

THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF VATICAN II

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I have been asked to attempt something that I would not allow my graduate students to try: to treat a very large and complex question in a very short time. The difficulty, even impossibility, of the task is fairly obvious. Karl Rahner remarked that Vatican II, “in all of its sixteen constitutions, decrees, and declarations, was concerned with the Church.”¹ At the time of the Council an effort was made to give coherence to its work by dividing its concerns under two great headings: the *Ecclesia ad intra* and the *Ecclesia ad extra*, a distinction which has its usefulness, as also its limits, but in any case does not lessen one’s work. The various conciliar documents were elaborated by distinct commissions, working at different rhythms, in the face of different problems and for different purposes, a lack of coordination and of systematic interest that was not entirely offset by the fact that on many of them the same experts played major roles (I think in particular of Msgr. Gérard Philips and of Fr. Yves Congar). Thus, for example, the Constitution on the Liturgy was completed before the Constitution on the Church and the latter before the Constitutions on Divine Revelation and on the Church in the Modern World. In addition, on more than a few matters, the Council deliberately chose not to settle important issues but instead to state their terms and to leave it to theologians and others to work out a more coherent reconciliation than was possible at the time. The Council also chose a rhetoric more discursive and allusive than the somewhat telegraphic language and argument characteristic of earlier councils. One might add to these difficulties others that would arise if one were to attempt to explicate the ecclesiology operative in the Council as an event.

It is a mistake, I think, to expect to find a fully coherent, systematic, and comprehensive ecclesiology in the conciliar documents, and I will not attempt one here. The Council did not produce a treatise, and its four years of deliberations did not follow the rules of a doctoral seminar. On the other hand, it would be dreary simply to go through the documents, one by one, summarizing with forced brevity. Instead I will ask three questions which are part of any ecclesiology, and comment on what the Council offered by way of position or clarification. They are: What is the Church? Where is the Church? What is the Church for?

What is the Church?

Vatican II did not offer a simple definition of the Church, the sort of thing one might have expected from the title of the first draft *De Ecclesia* whose first chapter was in fact entitled “The Nature of the Church.” *Lumen gentium*’s first chapter is entitled, instead, “The Mystery of the Church,” and respect for the mystery of God within the Church led the Council to approach it more meditatively and by a variety of means. A brief narrative of the history of salvation grounds the Church’s trinitarian basis and center, yielding its most comprehensive sense as the totality of those

¹Karl Rahner, “The New Image of the Church,” *Theological Investigations*, X (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973) 3.

who will be saved, from Abel to the last of the just. A nuanced discussion of the Church's relationship to the Kingdom is followed by a selection from among the abundant biblical images of the Church, with special attention given to that of the Body of Christ. The chapter ends with an insistence that it is at once a holy community of faith, hope and charity and a visible structure, the mystical Body of Christ and a hierarchically endowed society, a spiritual community and a visible group, endowed with heavenly gifts and existing here on earth, at once holy and always needing purification, a Church that subsists in the Catholic Church (*LG* 8).

The mystery of the Church thus described is what the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had already set out when it spoke of the eucharist, "the summit toward which all the activity of the Church is directed and the source from which all her power flows" (*SC* 100, as the special manifestation both of the mystery of Christ and of the nature of the Church: "The Church is essentially both human and divine, visible but endowed with invisible realities, zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation, present in the world but as a pilgrim, so constituted that in her the human is directed toward and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, the object of our quest" (*SC* 2).

Lumen gentium's second chapter is entitled "The People of God," and some interpreters have misinterpreted the chapter and its theme as if the Council were now moving to another topic; some have even seen it as in a certain tension with the first chapter and its theme of mystery. It was not rare soon after the Council to read suggestions that one had to choose between Body of Christ and People of God, and the last decades have seen a shift away from People of God to communion as the key to the Council ecclesiology, once again almost as if one had to choose one or the other. How far such proposals are from the Council's intention is clear from the explanation offered by the Doctrinal Commission when it introduced this new second chapter. Chapter II, it said, was an intrinsic part of the consideration of the mystery of the Church and must not be separated from its inner nature and purpose; the material had been divided into two chapters simply because one chapter would have been too long. The first chapter had considered the Church in its great span from before creation in the plan of God until its fulfilment in heaven; chapter II would discuss the same mystery in the time between the Ascension and the Parousia, that time during which it lives by faith until it is perfected in the blessed vision. Chapter II, in other words, discusses the mystery of the Church as lived out in history. It is the "communion of life, charity, and truth" that is the "messianic people" which God uses as the instrument of redemption, "the visible sacrament of saving unity." The chapter's final description of the Church as at once the People of God, the Body of the Lord, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit returns to the trinitarian center with which the first chapter had begun.

In these two chapters are concentrated the essential theological description of the Church. Other chapters in *Lumen gentium* spell out in detail the differentiation of the members of the Church among the clergy, the laity, and religious, their common call to holiness, their union with the saints in heaven, and their final eschatological destiny, of which the Blessed Virgin Mary is the model. Some interpreters have taken the clear difference in language and themes that mark especially chapters III and IV as indicating yet another shift (or shifts) in underlying ecclesiology. I do not think that this is true either, unless one indulges the less than Catholic idea that differentiation is incompatible with communion or that law and charism are antinomies.

I am of the view, in other words, that one should not speak of several ecclesiologies in *Lumen gentium* and in the other conciliar documents. There is no evidence whatever that the Council fathers thought that they were juggling various images, notions, or models of the Church. It was indeed necessary for the Council to free the spiritual and theological dimensions of the Church from the Procrustean constraints of the first draft, and that was the great achievement of *Lumen gentium*. But once that freedom was won, the bishops proceeded to deal, successively and variously, with essential elements of the rich and deep reality of the one Church. That it is easy to construct a coherent ecclesiology out of all this I am not saying; but that is the task of theologians; it is enough for the Council to have set out the dimensions that need to be integrated.

Where is the Church?

There are several levels at which this question may be asked. The first appears at first sight to be the easiest: identify the members of the Church and you will know where the Church is. This was the method used by Robert Bellarmine, whose criteria for membership were taken up by Pope Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis* and were then employed in the first draft *De Ecclesia*. The difficulty with this approach is that to be clear and decisive for apologetical purposes, the criteria must also be external and minimalistic--the external profession of faith, communion in the sacraments, and subordination to proper authority--while the internal dimensions of membership are left aside. Only Roman Catholics are true members of the Church; others belong to it only by desire. In this way, the criteria of membership lead to the conclusion affirmed in answer to another, parallel way of asking and answering the question: that the Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church.

But this approach could not suffice if one were to adopt the conciliar approach to the Church as mystery of communion lived out in history by the People of God. For in two respects that approach forbids a simple identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the Church of Christ. First, the reality of communion exceeds the boundaries of the Catholic Church, there being baptized non-Catholics who by their faith, hope, and love live the life of communion in Christ and the Spirit, and there being Roman Catholics who do not live in the Spirit. Second, when one considers the elements, spiritual, sacramental, and ministerial, that constitute and animate the Church, one discovers that very many of the most important of these can exist in other Christian churches and communities where they can mediate salvation (*UR 3*). In order to take these two considerations into account, the Council employed the language of communion and incorporation instead of the language of membership and asserted that full incorporation into the Church-society requires, in addition to the familiar criteria, the possession of (or by) the Holy Spirit, while lesser forms of communion or other relations may be enjoyed by other Christians and their communities.

Correspondingly, it nuanced the other claim and asserted that the Church of Christ “subsists in” (rather than simply “is”) the Roman Catholic Church. The Doctrinal Commission explained this change in the verb, which was disputed from several sides, not by referring to philosophical speculations about “subsistence,” but as more appropriate because of the Council’s recognition of the existence of elements of the Church outside the Catholic Church. Such elements are listed in at least three places and include the life of justifying grace, incorporation into Christ, communion in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scriptures, sacraments, devotion to the Blessed Virgin, etc. The special

claim, namely, that the Church of Christ “subsists in” the Catholic Church, means that in it alone can be found “the fullness of the means of salvation” (*UR* 3), which I take to mean the integral creed, full number of sacraments, and complete apostolic ministry.

On another level, the question “Where is the Church?” evokes the question of the relation between the one universal Church and the many local Churches. The Council regularly adopts a universalistic perspective: the Church as intended by God, reaching from creation to fulfilment in the Kingdom, existing throughout the world among all the peoples and cultures of the earth, constituted and enlivened by the word of Christ and the grace of the Spirit, guided by an apostolic ministry. These elements constitute what *Lumen gentium* called “the image of the universal Church” in accordance with which particular Churches are formed. But the same sentence also asserted that it is only in and out of these particular Churches that the one and single catholic Church exists (*LG* 23), a statement that the late Italian canonist, Eugenio Corecco, regarded as “the most important ecclesiological formula of the Council.”² It guarantees, or should guarantee, that the relationship between the whole Church and the individual Churches is seen as one of reciprocal or mutual inclusion, that individual Churches are not considered administrative subdivisions of a pre-existent reality nor the one Church as a subsequent federation of individual Churches. The many Churches are not Churches except in the one Church; the one Church does not exist except in and out of the many Churches.

Since the Council these carefully nuanced and mutually conditioning statements have prompted what some have called a “Copernican revolution” in ecclesiology, a renewed interest in the local Churches whose communion is the whole Church. Attention has focused in particular on what makes the local Church local: that is, an embodied appropriation of the word and grace of God in communities gathered in particular times and places and confronting specific cultural and historical challenges. The full substance of what makes the Church the Church is realized in these individual Churches, most visibly in eucharistic assemblies, “altar-communities,” where “believers are gathered together through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ and the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated” and “where Christ is present through whose power and influence the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is constituted” (*LG* 26; see *SC* 42). The diocese is defined theologically as “a portion of the People of God entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the assistance of the presbyterate, so that, loyal to their pastor and gathered by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular Church in which is truly present and active the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ” (*CD* 11). The terms “local” and “particular” Church are also used of organically linked groups of Churches, distinct “matrices of faith” within the unity of faith and structure, enjoying their own discipline, liturgical usages, and theological and spiritual patrimonies. This *Ecclesiarium localium in unum conspirans varietas* is illustrated in the ancient patriarchates and the modern episcopal conferences (*LG* 23).

² Eugenio Corecco, “Aspects of the Reception of Vatican II in the Code of Canon Law,” in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987) 274.

To these considerations, which ground the full ecclesial reality of the communities of faith at all these particular levels, the Council added reflections that promote their genuinely local character. These communities must undertake the discernment of spirits which acknowledges and integrates what is true and good in their particular cultures, purifies what is not, and thus brings it about that Christ and the Church are not foreign to anyone or to any place (AG 8), that the community of the faithful, endowed with the cultural riches of its own nation, are deeply rooted in the people (AG 15), that they undertake a new *intellectus fidei* in terms of the philosophy and wisdom of the people (AG 22), that they live for God according to the honorable usages of their nation (AG 15), and that they participate in the local social and cultural life (AG 11). The Church becomes concretely catholic by becoming particular. And this is grounded in the Council's profound notion of catholicity as "the gift of the Lord himself by which the Catholic Church ceaselessly and effectively strives to restore all of humanity with all its goods under the headship of Christ and in the unity of the Holy Spirit. In virtue of this catholicity, the individual parts bring their own gifts to the other parts and to the whole Church so that the whole and each of the parts are strengthened by this mutual sharing and by the common effort to achieve a fullness in unity" (LG 13). The Council's teaching is finely balanced: the Church is not catholic if it is not particular, that is, local; but the particular or local is not the Church unless it is catholic at every level, that is, redemptively integrated.

Finally, in answering the question, "Where is the Church?", one may look to the differentiated ranks of the assembly of believers. The Doctrinal Commission took pains to point out that the term "People of God" refers to all those who belong to the Church, clergy and laity alike, and that the chapter had been introduced in order to continue an exposition of what pertains to the whole body of believers before the Constitution addressed what differentiates and characterizes particular groups within the Church, that is, the hierarchy, the laity, and the religious. Still, what distinguishes *Lumen gentium* from the "hierarchology" that marked many a pre-conciliar treatise on the Church is the attention given to the place and role of the laity.

Going beyond a negative description of the laity as everyone except the clergy and the religious, *Lumen gentium* describes them as "Christian believers who, incorporated into Christ by baptism, constituted within the People of God, and in their own way sharing in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, have their own part to play in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world" (LG 31). The Council was at pains to note "the common dignity of the Church's members that derives from their rebirth in Christ, the common grace of being God's children, the common call to perfection, the single salvation, the single hope, and the undivided charity." It excludes any "inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition, or sex" and insists that the differentiation of ministries exists within "a true equality among all with regard to the dignity and to the activity that is common to all for the building up of the Body of Christ" (LG 32). In addition to acting through the ordained ministry and the sacraments the Spirit gives special gifts to the faithful, "from the reception of which, even the most ordinary ones, arises a right and duty to exercise them in the Church and in the world..., in the freedom of the Holy Spirit... and in communion with their brothers and sisters in Christ and with their pastors especially" (AA 3). On all these sacramental and charismatic bases, the Council grounded a set of rights and duties for all Christians, which include the right to "receive in abundance the help of the

spiritual goods of the Church,” the right and at times the duty to express their views on Church matters, and the right to initiate activities in the service of the Church. In addition, it stated the ability of the laity to engage in more immediate forms of cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy and to be appointed to some ecclesiastical offices (*LG* 33, 35). Such statements have prompted the spectacular increase in various activities, ministries, and associations of lay people that we have seen since the Council, one of the demonstrations of the Council’s claim that “the Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ, unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy” (*AG* 21).

If such passages strongly affirm the dignity and role of all Christians, prior to any differentiations, it remains to define more precisely what distinguishes lay people. Offering what the Doctrinal Commission called a “typological description” rather than an “ontological definition,” the Council found this in their “secular character,” that is, in lives lived in the world, in “the ordinary circumstances of social and family life that, as it were, constitute the texture of their existence.” That typical existence in the world is the locus of the laity’s Christian vocation, grounded in their baptism and confirmation and in their charisms, which is a share in the Church’s salvific mission, so that they are the ones who “make the Church present and active in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that the Church can be the salt of the earth” (*LG* 33) Theirs is the special role of “so illuminating and ordering all temporal things that they grow in accordance with Christ and for the glory of the Creator and Redeemer” (*LG* 32). They have “the principal role” in the effort undertaken “so that the world may be filled with the spirit of Christ and may more effectively reach its destiny in justice, in love, and in peace” (*LG* 36; *AA* 7).

What is the Church for?

This emphasis on the laity as the chief presence and activity of the Church in the world moves us to the question of the mission of the Church. In *Lumen gentium* this theme is addressed theologically in terms of the Church as sacrament. The term is explained in the very first paragraph: the Church is “the sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race,” a consideration recommended by the fact that “people today are being drawn ever more closely together by social, technological, and cultural ties” and making it all the more urgent that the Church work so that they “may also achieve unity in Christ.” Later the Council says that this “messianic people, even though it may not include all people and may often appear to be a little flock, is nonetheless for the whole human race a most sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation;” the “communion of life, love, and truth” that is the Church is said to be Christ’s “instrument for the salvation of all,” the “visible sacrament of this saving unity” (*LG* 9). This catholic unity of the People of God “prefigures and promotes universal peace” (*LG* 13); the eschatological restoration of all things in Christ is already begun in the Church that is “the universal sacrament of salvation” (*LG* 48). By such statements one is reminded of Henri de Lubac’s classic book, *Catholicism*, which not only helped restore the idea of the Church as sacrament but also pivoted around the notions of an original unity created by God, splintered by sin, and destined to be restored in Christ, a vision that de Lubac argued could overcome the idea that Christianity was a religion for the inner comforting of individuals alienated from the wider course of history.

With these claims the Council at once draws attention to what is most distinctive and constitutive about the Church as the “sign,” the effect of word and grace, and urges its instrumental redemptive role in the world. It is this role which is developed most fully in *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. This text was written in some independence of the dogmatic constitutions of the Council and, at least until its final stages, by bishops and experts other than those who had concentrated their work on those other texts. For that reason, the ecclesiology of *Gaudium et spes* has at times been criticized for not integrating the more theological, spiritual, and liturgical vision set out elsewhere and for verging on what is considered to be a “merely sociological” notion of the Church. Since the Council there has even arisen a dispute, for example, as to whether *Lumen gentium* or *Gaudium et spes* should occupy the hermeneutical center of one’s interpretation of the conciliar ecclesiology. This dispute, I suggest, is itself symptomatic of the need to integrate the mission of the Church into one’s ecclesiology from the beginning and not to leave it to a single chapter that tends to come late in one’s treatise.

As for *Gaudium et spes* itself, at two different places it insists that it is presupposing what has already been said elsewhere in the conciliar texts about the mystery of the Church as it now undertakes to discuss the presence and activity of the same Church in the modern world (see *GS* 2, 40). After the penultimate draft was criticized for an ambiguous notion of “the world,” the text was revised to include a description that is at once anthropological and theological: “The world which the Council has in mind is the whole human family with the totality of realities among which it lives, the world as the theatre of human history, marked by human labor, failures, and triumphs, the world which Christians believe to have been established and sustained by the Creator’s love, reduced to slavery and to sin yet freed by the crucified and risen Christ who has broken the power of the Evil One so that it might be transformed according to God’s plan and may reach its perfection” (*GS* 2). But the Council was not undertaking a generic discussion of the relation between the Church and the world, but a specific pastoral treatment of the Church in the *modern* world. That is why it offered throughout but also in summary form in *GS* 54, a description of certain features of the world today, among which can be mentioned the rapidity and depth of social and cultural transformations; the impact of the natural and social sciences and technology; modernization, industrialization, urbanization, mass media; a dynamic sense of nature; calls for greater freedom of self-realization and for human rights; the spread of democracy; the changed relationship between Church and State. In all these developments, the Council says, “we are witnessing the birth of a new humanism in which man is defined before all else by his responsibility for his brothers and for history” (*GS* 55).

Perhaps we might sum this up by saying that in *Gaudium et spes* the Council was addressing the relationship between the Church and the historic project of human self-responsibility and self-realization. The pertinent sense of the word “world” is what human beings have made, are making, and will make by the use of their freedom; perhaps it is less the world as “the theatre of human history” than the world as the drama of human history. Underlying this is an expanded anthropology which goes beyond a merely psychological consideration, which is content to relate Gospel and grace to the drama of the individual’s self-responsibility, to a fuller view which relates God’s gifts, and the Church as their embodiment, to the larger drama of the collective and historical self-responsibility of mankind, a drama in which the Church participates in all its joy and hope, its grief and anguish, its greatness and its misery.

There is a powerful and programmatic statement in which the Council makes clear that the Church that participates in this historic drama is the same Church that has arisen from the gift of God:

Proceeding from the love of the eternal Father, founded by Christ in time, and gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, the Church has a saving and eschatological purpose that can be fully attained only in the next life. But it exists now here on earth, composed of people who are members of the earthly city who are called to form the family of God's children already now in the history of the human race and to increase it continually until the Lord comes. Made one in view of heavenly blessings and enriched by them, this family was by Christ "constituted and organized as a society in the present world" and "provided with the means of visible and social union." Thus the Church, at once "a visible group and a spiritual community," travels the same journey as all of humanity and shares the same earthly lot as the world and exists to be the leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society, which is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into the family of God.

This compenetration of the earthly and the heavenly city can only be perceived by faith; indeed it remains the mystery of a human history which is always disturbed by sin until the full revelation of the splendor of the children of God. In pursuing its saving purpose, the Church not only communicates the divine life to people, it also casts its reflected light in some way over the whole world, especially by healing and elevating the dignity of the human person, by strengthening the cohesion of human society, and by endowing the daily activity of people with a deeper sense and meaning. The Church thus believes that through each of its members and its whole community it can contribute much to make the human family and its history more human (*GS* 40).

Because the drama that is human history is a drama ultimately defined theologically, as the effort, distorted by sin and enabled by grace, of God's human creatures to realize their full humanity in Christ, it is the duty of the Church "to examine the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel," that is, "to try to discern in the events, the needs, and the longings which it shares with other people of our age which of them are signs of the presence and purpose of God" (*GS* 4, 11). And it is this same linkage in the common human project that leads the Council to acknowledge that "whatever contributes to the development of the community of humanity on the level of family, culture, economic and social life, and national and international politics, by God's plan also contributes in no small measure to the community of the Church insofar as it depends on things outside itself" (*GS* 44).

How to relate these historical efforts and their results to the Kingdom of God was a matter of some disagreement at Vatican II. To avoid a facile identification and to respect the mystery of God's plan, the Council recalled that "we know neither the moment of the consummation of the earth and of humanity nor the way the universe will be transformed. The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away and we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells and whose happiness will fill and surpass all the desires for peace that rise in human hearts." But it went on immediately to insist that "far from diminishing it, the expectation of a new earth should spur on to develop this earth, for it is here that the body of a new human family

grows which in some way foreshadows the age that is to come. That is why, although we must carefully distinguish earthly progress from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society, is of vital concern to the Kingdom of God” (GS 39).

A similar oscillation is visible when the Council, perhaps concerned to avoid theocratic interpretations of its teaching, states that “the proper mission which Christ entrusted to the Church is not of the political, economic, or social order; the goal he set for it is of the religious order. But from this religious mission itself flow immediately a task, a light, and a strength that can serve the establishment and consolidation of the human community according to the divine law” (GS 42). The two dimensions of the Church’s mission are then reunited when the Council concludes its discussion of the matter: “The Church, when it aids the world and when it receives much from it, has only one purpose: that the Kingdom of God may come and that the salvation of the whole human race may be accomplished. Every good thing that the People of God during its pilgrimage on earth can confer on the human family derives from the fact that the Church is ‘the universal sacrament of salvation,’ at once manifesting and realizing the mystery of God’s love for man.” And all this has a christological foundation: “The Lord is the goal of human history, the point toward which the desires of history and civilization tend, the center of the human race, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations” (GS 45).

In this connection it is interesting to see how *Gaudium et spes*, to describe the purposes of creation, makes use of the language that describes the Church’s own inner reality: “communion of persons” (GS 12, 23), “social union, solidarity, fraternal communion” (GS 32, 39), “universal fraternity,” “the banquet of fraternal communion” (GS 38). We are thus reminded of the initial claim of *Lumen gentium*, that the Church, the mystery of communion lived as the People of God, is the sign and the instrument of a communion to which the whole human family is called.

Perhaps it cannot be said that the Council was completely successful in integrating what it called the Church’s proper religious mission and its participation in the common human project on earth. Disagreements on this matter within the so-called progressive majority were in fact particularly sharp, with French theologians such as Yves Congar and M.-D. Chenu urging a generally optimistic incarnational approach and German theologians such as Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, along with the Italian theologian Giuseppe Dossetti, insisting on what Rahner called the “Christian pessimism” that is required by the central role of the Cross. The final text of *Gaudium et spes* reflects the at times uneasy compromises that were necessary for the Constitution to gain a consensus.

Final Reflections

The ambiguity and compromise-character just noted with regard to *Gaudium et spes* are visible elsewhere in the Council’s ecclesiology and may serve as the first of several final reflections. It is a long-standing conciliar practice to work to achieve the greatest possible consensus, which, when achieved in conditions of freedom and charity within a common faith, is regarded as the work of the Holy Spirit. This method tends to frustrate intransigents of all colors because it requires them to be conciliatory and to work for compromise-statements that do not settle legitimately controverted

questions but rather express what all can accept as statements of the common faith. Still, the Council respected that tradition as is apparent in its final statements on the relationships between Scripture and tradition, between primacy and collegiality, between the whole Church and the particular Churches, between the primary and secondary ends of marriage, or on matters such as the morality of nuclear war or the authority of episcopal conferences, etc. This is perhaps the reason why it is not rare that some people who reread the conciliar documents today or others who read them for the first time find them rather colorless; it is certainly the reason why some people appeal beyond the texts of the document to the “event” of the Council and why some people prefer to appeal to the “spirit of Vatican II” rather than to its latter, this “spirit” often seeming to mean “what Vatican II would have said if there hadn’t been any conservatives there.” Justice to the Council, and to what it did in every case by overwhelming majorities, recommends caution in such interpretations.

But it also means that the Council, like every other magisterial statement and indeed like even the Scriptures, must be interpreted as an achievement that reflects the questions, the challenges, the resources of its time. The measure of the Council’s achievement--what I would see as its “event”-character--is grasped first by relating it to the content and method of Church-teaching during the century and a half or so that preceded it. These are conveniently available in the sets of texts written for the Council’s consideration during the preparatory period, especially those written by the Theological Commission, which by and large were designed to enable the Council to reconfirm the orientations, attitudes, and decisions that had characterized modern Roman Catholicism. One might then compare what the Council ended by saying in *Dei verbum* or in *Lumen gentium* with what it had been planned and expected to say in the preparatory schemas *De fontibus revelationis* and *De Ecclesia*. One will then be able to discern the continuities and discontinuities and come to a balanced judgement on the Council as an event.

That judgement will today have to reckon, however, with the fact that the life of the Church did not come to an end with the close of the Council, now close to thirty-five years ago. During those decades much has happened, both in the world and in the Church. Of what has happened in the Church much has been beneficial and much of that can be attributed to decisions of the Council. On the other hand, much that has happened has not been so favorable to the life of the Church, much of that certainly not intended or desired by the popes and bishops of Vatican II. Whether or not the Council should be held responsible for these aspects of its aftermath is, of course, a matter of considerable debate today. In any case, it is impossible, and quite unnecessary on good historiographical grounds, to pretend that all these things, good and bad, have not happened or to forbid them from entering into one’s judgements about the Council.

More particularly, with regard to the Vatican II’s ecclesiology, it has to be acknowledged that we are living with the consequences of the Council’s search for consensus. Many issues that it left unresolved in its documents remain unresolved in the life of the Church, in the relationships between clergy and laity, between pope and bishops, between Rome and local Church authority, between the whole Church and the particular Churches, between Church and world. Ritualistic calls for fidelity to the Council often ignore the fact that the Council on many of these points, instead of supplying an answer, simply set out the terms of the problem. It is not clear to me that, on some of them at least, great progress has been made in the meantime.

Let me end by suggesting a few challenges which Vatican II left to ecclesiologists. The first is that of integrating the set of statements which lay out the two great dimensions of the Church that come together in its single mysterious reality: the divine and the human. Since the Council, in an understandable reaction to the concentration on institutional elements of the Church, themselves often thought to exhaust the earthly, visible, human reality of the Church, attention has focused on the distinct and transcendent dimensions of the Church, particularly the communion in the divine life that is the Church's deepest mystery. But that this is a *dimension* of the Church is neglected when it is taken as a definition of the Church itself or to exhaust its formal intelligibility. The Church is not itself divine; it is a community of creatures blessed beyond merit with divine gifts, enabled beyond their abilities to respond with faith, hope, and love to the divine offer. I sense the danger of a new monophysitism in ecclesiology when the human responses of faith, hope, and love and the inter-subjectivity they enable and embody are not considered constitutive of the Church, and when it is forgotten that this communion is realized in a People of God still on pilgrimage in history. Symptomatic of this position is that the word "sociological" can hardly ever be used without the accompanying adverb "merely," while one hardly ever hears from this group the phrase "merely theological." An ontology of the Church that neglects the human, history-shaped, and history-shaping element falls short of the properly theological meaning of the word "mystery." I think we still lack an ecclesiology adequate to *Lumen gentium* 8.

Secondly, the relation between the whole Church and the particular Churches still needs development, a need indicated by the persistence of the question which has priority, the universal or the local Church. I think this question is ill-posed. Except in the mind of God, which alone can comprehend the Church from beginning to end, there has never been a Church except in a place and except as composed of creatures responding, yes, to the same Gospel and enabled by the same grace, but receiving both within and as a way of dealing with particular challenges. The dangers are, first, such a stress on particularity--as, for example, by way of inculturation--that the catholic, the redemptively integrative, dimension of the Church is lost from view, and, second, such a stress on universality that the Church is abstracted out of history. I also do not think we have taken with enough seriousness the implications of the Council's statement that the one Church exists only in and out of the many Churches, and of what this implies for the brave statements we make about "the Church," in the singular.

Thirdly, there is the challenge of making mission--service of the whole saving purpose of God--an integral informing part of ecclesiology. This will require conceiving ecclesiology in terms of a theology of history and deriving categories from an anthropology that understands the social and historical dimensions of the human project to be more important, indeed constitutive, than they have typically been. There is never a Church except within and as a response to a world, a response that alters the world, so that the genesis of the Church is no more intelligible without reference to that world than an individual's conversion is intelligible apart from the drama of his own personal existence.

And this, in turn, will require us to take far more seriously and far more rigorously into account that the Church whose inner nature we gratefully confess as God's gift and whose historic mission we undertake as our task is a Church 99% of whose members are lay people. We need to explore more fully and more consistently the implications of this fact for the various levels of our

discourse about the Church, that is, when we say what the Church is, what it believes, what it does, what it ought to be. Newman's quip about the laity, that "the Church would look foolish without them," has profound ecclesiological implications.

With these four suggestions for further work I will close, hoping that they will in turn be understood as themselves proof of the enduring achievements and challenges of the vision of the Church lived out and expressed at the Second Vatican Council.