

CONSTITUTION

As an historical thing -- i.e. America, Magna Carta, English Parliament, enlightened ideas, theistic sense of world (Washington, Madison, Jefferson), Declaration of Independence says - completely horizontal reflection and sufficient to "ordain and establish" purely humane social purposes are sufficient motivation for constitution and state.

State says: "It seems good to us...." The religious community says, "It seems good to us and to the Holy Spirit". The addition is of absolute importance, the community of faith is in the passive tense; it did not generate it, it has been generated.

Biblical Episodes; "You have not called me I have called you".

A "constitution" is an awkward term for an ordering document which is self-conscious about the difference elaborated above. This community like any other historical body requires an ordering document, common sense to do things decently and in order. The requirements of public law all require such order and ordering. On the other hand, this community specifies its emergence, its life, its steady, sustaining power, its guide; its goal -- all of these affirmed to precede and transcend historical forces and entities. All prayers for the church begin with the petition for a gift of God's Spirit.

To create a "constitution" for such an organism remembering that the Spirit (shows) where it wishes is like creating a net to catch the wind. We must affirm the wind, both the wind and the net.

There is no conceivable or conventional escape from this umbrella but there is a way for a community which lives tautly between her heavenly origination and her earthly place and responsibility to live out her life within this eschatological situation. If the church's self understanding of her eschatological character dominates her worship, her action, and her statements of self-understanding then there is room and occasion for her to make a "constitution" which is characterized by a devout and holy sense of humor! This document will make broad use of that beautiful word "normally". It will specify procedures with clarity but avoid absolutes. It will lay down ways of work which it believes effective but avoids affirming absolutes. It will be a guide for normal situations but recognizes that under the Spirit fresh occasions may demand new ways. To quote R.O.* "Style is the deference that action pays to uncertainty". (*Robert Oppenheimer*)

Now quite clearly such an eschatological document cannot meet the norms of human action or the requirements of corporate law. It cannot say in a constitution that a presiding bishop shall be elected in such and such a way except where the Holy Spirit has other ideas!

But whatever ordering document a church creates ought to be preceded by a preamble in which the exact nature and spirit of that document and the difference of the community postulates from other historical communities is confessed. Such a preamble will not change procedures but it might permeate modes of action, moderate legalistic judgments, invite a greater flexibility, deeper reflection....

Preamble should remind us of the limiting and self-correcting focus which the confession of the Holy Spirit requires. Such a preamble should remind the community of the memorable statement of an English divine "I beseech you brethren by the bowels of Christ that you recall that you might be wrong."

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