

Concepts of Communion. Past and Present

The emergence of an ecclesiology of communion at and particularly after the Second Vatican Council is often explained by contrasting this view of the Church with the one that had dominated theory and practice at least since the Council of Trent. The ecclesiology that lost its paradigmatic hegemony at Vatican II has been variously described as «juridical» or «institutional», as more a «hierarchy» than an ecclesiology, as centering around the concept of «societas», etc.¹

One cannot understand the dialectical movements represented at Vatican II, in the fortunes the Council's various images and notions of the Church have since undergone, and by certain ambiguities that still attend the invocation of the term «communion», without some appreciation of the degree to which the dimensions today considered to be articulated by that term were present and operative in the earlier ecclesiology. The task has to be stated in these terms because, statistically, the word «communion» plays a very minor role there and because, substantively, the content it mediated is quite different from what is widely intended by the term today.

As illustrations of this pre-conciliar ecclesiology, I will concentrate on the thought of two important figures who stand near the beginning and the end of the period from Trent to Vatican II, Robert Bellarmine, whose ideas largely oriented ecclesiology for the next three and a half centuries, and J.B. Franzelin, whose work is

¹ Still the best historical interpretation of the conciliar shift is A. Accetti, *Die ecclesiologie. Ecclesiologia gmirlich ed ecclesiologia di comunione nella «Lumen gentium»*, Bologna 1975.

marked by the initial impact of the recovery of fuller dimensions of the Church which would lead Vatican II to begin the movement out of the older ecclesiology.

Bellarmino

Everyone knows the definition of the Church which Bellarmine opposed to various Protestant notions: «the group of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and by communion in the same sacraments under the governance of legitimate pastors, especially of the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff». The profession of a common faith excludes from the Church Jews, Turks, pagans, heretics and apostates. Participation in the sacraments excludes catechumens and excommunicates. Submission to legitimate pastors excludes schismatics. These criteria, on the other hand, permitted great generosity towards Catholics: «Includuntur autem omnes alii, etiam si reprobi, scelerati et impii sint». The advantage of this definition over those of Protestants, Bellarmine explained, is that, while the latter require some internal virtues for someone to be in the Church, «we do not think that any internal virtue is required, but only the external profession of faith and communion in the sacraments, which can be perceived by the senses themselves. For the Church is a group of men as visible and palpable as is the group of the Roman people or the Kingdom of France or the Republic of Venice».²

Two reasons suggested this focus on the visibility of the Church. The primary reason is that without it no one could be certain he stood within that body which Christ had made the instrument of salvation. Without the certainty made possible by its visibility, everything about the Church and about Christianity would become uncertain.³ Related to this was Bellarmine's explanation of the Creed's *Credo sanctam Ecclesiam* as the conclusion of a syllogism, whose major («Christ's Church is the group of men professing the faith of Christ under the governance of legitimate pastors»)

was invisible, but whose minor («Those who today are subject to the Roman Pontiff are such a group») is visible: «For we put nothing into the minor which may not be perceived by the eyes or ears».⁴ The uncritical, almost naive, character of this epistemology of faith required a corresponding poverty in determining the constituents of the *vera Ecclesia*.⁵

Bellarmino, of course, did not deny the need for holiness in the Christian life nor that the Church itself is and must be holy. But his obsession with visibility prevented him from integrating this fact, as is clear, first, in his not entirely consistent application of the metaphor of the soul and body of the Church. In one passage, it is the Holy Spirit who is the soul of the Church.⁶ In another place, the Church's soul «is the inner gifts of the Holy Spirit, faith, hope, charity, etc. The body is the external profession of faith and sacramental communion».⁷ Finally, Bellarmine says that «The good are its inner part and, as it were, the soul of the Church; the evil are the outer part, as it were its body».⁸

Whether the soul that makes the Church a living body is the Holy Spirit, inner virtues, or the good members, this inner and vivifying principle cannot serve a substantive role in Bellarmine's argument. The consideration of the Church's holiness has to focus on the external: the Church is holy because its three visible constitutive elements are holy: baptism, the profession of faith, and «the at least external union of members among themselves and with their heads». That the Church in fact contains holy people within it and that it is consecrated to Christ, the holy of holies, are clearly secondary arguments, which Bellarmine leaves quite undeveloped.⁹ Stated quite

² Bk. III, ch. 15, 100.
³ As S. Diannich has pointed out, *Ecclesiologia*. (Questioni di metodo e una proposta, Milan 1993, 23-26, by its focus on visibility the counter-Reformation ecclesiology ignored the real point of the challenge posed by the question «De vera Ecclesia» «ecclesia gubernatur a Christo tanquam a capite sponso suo et a Spiritu Sancto tanquam ab anima» (Bk. III, ch. 14, 98). But the force of this comparison is rather weakened when elsewhere he speaks of the Spirit as «the external and separate governor» of the Church (ch. 5, 79).

⁴ Bk. III, ch. 2, 75.

⁵ Bk. III, ch. 9, 88.

⁶ Bk. III, ch. 9, 87. In ch. 13, there is a discussion of the holiness of the leaders and ordinary believers in the Church, but more space is given to the absence of holiness, or even basic human virtue, in heretics than to the exposition of holiness among Catholics, and the spirit of the analysis is summed up in the sentence: «Quod vero attinet ad populum, sunt quidem in Ecclesia catholica plurimi mali, sed ex haereticis nullus est bonus» (130-31).

⁷ De controversiis christianae fidei adversus haereticos, II Naples 1856, Bk. III, De Ecclesia militante toto orbe terrarum diffusa, ch. 2, 75.

⁸ «... si soli praedestinati essent de Ecclesia, omnia essent incerta. Nam nemo tunc cognosceret fratres suos, et nec pastores cognoscerent oves suas, nec ab illis cognoscerentur: cum nemo sciat qui sint praedestinati. Et praeterea nemo sciret quae sint verae Scripturae, quae vera sacramenta, quae vera fides, etc. Omnia enim pendunt ex testimonio verae Ecclesiae» (Bk. III, ch. 7, 82; see also ch. 10, 91).

badly, «believers or Christians are called such not because of charity but because of faith or the profession of faith»¹⁶

The same perspective dominates the consideration of the unity or «communion with the head and members» from which the schismatic separates himself. To explain schism, Bellarmine offers a description of the multiple causes of the Church's «essential unity» in the Church, he says, there is a unity in virtue of: (1) the one call of God, (2) the one ultimate end, (3) the same means: faith, sacraments, and laws, (4) the one Holy Spirit, «the external and separate governor» of the Church, (5) the one «internal and conjoined governor», Christ and his Vicar, and (6) «the connection of members among themselves and especially with their heads». But only the last two of these are considered to «make the Church one in the proper sense», «that is, one body, one people, one society»; and of these two it is only § 5 which retains any importance, because schism is defined by a refusal «to be a member of that body or under that head». The connection with other members recedes in importance or is reduced to subjection to the one head.¹⁷

The absence of internal virtue as a requisite for the constitution of the Church must be taken into account lest one be deceived by the appearance in Bellarmine's treatise of words such as «communio», «conjunctio», «unio», «communitium spirituales», etc. In *none* of the places where these words occur, referring either to participation in the sacraments or to membership in the one corporate body, do they refer to communion in the divine life or to a fellowship among Christians derived from it. The «communio sacramentorum» is merely external, and the «communio membrorum inter se et cum capite» is mere submission to authority. Ecclesiastical communion includes secret heretics and notorious and grave sinners, but excludes those who may be living by faith, hope and love but do not acknowledge the authority of the Church. What is visible about the Church may have no life, and what is vital in the Church is not visible. While these formal constituents grant ample room for sinners, in the hope of their repentance and salvation, what one might

call the material substance of the Church — the content of faith, the life the sacraments generate, the common life — plays no role. If it had, perhaps Bellarmine could have given greater appreciation to those elements of each of these constituents which were retained in the other Christian churches and might have acknowledged their power both as elements propelling toward unity and as principles for common commitment to the reconciliation of a newly divided world.

Finally, the sole purpose of the Church for Bellarmine is to provide the means by which individuals may safely be borne to eternal salvation. The superiority of this end grounds the superiority of the Church's spiritual authority over any temporal authority. The only point at which what today we would call the «Church-world» relationship arises is in connection with discussions of the relative authority of spiritual and temporal rulers. Bellarmine is still arguing within the framework of the single Christian *respublica*, within which exist both *reges et pontifices*, related as body and soul of one social reality.¹⁸ The medieval regime is still taken for granted, its dissolution as a result of the Reformation is considered temporary, the ideal is its restoration. The possibility of a temporal order in which there might be conciliation between Catholics and heretics is expressly rejected, since the bonds of community within the temporal realm must be the same as those within the spiritual realm.¹⁹ For this reason, the pope retains an indirect power to depose rulers when the spiritual good of the commonwealth requires it, and in turn magistrates must not grant religious freedom, may and ought to sanction books forbidden by the Church, and may inflict temporal punishments and even death upon heretics. The close association of the two powers also made it natural for Bellarmine to borrow anal-

¹⁶ Bk. III, ch. 9, 86. For the consequences of the absence or presence of the theme of charity in ecclesiology, see S. Dianich, «De caritate factitane», *Introduzione ad un'enna incensata*, in *Associazione teologica italiana, De caritate factitane*. Il principio «amore» e la chiesa, Padua 1987, 27-107.

¹⁷ Bk. III, ch. 5, 78-79; see also Bk. IV, *De mans Ecclesiae*, ch. 10, 124-25.

¹⁸ «Protestans civilis subjecta est potestati spirituali, quando utraque pars est eiusdem reipublicae christianae». «Reges et pontifices, clerici et laici non faciunt duas reipublicas, sed unam, id est, unam Ecclesiam: sumus enim omnes unum corpus». *De Romano pontifice*, Bk. V, ch. 7, vol. 1, 532.

¹⁹ Thus Bellarmine had to reject Georg Cassander's proposal that reconciliation was possible between Catholics and heretics: «Lutherans and Calvinists cannot be called true members of the Church even if they were to agree with us on the Creed, for besides that faith there is also required subjection to the legitimate head of the Church established by Christ and communion with the other members». *De haereticis*, Bk. III, ch. 19, vol. 1, 336.

ogies from the temporal order to justify the nature and exercise of coercive power within the Church.

Franzelin

I chose Franzelin's book both because within the manual tradition it is one of the most serious efforts to restore some theological and spiritual substance to the treatise on the Church and because it illustrates the difficulty (Catholic ecclesiology, down through *Mysteri Corporis*, experienced in breaking the narrow Bellarminean mould. The influence of Tübingen theologians on the Roman School led Franzelin to broaden the theological horizon typical of a Roman textbook.¹⁴ His treatise *De Ecclesia* begins with nuanced discussions of the term «Church», of the Church as *communio sanctorum*, of the Church under the Old Covenant, and of the distinction of powers within the Church. A second section is more familiar: the institution of the Church by Christ. But before going on to a discussion in the last section of the properties of the Church, Franzelin interposed a section on the Church's relations with Christ, considered under four headings: as the Church's efficient and meritorious cause (Church as «*mundus supernaturaliter transformatus*»), as its formal cause (Church as Spouse and Body of Christ), as its exemplary cause (the analogy with the Incarnation), and as its final cause («*Gloria Christi finis Ecclesiae*»).

There results a notion of «communion» that is much richer than Bellarmine's. The consideration of the *communio sanctorum* in its fullest extension begins with a reference to the «ordo communionis naturalis creaturarum rationalium», to which the Church in its full sense adds the supernatural vocation to a destiny beyond the powers of created nature. The Creed's *communio sanctorum* refers to the Church in the broad sense as including all the just from the beginning to the end of the world, for which Franzelin offers a rich description:

«It is constituted by all the rational creatures which in virtue of a supernatural habitual gift pertaining to sanctification are subject to Christ the Head and by him are either being directed on their way or have reac-

hed the goal of eternal glory. These supernatural gifts, therefore, are the unifying bond and the *final cause* by which these creatures, in all the diversity of gifts in various degrees, are joined as members with Christ the Head, in Christ with God the Sanctifier, in Christ and God with one another to constitute the *societas* that is the Church of God: "So that you may have *societas* (*komonia*) with us, and our *societas* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1Jn 1,3; 1Cor 1,9) ... If, then, we were to take these gifts, from the least to the greatest, insofar as they are the *form* of this supernatural society, and were to include them all under the name "holiness", taking this to express what *concretely* informs these rational creatures, then the Church of God must be called the *supernatural society of saints*, or, in the solemn formula of the symbols, the *communio sanctorum*».¹⁵

Equally rich is Franzelin's exploration of the analogy of the Church with the Incarnation:

«The Church is an image of Christ, its Founder and Head, in its most constitution, by which it expresses itself in a likeness to the Incarnate Word. As Christ is the God-man, the Word made flesh, so his Body, the Church, in its members, in its hierarchy, in its sacraments and institutions consists of a twofold element, an external element that of itself is human and visible, and an internal element that is divine and invisible and by which the human element is informed and elevated and thereby formally constituted as *ecclesiastical*. It is, then, by the conjunction of the two elements, human and divine, that the individual parts are constituted and out of all of these the whole Church is human and divine. In it, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are, as it were, incarnated, the invisible gifts become visible, not indeed in themselves but in the conjoined visible element which they inform and by which they are made manifest».¹⁶

But the richer and fuller meanings of the word «Church» that are explored in these and other passages have to yield when Franzelin turns to the questions of visibility and membership. The ecclesiology of the visible perfect society, considerably developed from the embryonic state in which it appeared in Bellarmine, must govern the discussion of the special state of the Church here on earth. To identify this Church, references to God's universal will and call will not suffice and the christological analogy proves irrelevant: the epistemological criteria for clear and certain determination of who

¹⁴ Franzelin, *Theses de Ecclesia Christi*..., 17-18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 324. See also, a little later: «*Externa autem haec omnia et vistibilia suam propriam rationem summeque valorem habent a donis internis, a quibus promanant et quibus informantur*»

¹⁵ J.B. Franzelin, *Theses de Ecclesia Christi*, Rome 1887. The work was left incomplete at the author's death.

does and does not belong to the Church require a notion of visibility that has nothing theological about it.

The determination of membership in the Church does begin with a recognition of the complexity of the question as evidenced, for example, in Augustine's wrestling with the issue. Franzelin could speak of people who can be said to be «members of the Church by God's antecedent will» and of others who are members «according to God's foreknowledge». But, Franzelin goes on, such broad considerations of the divine will and call contribute nothing to the question of the nature of the visible Church.¹⁷ To determine who belongs to the Church *simpliciter*, one has to turn to the three conditions already established for the constitution of the Kingdom of Christ on earth: «the unity of faith with the sacrament of faith, the unity of legitimate subordination, which the Fathers used to call the unity of charity (social), and the unity of juridical or canonical communion»¹⁸

With these three necessary conditions, we are still locked in Belharmine's problematic. The strengthened framework is apparent in the identification of *caritas socialis* with legitimate subordination, which is therefore difficult to distinguish from «juridical or canonical communion». Franzelin is not unaware that «no less than the truth of faith and social charity, the proper form of the Church is holiness and theological charity»¹⁹ but the dominance of the concern for the Church's visibility prevents him from giving the latter an essential role. Consider, for example, his treatment of the many different bonds of union with the Church:

«For (a) there are external bonds, in themselves visible, which, although they are means to an end, namely charity and sanctity, are nonetheless by the institution of the Church's Founder, essential elements by which the Church itself is on earth formally constituted *as visible*. (b) There are internal bonds, utterly spiritual, in themselves not visible, which, although they are nobler and the proximate goal of the holy and holymaking Church, by the very fact that they are made manifest only by the former bonds, do not constitute the essence of the Church's visibility and the visible society. The visible bonds, essential by the institution of Christ, we have demonstrated to be baptism, the sacrament of faith, the communi-

on of the profession of faith under the legitimate magistratum, social charity, that is, the obedience of discipline under the legitimate hierarchical governance of sacred rule, communion in divine worship and the sacraments under the legitimate presbiterium...»²⁰

The conclusion drawn, of course, is essentially identical to Belharmine's determination of who does and does not belong to the Church on earth.

If Franzelin's ecclesiology, when compared to Belharmine's, makes far more room for the spiritual and christological communion at the heart of the Church, he cannot be said to have successfully integrated this dimension into the discussion of the visible society of believers. His book seems to have two separate worlds of discourse, two distinct sets of interpretative and evaluative criteria. The truth sought in the question *De vera Ecclesia* cannot include the truth, that is, the authenticity, of the Church's inner life. The full inner form of the Church is spiritual and christological; but although said to be modelled on the Incarnation, this living Body of Christ is not visible in any sense useful for apologues. Once again what in the Church is richest and deepest, most substantial, is not visible, and what is visible is merely formal and may even be lifeless.

What passed for *communio* in the understanding of the Church that dominated post-Reformation Catholic ecclesiology? First, it was used chiefly to designate the visible unity of Catholics and was displayed in their *consensio* in matters of faith, in their *communio sacramentorum*, and in their juridical subordination under the authority of bishops and especially the pope. If mentioned at all, other bonds of union, such as the Holy Spirit, sanctifying grace, the inner virtues of faith, hope, and love, because they are thought not to be visible, are not developed as principles of Catholic *communio* relevant to the identification of the true Church.

The principles of communion, then, are purely formal and empty of content. The content of the faith externally professed, the life the sacraments generate, and the common life within which authority must function are ignored in this approach, where only the structures and bearers of authority are described and defended at length. The other human subjects of *communio* are largely ignored,

¹⁷ «At hanc universalis voluntas et etiam particularis destinatio Dei per se spectata nihil confert ad propriam rationem visibilis Ecclesiae» (Ibid., 380-81).

¹⁸ Ibid., 381-82.

¹⁹ Ibid., 438.

²⁰ Ibid., 453-454.

in particular the laity, who appear only in the form of secular rulers, who must be reminded of their duties towards the Church. The emphasis falls upon the universal Church, conceived chiefly as the object of the universal authority of the pope; particular Churches appear only as the objects of the circumscribed authority of bishops.

Second, because of this focus on visible identification of the Church, Catholic *communio* is generous or inclusive only towards sinners in its own midst, who must be counted as members of the Church, even if they are dead members; this includes even secret heretics. Otherwise, the *communio* is defined negatively, that is, by those who are excluded from it: unbelievers, Jews, Muslims, pagans, open heretics, schismatics. These may at best be considered to be related to the Church by God's foreknowledge, *in potentia*, or by desire.

Third, just as the spiritual and substantive dimensions of *communio* do not enter into the discussion of the constituents of the visible Church, so also there is no interest in the bonds that might unite Catholics with others in a communion based on their unity of origin and destiny or on whatever share they might actually have in the faith, hope, and love of the Church. These cannot yield a sense of a wider *communio* because whatever spiritual elements are possessed by those outside the Church are not possessed as they ought to be, that is, as mediated in and by the authority of the visible Church. The best that might be hoped is that there will be a future union, in the *communio sanctorum*, with those who are not now members of the Church.

Fourth, the «world» appears only as either (1) the totality of those whom the Church seeks to bring within its visible communion or as (2) the rulers and political bodies with which the authorities of the Church must deal. In the first perspective, salvation is largely conceived of individualistically and in other-worldly terms, while in the second, relations between secular and ecclesiastical authority are measured by the degree of freedom the political power allows to the spiritual and by the degree of support it lends to its efforts, even to the point of restricting the religious activities of all others. If history enters at all, it is chiefly retrospectively, appealing in particular to the ideal regime of medieval Christendom, rather than prospectively, envisaging and seeking to create a different, reconciled human world. Redemptive *communio*, then, does not serve as an inner-historical goal or criterion.

Vatican II

The vision of the Church embodied in the schema *De Ecclesia* prepared for the Second Vatican Council faithfully reflected the dominant post-Reformation ecclesiology. Christ's Church was identified with the Roman Catholic Church, membership in which was determined by Bellarmine's three external criteria. Others were at best related to it *in voto*, any mystical links with the Church not being of a nature seriously to nuance the primary emphasis on the visible communion. Efforts of the Secretariat for Christian Unity to explain the ecclesiological significance of the presence of substantial elements of the Church in non-Christians and their communities were vigorously rejected by the Preparatory Theological Commission which produced the schema.

What emerged from the conciliar debates, however, was a quite different image and conception of the Church, whose features can be briefly set forth by comparison with the four characteristics of the previously dominant notion just reviewed above. First, there is the recovery of the inner, spiritual substance of Church communion as something more than a social unity under legitimate authority. As *De verbum* presents a notion of revelation, for which Christ is not merely the «divine legate» but the embodiment of God's redemptive Word, *Lumen gentium* offers a description of the Church as constituted first of all by a common participation in the Trinitarian mystery of God, which grounds the new People of God as a «communion of life, love, and truth» (LG 9) which all differentiations of Church members, including the hierarchical and ministerial, must presuppose and respect. The Constitutions on the Liturgy and on the Church restore the ecclesial character of worship and the sacramental and especially the eucharistic character of the Church. In several texts the Council promoted the responsibility of all the members for the life of the Church and for the realization of its mission in the world. At the same time it began the restoration to true subject-hood of the local Churches and their groupings, thus initiating the rediscovery of the one Church as the communion of communions. Even the nervous insistence that the adjective «hierarchical» be added before «communion» does not lessen the significance of this new orientation and emphasis.

Second, to the Council's insistence on the spiritual substance of communion corresponds a new approach to the question of what it means to belong to the Church. For this the Council found the

language of «membership» too confining. In describing what makes a person «fully incorporated» into the society of the Church, *Lumen gentium* listed, before the evocation of visible elements, the possession of the Spirit of Christ (LG 14): full participation in the Church, then, requires communion in the Spirit. This requirement, as well as the other rather tentative statements about the Church's constant need for renewal and reform, greatly complicates the task of identifying where the «true» Church is to be found: it can no longer be settled simply by external or visible criteria, but has to include as a criterion the genuineness of the realization of Christ's will for the Church. At the same time, the Council's attitude towards others was no longer simply exclusionary, but open and dialogical: it looked for the positive bonds that already link others with a Church intended by Christ to be genuinely and concretely Catholic.

Third, this led to a series of affirmations that are impossible to imagine in the framework of post-Tridentine ecclesiology. The Council gives two lists of bonds between the Church and other Christians. In LG 15, the following link individuals to the Church: the Scriptures, religious zeal, faith in God and Christ, baptism, union with Christ, the episcopate, the Eucharist, devotion to the Blessed Virgin, a *communio* of prayer and other spiritual benefits, a true *communio* in the Holy Spirit, sanctifying grace, martyrdom. A formal statement at the beginning of *Unitatis redintegratio* (§ 3), impossible to conceive in the earlier framework, acknowledges that «many, even very many, of the most important elements and endowments that together constitute and give life to the Church itself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church» and then provides the other list: «the written Word of God, the life of grace, faith, hope and charity, other inner gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements». The Council also acknowledged that, because of these constitutive elements, other Christian Churches and communities can by their actions generate the life of grace and open the way to the *salutis communio*. Because of all these blessings outside the Church, the Council had to nuance the simple identification of the Catholic Church with Christ's Church, which now is said to «subsist in» the Catholic Church (LG 8) and had to state the question of the other Christian communities, not in the language of either-or, but by distinguishing degrees of «communion» with the Catholic Church.

Similarly, links with non-Christian believers and with atheists

are acknowledged both in LG 16 and in the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions. A formal statement in *Gaudium et spes* (§ 22) declares that «since Christ died for all and since all are called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility that, in a manner known to God, they may participate in this paschal mystery». By such statements the Council acknowledges that the saving activity of God extends beyond the boundaries of the visible Church: the communion of salvation, communion with God, does not simply coincide with the formal ecclesial communion.

All these considerations contribute, fourth, to a quite transformed vision of the world and of the Church's role in it. Underlying this is a basic view of the world that was not taken seriously enough before the Council, namely, that what counts theologically as «the world» is the world that human beings have made, are making, and will make. The history to which Christ's grace and Gospel come for redemption is no longer simply the life of individuals, but the collective life of mankind as well. The title of *Gaudium et spes* is significant: it is not a pastoral constitution on the Church in the world in general, but in «the world of today», that is, in the world as it has come to be through various historical developments, not all of which need be judged negatively and indeed in some of which God's own hand can be discerned to be at work. It is also a world of human beings conscious of their responsibility for what they will become and for the world of the future they will create. Revelation and redemption, Gospel and grace, now are to interpret and transform not only individual lives but the course of collective human history. The Council sought to relate the Church to that «new humanism» it saw being born, «for which man is defined principally by his responsibility for his brothers and for history» (GS 55).

This requires of the Church a keener discernment of the forces that have shaped and now direct the course of collective history; this is the full meaning of the reading of «the signs of the times» and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel (GS 4). In this newly balanced statement, the Church remains anchored in the Gospel, but its gaze is not self-centered but must look also for indications of the will and work of God outside the Church. And as it has something to bring to the world, the Church has also something to learn from the world (GS 40-45). Perhaps the most telling exam-

ple of this is the growing awareness in modern times of the dignity of the human person that led the Council, in its Declaration on Religious Freedom, to reject the coercive assistance of the state and to place its trust in the gentle and powerful persuasiveness of the truth itself.

All this places the purpose for which the Church exists outside itself, not only in the sense that its realization must await the coming of the Kingdom, but also in the sense that what is realized in the ecclesial *communio* is the sign and instrument of a *communio* that must, by God's will, be realized in the world, that is, in human history. Thus *Gaudium et spes*, to describe the divine purposes for creation, appeals to the language that describes the Church's own inner reality: *communio personarum* (GS 12, 23) *societas unio. solidaritatis, fraternitatis communio* (GS 32, 39), *fraternitas universalis, coena communiois fraternitatis* (GS 38). Such statements fill out the formal description of the union with God and the unity of the whole human race of which *Lumen gentium* had said that the Church is the sacrament (LG 1).

In all four respects, then, the Council expanded the framework within which the communion of the Church was to be understood. Communion with God and with others is now seen as the goal intended by God in creation to be realized in the recapitulation of all peoples under Christ and in the Spirit (see LG 13). The Church's inner life is supposed to be the anticipatory sign of the communion of the Kingdom, serving thereby and in its activity also as the instrument of that reconciling mission. Communion in the divine life of itself requires that Catholics be alert and grateful for the bonds of communion that already genuinely link them with other Christians, with other believers, with non-believers and, on the basis of this communion, however imperfect, to undertake the various dialogues with others that can lead to even greater communion not only among Christians but in a still divided world. Communion now has burst the bonds of the visible Church and been recognized as the substantive spiritual criterion of what the Church is supposed to be and to do.

The Post-conciliar Discussion

This broad invocation of the themes of *communio* has led many commentators to sum up the ecclesiological achievement of the

Council as a transition from an institutional to a communion-centered view of the Church. Since the Council closed, however, some have developed this communion-notion in ways that imply that it is in basic tension with another notion the Council used to state its vision of the Church, that of «People of God». This tendency was given unfortunate expression in the Final Report of the 1985 Synod of Bishops, which almost completely neglects the idea of People of God in favor of the idea of communion, which it considers the chief conciliar notion of the Church. Behind this choice lie fears that People of God has been understood and used too «horizontally» and too «sociologically», to the neglect of the properly «vertical» and theological constituents of the Church. In reaction, others fear that «communion» is often being used as a kind of wand that can be waved over various ecclesial problems, both internal and external, to solve them — or make them disappear — if by magic.²¹

The counterposing of these two major themes is unfortunate on two counts. First, it betrays the ecclesiology of the Council itself, almost as if *Lumen gentium* had been talking about two different things in Chapter 1, on *The Mystery of the Church*, and in Chapter 2, on *The People of God*. But the official explanation of the Doctrinal Commission made it clear that Chapter 2 was continuing the discussion of the same Mystery of the Church begun in Chapter 1, only now concentrating on its existence and activity in history, between Ascension and Pentecost.²² Put in terms that have become familiar in the years since the Council, the two chapters attempted to show how the one Church is at once a communion in the mystery of God and a subject or agent of history. To see a contradiction between these two chapters and between the concepts that characterize them is itself to betray the Council.²³

Secondly, counterposing communion and People of God hinders efforts to achieve a systematic ecclesiology that might at once iden-

²¹ For the debates at the 1985 Synod, see J.A. Komonchak, 'The Theological Debate, in Synod 1985, An Evaluation, ed. G. Alberigo and J. Provost (Cincinnati, 1988), Fidinburgh 1986, 53-63, and The Synod of 1985 and the Notion of the Church, in Chicago Studies 26 (1987), 330-45.

²² See the *Relatio generalis*, introducing chapter 2, in *Constitutiones Dogmaticae Lumen Gentium Synopsi Historica*, ed. F. Alberigo and F. Magistrini, Bologna 1975, 441. For a full and critical review of the imperfect reception of the Council's teaching, see G. Colombo, 'Il «Popolo di Dio» e il «mistero» della Chiesa nell'ecclesologia post-conciliare, in Teologia 10 (1985) 97-169.

tify and integrate all the dimensions of the Church and motivate and direct its mission in the world. This requires the integration not only of the hierarchical, visible, and earthly aspects with the mystical, spiritual, and heavenly aspects of the Church, nor only of the claim that the Church of Christ «subsists in» the Catholic Church with the strong statements that constitutive and dynamic principles of the Church exist outside the Catholic Church, but also the integration of the unique identity and historical mission that constitute the Church with the acknowledgment that God is already at work in the world and that his salvation, of which the Church is to be the sacrament, is a *communio personarum* of universal dimensions, in the realization of which the Church is not the only historical subject.

The fact that people can be tempted to such counterpositions is one indication that ecclesiology, as a theological discipline, is still in search of a critical scientific method and goal.²⁴ Pluralism, whether of language, methods, interests, or models, still prevails. While this is perhaps understandable as a reaction to the imposed dominance of the societal view of the Church, it is at least questionable whether this pluralism satisfies the exigencies of a critical scientific discipline and whether it genuinely serves or does not rather hinder the effective realization of the Church's redemptive mission as the sacrament of unity, particularly in a world in which, on the one hand, respect for diversity, for «the other», is often little more than cultural laziness and indifference and, on the other hand, a revival of tribalism and nationalism threatens again to postpone genuine reconciliation among peoples and nations.²⁵ The Church cannot serve as a sacrament of unity unless these tensions are addressed within itself, and it is doubtful that they can be faced effectively without an ecclesiology that attempts to integrate the dimensions of the transcendent and the empirical, the eschatological and

the historical, the theological and the sociological, that constitute the very mystery of the Church.

Perhaps a necessary start on the way towards such a synthetic ecclesiology is to discard a method that begins by identifying and defining various images, concepts, or models of the Church and then chooses one of them as the hermeneutical key by which to render the others intelligible. It may at least be questioned whether any single concept of the Church can bear so heavy a load. Perhaps it might be more helpful first to make an inventory of all the kinds of statements that Bible and tradition, worship and mission, theology and practice require us to make about the Church. This would yield the data that need to be integrated into a synthetic view and thus provide at least a material criterion by which to measure the validity or success of any proposed synthesis.²⁶

We might then learn to distinguish, in order later to relate, various levels of discourse: between, for example, first-order, symbolic, imagetal language and second-order, critical and systematic language, between faith-statements derived from revelation (the *credendum*) and statements derived from historical and social experience (the *scitum*), and between statements about identity and statements about mission. This might yield a critical ability to recognize different semantic levels and to avoid a confusion of claims and criteria.²⁷

We might then ask about the subject of predication of various statements about the Church: we would ask, then, not simply *what* is the Church, but also *where*, that is, *of whom* or *in whom* are these statements true? (For example, *who* are the *congregatio fidelium*? *Who*, even now, are the *communio sanctorum*? *Where*, that is, in what communities, is the mystery of the Church realized? *Where*, *in whom* and *by whom*, is its mission undertaken?) This might yield a recognition that an ecclesiology remains merely formal and abstract as long as it remains at the level of the merely theological

²⁴ Diamant's book, *Ecclesiological*, is very useful on this point, and what follows in my text owes much to it.

²⁵ See J. Zizioulas, *Communion and otherness*, in *Sobornost* 16 (1994) 7-19.

²⁶ A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, New York 1978, 27-28, remarks pertinently: «A model is accepted if it accounts for a large number of biblical and traditional data and accords with what history and experience tell us about the Christian life»; but he does not seem sanguine about the possibility of anything more than a plurality of competing models.

²⁷ On this question, both Diamant, *Ecclesiological*, and H. Rikhof, *The Concept of Church. A Methodological Inquiry into the Use of Metaphors in Ecclesiology*, London 1981, have important things to say.

and the universal, ignoring the human subjects and local communities in and out of which alone the one Church exists and realizes itself in mission.²⁸

Finally, we might also realize the significance for a theology of the Church of all sorts of other statements that we have to make, statements drawn not only from revelation but also from historical experience. What are the pertinence for ecclesiology of statements about the universality of sin, about God's universal salvific will and grace, about the work of the Spirit outside the Church, indeed outside Christianity, about the Kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace, which is the eschatological goal of creation? What do history and social theory have to contribute, both by way of data and as aids to understanding?²⁹

It seems to me that it is only after addressing such questions that an ecclesiology can be said to be truly comprehensive and critical. Perhaps they also are the sorts of questions that need to be asked about any single term invoked as the single key to an understanding of the Church. Thus, with regard to *communio*, one might ask: (1) Which of the dimensions of the Church does it comprehend? Does it leave any unaddressed or unaccounted for? If *communio* itself is constituted by both invisible and visible dimensions, how are these related? (2) At what semantic level is *communio* used? If, as seems obvious from the New Testament, it is used on a first-order level, can a critical, systematic, second-order notion of it be derived? Are «Church» and *communio* identical in connotation and denotation? If not, how are they related? (3) Who are the subjects, individual and communal, of whom *communio* is predicated?³⁰ Is the term adequate to define the identity and historical mission of the Church?³¹ (4) How does *communio* relate to other terms used of

the Church, such as «community» (*Gemeinschaft*)? Do they refer to the same reality, one from a theological, the other from a sociological standpoint? Can social theory throw any light on the reality meant by *communio*? (5) What are the relations between *communio* as realized in the Church and the universal *communio* willed by God, already existing in some way outside the Church, and one day to be realized in the Kingdom? What role must the eschatological *communio* play in determining the forms and practices of ecclesial *communio* itself? What do the relations between ecclesial and eschatological *communio* suggest for ecumenical, inter-religious, and Church-world communication and cooperation? (6) If the one Church only exists and realizes its mission in the many local Churches, can an ecclesiology of communion provide a heuristic for local ecclesiologies, constructed in and for the various circumstances in which «the *Ecclesiarum localium in unum conspirans varietas*» shows forth the catholicity of the undivided Church» (LG 23)?

It is only by addressing such questions that one can settle the question of the adequacy of *communio* as the key to understanding the Church and elaborate a truly critical notion of communion that will avoid two temptations visible today. One would evaporate communion into a nebulous fellow-feeling, into an uncritically tolerant, content-less, «agreement to disagree», or into a purely spiritual or eschatological ideal with no historical form or force, while the other would exploit it ideologically, covering with its spiritual and mystical connotations an ecclesiological theory and an ecclesial practice that do not differ substantially from the old *soeretas perfectae* notion. The first extreme would make the Church impotent as an historical subject or agent, with nothing distinctive to offer or to represent because it has lost its constitutive reference to Jesus Christ and to the apostolic witness (see Jn 1.1-4). The second would lead the Church back into the nervous, jealous, sectarian view that served the Church so poorly when it first was forced self-consciously and critically to face the challenges of becoming an agent serving as both sign and instrument of human history conceived as the struggle to realize a universal redemptive communion.

The jealous exclusion of others from its own *communio* once provided Catholics with a clear identity, but this was an identity that, as articulated in theory and realized in practice, itself often contributed to the divisions and alienations of humanity and postponed the realization of redemptive *communio* in history. The chat-

²⁸ I have made an effort in this direction in Towards a Theology of the Local Church, EABC Papers 42 (Hong Kong 1980) and in The Local Church and the Church Catholic, The Contemporary Theological Problematic, in The Jurist 52 (1992) 416-47.

²⁹ See J.A. Komonchuk, Ecclesiology and Social Theory, A Methodological Essay, in The Thomist 45 (1981) 262-83.

³⁰ For a discussion of some of the literature on this subject, see Colombo, II «Popolo di Dio» e il «mistero» della Chiesa... and J. Meyer zu Schönbem, Ist die Kirche Subjekt oder Kommunität? Annmerkungen zu einem ekklesiologischen Begriffskonzept, in Kirche Sein, Nachkonziliare Theologie zu einem ekklesiologischen Begriffskonzept, in Josef Potlmever, ed. W. Geering and M. Seckler, Freiburg 1994, 221-39.

³¹ For arguments that it is not, see Colombo, II «Popolo di Dio» e il «mistero» della Chiesa... and Dammich, Ecclesiologia...

henge today is to recognize that the very *communio* constitutive of the Church and defining its identity requires the recognition of a larger *communio* both as reality already at work in the world and as an eschatological goal, which, confessed in faith and yearned for in hope, serves even now as a measure of its love.

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Summary: *The author emphasizes the difference between the concept of *communio* typical of Catholic theology after the Council of Trent and that of Vatican II. Within the former approach, the positions of Bellarmino and Franzelin are adapted as representatives; according to both theologians, though with different solutions, Church communion is limited to the visible dimension, while the substantial aspects of Christian life take on a minor importance. By contrast, the position of Vatican II centers on the spiritual dimension leading to a dynamic and open communion.*