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Review of Tom Greggs, *The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*

The One Thing Needful: The Ecumenical Value of a Theological Ecclesiology

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ABSTRACT

The first volume of Tom Greggs' *Dogmatic Ecclesiology* is extremely promising for ecumenical ecclesiology, because it roots ecclesiology in core theological commitments, focusing on the constitution of the church through God's gracious and life-giving action. Questions of church order and polity, along with other 'purely ecclesiological' questions that often preoccupy ecumenical discussions, rightly take second place to the central investigation of the place of the church in the economy of salvation. I first outline how Greggs' method enables a fresh approach to ecclesiological questions, and then engage with his account of the transformation entailed in being incorporated into the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit. I suggest that the emphasis, in this volume, on self-sacrifice and self-gift calls for a complementary emphasis on the gift of a new identity – as suggested already in Greggs' discussion of baptism. In conclusion, I note the relevance to Greggs' work of his own experience of church life and ministry, and consider how his ecclesiology can acknowledge and engage in conversation with the work of theologians from different contexts.

The first volume of Tom Greggs' tripartite ecclesiology is a refreshing and often even surprising read. Time and again, Greggs raises a question that we might (from experience) expect anyone writing a systematic ecclesiology to spend a chapter or two resolving – and proceeds to persuade the reader that it is really not the most important question. That on its own should be enough to sell the book to anyone who has ever, in inter- or intra-church debates, felt in danger of being bogged down on questions about order, authority or governance – or even baptism, eucharist and ministry.[1] Greggs' ability to cut through these Gordian knots is all the more impressive and persuasive because it relies, not on shiny new purpose-built ecclesiological concepts, but rather on a resolute determination to do ecclesiology theologically. He makes the reasonable assumption that the church, *qua* church, makes sense in relation to God – and hence seeks the answers to ecclesiological questions in core Christian affirmations about the God through whose gracious action the church is formed and sustained. In this paper, I first draw out the importance of Greggs' method and approach for ecclesiology and particularly for ecumenical dialogue. I then briefly trace what I take to be one of the book's most important theological movements – relating the material and quotidian being of the church to the act of the Holy Spirit – and move from this to an outline of one of the issues that I am hoping to see discussed in future volumes.

It is important not to mistake the relative lack of attention to specific questions of church order in *The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* – at least if attention is to be measured in numbers of words – for a lack of concern for the practical outworkings of the ecclesiology developed in the book. Greggs acknowledges the significance, in their place, of the many things about which churches and hence

[1] World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,* Faith & Order Paper no.111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

theologians are concerned; he simply proposes that those who are concerned about them should not lose sight of the 'one thing needful'.[2] His conviction – indicated in this first volume, *inter alia,* by the occasional promissory footnote referring to discussions in future volumes – is that to begin with fundamental theological affirmations will open up more productive ways forward on many of these questions.

A key example of this approach – and one of the topics on which Greggs is most obviously going against the flow of much extant ecclesiological work, particularly in the ecumenical sphere – is found in the treatment of orders of ministry in the chapter on 'The Priestly Ontology and the Church's Life for the World'. Here, Greggs begins with an account of the place of the church in the economy of salvation – as the body of Christ that mediates Christ to the world by the act of the Holy Spirit in the time between ascension and *parousia* (p. 113). From that starting-point he develops an account in which the particular ministries of individuals, and related questions of polity and order, are 'subsequent to (and appropriately proportionate to)' the corporate life and mission of the church, depicted here in terms of corporate priesthood (p. 139). A full discussion of orders of ministry, moreover, is explicitly deferred until even more theological questions – around the kingly and prophetic offices of Christ – have been considered in later volumes. Now, clearly it would be possible to start with somewhat different answers to the initial question about the place of the church in the economy of salvation – for example, by characterising the church as eschatological community, to use the terms that appear in some recent ecumenical documents – and thus reach a different conclusion about the nature and significance of orders of ministry.[3] The key methodological point, however, is that Greggs avoids the temptation to try to resolve questions of church life and practice without enquiring into their deeper theological logic.

The work of which this volume forms part is explicitly a Protestant ecclesiology. This means, *inter alia*, that it is consciously a 'post-Reformation' ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that engages with the reality of church division and that locates itself in the context of inter-confessional debates and conversations. It is easy to identify ways in which it makes a distinctively 'Protestant' contribution to those debates and conversations – for example, by emphasising, and grounding theologically, the priestly character of the whole people of God; by presenting a Zwinglian account of the role of the eucharist in the life of the church; perhaps most fundamentally, by focusing on the gracious freedom of God in relation to the particular forms and orders of church life. I suggest, however, that the full value of the book for ecumenical dialogue would not be realised if it were swiftly pigeon-holed as a 'Protestant perspective'. It offers the prospect of a theologically integrated ecumenism, in which inter-confessional discussions of a wider range of fundamental theological issues can be expected to give rise to fruitful developments on questions of church order and unity. Furthermore, it sets out a – admittedly and unashamedly Protestant, and indeed specifically Methodist – route to better disagreement in the ecumenical space; dialogue between Christians is rooted in the priority of mutual love, as the gift of the Spirit that is the ground of both catholicity and unity. [4] Both catholicity

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[2] Luke 10:41-42.

[3] On Church as eschatological community, see for example World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards A Common Vision*, Faith & Order Paper no. 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), p. 21.

[4] Greggs refers to the idea of 'better quality disagreement' – Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology volume 1: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 438. He links it to his involvement in Scriptural Reasoning – for which see the introductory paragraph of http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/ (accessed 4 August 2022). For the Methodist roots of Greggs' account of catholicity, see his discussion of Wesley's sermon 'A Catholic Spirit' – Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, pp. 435-44.

and unity, moreover, are again ordered towards the church's mission in and for the world. From this perspective, Greggs argues, it is possible both fully to inhabit and be committed to a particular order, polity and denominational tradition, and also to relate to Christians from other traditions as members of the church catholic. This is not, as Greggs makes clear, simply a reheated 'invisible church' ecclesiology, but rather an attempt to do justice to the visible dynamics of catholicity and unity – to discern the Spirit-filled unity of the church precisely in relationships of mutual love across disagreement and difference, rather than in uniformity of order and practice.

Clearly Greggs' argument is not likely to persuade those Christians who are committed on theological grounds to understanding specific orders of worship and/or of polity as indispensable attributes of the church as body of Christ – with all that that implies for the status of partners in ecumenical dialogue – that they should simply drop those commitments in the interests of better disagreement. However, what Greggs' approach does offer to ecumenical dialogue is encouragement to engage with deeper-level questions about (for example) the nature of church unity, the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, and the relationships between ecclesiology, christology and soteriology – and to allow these questions and the substantive answers they receive to shape more of the ecumenical agenda, rather than being relegated, metaphorically or literally, to introductory remarks. To go back to the example mentioned in passing earlier – the World Council of Churches' 'convergence text' *The Church: Towards A Common Vision* include substantial claims about the character of the church as 'already the eschatological community that God wills', which are juxtaposed with claims about the primacy of the Holy Spirit's agency in salvation-history.[5] Greggs' contrasting account of the church as 'provisional community', belonging to the time *between* the ascension of Christ and the coming of the reign of God (p.246-7) is rooted in his own extensive account of the primacy of the Holy Spirit's agency. The two contrasting portrayals of the relationship between the church and the eschatological reign of God will, in due course, issue in different accounts of church order, which could be compared and argued over at length – and that is what the structure and preoccupations of a document like *The Church* tend to invite; but on the face of it, it looks more promising, for mutual understanding and reciprocal learning, to go back to the shared source and discuss what different emphases in pneumatology and in eschatology have given rise to the initial difference in ecclesiology. If I read him correctly, Greggs not only offers a theological account of ecumenical dialogue – he also demonstrates the importance, for the ecumenical project, of broad and deep theological conversation across confessions and traditions.

The reference above to Greggs' wish to avoid an 'invisible church' ecclesiology relates to what is to my mind one of the most important theological contributions of the book. As already noted, Greggs maintains a sustained focus on God's gracious *action* in and for the church. This focus helps him to maintain the theological character of his ecclesiology, by avoiding being drawn into extended analysis of what the church's life is 'in itself' apart from its ongoing reliance on the divine gift of life. To that extent, Greggs' is an act-focused ecclesiology (in his own words 'pneumatologically actualistic' – p.15); but, as we might expect from someone who is a scholar of Bonhoeffer as well as Barth, 'act' is not used here to the exclusion of ontological questions. Just as, *per* Greggs in his chapter on the priesthood of Christ, priestly or mediating activity is at the heart of who Christ *is* and not simply something that he *does* – so, and by virtue of the same divine movement of grace, the life-giving activity of the Holy Spirit constitutes the church as a new social reality.

The challenge Greggs then faces is to give an account of this new social reality, in its essential character, without being diverted again into the questions of ecclesial form that he has rightly set

[5] *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, p. 21.

aside as secondary. To meet this challenge, he does deploy a relatively unfamiliar ecclesiological concept (taken, not uncritically, from Daniel W. Hardy, and developed here in close conversation with Bonhoeffer –pp. 31-3) – abductive sociopoiesis. The Holy Spirit, working in and through the quotidian givenness of human life, draws people out of themselves (hence 'abductive') into love of God and neighbour, and hence into new, particular and concrete modes and patterns of relationship (hence 'sociopoiesis'). Where this happens, there is the church. One noteworthy consequence of this approach to the question 'what is the church?' is that Greggs is able to say, both that there is no invisible church (the church exists in quotidian material reality) and that the church, *qua* church, is properly an object of faith – since its ecclesial character rests on its relation to the act of the Holy Spirit. The sustained refusal to separate, not only pneumatology from ecclesiology, but also pneumatology from theological anthropology and questions of Christian identity, is a particularly welcome feature of the book – not least for the prospects it offers for meaningful conversation with Pentecostal theologies.

The 'priestly catholicity' to which the book's title refers is fleshed out, *inter alia*, in Greggs' account of the transformation of human existence effected by incorporation into the body of Christ. As suggested above, this transformation is understood in terms of being 'drawn out' beyond oneself. More precisely, it is a reversal of the sinful self-directedness and self-absorption of the sinful *cor curvum in se,* to a life that is determined 'vertically' by love of God and 'horizontally' by love of neighbour – the church-community being the context in which the inextricable link between love of God and of neighbour becomes apparent (see for example pp. 30-1). The new life given to a person in Christ, Greggs argues, *just is* life within the new community to which Christ gives life. The church is not an incidental or secondary gathering-together of saved individuals; to say so would be to deny the fundamentally social character of the life for which human beings are created and saved. Individualism, Greggs repeatedly suggests, is a profound problem, and it is no less a problem when it is dressed up as religion. The priestly character of the church as community – and, secondarily but still importantly, the priestly vocation of each member of the church – is frequently characterised, in this book, in terms of being for others; the church is for the world, the member of the church is for the neighbour and the stranger. This 'being for others' is of course, in Greggs' presentation, always to be understood as itself a gift of grace rather than as a natural capacity or as a work undertaken; but at the same time it is *being* for, a fundamental determination of identity rather than a sporadic action, event or experience.

This emphasis on the church's, and the Christian's, 'being for others' raises a question for me that relates perhaps more obviously to theological anthropology than to ecclesiology – but I take Greggs' cues about the strong connections between the two. I have noted that there is a strong association, in Greggs' text, between the condition of sin as *cor curvum in se*, and self-centred or selfish relations to the neighbour. Correspondingly, the core contrast, or the transition, between the old life and the new, is described in terms of a new other-directed life characterised by self-giving love for God and neighbour ('self-sacrificial love, in which the self is given over for the sake of the other in the horizontal and vertical axes', see p. 420). Interestingly and importantly, this contrast is developed, not only at the individual level, but also at the communal or societal level – as Greggs explores the distinction between what P.T. Forsyth calls the 'co-operative egoism' of a club, on the one hand, and the proper relation of church members to the givenness of their community and the particular others who constitute it, on the other (see p. 344). '[M]ost communities in the world come to exist for the benefits of the individual or of the collective itself' (p. 343). The formation of the church through the gift of the Holy Spirit overcomes both individual and co-operative egoism – which, in Greggs' presentation, work in tandem; in the condition of *cor curvum in se*, I am centred on my own

interests and join 'communities' that advance those interests, and both the distortion of self and the parallel distortion of community-formation are addressed in the Spirit's work of forming the church.

Looking at this key contrast between self-centredness and self-giving love, I want to ask whether it risks over-emphasising one, important but partial, account of the distortion of human life in community – and hence also over-emphasising one aspect of the redeemed life of the new community. One does not have to accept the whole of Valerie Saiving Goldstein's much-discussed critical feminist rereading of doctrines of sin to recognise that excess of selfishness and self-worth is not the only way in which a person's relations to others can be systematically and persistently distorted, and hence not the only respect in which redeemed social existence should be contrasted with the sinful condition of humanity.[6] To say, as Greggs does at one point, that 'the others in the [church] community give the individual her true and primary identity' because her true and primary identity comes from her incorporation into the body of Christ (p. 344) sounds less like good news – perhaps even depressingly like more of the same – if 'the individual' involved is already accustomed to defining and judging herself by how other people see her, or by the roles she fulfils for other people. While this question might at first appear to be primarily psychological and pastoral – one of those we can leave quietly on one side because it has nothing to do with theology – it seems to me, on the contrary, that the structure of Greggs' argument makes it at least in part a theological question, because of the tight connections he draws between Christology, soteriology, theological anthropology and ecclesiology, and the central role that the language of self-gift and self-sacrifice plays in all of these.

What should be said – if we follow Greggs' lead in looking for a properly theological response – about what 'new life in Christ' means for the person whose sense of self and community were deformed by the effects of coercive control, persistent denial of agency, or dehumanising relations of oppression? I suggest that in this context the recognition of a new socially-oriented identity as gracious gift is perhaps less about being called to give up self-centredness and more about having a secure centre for the first time – a radically secure centre in Christ. The social realisation of this – the equivalent of the phenomenon, in Greggs' 'moving away from self-centredness' narrative, of being enabled to serve the neighbour self-sacrificially in her or his givenness – might include the capacity to encounter the neighbour freely and without fear, not needing to acquire self-worth or validation from another's gaze, and not vulnerable to another's efforts to determine or constrain one's identity, just because *not this other person but Christ* is the centre and source on whom one's existence depends.

How would any of this work out in ecclesiological terms? As might be expected, there is in fact a clear starting-point in this first volume of Greggs' ecclesiology. It is most clearly evident in the chapter on baptism where, embedded in a discussion of baptism that uses the language of sacrificing one's old identity (see p. 182) Greggs offers a wonderful reflection on how each individual is integral to the being of the church – 'Without her in her givenness… the realisation… of the body of Christ in that given quotidian space and time cannot be fully the body of Christ' (p. 184). The community is enabled by grace to mediate to the individual, not only Christ's unconditional acceptance and welcome of her in her contingent particularity, but also Christ's gift to her of a vocation that, although it can only be lived out in the context of the larger body, is still properly and inalienably hers.

[6] Valerie Saiving Goldstein, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', *Journal of Religion* 40/2 (1960), pp. 100-112.

The implications of Greggs' account here, and elsewhere in the book, would I assume take him somewhat beyond Forsyth's contrast between church-community on the one hand and 'co-operative egoism' on the other, because there are other problematic ways to be a social body besides co-operative egoism. The members of the body of Christ, unlike (say) the members of a corporate workforce, or even the carefully-selected 'diverse representatives' of different communities in a focus group, are not in any way or on any terms substitutable; we cannot simply fill their places with others who share similar characteristics. Within the church, if *this* person is missing, the body is incomplete, and this is true not because of the work she does or the pre-existing slot she fills, but just because of who she is – or more precisely, because of the unique gift to the church and the world that the Holy Spirit makes her to be. One might explore, on this basis, the contrast between the church on the one hand, and on the other hand any social body that sacrifices its individual members –perhaps by exploiting this same language of self-sacrifice – in order to serve the imagined good of the collective.[7] Such a contrast might indeed, like Greggs' overall account of priesthood, be developed through an account of the non-substitutable and non-repeatable priesthood of Christ. *Post Christum* and in the life of the Church, we might say, the various deathly chains by which one enforced sacrifice brings on another – the next group of soldiers who have to die now so that previous deaths are not seen to be in vain – are decisively broken.[8]

Now, it might reasonably be objected that the emphasis on self-gift and self-sacrifice is simply a consequence of this particular volume's focus on priesthood (alongside catholicity). This in turn points towards an account of priestly 'self-gift', by both the believer and the community, that emphasises –as it were – not only the gift but also the self. Greggs' account already allows us to emphasise, not only the fact that the church exists as a distinctive community *only* for the sake of the world (to guard against the fall into institutional self-preservation and self-importance), but also the fact that the church *exists as a distinctive community* for the sake of the world (it is, by the grace of God, salt for the world, provisional but nonetheless indispensable in the history of salvation). Correspondingly, it is my sense that it will be possible, without significant changes to the framework he sets up, to develop at more length the positive implications of the theological anthropology that accompanies his ecclesiology – the unique and non-instrumental value of each member of the body of Christ; and I look forward to seeing how this plays out.

This reflection on a particular emphasis in Greggs' work leads me to a final reflection concerning the kind of theological conversation to which the book might give rise. It seems to me possible that Greggs' emphasis on the diagnosis and repair of individual and co-operative egoism is linked in some way to the needs of his specific social and pastoral situation – for example, to his long experience of ministry in a context where the dominant cultural narrative does indeed view church membership as the equivalent of joining a social club. If this suggestion is correct, it is not a problem; if anything, it is a sign that his ecclesiology is really informed by the attempt to discern and speak about the

[7] I wrote this review against a background of nearly-constant use and misuse, by representatives of the state, of the language of 'self-sacrifice' in relation to Covid-19. While wanting to tread carefully in the context of an evolving situation, there is clearly a problem with praising low-paid and under-protected workers for their 'sacrifices' on behalf of the community – while taking little or no action to increase their pay, reduce their unsustainable workload, or protect them from mortal risk. I discuss this issue at slightly more length in Rachel Muers, 'Christ-Centred Solidarity in a Time of Pandemic: The Theological Challenge to Contemporary Performances of Human Solidarity', *Ecumenical Review* 72/4 (2020), pp. 527-537.

[8] On the relationships between the 'ethics of war' and the language of self-sacrifice – on lines that would, I think, fit well with Greggs' account of the implications of Christ's sacrifice – see Stanley Hauerwas, 'Sacrificing the Sacrifices of War', in *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 53-70.

quotidian activity of the Holy Spirit in particular places and communities. It does, however, point to possibility of ecclesiological work explicitly rooted in rather different social and pastoral contexts that would complement or challenge his account – not only or mainly at the level of application, but also at the level at which Greggs wishes to work, namely of core theological claims. Greggs' coda, indeed, appears to invite such responses, in a concluding reflection on 'unity' where he differentiates carefully between the desire to reflect theologically on the unity of the church (in its relation to the unity of God), and the desire to provide a comprehensive or exhaustive theological account of the one church (pp. 454-5), and states that he will 'welcome reading the accounts of *the one church* that [those who disagree with him] also will offer from their traditions' (p. 455). My modest supplementary observation is that the resulting conversation may sometimes be advanced by explicit attention to differences of context – including, but not limited to, ecclesial tradition – and that this need not prevent, but can rather in the long run enable, close attention to the 'one thing needful'.