

COMMENTS ON ROBERT T. SEARS'S ARTICLE

After rereading Robert Sears's "Trinitarian Love as the Ground of the Church," I wished it had preceded my own instead of following it, since its position makes it appear as a retort or an alternative view. But this would obscure the fact that we share many common concerns and that I feel myself in agreement with most of his assertions, if not with his method. For example, he raises the question of the *kind* of love that is salvific and responds to it in clear and distinctly Christian terms. Thus I believe that our views could be taken as being complementary on a certain level, even while on another they are fundamentally different. I shall, therefore, briefly outline my position in his terms to show where we might agree and then try to pinpoint where we differ.

The point at issue lies in whether the *raison d'être* of the Church consists in its being a Christian community which also has a mission, or its being a Christian community-primarily-in-service-to-the-world.¹ Were I to adopt Sears's developmental point of view, I would insist more consistently than he does that, in Lonergan's words quoted by him, the final stage of religious development to which the Church is called is indeed a higher stage which "introduces something new and distinct, puts everything on a new basis, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context." Thus, to view the Church simply as a community of love and reconciliation (the third level) "is not enough"; this must be transcended in such a way that "communal love in the Spirit gives rise to outgoing love," a transition that requires a quantum jump (a "dying") "from communal worship to immersion in the world." Thus the Church, which is a spiritual community, is "raised to a higher realization" in a mission Church. The idea and the actual status of the Church as mission "develop more richly what was begun in previous stages." This new and richer context of existing and understanding includes the former stages, cannot exist authentically without them, and is nourished by them.² And yet this is a different and higher level of existing to which the Church is called, negatively because falling back to a prior stage or idolizing it "and refusing to open further to the transcendent call of grace" may involve sin, positively because in a Church whose mission is turned outward to the world God's "love is . . . more fully realized." In all this we agree.

The position of Sears, however, is quite different from this, because in reality, I believe, he is operating within the context of three stages of development and not four, having collapsed the third and fourth stages into a single one. Or else the goals, finalities, or intelligibilities of each of the higher stages are not distinguished in importance or are equally primary. Thus, he states that "both Christian community and mission are viewed as equally primary, for the mission is for the sake of expanding community, and the community for the sake of expanding mission." The strictly reciprocal or mutual interdependency between

¹ For my part, I hesitate to use Sears's phrase "servant of the world" because of its over-close association with that particular movement called "secular theology."

² I therefore agree with Sears that "service to the world would then be seen as impotent or only feebly possible without a spiritual community."

community (third stage) and outward-turned mission (fourth stage) on a *de facto* psychological and everyday level (which I accept) is raised by Sears to the level of understanding the very purpose or ultimate finality of the Church. It is here that we differ.

The reasons for this difference are multiple, but two stand out. The first, which is more fundamental and complicated and therefore cannot be dealt with adequately here, has to do with method. Sears, who begins his argument from above, from Scripture as an external and objective authority and from a dogmatic theological understanding of divine Trinitarian love, sees things from a different perspective than myself, since I assume a concrete, historical, and existential point of view and seek to correlate Christian symbols with a critical appreciation of the present situation both inside and outside the Church. Secondly, this difference in method, it seems, is implicit in a different understanding of the very word "Church." In Sears the term "Church" is eschatological, in the sense that it applies equally to the empirical Church and the final spiritual community. For this reason "the spiritual community of the Church is itself the message" of the Church, community tends to become an end in itself, and the goal of the Church of this world is the same Church in the end time. For my part, I prefer to limit the term "Church" to the community we see in this world and apply the symbol "kingdom of God" to the eschatological community.³

In sum, then, although I agree that the Church *is* a spiritual community, and although Sears too asserts that this community has an exigency for mission to the world, I cannot affirm that these are equally the finalities of the Church we know today. It appears to me impossible at this moment in time to assert that the goal of the Church is to draw all men and women into itself.⁴ This would constitute the ultimate theological justification for triumphalism. And such an understanding would never allow any given church to sacrifice or even to risk its empirical existence as church (community) to its mission (or to the *missio Dei*) as sign for other people and of self-sacrificing love after Christ. Unless the Church passes to

³There are grounds in the New Testament for an eschatological understanding of the term "Church" (See Dulles' *Models of the Church*), but this usage can lead to an idealized language about the Church that is uncritical and unbelievable, as well as to a confusion about what exactly is being referred to by the word "Church." I find this ambiguity in Sears's article. For example, he writes that "the Church is the normative and constitutive embodiment of the fulness of Trinitarian love in the world." But since in his view there is salvation outside the visible Church, and other authentic spiritual communities may exist, relative to salvation the Church is *not* constitutive but normative and representational. Or, since the Church is also the final community sharing Trinitarian love, in which the Church community in this world already shares proleptically and consciously, then the Church in this world *is* constitutive of salvation by participation. Or, since the Church in this world is constitutive of salvation, and since there is salvation and may be authentic spiritual community outside this Church, where these latter occur, there too is the Church. Or, finally, all of these positions might be affirmed at once. These ambiguities could be easily cleared up by restricting the word "Church" to the visible Christian communities we see.

⁴Lack of space prevents development of the positive theological justification for this position, which has been worked out in mission theology.

Sears's fourth stage, where the spiritual community is precisely not primarily in service of itself, the Church will not be a credible witness to the divine love manifested in the cross of Jesus.

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