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Book Review

Matthew Vellanickal, *Church: Communion of Individual Churches* *BiblicoTheological Perspectives on the Communion Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2009, Pp. 349.

This book is another outstanding contribution to the field of ecclesiology from the noted biblical scholar and theologian, Dr. Matthew Vellanickal. The nature of the Church as communion of Individual Churches is the very biblical and patristic understanding, and practiced in the first millennium. Though this understanding was partially forgotten later, the Vatican Council II re-asserted it with a renewed interest. This communion aspect is the basis of catholicity of the Church. This book explores the biblical, patristic and theological aspects of this important notion in a systematic way.

The book is divided into 15 chapters with an introduction and a conclusion, has full of biblical and theological insights. The terms, such as local, individual, particular, *Sui Juris*, used in this work are clarified in the first chapter. The term local is for a Church in a locality, particular for an eparchy/diocese of an individual Church, and individual for Churches with features of unique liturgy, spirituality, theology and discipline. The term *Sui Juris* is used almost equal to the term individual, but with more stress on canonical status.

The Chapters two to four are the biblical exposition of the concept of the Church. While the chapter 2 deals with the Church's self understanding in relation to God's reign and the images of the Church in the NT, the third chapter explores into the NT basis of the communion ecclesiology. The fourth chapter looks into the biblical basis of the Church as a local and individual entity. It is an enquiry into the essential nature of the Church, both local and individual, and the interplay of these characteristics.

From the chapter 5 onwards this book specifically deals with the different aspects of the theology of the Individual Churches. Chapter 5 explains the formation and growth of Individual Churches and the basic factors in the process of diversification. The relation between the Individual Church and the Universal Church is discussed in the next chapter. There is no Universal Church without the Individual Churches. The primacy of the Individual Church in the communion ecclesiology is very important. While the sacramental or outward unity is discussed in the next chapter, the inner principle, the holiness, is discussed in relation to communion in the 8th chapter.

The next two chapters discuss the catholicity and apostolicity in relation to the communion of Individual Churches. The apostolic succession is not mere an “unbroken chain in the occupation of an Episcopal See” but “the succession of faith and its profession” (p.238). Ministries, including the episcopal and the Petrine, are discussed in the next three chapters in relation to the Communion of Churches. While emphasizing the aspect of collegiality and service in the ministry of the Church, the Petrine ministry and primacy are presented as essentially “a ministry to preserve the unity of the Universal Church” and “a primacy of service in Communion” (p.281). The last but one chapter deals with one of the fundamental questions in ecclesiology: the relation between the mission and the Church. “As there is a priority of the Individual Church, at the level of communion, so there is a priority of the Individual Church at the level of the evangelizing mission of the Church” (p.293). In the context of India this is very important. An Individual Church (Syro Malabar) who supplies 65% of the missionary personnel in India is denied to do evangelization work as an ecclesial body. This is an anomaly to the very concept of the Communion of Churches itself.

The last chapter deals with the Syro Malabar Church (of the Thomas Christian tradition) and its identity, mission and experience as an Individual Church. While participating in the faith-vision of the other Thomite Churches it has a unique theological, liturgical and spiritual heritage and discipline, known as “the Way of Thomas”. This ecclesial heritage developed outside the Roman Empire “is an authentic model of the harmonious blending of individuality and communion” (p.319).

The book gives a useful bibliography at the end, but lacks a subject and author index. Hope the next edition will suffix it, which may be very useful to the students of theology.

Though the heated discussions on the plurality of Churches and the rightful existence of the two Oriental Churches, Syro Malabar and Syro Malankara, along with the Latin Church somewhat subsided, the practical solutions are yet to be implemented in the Indian Church. In this situation such a work on the biblico-theological basis of the communion ecclesiology of the Vatican council II is very appropriate. This book is a warning to those who consider Individual Churches other than the Latin Church as “merely different forms or ‘rites’, or just archaic museum pieces” (p.160), and also an invitation to understand and appreciate the catholicity of the Church. Let us hope also that this communion understanding of the Churches will boost the ecumenical dialogues world-wide.

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