fashion, or stood opposite each other in complete detachment, and he added: "I accepted the invitation to come here because I judged this coming together to be an attempt mutually to take each other seriously."<sup>5</sup>

The following year (1928) he delivered another famous lecture, this time on "Roman Catholicism: A Question to the Protestant Church." He said that an objection to the idea implied in the title could be made, on the ground that Catholicism did not actually present a question, so far as most Protestants were concerned. Roman Catholicism seemed too remote and unrelated for Protestants to suppose that they had to listen to any question coming from that direction. And he answered: "He who knows Catholicism, if only a little, knows how superficial are the remoteness and strangeness;

*Mai 1956* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), pp. 249–65; W. A. Visser 't Hooft, "Ein Gruss aus der Oekumene," *ibid.*, pp. 14f. (underlining Barth's contribution to the ecumenical movement, but regarding as most "primitive" the viewpoint of those Roman Catholics who consider the entire World Council of Churches to be under Barthian influence); G. C. Van Niftrik, *Een beroerder Israëls: Enkele hoofgedanken in de theologie van Karl Barth*, 2nd ed. (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, 1947), ch. 7, "Het Rooms-Katholicisme."

5. K. Barth, "The Concept of the Church," in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962), pp. 272f.

how uncannily close to us all it is in reality; how urgent and vital are the questions it puts to us; how essentially impossible it is not to attend to them seriously when one has once heard them. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Because he thus accepted being questioned, some became afraid that he might lean towards Roman Catholicism himself, or found it necessary to insist that he remained true to his church tradition. R. Birch Hoyle, writing in 1930, said, with reference to the lecture just mentioned, that Barth, "whilst displaying an eirenic spirit, abated not a whit the fundamental view of the Reformed Church as to grace, faith, the Word and the Spirit as constituting the true Church," and that the address "establishes incontestably the right of the speaker to be called a doughty champion of Protestantism."<sup>7</sup> Keller took the whole matter a little more philosophically: "But the essential point here is not the greater or lesser proximity to the Roman Catholic conception at individual points. . . . Without embarrassment we may emphasize and acknowledge the common possessions, the historical inheritance, the Roman Catholic Church's preservation of certain treasures, without thereby surrendering our own peculiar possessions or without falling victim to a characterless 'Catholicophilism.'" The same author, however, was much relieved to hear from Barth, that he considered the Roman Church as the greatest heresy of Christian history, especially in her doctrine of the *analogia entis* and of the *imago Dei*.<sup>8</sup>

No doubt, Barth assumed that divisions of Western Christianity appeared "nowhere else so glaringly as in its disagreement on the concept of the Church."<sup>9</sup> But talk he did, and not unlike the Catholics and the Protestants of former centuries, at times angrily. We need only refer to his strong reactions at Amsterdam, in 1948, in reference to the refusal received from Rome and Moscow:

Why should we not simply acknowledge in this refusal the mighty hand of God! . . . Perhaps he preserves us by this from discussion partners with whom we would not have been able to form there a community even in an imperfect way, because, though for different reasons, they do not want to enter the movement of the whole of Christendom towards Jesus Christ, this movement without which Christians of different origins and of different kinds cannot even speak to one another, listen to one another, much less come together.<sup>10</sup>

To this declaration Barth was to add shortly after, in an answer to the French Jesuit Jean Daniélou:

On our side we had no reason to deplore the absence of your church, because, through what you yourself call her intransigence, she has excluded herself from the common search for the unity in Jesus Christ which gives its significance to the Ecumenical movement. . . . We asked there about the Kingdom

6. *Ibid.*, p. 310.

7. R. B. Hoyle, *The Teaching of Karl Barth: An Exposition* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1930), pp. 49f., 53.

8. A. Keller, *Karl Barth and Christian Unity*, pp. 211, 224.

9. Barth, "The Concept of the Church," p. 273.

10. K. Barth, "Die Unordnung der Welt und Gottes Heilsplan," *Evangelische Theologie*, 8 (1948-49), 185.

and the Work of God. But you would have given us to know what that means: we would have to be converted to the human Kingdom and the human work of your church. So we did not come together in Amsterdam, either with the Lord of the church or with one another. That is why it was, for us, no regrettable thing, but a good thing, known as the clear will of God, that you were not there in Amsterdam. You would only have disturbed and held us back from doing what we wanted to do in obedience to our faith. Your absence has spared us a scandal and a temptation.<sup>11</sup>

If he took the Roman Catholic Church seriously, as a question which Protestants have to face, Karl Barth had certainly no hesitation in directing counter-questions. Consistently, his most fundamental point has been that Catholicism has made the church independent and, even worse, has tied God to the church. In the first part of the *Church Dogmatics* he warns us that, even if the church is accepted as a sign and an instrument, "this still does not mean that God manifest has, as it were, become a bit of the world. It does not mean that He has passed into the hands or been put at the disposal of men gathered together to form a Church. . . . We stand at the point where the Evangelical conception of the Church diverges abruptly from the Roman Catholic. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Together with pietistic-rationalistic Modernism, this is what is opposed throughout his writings: the absolutizing of the church that he finds present in the Roman Catholic doctrine on sanctity, on sacramental action, on apostolicity (apostolic succession), on authority, to the point of seeing in "the autonomy of the Church the explicit essence of Catholicism."<sup>13</sup>

An early Protestant commentator on Barth, already quoted, puts the objection in these terms:

. . . The Roman Catholic Church is asked whether it is not committed to a dangerous self-assertion over against God and Christ. If a "continuity between divine and human activity" is demonstrated and even a sort of a reciprocity—must not the divine Lord of the Church recede behind the representation by the Church and by the earthly stewards of the heavenly gift in spite of all the glamour attributed to Him? If the Crucified, the heavenly and hidden Lord of the church, is offered directly and concretely in the church's gifts and functions "as a mere sublime part of its own reality," if He is offered as actually present, administered, visible and to be "enjoyed"—is this not the most dangerous possible obliteration of the boundaries between God and man? Does it not claim to give something here which Christ alone can give?<sup>14</sup>

Roman Catholic theologians have listened to these massive affirmations as well as to many other vital questions regarding the Church. Are you

11. K. Barth, "Antwort an P. Jean Daniélou," in J. Daniélou, R. Niebuhr, K. Barth, *Gespräche nach Amsterdam* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1949), pp. 8f. On this question, cf. E. Lamirande, "Could the Roman Catholic Church Become a Member of the World Council of Churches?" *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 35 (1965), 213\*-16\*.

12. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 227.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 575, cf. *Karl Barth's Table Talk*, p. 43.

14. A. Keller, *Karl Barth and Christian Unity*, p. 212. For a recent statement, cf. K. Barth, "Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council," *Ecumenical Review*, 15 (1963), 358-67. See also G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), ch. 7, "The Triumph of Grace in its Antithesis to Rome."

conscious enough, Karl Barth would ask, of what is meant by I *believe* in the Church, or by the *sola fide intelligimus* ("we understand by faith alone") of the *Roman Catechism*? Do you not see the church too much as a thing, as a possession, as a situation, rather than as a call, an act, an event, a mission? Is not the church as you know it, more interested in a dry system of truths than in the powerful Word of the everliving God? Is not the church more interested in proclaiming and establishing the objectivity of revelation and salvation, than in considering herself challenged by this and judged by this? In your eyes, is authority in the Church really a service and does it really make visible the Lordship of Christ? Are you not more concerned with the external aspects of apostolic succession than with the interior spirit of discipleship? Are you ready, as a people of pilgrims, to be an *ecclesia semper reformanda*?<sup>15</sup>

I have said that Roman Catholic theologians have listened to these questions. How did they reply? For a man like Keller, the problem is quite simple:

The Roman Catholic Church as such cannot answer because it cannot permit itself to be questioned. If it does reply, it is with the sentence, the index, the decision "ex cathedra"; "Roma locuta, causa finita." It simply knows no discussion, for such could only take place between equals. The church judges, condemns, approves or remains silent, but it carries on no debates; at the most this is done by individual Roman Catholic theologians, who must risk the possibility of having to recant their replies to the Barthian questions.<sup>16</sup>

It is a matter of opinion whether Karl Barth was representing the Protestant churches any more than the individual Roman Catholic theologians their church. The point is that, at any rate, these entered the debate, and gave the theology of Karl Barth such consideration as had hardly ever been given to a Protestant theologian since the days of the Reformation.

It even appears as if Roman Catholics had definitely won predominance among the exponents and critics of Barth's theology. Barth himself spoke of the central thesis of Hans Urs von Balthasar, "the shrewd friend from another shore,"<sup>17</sup> as "incomparably more powerful than that of most of the books which have clustered around me."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he mentions with particular appreciation three books very different in character:<sup>19</sup> the now famous essay of Hans Küng which endeavoured to reconcile the Catholic doctrine of justification with Barth's own;<sup>20</sup> the Sorbonne dissertation of the Jesuit Henri Bouillard,<sup>21</sup> which has been called "*the introduction to Barth's*

15. Cf. H. Fries, *Kirche als Ereignis* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1958), pp. 116f. The last chapter of this book reproduces "Kirche als Ereignis. Zu Karl Barths Lehre von der Kirche," *Catholica*, 11 (1958), 81-107.

16. A. Keller, *Karl Barth and Christian Unity*, p. 212.

17. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 44.

18. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 768. Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Cologne: Jakob Hegner, 1962), especially pp. 393-97 (on the church).

19. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), p. xii.

20. Cf. H. Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964).

21. Cf. H. Bouillard, *Karl Barth*, 3 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1957).

theology for the foreseeable future;"<sup>22</sup> and coming from more conservative Italy, a book by Emmanuele Rivero which, according to Barth, also ranks with the best contributions on the Protestant side.<sup>23</sup> To these must be added several other names: J. C. Groot, Jérôme Hamer, Brunero Gherardini, Charles Journet, Heinrich Fries, Boniface Willems, to mention only a few post-war writers. While no important contribution has come from this side of the Atlantic,<sup>24</sup> Switzerland, Germany, France, Holland, and Italy are well represented. Although all of these critics did not focus their attention on the church, most of them significantly gave ecclesiology special consideration.

It is commonly agreed that Barth's ecclesiology cannot be given a fair treatment unless its evolution is duly taken into account. This evolution, however, is diversely understood. The long career of Karl Barth may be divided, for our purpose, into several periods. First there was the period of the *Römerbrief*, of the dialectical theology or theology of crisis, characterized by a very negative approach towards the church. Secondly, there was the intermediate period, between the second edition of the *Römerbrief* (1922) and the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics* (1932): the period of the theology of the Word of God and of the church as pure event. Thirdly, there is the period of the *Church Dogmatics*, referred to sometimes as the period of "coherent" Christology, which brings out more explicitly the link between the church and the Incarnate Word. Finally, some have considered the 1956 lecture on *The Humanity of God* as a kind of manifesto which would mark the beginning of a new period.

From the beginning, Roman Catholic criticism centred upon basic theological presuppositions, such as the Barthian concept of God, or the problem of analogy, rather than on specific points. This is particularly true of ecclesiology, which has been seen most of the time as an application of a general theological approach and as an expression of a global conception of the relationship of God with men.<sup>25</sup> As a matter of fact, it is in the very concept of God as the wholly Other, the only Real, the only Active, that the first Roman Catholic critics saw the explanation of what they considered Barth's depreciation of man, the world, and the church.

In his earlier period, thinking in terms of dialectical opposition, Barth envisaged the church as an attempt to humanize the divine, to comprehend it, to secularize it, asserting, however, that this was no reason to withdraw from her. The church was seen as a form of the religion of this world, a form of sin, in opposition to revelation, but also as a way to the gospel, in this sense at least, that she reveals what we are: sinners and darkness. At that

22. Grover Foley, "The Catholic Critics of Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 14 (1961), 136.

23. Cf. E. Rivero, *La teologia esistenzialistica di Karl Barth* (Naples: Istituto editoriale del Mezzogiorno, 1955), especially pp. 298-324 (on the church).

24. The paper of Bonaventure M. Schepers, "Naturaleza de la Iglesia según Karl Barth," *Studium*, 3 (1963), 127-36, is based upon a rather stereotyped idea of Protestantism.

25. Cf. A. Keller, *Karl Barth and Christian Unity*, pp. 210, 214-18.

point, it was really impossible for Roman Catholic theologians to enter into genuine dialogue with Barth on the specific question of the church, and it is in retrospect that they examine this phase of Barth's ecclesiological thinking, in relation to the direction which it has now taken.<sup>26</sup>

Relatively soon, Barth began to look at the church in a more positive way. He progressively drew back from his dialectical approach, and gave much thought to what is meant by the church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—and by the authority of the church. He underlined the large measure of agreement between his own understanding and the Roman Catholic doctrine on *what* the church is, but on the other hand, he seemed to regard this agreement as of little importance, since Protestants and Catholics cannot unite on the three words *fide solum intelligimus* ("we understand by faith alone"), "and therefore there can be no basic talk between them on the other points, or at most they can only discuss why they cannot discuss."<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, Barth persistently insisted that the church is pure event, that she has nothing of her own, that her very being is the being of God and of Christ. The church appeared as the transient, the discontinuous, the event which occurs in the institution and is thus made visible to the eyes of faith. Through God's sovereign action, the church is at every moment actualized, she is a totally dynamic event. Thus Barth apparently failed to acknowledge her objective permanent reality. To the eyes of a Roman Catholic, his position was still, in this period, radical actualism, tantamount to a mere negation of the church.

Does the publication of the first volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* initiate a true change in this approach? Let us recall that, in the first three volumes, the theme of the church is often present, but is not considered for itself.<sup>28</sup> It is only in the long treatise on "Reconciliation," in the fourth volume, that Barth has actually examined the question *ex professo*, in relation to election, the individual being elected in a community which, through its existence, witnesses to Jesus Christ. These pages offer new developments, bring many new insights, but they do not repudiate the image of the church presented before; at least, Roman Catholics have failed, in spite of their secret expectation in some instances, to notice such a repudiation. However, a slow process has been going on. I may refer at this point to a perceptive essay on "The Changing Course of a Corrective Theology,"<sup>29</sup> by Professor Paul L. Lehmann, of Union Theological Seminary, who first introduced me to Barth's thinking. As far as ecclesiology is concerned, the acknowledgment of revelation and its central reality, the Word of God which is Jesus Christ, as the starting point of theology, should have proved decisive. The church is still event, but now in another way,

26. Cf. H. Bouillard, *Karl Barth*, vol. I, pp. 60-64; C. Journet, *L'Eglise du Verbe Incarné*, 2d ed. (Bruges: Desclée, 1962), vol. II, pp. 1137-40.

27. Barth, "The Concept of the Church," p. 280.

28. Cf. O. Weber, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

29. *Theology Today*, 13 (1956), 332-57.



since that event is first of all Jesus Christ. Since in Christ God's grace has become an historical and earthly reality, in him the redeeming love of God has taken the appearance of a creaturely "clothed objectivity."<sup>30</sup>

Not everybody agrees about the significance of this new emphasis. Some critics keep in mind the previous forms of Barth's thinking and repeat the questions posed by Georg Feuerer in his book on the concept of the church in dialectical theology: Is there in Barth a positive I-Thou relationship with God? Does Barth take seriously enough God's love for men? Is the Incarnation taken seriously? Is man taken seriously? Is history taken seriously?<sup>31</sup> Are these questions from the early 1930s still relevant? Several think so; in order to understand something of their reactions, let us read a few paragraphs from Karl Barth himself. My first choice was a passage from the *Church Dogmatics*,<sup>32</sup> but I finally settled for a paper published in 1947, in preparation for the Amsterdam Assembly.

What, in these carefully prepared comments, will naturally draw the attention of the Roman Catholic? Not so much the opening sentences, in spite of their eloquent description of the church as the living congregation of the living Lord, Jesus Christ. Nor the affirmation that the concept of the church is the concept of a dynamic reality.<sup>33</sup> He begins knitting his eyebrows when he reads that "the Church exists by happening," that "the Church exists as the event of this gathering together," and when in paragraph after paragraph he finds that *the being* of the church ("das Sein der Kirche," rather than the "essence of the Church" of the English translation) is an event:

the event in which men are placed together before the fact of the reconciliation of the world, which has taken place in Jesus Christ . . . the event in which this peculiar human togetherness becomes possible and effectual . . . the event in which God's Word and revelation in Jesus Christ, and the office of Jesus Christ as God's ordained Prophet, Priest and King, is accomplished to the extent that it becomes a *Word* which is directed toward, reaches, and touches certain men . . . the event in which the Holy Scriptures as the prophetic-apostolic witness to Jesus Christ carry through the "demonstration of the Spirit and power" . . . the event which is called in the New Testament "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" . . . the event in which baptism into the name of the triune God, which many men have received in different times, in fact brings to their remembrance that they have been received into the friendship of God . . . the event in which these many men, as often as they have all received the bread and the cup of the Lord's supper, anticipating the power and joy of the future revelation, share already here and now in the "wedding feast of the Lamb" . . . the event in which the community is a light shining also in the world. . . .<sup>34</sup>

30. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 16ff.

31. Cf. G. Feuerer, *Der Kirchenbegriff der dialektischen Theologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1933), pp. 129-33.

32. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 214. Jean-Louis Leuba, "Le problème de l'Eglise chez M. Karl Barth," *Verbum Caro*, 1 (1947), pp. 4-24, is a commentary on this paragraph.

33. Cf. K. Barth, "The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ," in *God Here and Now* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1964), pp. 61f.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-66.

It is not that Roman Catholics do not fully accept the supreme significance of this multiform event for the life of the church. Nonetheless the very repetition of the word "event," *Ereignis*, elicits an uneasiness which is, in the mind of some, readily transformed into a resolute "No": the church is not only an event!

True, the same paper contains a few sentences that could be understood as an acceptance of the horizontal line connecting the church of today with the church of the past, the church of the apostles and of the historic Christ. Barth speaks of the event which takes place "in the historical association of the call of Christ and Christian obedience"; he affirms that the word "church," if it is to be a genuine word, must refer in every case to this historical association;<sup>35</sup> he stresses that we should learn to think, when we use the word church, "not only of an organization," or, when we use the word community, "not only of the existence and the condition of a society," but in both cases "rather of the event of a gathering." Barth seems to admit an historical dimension, a social dimension, even an organizational dimension, which in turn presuppose a consistency and a continuity in the ontological order. To be sure, inasmuch as it is a human reality, the church is a threatened reality, and her existence "is an existence secured, unthreatened, and incontestable only from above, only from God," since it is only "God's faithfulness which promises and guarantees this continuance."<sup>36</sup> Karl Barth does not deny the reality of a visible congregation, but the whole problem is how it is connected to the church, the event, the constant happening.

The ever-recurring lament among Roman Catholic critics is that, for all his endeavours, Barth does not respect the proper consistency of created being, the relative autonomy of man in his relationship with God; that he does not acknowledge the transformation of man through divine grace or the co-operation which he is called to bring in response to this grace; and finally, that he suppresses the very reality of the church.<sup>37</sup> Not only does he affirm, as he must, that everything comes *from* Christ, but also, apparently, that everything remains *in* Christ. Thus no church, in the Roman Catholic sense, exists, but only a purely human world, which God touches tangentially, without ever penetrating it.<sup>38</sup> For some, the source of this position is to be found in an insufficient Christology. Bouillard is quite harsh in this regard and speaks of a "Christological dream projected upon a Platonic heaven."<sup>39</sup> This meets with the approval of the Dominican, Jérôme Hamer: "The judgment is severe, but it appears just to me. In a vigorous reaction against liberalism, Barth takes up the dogma of the two

35. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 67f.

37. Cf. H. Bouillard, art. "Barth, Karl," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed., vol. II, col. 7.

38. Cf. Yves M.-J. Congar, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Eglise* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1950), p. 452; "Pour le dialogue avec le mouvement œcuménique," *Verbum Caro*, 4 (1950), 120.

39. H. Bouillard, *Karl Barth*, vol. III, p. 291.

natures defined in Chalcedon. But does he understand it in the same way?"<sup>40</sup> Others, on the contrary, including Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hermann Volk, Hans Küng, and Heinrich Fries, openly reject the view that Barth does not take the Incarnation seriously.<sup>41</sup>

Let us hear more, however, from the critics of the first category, and specially from the most articulate of them, Hamer, who, significantly, gave the original edition of his book the title: *L'occasionalisme théologique de Karl Barth*.<sup>42</sup> For him, the first principle of Barthianism, and one which directly influences his ecclesiology, is the active and discontinuous character of the manifestation of the Word. No redemptive action of God, including the church, results in an effect distinct from itself. We are consistently faced with an actualism opposed to every kind of continuity. No gift is really offered to man; creation is denied its proper subsistence and is reduced to being "a symbol and sign of the only authentic realities, namely, the intermittent accomplishments of the Word of God." There seems to be a rupture between God and creature, and Barth's thought would manifest a "violent dualism."<sup>43</sup> Barth's ecclesiology is based on the Word of God; more than that, the church is, for him, constituted by the Word of God, as "a spontaneous and discontinuous, mysterious and imperceptible manifestation." By this very fact, despite Barth's insistence on the visible church, his ecclesiology is essentially an ecclesiology of the invisible church: "Furthermore, the Church is invisible. Barth would not admit this, but the fact is evident. . . . The fact remains that the true Church is founded exclusively upon the action of the Word of God, which can be neither controlled nor perceived."<sup>44</sup>

Msgr. (now Cardinal) Journet, who wrote at about the same time, followed this line, and traced Barth's insufficient ecclesiology back to his "aggressive equivocity," which results in a kind of rivalry between the human and the divine causality. "The most characteristic point of his ecclesiology," Journet wrote, "is perhaps that it tries to eliminate radically the principle of causal subordination . . . in order to base itself entirely upon the principle of causal rivalry. It becomes, because of this, pure occasionalism."<sup>45</sup>

This reaction, which on the whole has been more serene and irenic than I may have suggested in reducing it to its most abrupt expressions, began, from 1950 onwards, to give place to a much more positive appraisal. The

40. J. Hamer, *Karl Barth* (London: Collins, 1962), p. xxii.

41. Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Karl Barth*, p. 389; H. Fries, *Kirche als Ereignis*, p. 107; H. Küng, *Justification*, p. 194; H. Volk, "Die Christologie bei Karl Barth und Emil Brunner," in A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht (eds.), *Das Konzil von Chalkedon* (Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1954), vol. III, p. 643.

42. (Paris: Desclée, 1949). The English translation (which does not retain this title) is preceded by a significant introduction, "A Reflective Glimpse and Precisions" (pp. xi-xxxviii).

43. Hamer, *Karl Barth*, pp. 208, 211.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 168.

45. Journet, *L'Eglise du Verbe Incarné*, vol. II, pp. 1130-33. The general conclusion of this essay, "L'ecclésiologie de Karl Barth" (pp. 1130-71), is a clear rejection of the entire Barthian ecclesiology, in spite of the great hopes which it had aroused at first.

turning point is the above-mentioned book (first published in 1951) of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who insisted on the evolution of Barth's thought towards a complete idea of analogy and on the place given to Christology as the axis of his theology. In his view, in the 1920s Barth's ecclesiology was conditioned by the rejection of continuity or permanence and by a one-sided emphasis on the event. However, since the Incarnation is now the event *par excellence*, the event is linked with history and continuity, and this should condition a new form of ecclesiology.<sup>46</sup> The German, Heinrich Fries, also goes very far towards accepting, not only Barth's Christology, but his ecclesiology as well. The dynamism and the actualism in Barth's concept of the church would in no way exclude the objective, substance, continuity, since this actualism consists in the Word which is Christ.<sup>47</sup> Even a man like Brunero Gherardini also thinks that former critics have too hastily concluded that for Barth the church is inevitably invisible, subjective, discontinued, in perpetual creation. He does not deny that actualism was, and still is in part, a pillar of Barthian theology, but he holds that it finds a corrective in the continuity of Jesus Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Were these and other similar comments too optimistic? The last ten years have been, as a matter of fact, a period of anxious expectation. Would the new emphasis become more apparent, or had sympathetic Roman Catholics read more in Barth than was really there to be read? An answer has apparently been given by Barth himself, and perhaps I may be allowed to dwell on this for a while.

When he delivered his lecture on "The Humanity of God" at the meeting of the Swiss Reformed Ministers' Association in Aarau, on September 25, 1956, Karl Barth was aware that he was expressing a certain change of trend in his theological thinking. He looked back across forty years of work and said:

Surely I do not deceive myself when I assume that our theme today should suggest a change of direction in the thinking of evangelical theology. . . . What began forcibly to press itself upon us about forty years ago was not so much the humanity of God as His deity—a God absolutely unique in His relation to man and the world, overpoweringly lofty and distant, strange, yes even wholly other. . . . Unmistakably for us the humanity of God at that time moved from the center to the periphery, from the emphasized principal clause to the less emphasized subordinate clause. . . . That it is our subject for today and that I could not refuse to say something on it is a symptom of the fact that that earlier change of direction was not the last word.<sup>49</sup>

Roman Catholics, among others, have endeavoured to evaluate this change of direction and (to focus on my particular topic) have asked themselves if it meant a change in Barth's concept of the church. Barth insists, indeed,

46. Cf. von Balthasar, *Karl Barth*, pp. 393–97; Hamer, *Karl Barth*, pp. xii–xvii.

47. Cf. Fries, *Kirche als Ereignis*, pp. 107–11.

48. Cf. B. Gherardini, *La parola di Dio nella teologia di Karl Barth* (Rome: Editrice Studium, 1955), pp. 124–30; "Nota sull' Escursus VII di 'L'Eglise du Verbe Incarné' (2e vol.), di Mons. Journet," *Euntes Docete*, 6 (1953), 387–91.

49. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, pp. 37f.

that "a genuine revision [he is thinking of Augustine's *Retractationes*] in no way involves a subsequent retreat, but rather a new beginning and attack in which what previously has been said is to be said more than ever, but now even better." Nevertheless, he casts a critical look at his past and recalls expressions now abandoned: "the famous 'wholly other' breaking in upon us 'perpendicularly from above,' the not less famous 'infinite qualitative distinction' between God and man, the vacuum, the mathematical point, and the tangent in which alone they must meet." And he asks the question which is so fundamental from our point of view in this study: "Was the impression of many contemporaries wholly unfounded, who felt that the final result might be . . . to make God great for a change at the cost of man?" Or again: "Is it possible . . . that the humanity of God did not quite come into its rights in the manner in which we . . . lifted up His deity on the candlestick?" Barth confesses that it appeared to escape him "that the deity of the living God . . . found its meaning and its power only in the context of His history and of His dialogue with man, and thus in His togetherness with man. . . ." <sup>50</sup> A deepening of the Christological perspective brought him to know that "in His deity there is enough room for communion with man." <sup>51</sup> From a more unconditional acknowledgment of God's humanity, Barth draws a series of conclusions, some of which seem to meet the most radical objections brought by Roman Catholics against his ecclesiology.

First, there follows "a quite definite distinction of man as such," due him "because he is the being whom God willed to exalt as His covenant-partner, not otherwise." Barth comments on this: "On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of every human being, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption." This distinction extends to everything with which man as man is endowed by his Creator. <sup>52</sup>

From this we may immediately jump to the fifth consequence, which concerns ecclesiology directly. The distinction accorded to man is also accorded to the church:

In the knowledge of the humanity of God one must take seriously, affirm, and thankfully acknowledge *Christendom*, the *Church*. We must, each in his place, take part in its life and join in its service. It was a part of the exaggerations of which we were guilty in 1920 that we were able to see the theological relevance of the Church only as a negative counterpart to the Kingdom of God which we had then so happily rediscovered. We wanted to interpret the form of the Church's doctrine, its worship, its juridical order as "human, all too human," as "not so important." We regarded all the earnestness or even zeal devoted to them as superfluous or even injurious. In all this we at least approached the theory and practice of a spiritual partisanship and an esoteric gnosticism.

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50. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-45.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 53f.

Barth is certainly not ready, especially in view of what he calls "the actual and recurrent Roman temptation," "to silence or even to soften the stress on the judgment beginning with the house of God," or "to reverse the sequence whereby *event* precedes *institution*," but he adds:

We had and still have to see and to understand, however, that the maintenance of this sequence and the remembrance of that judgment must in no case result in neglect or renunciation of our solidarity with the Church. The word which is critical of the Church can be meaningful and fruitful only when it stems from insight—I do not say too much—into the existence and function of the Church as necessary for salvation. . . . We should be inhuman where God is human, we should be ashamed of Jesus Christ Himself, were we willing to be ashamed of the Church. . . . The Church is not too mean a thing for Him but, for better or for worse, sufficiently precious and worthy in His eyes to be entrusted with His witnessing and thus His affairs in the world—yes, even Himself. So great is God's loving-kindness.<sup>53</sup>

The lecture terminated with this beautiful profession of faith:

Our "I believe in the Holy Spirit" would be empty if it did not also include in a concrete, practical, and obligatory way the "I believe one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." We believe the Church as the place where the crown of humanity, namely, man's fellow-humanity, may become visible in Christocratic brotherhood. Moreover, we believe it as the place where God's glory wills to dwell upon earth, that is, where humanity: the humanity of God, wills to assume tangible form in time and here upon earth. Here we recognize the humanity of God. Here we delight in it. Here we celebrate and witness to it. Here we glory in the Immanuel, just as He did who, as He looked at the world, would not cast away the burden of the Church but rather chose to take it upon Himself and bear it in the name of all its members. "If God is for us, who is against us?"<sup>54</sup>

It is not surprising that a few Roman Catholics have been prone to interpret those affirmations in a sense favourable to their traditional theology. Others too have spoken of Barth's lecture as something of a revolution in his thought.<sup>55</sup> But was it not rather only maturation still, without repudiation of the past, without withdrawal from any major position?

In the introduction to the English translation of his book, Hamer still maintains most of his reservations, and it is clear that he would not readily follow the interpretation of von Balthasar, Fries, or Küng. He does not think that "the evolution of Barth has finally led him to cross this threshold which would give to the fundamental options of his thought the right to be cited within Catholic theology," because Barth has not realized his plan of thoroughgoing Christology. Hamer goes back once more to former objections:

Can one treat of the humanity of God without giving its full dimension to the humanity of man? This is the whole problem. In Christology the instrumentality of the human action is stripped of all true density. . . . The history of salvation is transported outside of concrete human existence. Our justice is

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

55. Cf. Cosslett Quin, "The Humanity of God," *Theology*, 62 (1959), 272.

there; our sin is past, but the passage is real only in Jesus Christ, in no way in our existence. . . . The theology of the Incarnation is not, therefore, fully developed."<sup>56</sup>

With more specific reference to the church, Hamer's reaction remains the same:

In 1949 von Balthasar wrote that the Ecclesiology of Barth would have to take another direction in the years to come in order to be faithful to the new Christological orientation of his whole thought. Twelve years have gone by. Nothing permits us to suppose that Karl Barth has profoundly modified his Ecclesiology. Certainly there is in Barth a re-establishment of the primacy of the Christian community. This is a very precise reaction against Protestant individualism. This reaction is even of such a nature as to surprise certain Catholic readers. The "event-happening (événementiel) character" of the Church remains entire. If Barth rejects all the constitutions of the Church in order to keep only its congregationalist structure, it is because the organization of the Christian community has density only in immediate and exclusive dependance upon an event. But this thesis of Barth is not independent of the ensemble of his thought: *it is an immediate consequence of his theological anthropology.*<sup>57</sup>

I can readily see the point of Hamer's argument. I think, however, that his approach is a little too systematic and perhaps does not take sufficiently into account the complexity and even the inconsistency of Barthian theology. I would rather take the middle way with the most recent Roman Catholic critic, the Dutch Dominican Boniface Willems, a pupil of Barth himself.

Paradoxically enough, Willems, not unlike other Roman Catholics, would at first seem to imply that he perceives the final implications of Barthian theology better than Barth himself: "In a consistent pursuit of Barth's incarnatory view on the Church, one comes to conclusions that are not far removed from Catholic ecclesiology. The question is only whether Barth himself also explicitly accepts responsibility for these conclusions, which in our opinion are obvious." The trouble is that the answer is "No!" Willems has to admit this, while trying to offer an explanation from outside the system: "Now it is more than clear that Barth consciously persists in opposing Catholic ecclesiology. Perhaps this is also caused partly by the signals of alarm of his fellow Protestants who saw him drifting off toward Rome. However this may be, it would be incorrect and one-sided not to pay due attention to Barth's explicit criticism."<sup>58</sup> He comes back to this a little later:

Notwithstanding many positive ideas that Barth has brought forward about the Church, for the time being he definitely does not want to hear of an agreement between his teaching and that of Catholic ecclesiology. This then—until such time as the contrary would be expressed—is a clear and definitive word.

56. Hamer, *Karl Barth*, pp. xxvi, xxixf.

57. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

58. B. Willems, *Karl Barth: An Ecumenical Approach to His Theology* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1965), pp. 101f. Cf. Willems, "Christus und die Kirche," *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift*, 67 (1958), 257-73.

One may speculate on the question of whether with a better knowledge of modern Catholic ideas about the Church he would have given the same apodictic judgment. . . . Perhaps another Küng will someday be able to demonstrate that even on this precarious point the ideas of Barth and Rome do not have to be Church-splitting. This is a beautiful fantasy, but at the same time it is a very real possibility. It is therefore better to study than to indulge at such an obviously premature stage in shouts of joy, and in this connection the remark should also be made that even premature shouts of joy are always still a little more stimulating than the *Non possumus* chorus in A-minor one still hears from time to time from behind the denominational barricades.<sup>59</sup>

For Willems, Barth has finally laid the foundation for a more positive appreciation of the human element in the church. The problem, however, is "whether in the Person of Jesus Christ God has assumed a human nature that now also in the activity of Christ has become a coactive *subject*. . . . Does he [Barth] accept a certain relative autonomy of man?" Willems personally believes that for Barth "the Church is more than merely a space within which God's redemptive activity reveals itself: she herself is that redemptive activity in a created form, and therefore in a form that shows itself under a veil."<sup>60</sup>

I should like to end my paper on this note. Roman Catholic theologians are not of one mind as to the significance of Barth's ecclesiology. Probably several, including myself, would understand the perplexity of St. Hereticus, in his chapter "Beware of Barth:" "I'm having second thoughts about Barth. The trouble with outlining his works is that it might actually encourage people to go and read them. And although he may, of course, turn out to be the grandest heretic of them all, who can tell for sure?"<sup>61</sup>

59. Willems, *Karl Barth*, p. 118.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 113.

61. Robert McAfee Brown, *The Collect'd Writings of St. Hereticus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 97.