



bi-annual Bulletin

**In this issue:**

<i>To our Readers: two important announcements from the Director.</i> . . . . .	p.	2
<i>The Theological Problem of "Reception",</i> by John Zizioulas. . . . .	"	3
<i>The Ten Propositions: A Bibliography</i> . . . . .	"	7
<i>The Churches' Council for Covenanting: A Bibliography</i> . . . . .	"	8
<i>An International Directory of Ecumenical Research Centers and Publications</i> (1984 Update)		
– Centers . . . . .	"	10
– Publications . . . . .	"	12

TO OUR READERS: two important announcements from the Director.

First, we joyfully announce the publication of a new 260 page volume, our BIBLIOGRAPHY OF INTERCHURCH AND INTERCONFESSIONAL DIALOGUES. Ten years in preparation, the publication marks an historic development for our Centro Pro Unione, and makes available for the first time a complete guide to the growing mass of material published around the world about these dialogues. As the churches now move forward into an unprecedented and historic period of reflection and reception of these interchurch and interconfessional dialogues, the vast amount of published material now made more available for study by this *Bibliography* will become a focus of theological research. This new volume completely supplants and advances all of the material this Centro has been publishing in installments since 1978, and which has been published in this Bulletin. Thus for the first time, theologians, teachers and students using this *Bibliography* will have in one place and in an organized format for easy reference over ten years of cumulative research. It has over 6,500 bibliographical entries, surveys over 80 periodicals covering over 200 national, regional and international dialogues, both bilateral and multi-lateral. It also emphasizes hard-to-find information on local dialogues, selected for their importance to the field of theological study. It is the only organized list available anywhere of these dialogues, which are organized for easy reference according to the churches involved, with individual entries divided according to where one can find the text, then what information has been published about them, and finally a complete survey of reflection and analysis. Thus for instance, a Lutheran seeking to respond to *BEM* can compare that Lima document with all the other dialogues and their positions in which Lutherans around the world have participated. The *Bibliography* is available only through the Centro Pro Unione at 35,000 Italian Lira or 20 U.S. dollars postpaid.

Second, with this number of our bi-annual Bulletin we inaugurate a new and improved format, which is sent free of charge to about one thousand scholarly institutions, libraries, faculties and individual scholars in the field of ecumenical research.

About this issue: we are honored to have Prof. Zizioulas' article on Reception. This paper was originally given last spring at the Centro, and provides a very important Orthodox insight into what is fast becoming a major topic of theological reflection. Msgr. Stewart's paper on the same topic, which formed the other half of the original program, was carried in the last issue.

Also in this issue we present a bibliography of the *Ten Propositions* and the *Churches' Council for Covenanting* much discussed in Great Britain recently. Because this material did not fall within the scope of our interchurch bibliography, we are publishing it separately here.

Finally, we continue with the latest update of our *International Directory*, with the hope that in early 1986 we will be ready to publish a new complete edition.

IN ORDER TO CONTINUE OUR WORK WE NOW FIND IT NECESSARY TO ASK FOR AN ANNUAL CONTRIBUTION OF AT LEAST FIVE U.S. DOLLARS OR MORE FROM EACH RECIPIENT. This amount covers only printing and postage, and does not include costs of research, secretarial services and handling. Your response will ensure the continuance of our Bulletin features, including our annual up-date of the *Bibliography* announced above, as well as the annual update of our *INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORY OF ECUMENICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTES AND PUBLICATIONS*.

May we please hear from you? Please make checks or international money orders payable to our business manager, "Roland Lawson" and send to this address. All items are sent by surface mail.

Charles Angell, S.A.  
Director

## THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF "RECEPTION"

John Zizioulas\*

### I. Introduction

The subject on which I have been asked to speak is extremely vast and complex. We cannot cover all its aspects here. Our object will be to touch upon some of the most important areas which are of particular importance ecumenically today.

Let me first say a few words about the importance of the subject before I outline the method I shall follow in this presentation.

Reception is part of the on-going life of the Church. Ever since the time of our Lord and the Apostles the Church constantly receives and re-ceives the message - and indeed more than the message - of Our Lord. In fact one can go even further back and make the point that *Our Lord himself* received not only vertically (the mission from his Father) but also horizontally, i.e. the history of the people of Israel to which he belonged as Man. Our Lord belonged to a certain historical period, to a certain generation, and he did not speak except in and through what was transmitted to him historically in his own context. Thus the idea of reception precedes the Church herself and it must be stressed that in a very deep sense the Church was born out of an on-going process of reception; she is herself a product of reception.

But in spite of this general sense of reception - which we must always bear in mind - the term acquired in the course of history a very specific and technical sense. This sense is mainly associated with the *Councils* of the Church and their decisions. It entered even the terminology of Canon Law and acquired a very special meaning: it is the acceptance and consent given by the people to a particular conciliar or ecclesiastical decision.

In modern times the idea of reception became a basic theological concept in the context

of the Ecumenical Movement. I was myself involved in the very first occasions when this issue started to emerge in the ecumenical horizon: it was a meeting organized by Faith and Order, first in Oxford and then in Bad Gastein, Austria, in 1965 and 1966, which brought together Church historians and Patristic scholars to discuss the Councils in the Ancient Church. It emerged then that Reception is an important part of conciliarity. But it also emerged that we know very little about the meaning and especially the theological content of this term, a fact that called for further reflection on this matter.

As time went on the idea of reception began to enter into the ecumenical vocabulary officially and in a decisive way. It was, I remember, in Louvain, at the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in 1972 that an attempt was made to make use of this idea in a decisive way. As time went on the idea of reception became more and more the object of attention both theologically and practically in the Ecumenical Movement. Reception is now a subject we cannot ignore, as subsequent events in the Ecumenical Movement, (especially the development of bilateral theological dialogues which produced official documents, e.g. the ARCIC, as well as the Lima document) have made this issue relevant and inescapable.

But these latter developments have also made the entire matter even more complex for the following reason:

In the classical idea of reception (about which students of theology are not very clear anyway), we have to deal with a *united* Church, which knew exactly what the organs of reception were and assumed agreement on this point. Today we have to take into account that there is a variety of views and differences among

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Christians as to how reception operates. It is also peculiar to our actual situation that the divided Churches are called to receive from one another or indeed to receive one another, which raises all sorts of fundamental ecclesiological questions, since the highest form of reception in this context is that of *mutual ecclesial recognition* and not simply of agreement on doctrine. This makes one wonder whether the classical views would have any relevance for our present situation. Do we have to take into account the classical view of reception and how can we fit it into our situation?

My answer to this question is positive, for two reasons:

a) There are Churches which are so deeply bound to their traditions that they cannot act without reference to the classical view of reception, e.g., the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, to some extent also the Anglicans, have certain fixed organs and procedures of reception which they cannot ignore or bypass in their present ecumenical relations. b) The classical view of reception contains many elements that can be helpful for our situation, if we are able to appreciate them theologically and make the proper use of them.

For these reasons I propose to deal with my subject in the following way:

First, I shall try to point out the major theological issues that reception involves in the classical use of the notion.

Secondly, I shall look at the present day situation and see what difficulties these issues entail for the Churches involved in the ecumenical dialogue.

Finally, I shall try to identify ways in which the classical model of reception can be operative today.

## II. The Classical idea of Reception and its theological significance

### 1. What is being received?

As I said at the beginning of my presentation the notion and experience of reception is deeply rooted in the historical origins and the very being of the Church. The Church was born out of a process of reception and has grown and existed through reception. If we look deeply into this matter from a theological point of view, we must note that there are two fundamental aspects to this fact of reception, both of which are important for us today. The first is that the Church *receives*: she receives from God through Christ in the Holy Spirit; but she receives also from the world, its history, its culture, even its tragic

and sinful experiences and failures, for she is the body of the crucified Lord who takes upon himself the sins of the world. The second aspect is that the Church is *received*: this involves two points: on the one hand the Church as a distinct community within the world exists in constant dialogue with whatever constitutes the "non-ecclesial" realm in and attempt to make herself acceptable to the world. What we used to call "mission" is better rendered with notions and nuances of reception, because "mission" is loaded with ideas of aggressiveness, whereas the Church should be *offering herself to the world for reception* instead of *imposing* herself on it. (It is interesting that in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel the Son of God is spoken of as having not been *received* by the world: his own did not "receive" him). The other point in the Church's being received is that of a *reception of one Church by another Church* - a most important aspect of reception, which stems from the basic ecclesiological fact that the Church although one exists as *Churches* (in the plural), and these Churches exist as One Church in and through constantly receiving one another as sister Churches. We shall see later how important this aspect is for us today.

Thus, to the question: *what is received in reception* we can answer by the following remarks:

a) What is received in the first place, and also in the final analysis, is *the love of God the Father* incarnate in His own unique and beloved Son and given to us in the Holy Spirit. Whatever we may add to the meaning of reception as theologians, as Church historians and as Canon lawyers should not obscure, ignore or destroy this fact. The Church exists in order to give what she has received as the love of God for the world.

Because the content of reception is this love of God for the world incarnate in Christ, St. Paul uses the technical term (and it is technical) of *parelabon* and *paralabete* with reference to the *person* of Our Lord. In Col. 2,6 he writes "as you have received Jesus Christ". Equally it is interesting that in Hebrew 12,28 the verb "to receive" is used in the sense of "receiving the Kingdom". Reception is not a dry practical idea.

b) Within this broader theological and existential context the Church according to St. Paul received also *the Gospel (to euaggelion)* of Christ (1 Co 15,1; Gal 1,9-12). This Gospel is the Good News of God's love to the world in Christ, but in the concrete form of a *teaching* and of a *creed* stating the *historical facts* that make up this giving of the love of God to us. Thus, the Church receives also the *histori-*

cal facts (that Jesus Christ died and was raised from the dead), which are *part of the history of the people of God* and not unrelated to it. The Church receives in this way a *Creed* which she confesses to be a true statement of the acts of God in the history of His people and Man, i.e. of the way God so loved the world as to give His only Son for it.

c) But this creed, these verbal confessions, should not take away from reception its personal-existential character. The fact that the Church receives above all a *Person* - and not ideas - underlies the use of *paralambanein* by Paul for the Holy Eucharist. In Cor. 11,23 and elsewhere St. Paul speaks of the Eucharist as something *received* and transmitted. This, as we shall see later, is of great importance for the problem of reception.

d) Attempts to maintain the purity of the original *kerygma* concerning the facts through which the love of God is received led the Church to develop a *magisterium* which is responsible for protecting this *kerygma* from heretical distortions. We shall see later on what theological problems this raises. For the moment we must note that decisions and pronouncements of this responsible magisterium, particularly in the form of *conciliar decisions* becomes an essential part of the *what* of reception only when it is shown that distortions of the narrative and the meaning of the facts that make up the gift of God's love to us can have serious existential consequences. Dogmatic formulations which bear no such existential consequences - or are not shown to bear such consequences - cannot claim to be part of reception. The Church does not receive and perpetuate ideas or doctrines as such, but life and love, the very life and love of God for Man.

e) Finally, as I have indicated earlier on, the Church is also herself the object of reception in the two senses: of her acceptance and reception by the world, and of the mutual recognition of *Churches* in the communion of the *One Church*. This is so because the Church is supposed to be the body of Christ, i.e. the very presence of this gift of God to the world in each place. As long as the world rejects the Church or the Churches reject one another the need for reception will exist. There is no full catholicity of the Church in a state of schism.

But all this leads to the question of the *how*:

2. *How* is Reception (in the classical sense) realised?

The *how* of reception is the most difficult thing to agree upon in our ecumenical situation

today. But with the help of some theological principles drawn from a study of the classical notion of reception we can make the following points, hopefully in common:

a) God's giving of his Son to us took and takes place, we all confess, *in the Holy Spirit*. The *how* of reception is theologically determined by this fact. But what does it imply? There are many elements basic to Pneumatology, but from the ecclesiological point of view the most crucial one is that the Spirit is *koinonia*. If, therefore, reception takes place *in the Spirit*, it must always take place in and through an *event of communion*. By giving His Son as His own very love, God does not *impose* the reception of this gift on us. The Spirit is Freedom, and reception of anything that is the content (the "what") of reception cannot be imposed, on anyone by anyone. Truth is not authoritarian; it is authoritative by springing from an event of communion.

b) Communion means in concrete terms *community*. The "how" of reception must pass through the concrete community or communities of the Church. But not *any* form of community is an ecclesial community. And this is now the crux of the matter.

I have noted earlier how important it is that reception becomes related to the Eucharist. It must be now repeated that this is so also with regard to the "how" of reception. And this implies the following:

(i) No matter how *widely* something is received in the Church unless it is received *in the context of the Eucharist* it has not yet been received *ecclesially*. All credal and conciliar formulations meet their final purpose only when they become integral parts of the Eucharistic community.

(ii) Reception does not take place on the level of individuals but of communities. Because the Churches receive the Gospel, the creeds etc. *as communities*, there is need for a certain *ministry* expressing the *unity* of the community. In the classical model of reception this was the function of the *Bishop*, or to put it better, the ministry of the *episkopè*. Each local Church received the Gospel as *one* body through the *one* "episkopos" in each place. This one bishop guaranteed (a) that the reception was in line with previous communities going back to the first Apostolic communities; and (b) that the reception was in common with the rest of ecclesial communities in the world, which was ascertained through conciliar gatherings and decisions. Thus the episcopal office became essential to the *how* of reception.

(iii) Because of the fact that in the Holy Spirit everything takes place as an event of

communion, the classical model of reception provided that every decision by the bishop or the bishops in council should be *received* by the community. A form of vicious circle was thus created: the community could do nothing without the bishop and the bishop had to receive the "Amen" of the community in all he did. This was a profoundly Eucharistic approach to reception, since the "Amen" of the people always formed an integral and indispensable part of the Eucharist.

(iv) Reception cannot be limited to the local level but has to be universal. A ministry of universal reception is needed which should meet the requirements of communion. Such requirements would involve the following: (a) that this ministry should be episcopal in nature: i.e. it should be exercised by the head of a local Church. This would assure that universal catholicity does not bypass or contradict the catholicity of the local Church. (b) That a consensus of the faithful should be obtained in every case of reception and that this should pass through the local bishops and not be a matter of individuals. In these circumstances one should not hesitate to seek such a ministry in the Bishop of Rome.

(v) Reception requires *inculturation* of the Gospel. Different people receive the Gospel and Christ himself in different ways. There should be room for freedom of expression and variety of cultural forms in reception. This is one of the reasons that makes it necessary for reception to pass always through the local Church.

This, therefore, is the classical model of reception: each local Church receives the Gospel and re-receives it constantly through the ministry of the *episkopè* acting in communion with the faithful and with the other local Churches in conciliar decisions through a universal ministry.

Is this model applicable today?

### III. *The actual ecumenical situation*

It is obvious that there are differences among the Churches today concerning the application of this model of reception. There are nevertheless certain developments which allow for the hope that this model can be of use today at least in some of its basic features.

1. There is growing consensus that reception is a matter not of juridical norms and practices but of relating the Gospel to the actual existential needs of Man. The Churches are attentive to the needs of Man today. Tradition has to be received in close relation with this attention to the needs of modern Man and with due respect to the variety of cultural backgrounds. But there are still differences as to the value and decisiveness to be attached to the past. Some

Protestant Churches feel that there is no allegiance due to the past, to the doctrines and practices of the Church throughout the centuries. Others feel that history is a continuity and reception cannot ignore this. What parts of this continuity are essential? What should be received? Is there an eclectic possibility open to the Churches? Is there a hierarchy of truths? Is there a difference between dogma and *theologoumena*, between faith as such and the expression of faith through schools of theology etc? These are crucial questions today, and affect the problem of reception. The very fact that they are faced and discussed so widely and so profoundly today is a very hopeful sign.

2. There is also growing consensus that the Eucharist is the proper context of reception, and that unless there is eucharistic communion reception is not complete. This of course is the difficult goal of the Ecumenical Movement. But it is important that it is universally admitted that the Eucharist occupies this central place in the idea of reception.

3. The greatest and immediate difficulty lies with the office of the Bishop. On this point two hopeful signs are emerging ecumenically: (a) that the Churches which have episcopacy as an essential ministry realize that it should be exercised in the sense of the *episkopè* and in unity with the *community*; and (b) that the Churches which traditionally have rejected episcopacy are considering the need for a ministry of *episkopè* as an essential part of ecclesial unity. Related with this issue of the *episkopè* is that of the ministry of the Pope which will have to be raised sooner or later. If this thorny issue is put in the right theological perspective, it may also find its resolution. A great deal depends on the right direction theology gives to ecclesiology. And I think that this right direction is actually been given. Thus the ecclesial model of reception is not at all out of date. It may have to be re-adjusted but it is certainly the basis.

And until this re-adjustment takes place? Well, on this we shall hear more by the next speaker, but from a theological perspective the following points may be made:

a) We must remember that reception is not a matter of *texts* alone, but of *Churches* and *people*. In the very act of reacting to texts the Churches enter a process of receiving each other as *Churches*.

b) We must realize that *all* Churches need to re-receive their own tradition and re-adjust themselves to the original Apostolic community.

c) The last word is with *Churches* and not with individuals (theologians or not). But Churches mean *communities* structured in a particular way, in an event of communion, it does not mean either dispersed individuals or isolated authorities.

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