

## MANY MODELS, ONE CHURCH

Joseph A. Komonchak

The Catholic University of America

This was done, I believe, for Karen Smith who was the editor of *Church* magazine published out of Phil Murnion's office. It seems to date from around 1992. I don't know if it was ever published—it's not in my bibliography.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in the life of the Church that has been introduced since Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council is the much greater space allowed for diversity. Although even a little knowledge of the history of the Church shows that diversities in the expression of faith and life have marked the Church from its beginning, respect for difference diminished in the modern period, partly as a result of a certain defensive introversion of a Church that felt itself under multiple attack, partly also by the growth within the Church of a tight system of ecclesiastical and theological control.

The Council represented a break with this defensive attitude and with the system that reflected it. The work of historians and theologians in the decades before the Council had restored to Catholic consciousness the broader, deeper, more self-confident, and more diversified Catholicism of the centuries before the break with the Eastern Churches had begun to contract it. It is only an apparent paradox that it was this recovered Tradition that enabled the Council to propose new ways in which the Church could live its life and engage in its mission to the world.

In part as a reflection of an experience of liberation from the system of control and in part simply as an implication of a recovered sense of the catholic dimensions of its central Mystery, the Church has developed a new respect for diversity. The evidence is multiple: diversity in ministries, particularly in the much greater roles played by the laity; in liturgical language and ritual; in concrete social engagements; in the forms of community; in the consequences of a commitment to inculturation; in theology.

With this new diversity within the Church come new sets of problems, particularly when it is contrasted with former habits of thought and action. It can be argued that the single thread running through the discussions that have marked all the meetings of the Synod of Bishops since the Council has been the reconciliation of diversity and unity: whether in relations between the pope and the bishops, in the tasks of evangelization and catechesis, in the Church's engagement with justice-issues, in the roles of the clergy and laity, in the challenges of inculturation. And it is quite likely that tensions around this theme of diversity and unity will mark the worldwide Church for many decades to come.

What is visible in episcopal discussion at the level of the Synods of Bishops is also seen in the everyday concrete life of the one Church in the many Churches. Neither in outsiders' perceptions nor in the ordinary consciousness of Catholics does the Catholic Church give that once widely-felt sense of a "disciplined army," unified in spirit, self-confident in its campaigns, and always victorious. In some cases the appearance today is almost the opposite, of diversities so sharply defined and jealously defended that they have become divisions, to the point that one wonders at times, as when reading the national Catholic newspapers, whether it is still one Church at all or whether people mean the same thing when they use the word "Church".

It was in part to address this issue on the levels both of ordinary Church-life and of theological reflection that almost twenty years ago Avery Dulles published his widely-read book, *Models of the Church*. Fr. Dulles offered the book as a service to inner-Church dialogue. His hope

was that by tracing differences in practice or in theory back to guiding images and controlling models of the Church, Catholics would learn to be at once more modest and self-critical about their own positions and more respectful of the views of others because they would appreciate the inability of any single vision of the Church to exhaust the riches of its Mystery. A diversity of theological and practical concepts of the Church could not only be "tolerated" but seen to be necessary, and Catholics could commit themselves more readily to the respectful dialogue that is the most effective way to prevent diversity from becoming division.

Fr. Dulles' aim seems to have been realized most fully on one level of theological reflection. His history of developments in ecclesiology in this century is widely accepted. The dominance in official textbooks of the "institutional model"--drawn up in terms of the Church as a "perfect society," that is, distinct and autonomous vis-à-vis the State, and largely concerned with the distribution of power--began to be challenged long before the Council by a recovered sense of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. This notion not only provided Catholics with a lofty sense of the Church as a living organism sharing in the life of the risen Christ, realized in the eucharistic celebration, and binding its members at once to Christ, their Head, and to one another; it also inspired many of the vibrant apostolic movements that marked the pre-conciliar Church. To some degree the idea of the Church as the "sacrament" of Christ in the world emerged out of this vision, developing its liturgical basis and providing a different theological articulation of the Church's role in history.

In the 1940s and 1950s a new notion began to emerge, that of the Church as the People of God. This recommended itself because of its biblical roots, its ecumenical implications, and its usefulness for articulating the historical and pilgrim character of the Church. Warmly endorsed at Vatican II, it remains perhaps the most popular notion of the Church, widely invoked in discussions of inner-Church relations and in justifications of the Church's engagements in contemporary historical challenges. I incline to see Fr. Dulles' last two "models"--herald and servant--as specifications of the People of God notion.

That the identification and exploration of various ideas of the Church does not necessarily lead to greater dialogue and mutual comprehension, however, was displayed when the 1985 Synod of Bishops attempted an assessment of the reception of Vatican II. In the synodal debates and especially in its Final Report a clear tendency was visible to set in some tension with one another the notion of the Church as People of God and the notion of it as a communion in Mystery. People of God was criticized on two grounds: that it was being given too "sociological" a sense, as if the Church were something that we *make* and not something we *receive* from God, and that it was being turned into an instrument of political options. Its critics argued that concentrating on the Church as communion in the Mystery of God would counteract these tendencies and restore a more transcendent sense of the Church's identity.

Even if one were to agree with the criticisms of some uses of the notion of People of God and with the necessity of restoring a sense of the Church as communion in Mystery, one could still regret the impression given by the Synod's Final Report and echoed elsewhere that one has either to choose between the two ideas or to move, rather incoherently, from one to the other. First, this runs quite contrary to the vision of the Church in *Lumen gentium*, which moves easily and without a break from its first chapter, "The Mystery of the Church," to its second, "The People of God." The Doctrinal Commission that prepared this text informed the bishops that its integrated theology of the Church had been divided into two chapters, not because the Council was moving from one idea to another, much less from one "model" to another, but for the simple practical reason that the material was too much for one chapter! It is a betrayal of the Council's ecclesiology to counterpose People of God and communion in Mystery; in fact it might not be a bad summary of the Council's view to say that the Church is the People of God constituted by communion in the Mystery of Christ.

The Synod's seeming indulgence in the view that one must choose among various notions of the Church leads one to ask whether speaking about distinct "models" of the Church is the best way in which to address the diversities that mark both the Church and theological reflection on it. There is, of course, no doubt that there are various dimensions of the Church, among which one might be chosen--for example, the Word, sacrament, or service--to serve as the organizing principle for bringing them all into a synthetic vision of the whole life of the Church. Similarly, there are various ways in which the Church has been concretely organized and realized throughout the history of the Church and across cultures in any one generation, and one may use this fact to justify exploring the various concrete forms the Church takes when it is realized in local communities of faith as different as those in, say, Bogotá, Berlin, Beirut, and Boston. And what I am about to argue is not meant to call either observation into question.

But at the level of theological synthesis, to approach the task in terms of models seems to me to run three major dangers. The first is that speaking of "models" tends to harden positions, particularly when models are considered to be coherent and incompatible wholes. For example, in the New Testament and even more in the later Tradition, there is a wonderful abundance of images and metaphors of the Church: wheatfield, marriage-banquet, fishing-net, boat, house, body, etc. As images, these are, of course, incompatible: a wheatfield is not a fishing-net is not a house, etc., and only an addict of the prose-fallacy could complain about this.

But an image is not a theoretical model and should not be confused with one. I take a model as something developed on the level of critical and reflective thought, and as such it has as one of its goals, which also generates one of the criteria by which it should be judged, the integration into a synthetic vision of all the insights generated and communicated by the various images employed in ordinary language. Critical and synthetic thought seeks to bring the wonderful variety of first-order language into an enriching and reconciling intelligible unity. To make images into models confuses two levels of language and thought and runs the danger of compromising the integrity of each.

Secondly, reflective ecclesiology also seeks to bring all the various dimensions of Church life into intelligible relationship with one another. One might use Fr. Dulles' five models to describe some of these essential dimensions: communion in the life of Christ, liturgical action, preaching and catechesis, service in the world, institutional roles. But so far from these dimensions grounding distinct reflective models of the Church, they represent precisely what an ecclesiology ought to try to relate intelligibly, to show how they are all integral to the life of the Church, to show which of them is prior and which derivative, to describe the relationship, for example, between preaching and sacrament, or between communion and institution. To build distinct theoretical models of the Church on a choice among essential dimensions is to disorient the discussion from the beginning.

A third danger represented by overuse of models brings us closer to the problematic of everyday Church life. I refer to a certain tendency to turn Fr. Dulles' theoretical models into practical models either when planning for the future or when describing present tensions in the Church. This turns distinct *models* of the Church into distinct *Churches*. This confusion was already apparent in some unjust criticisms of Fr. Dulles' book, as when his severe criticisms of the institutional model were interpreted as a rejection of the Church's institutions.

But perhaps there are more recent and more familiar examples. Almost any time one teaches a course on the Church, one will hear complaints about "the institutional Church", always, of course, in the third person and usually in criticism. Last year, a student of mine complained, "The institutional Church does not respect my ministry." I asked what he meant by the phrase and found out that he did not mean the Church but the hierarchy; and during the coffee-break I discovered that he did not mean the pope and bishops, but his local pastor! Other illustrations could be given to demonstrate that, long after one had hoped that the Council had banished the idea that the Church

is to be equated with the hierarchy, one still hears people using the word "Church" to mean the pope and/or bishops. To contrast "the Church as people" or "the Church as community" to "the institutional Church", is no improvement.

These contrasts, of course, reflect tensions and alignments within the Church and particularly between people and hierarchy, that need to be addressed. The popular phrases often refer to different persons or groups or to different perspectives or emphases or desires within the Church. But the point is precisely that these are tensions *within the Church*, and not *between Churches*. To speak, say, of basic Christian communities or of intentional Christian communities as one sort or model of Church and of the institutional or hierarchical body as another is to invite confusion from the beginning. Not only does it suggest an opposition between community and institution that is indefensible both theologically and sociologically, it also can impede dialogue, particularly when the distinctiveness and inner coherence of "models" are so stressed that they and the "Churches" they reflect are thought to be incompatible.

A decade before Vatican II, Yves Congar wrote a perceptive article entitled "Diversity and Divisions." He explored the principles of unity and of diversification in the Church, examined the maladies from which each principle can suffer, and made some suggestions for achieving a healthy balance between them. He was severe in his critique of the tendency of the ministers of unity in the Church to confuse it with uniformity, but he was no less critical of what he called an "*esprit de chapelle*" in the Church, a particularism, often associated with ethnic, national, or political commitments, that turned the one Church into multiple little sects, unable or at least unwilling to speak to others, each convinced that it represents the "true" Church. Congar hoped that a renewed appreciation of concrete catholicity--diversity-in-unity--might provide a means of overcoming the two destructive tendencies.

The Council attempted to restore the sense of catholicity that Congar described. *Lumen gentium* 13 first provided a sort of definition: "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 its individual parts are enriched because all are communicating with one another and working to achieve a fullness in unity." This rich notion of catholicity has since inspired the effort to realize genuinely local Churches in which, as Pope John Paul II remarked when commenting on this definition, the distinct Christian experiences of peoples influence the way they receive the Word of God, celebrate their liturgies, and live their common life. The one catholic Church, the Pope went on, is the communion by which these distinct local Churches live within one another, enriching one another, challenging one another. And he even presented the Petrine ministry in this perspective, as a service for the mutual communication and enrichment of the local Churches.

The Council went on in the same paragraph to speak of catholicity also in terms of the variety of orders, roles, and conditions of life that exist within the Church and that bind clergy, laity and religious in a common life and task. It is perhaps startling to think of catholicity in this reference, but there is considerable wisdom in doing so. For the "fullness in unity" that defines the goal of catholicity is surely applicable here as well. The Church in its internal life is also supposed to be a common life, in which all members have gifts to bring to others and to the whole community. The word "Church" cannot be claimed by any one of the members or groups: "Church" is the living whole, the "fullness in unity", that is realized in the common life and the common effort.

"Fullness in unity" is the Council's synonym for catholicity. "Fullness" refers to the right and duty of all to participate in the realization of the mystery of the Church, whether all the diverse peoples of the world or all the diverse members of the Church. And it was the validation of this right and duty that is one of the greatest achievements of the Council and one of the most remarkable developments in its life since. But it is not catholicity if this full diversity is not realized in unity, in

unity first of all under Christ and in the Spirit, secondly in communion with all other Churches and their riches, and finally in unity with all the other members of the one Church. To commit oneself to catholicity is to commit oneself at once to diversity and to unity.

Two years after the Council, John Courtney Murray commented on the changes already taking place in the Church: "Today there are abroad all sorts of tendencies, currents of thought, climates of opinion." Asking himself how to prevent this variety from wandering off into exclusive error, he replied: "I think the corrective is a will to community--of thought and love." The suggestion came from a man who insisted as few have that the way his country could successfully carry out the experiment of political unity within cultural and religious diversity was by civilized dialogue. A similar dialogue, one would like to hope, should be an even more attractive implication of "a will to community" among Catholics, aware of the great gifts which each has received, not separately and individually, but within a communion of life, love, and truth.