

THE ESSENCE OF THE CHURCH

Introduction

I used to think that when the Holy Spirit led us 'into all truth' [John 16:13], that this would mean being inundated with new piles of truth! But I am now convinced of two things -

- That most of us are already encumbered with far more truths than we can cope with!
- That the work of the Holy Spirit is usually to lead us into the truth *about these truths* - rather than inflict us with more!

In other words, he enables us to see the priority of certain truths from fringe ones; to know which truths are root and which are fruit; to discern the essential truths amidst the non-essential ones.

Of the Essence

The word 'essential' refers to the real 'essence' of something, and you can immediately see that they each derive from the important Latin word *esse*, - 'to be'.

People used to distinguish between the nature of a thing's essential 'BEING' (*esse*) and the elements that existed for its mere WELL-BEING (*bene esse*).

A Tasty Example

Take an omelette.

What is the essence of an omelette? Or, to put it another way, what remains when non-essentials have been removed?

We can probably make an omelette without water/milk, salt/pepper, ham/cheese/tomato/mushrooms. These things improve an omelette, but are non-essential. The real 'essence' of an omelette is EGG + HEAT. Since an omelette cannot exist without egg-and-heat, egg-and-heat are of its *essence*.

Discernment

The Holy Spirit is ever active in our spiritual lives to draw-together, unite, and give order. The Devil works to demolish, divide and bring disorder. He knows the essentials of the Christian Church, and his prime task is to undermine by eclipsing or distorting them.

An over-commitment to non-essentials tears the Church apart as our energies get wrongly diverted to secondary matters at the cost of the Church's two tasks - worship and witness.

Experience versus Essence

Let me explain the heading of this section. Most of us could describe our *experience* of cars. It takes considerable mental effort to discern correctly the real *essence* of a car - our experience actually gets in the way!

We need mentally to get far beyond the radio, heater, chrome trim, clock and cigarette lighter if we are to find what a car really *is*.

Since their invention, cars have accumulated a hundred years' worth of extras!

The Essence

What is the *essence* of a car?

- Small vehicle
- With three-or-more wheels
- Self-propelled
- For road use
- Driver-operated
- For passengers

The essence is unchanging and very, very important. If a 'car' is large (contrary to 1) it becomes a *bus*; if 2-wheeled (contrary to 2) it becomes a *motorbike*; if for land use (contrary to 4) it may be a *tank*; and if for goods (contrary to 6) it becomes a *van*!

The Church

Now we have learnt to understand a car, we're well on the way to understand the Church because the process of discernment is the same. Our experience of the Church is misleadingly different from her essence, due to twenty centuries of added extras.

Similarly we need to do a great deal of stripping away to find her essence.

(What is immediately apparent is that our buildings - confusingly called 'churches' - are later additions to protect the Church from the weather.)

If you've time list six items you think comprise the essence of the Church before you read on... (Later take your list and mine to your Christian minister, who will advise you if I've got it wrong!)

The Essence of the Church

Nothing that the Church can survive without is of her essence, and nothing of her essence can be removed without destroying or changing her.

These six items are the Church's essence –

- God's act of Revelation in Jesus [John 3:16]
- Personal Recognition of item 1 and confession of Jesus as LORD [Acts 16:31]
- God's Calling-out (Greek *ecclesia*) of such believers into Fellowship [1 Peter 1:2]
- The Promised Presence of Jesus in this fellowship of the faithful [Matthew 18:20]
- The Lord's Commissioning and Spirit-Empowering of the faithful for Evangelism/Evangelisation [John 20:21-22]
- The Obedience of the Faithful to their Commission, and Reception of the Spirit for their Mission-task, i.e. the declaration of item 1 above [Acts 2:38-47]

The message of the last item is the event of the first! So the 1-6 sequence is self-repeating (like a film or tape 'loop'). The Church therefore is self-propagating; her growth is in-built; *expansion is of her essence.*

Like a car, the Church's essence lacks much that we generally assume and experience. What about Sacraments, Scripture, Doctrine, Priesthood, etc. ?

Such things are the cherished first-generation children of the Church. They *derive* from her essence, born of her for her well-being.

Put simply, it might be suggested that -

- The Church's Scriptures/Gospel are born of (1).
- Christian Faith and Worship are born of (2).
- The Christian Community (living and departed) are born of (3).
- The Church's Ministry and Sacraments are born of (4).

The essence of the Church is expressed by St. John in 20:19ff.

The Risen Christ comes to his followers: These **gathered disciples** recognise **God's Revelation** of himself in Jesus. They acknowledge him as **Lord**. They rejoice in his **Presence**. They are **sent-out and Spirit-empowered** for **mission**.

Renewal for What?

Importantly for us, Spirit-empowering is of the essence of the Church, but its purpose is to equip the Church for **Evangelism/Evangelization**.

The disciples were FIRST commanded to go out, and THEN received their Spirit-empowering.

Is it fair to suggest that for the most part our Spirit-empowering has been enjoyed behind church doors? Is it also possible that the *non*-essentials of the Church consume so much time and energy that we have little of either left for our mission to the world?

Evangelism is not optional, but 'essential', i.e. of the Church's true essence. Its absence is like a two-wheeled car, it casts doubts on her authenticity! "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of its non-members".

Our spiritual renewal is not for the blessing of the Church, but to equip her to bless the world.