

The Church of The Future

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Published in 2018 by SCM Press, 3rd Floor, Invicta House, 108–114 Golden Lane,
London EC1Y 0TG.

SCM Press is an imprint of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd (a registered charity)
13A Hellesdon Park Road, Norwich NR6 5DR, UK

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ISBN 978 0 334 03155 0

Printed in the UK by
Ashford, Hampshire

Concilium is published in March, June, August, October, December

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Editorial

Thinking how the Church needs to change if it is constantly to fulfil its mission better is an activity that has been part of its life since the beginning. At the end of the last Council Karl Rahner regarded this as a task and an opportunity. The current period is marked by a deep cultural crisis across the world, in which we must learn to identify the upheavals taking place, in technology, the economy and society, the appeals to new structures of authority and participatory decision-making, the population movements associated with globalisation, with the distribution of resources, with environmental factors, etc. The Church itself cannot be content to continue as a rigid system, fixed once and for all. It has ceaselessly to find in Him who is its foundation, and in conversations with the worlds it has to engage with, the means to renew itself to fulfil its role of being the universal sacrament of salvation.

There are four parts to this issue: Why and how can we frame the question of the Church of the future? What view of this issue is emerging in the continents of the South? What are the significant fields we must explore to imagine the future? And where can we find an idea that holds everything together? Of course, these reflections make no claim to be exhaustive or to end the building work. They are a first effort and an invitation to go further, in freedom.

The first part seeks to place the framework of reflection on the Church of the future on a plane built partly on theology but also on history and sociology. Christoph Theobald, professor of fundamental and dogmatic theology in the Jesuit Faculties in Paris, introduces this issue by questioning the legitimacy of trying to outline the future shape of the Church. He gives

an answer and places himself in the footsteps of Vatican II. By so doing he indicates a path that takes the form of a process of ecclesial conversion in four stages, led by the holy Spirit. This reveals the theological criteria that must accompany this process on a world scale: pastoral concern, reform in the spirit of the Gospel, an ecumenical and missionary character and the charismatic and hierarchical gifts, placed within a process of listening to the faithful.

The Church historian Massimo Faggioli, professor at Villanova University (Philadelphia, USA) carries out a historical and sociological analysis of some tendencies that may be significant for the Church of the future as they build on the openings created by the Second Vatican Council and recently by Pope Francis. He asks about the factors influencing our age, and whether it should be described as a period of transition, touching on cultural plurality, the tragic events that have occurred in the world and the Church, its sociological decline, deinstitutionalisation, the question of the ordained ministry, the place of women, popular culture and the neo-traditionalist reaction.

Part II is an attempt to define a number of turning-points seen from three so-called 'Southern' continents: Asia, Latin America and Africa. The Filipino sociologist, a young researcher at Manila University's Ateneo, Jayeel Cornelio, begins with a consideration of the Church as a worldwide phenomenon. He shows first that the common claim that the new centre of the Church is in the global South has to be qualified. Then he emphasises two challenges: the younger generations and the inequalities that have severe impacts on the present and future life of the planet. The way the Church responds to these challenges will deeply influence its future shape.

Virginia Azcuy, professor of theology at the Catholic University of Buenos Aires (Argentina), currently doing research at the Catholic University of Chile, has chosen to start from the complex and ambiguous reality of the Church today in order to imagine its future. She underlines the tension the institution is experiencing between what it is able to achieve and its aspirations to live its mission to the full. This forces it to face failure and limit. To discern the features of the future Church, Azcuy decides to do practical ecclesiology on three challenges she sees as fundamental: weak credibility, the deformation created by clericalism,

male prejudices and spiritual worldliness.

Stan Chu Llo, professor at Chicago's DePaul University, who is doing research on African Catholicism, considers the Church of the future in Africa in the light of Pope Francis' ecclesiology. He reflects on a world Catholicism in which the African churches are playing a significant role in the formation of the identity and mission of the universal Church. He offers the theological outline for a route map for the African church, which, he argues, will have to engage in mission as poor and merciful if it wishes to transform the tragic and unacceptable episodes of the continent's history into eschatological fruits of the Reign of God.

After geographical approaches in which theology combines with sociology, Part III envisages the problems associated with the Church of the future from the point of view of specific disciplines. Mike van Treek Nilsson, a young Chilean biblicist, considers what the bible can contribute to the life of society and a renewal of the Church when approached via an exegesis that takes account of its powerful symbolic imagination. A sapiential, literary and humanistic approach to the bible makes it possible to open up the biblical material and put it in touch with other experiences of God, to initiate conversations with other worlds. The aim is to avoid any form of fundamentalism or instrumentalisation of the bible in order to allow deeper human encounters and recognise God's action in them.

The Italian theologian Serena Noceti, an ecclesiologist and specialist in catechetics, seeks to emphasise how it is necessary and possible to imagine structural transformations of the Church in a period in which we are leaving behind a Euro-centric Church thanks to Pope Francis. This means reshaping roles and functions, powers and their exercise, and the models of communication within the Church. Prophetic initiatives in particular local churches may make it possible to try experiments that could benefit the universal Church's evangelising mission while respecting cultural sensitivities.

The digital world is of particular relevance to the future Church's missionary activity. Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, professor of liturgy and pastoral studies in New Orleans, argues for a proactive presence of the Church in the world of digital communications technologies and the culture they create. This requires attention to three socio-cultural aspects of that world: trust, the possibility of authentic encounters and the overturning of

concepts of authority. By stressing the holy Spirit in relation to these three dimensions, she tries to produce a pneumatological foundation for a vision of a Church that bears witness to the Gospel in a voluntary and prophetic way in this digital culture.

Finally, Thierry-Marie Courau, professor of theology at the Institut Catholique in Paris, in search of a keystone that will hold the different elements of this discussion together, suggests that this keystone has to permeate the spirit and the reform of the Church to make it attentive to the calls of the future, and finds it in a listening attitude that unfolds in action. Exactly like the term *dia-logue*, this concept must become part of the vocabulary of theology and its teachings and become the subject of specific theological research projects, since it is nothing less than the possibility for individuals and communities to attain salvation in their ordinary everyday existence, which is capable of transforming society. This possibility becomes reality, as Pope Francis' popular theology invites us to see, through the eyes and ears of the poorest in society as it leads the Church into a state of *metanoia* through the action of the Spirit.

Professor Courau has just been elected president of *Concilium* in succession to the Indian theologian Felix Wilfred, who filled the role for more than eleven years with great intelligence, clarity of vision and generosity, for which we here offer him our heartfelt thanks.

The Theological Forum in this issue deals with the place of theology at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, and considers the state of theological publishing in continental Europe and the fiftieth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*.

Translated by Francis McDonagh