

Thinking the Church: Some Autobiographical Remarks

The Marianist Lecture

The University of Dayton - October 3, 2012

Joseph A. Komonchak

A video of this talk can be found at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDxPiRFx85s>

Presuming that one of the reasons I have been honored with the Marianist Award has been my work in ecclesiology, I wish to speak today about how I came to think about the Church the way I do and how this approach illustrates in a particular way the relationship between faith and reason, the general rubric under which recipients of this award are encouraged to speak. I shall speak, then, about how I came to think about the Church the way I do.

The Challenge

In the late summer of 1967 I was, on very short notice, appointed to teach dogmatic theology at St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie. The other dogmatist, Austin B. Vaughan, and I agreed that I would begin by teaching the course on the Church. That would not have been my first choice. The only course in ecclesiology I had taken was the course in apologetics by Fr. Francis Sullivan, S.J., at the Gregorian University in the spring of 1961. As was usual in textbooks throughout the modern era, the course was designed to demonstrate (1) that Christ had established a Church; (2) that this Church had a hierarchical and monarchical structure; and (3) that this Church was to be found in the Roman Catholic Church.¹ I recall a sophisticated explanation of papal infallibility as defined at the First Vatican Council, but a treatment of dogmatic, more spiritual, elements in the Church was to be reserved for a second volume, which I believe never appeared. In any case, the course was not very exciting. Since then I had not done any other work in the field, so that teaching ecclesiology was not high on my list of things I would prefer to teach. (Sometimes one should be grateful that things have not worked out as one had wanted or planned them to do!)

On the other hand, by that fall of 1967, the Second Vatican Council had completed its work which, of course, included major texts on the Church, on ecumenism, on the missions, on the Church in the modern world, etc. and it had begun to have the impact on the life of the Catholic Church (and, for that matter, also on other Christian Churches) that we all know about. The Church had presented a different picture of itself in the varied texts, but, just as important, it was in the process of becoming something significantly different in its worship, in many aspects of its everyday life, in its relationship with others, in its attitude towards the modern and contemporary world. For three years of ministry as a newly-ordained priest, I had experienced the thrill of participating in those developments as well as the more than occasional disorientation

¹ His students will recognize portions of his course in Fr. Sullivan's *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church*, Newman, 2001, p. 14) He would later claim the distinction of having published the last volume *De Ecclesia* in Latin. His many other publications show how much his thought developed in subsequent decades.

when the genie of renewal and reform proved too powerful to be confined to officially sanctioned channels. The Catholic Church was not an inert body, boasting that it had no need of change, much less of reform. It had embarked on a program of self-examination for the sake of spiritual renewal and pastoral reform, and, it seemed, all of the familiar habits of thought, practice, worship, relationships could no longer be taken-for-granted. The object I would be teaching was itself on the move, changing. The Church that had presented itself as an unmovable rock seemed to have become a raft in a stormy sea, and many Catholics were becoming seasick. The Church which I would be talking about in my course was a moving, a changing thing.

As I began teaching in the fall of 1967, I was able to use *Lumen gentium* and other conciliar texts to fill in gaps in my ecclesiological training and to enable me to get by until I could figure out what to do with the course. From the beginning, my course included a strong biblical and historical component, and I read what books and articles I could on the history of ecclesiology and on efforts to make sense of the new phenomenon of pluralism in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, the subject soon of Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church* (1974).

As Fr. Dulles noted, the movement of Catholic ecclesiology in the twentieth century had been largely marked by a series of efforts to challenge the dominance of the institutional approach and to restore to ecclesial consciousness the divine and transcendent aspects of the Church. Early in the century, the idea of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ had been recovered by biblical and historical scholars. In the 1940's the notion of the People of God came to the fore, and in the next decade or so the idea of the Church as a sacrament spread. All of these ideas were incorporated into the first chapter of *Lumen gentium*, which bore the significant title "The Mystery of the Church," which reflected a more meditative approach rather than the analytical approach suggested by its original title "The Nature of the Church" and presented that mystery in its full breadth from creation to fulfilment in the Kingdom of God. The result was a new focus on theological categories: the Church was the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Spirit; it was *koinonia* (communion, fellowship); it was the sacrament of salvation.²

When Avery Dulles tried to bring some clarity to a newly pluralistic Catholic ecclesiology, he did so by contrasting the new and theological models of the Church to the institutional model that had dominated Catholic ecclesiology since the Reformation. Quite contrary to Dulles's own intention, however, his distinction of theoretical and critical models for *understanding* the Church was often taken as a description and even validation of distinct practical ways of *being* the Church. It became common not only to counterpose the theological images or models –Mystical Body was out, People of God was in; People of God was out, *communio* was in– but also to distinguish and even separate the so-called "institutional Church" from "the Church as people, as community."

The result was that the basic challenge posed to ecclesiologists by Vatican II was in

² See my two essays on the conciliar ecclesiology: "Ecclesiology of Vatican II," *Origins*, 28 (April 22, 1999) 763-68; "The Significance of Vatican Council II for Ecclesiology," in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook in Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield, O.S.B.*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) 69-92.

danger of being ignored. I refer to paragraph 8 in *Lumen gentium*'s first chapter in which the Council set out, as if in parallel columns, certain features of the Church: it is at once a community of faith, hope and charity and a visible structure; Christ's mystical Body and a hierarchically ordered society; a spiritual community and a visible group; blessed with heavenly gifts, but living here on earth; at once holy and always in need of being purified. These divine and human elements, the Council insisted, do not result in two Churches but come together to constitute a single Church, in a way somewhat analogous to the unity of the divine and human natures in Christ (LG 8). This is the mystery of the Church; take away either the divine or the human elements, and you destroy the mystery. The tensions or even opposition thought to exist between and among the conciliar notions of the Church was threatening to dissolve the mystery.³

To this had also to be added the difficulty that many ordinary Catholics were having in understanding what the new and distinctively theological terms might mean, might refer to. They knew well enough, even from experience, what the institutional aspects of the Church were; but their eyes often glazed over when they heard terms like "Mystical Body" or "people of God" or "temple of the Spirit"? What could such notions possibly have to do with their experience in and as the Church? Were they simply terms that the Bible or the tradition imposes on us, to be accepted on authority, by faith, but never expected to cast light on what it means to be a Christian within a community of faith? The theological notions, to be sure, could not simply be deduced from experience—what experiences would lead one to speak of the Church as the "Body of Christ"? But did this term, and others as well, have anything to do with an experienced reality—the common Christian life?

There seemed to me something wrong here. On the one hand, there was the Church as an object of experience, of experiences both good and bad, en-couraging and dis-spiriting. It's true, of course, though often overlooked, that in the Creed the Church appears as an object of faith; but the Church is not like the Holy Trinity about which theologians might speculate without having to give much attention to Christian experience: we have no experiential data on the inner life of God. Catholic Christians are Christians within the Church however, and a theologian who ventures a statement about the Church runs the danger of someone's objecting, "That's not true of the Church I know! What's the point to all those lofty theological notions? It's OK for the theologians, if they so desire, to go off into the theological empyrean, but it's got nothing to do with me or with the Church of my experience."

Such were some of the core-questions in ecclesiology as I conceived them in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

³ Similarly, it was not uncommon to hear the first two chapters of *Lumen gentium* counterposed as if the Council had been changing topics when it moved from a consideration of "The Mystery of the Church" to "The People of God." The Council's Doctrinal Commission, however, made it clear that the second chapter continued the discussion of the mystery of the Church begun in the first chapter by now presenting the Church's concrete historical existence in the period between Pentecost and Parousia. A single mystery was being unfolded, first in its transcendent and then in its historical dimensions, and the Commission broke the material up into two chapters simply because a single chapter would be too long; see *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. III/I (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1973), 209-10.

Resources

What intellectual resources could I call upon in attempting to meet such challenges? I have already indicated that my Roman *De Ecclesia* course was not going to take me very far. It was at the Gregorian, however, that I encountered the man whose thought and method would provide a basis and a dynamic framework for almost everything I have done since. I am referring to Bernard Lonergan whose Latin courses on the Trinity and on Christology I took, whose book *Insight* I read one summer, whose seminar in theological method I followed, and whose kindness toward pestering students I will never forget. He saved my intellectual soul. I'll explain.

I had been a bright enough student and had had the good fortune to be taught in high school and college by priests who valued the intellectual life and encouraged their students to pursue it, and this not just as an end in itself but also as necessary for an effective ministry as priests in the archdiocese of New York. Excellent courses in the humanities, particularly in literature and history, were supplemented by attention to Catholic history and figures. Two of these teachers introduced me to John Henry Newman, for which I am most grateful even to this day. I read widely in the works of the Catholic literary revival, Hopkins, Chesterton, Belloc, Mauriac, Greene, Waugh, Christopher Dawson.

But when we graduated to the major seminary, this rich education in the humanities and in Catholic literature was not followed by anything comparable. The two years of philosophy that we took at Dunwoodie were taught from textbooks in Latin that claimed to present the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in various fields: epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, cosmology, etc., and I suppose I assumed that these manuals accurately represented the thought of the Angelic Doctor. We were not encouraged to read widely in modern or contemporary philosophers who were made known to us mainly as so many "adversaries" to be refuted by scholastic syllogisms. It was intellectually very unsatisfactory; and, looking for something that might provide richer food, I turned to patristics (our Church history course led me to the Fathers) and then to biblical studies, the latter because of the influence of Myles M. Bourke, the only true scholar on the seminary faculty. The Fathers I appreciated, and Newman still, but after Newman, who could be cited as a representative of the Catholic mind?⁴

The summer before we left for four years of study in Rome, I first heard the name of Bernard Lonergan when one of our philosophy professors at Dunwoodie mentioned that we would be studying under him; he also confessed that he did not understand him! Our first encounter with Lonergan was in his courses on the Trinity and on christology. Constrained to write in Latin and to work within the framework of a neo-scholastic textbook, Lonergan nevertheless did his best to make use of contemporary biblical and historical scholarship, engaged in close interpretation of classic texts, offered a dialectical understanding of the course of doctrinal development, and at every moment gave evidence of a first-class mind at work.

Courses in christology and Trinity did not provide many opportunities for Lonergan to

⁴ Two months after starting at Dunwoodie I read Etienne Gilson's essay, "The Intelligence in the Service of Christ the King," in *A Gilson Reader* (Garden City: Doubleday Image Books, 1957) 31-48, and a note I wrote in my copy indicates how it excited me: "So good. Deo gratias."

display an engagement with modern and contemporary thought. That we were to find in *Insight*. I read the 750-page book straight-through in ten very intense days in the summer of 1962 when I was alone at our summer Villa. I don't pretend that I understood more than, say, a quarter of it, but I felt I needed to get through it all at once or I would forever remain intimidated by its length and its difficulty. A second reading of it a year later brought further light, but *Insight* is the sort of book from which one can always learn, no matter how many times one reads it.

But the years I was studying in Rome (1960-1964) were also the years when Lonergan was himself developing intellectually, gradually working out the views that would eventuate in his second major work *Method in Theology* (1972). Participating in his seminar on theological method and attending lectures he gave in Rome, we were able to witness his engagement with continental philosophy and in particular (for me, at least) the emergence into prominence of his attention to meaning and value as constitutive of individuals, communities, societies, and history—this grounding the distinction between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften*.⁵

How would I sum up Lonergan's influence on my intellectual development? First, I found his analysis of the structure and dynamism of human consciousness convincing and compelling, and it has enabled me to keep my head above water in the flood of intellectual fads over the last half-century. Second, Lonergan offered a theological anthropology, in many respects similar to that of Karl Rahner, in which transcendence was shown to be, in the end, a reaching for God that was met and fulfilled beyond expectation or merit by God's movement us-ward. Third, it confirmed me in something I had already learned from earlier teachers: to read as widely as I could in as many areas as I could. Lonergan reminded me of Aquinas in his intellectual courage—not to be afraid to read a page of anyone's writings--and I have tried to follow their example.

Both his major works end with a similar comment that focuses on the relation between theology and other disciplines. In *Insight* it is the statement that “grace is not a substitute for nature, and theology is not a substitute for empirical human science”;⁶ in *Method*, the statement occurs in a paragraph urging the church to become “a fully conscious process of self-constitution.” To do so, he writes,

it will have to recognize that theology is not the full science of man, that theology illuminates only certain aspects of human reality, that the church can become a fully conscious process of self-constitution only when theology unites itself with all other relevant branches of human studies.⁷

When I put all this together, I concluded that if theology is not the full science of the

⁵ To read a volume of his papers from that period is to relive the intellectual excitement of those years; *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 6: Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, ed. Robert C. Croken et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1958) 746.

⁷ Lonergan, *Method*, 364.

human, then theology is not the full science of the Church either; and so for help in understanding the Church I began to look to the social sciences. The older ones among you may remember that the 1960's and 1970's were a period of great interest in sociology. Secularization-theories abounded; works like Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (1965) and Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967) became international best-sellers; and what was called "critical sociology" arose to call into question some of the assumptions of main-stream American sociology. I became particularly interested in approaches that drew upon European thinkers such as Ernst Gellner, Alfred Schutz, and (somewhat later) Anthony Giddens and, closer to home, Richard Bernstein, Russell Jacoby, and Christopher Lasch. I was greatly impressed by *The Social Construction of Reality* of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman which not only studied how our perceptions and claims about the real are mostly mediated to us by our communities and societies, but also illustrated what Lonergan called the constitutive function of meaning.⁸ I dreamed at one time of attempting to do a parallel work on the Church; I even proposed adopting their statement of the social dialectic—"Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product."⁹—to the relation between the Christian and the Church—The Church is a [Christian] human product. The Church is an objective reality. The Christian is an ecclesial product.¹⁰

It was natural, then, to be attracted also by a new phenomenon in biblical studies—the sociology of the early Christian communities—that was illustrating the usefulness of such comparisons, sometimes substantively and sometimes by supplying heuristic notions that focused attention and suggested questions about structures and dynamics to be alert for and attend to. On the one hand, such studies showed respects in which the nascent Church (or Churches) resembled other communities of the time and cast new light on social dynamics at work within them and in their relationship to the larger world. On the other hand, these very resemblances provided a background against which what was distinctive about the Church became more clearly visible.¹¹ Such works enabled a study of a Church (in, say, Thessalonica or Corinth) that would not be based merely on St. Paul's explicit statements about the Church but also on the ecclesiology implicit in the lived community as described and addressed.

The last influences I wish to mention derive from a paradox, or at least a curiosity,

⁸ Thirty years later, I was just as fascinated, if not as convinced, by John R. Searle's account of *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967), 61.

¹⁰ See my programmatic essay, "Ecclesiology and Social Theory: A Methodological Essay," *The Thomist* 45 (1981) 262-283; reprinted in *Foundations in Ecclesiology* (Boston: Lonergan Workshop, 1995) 57-75. As an example: without compromising the priority of God's enabling Word and grace, could not the phrase "the Church" be substituted for "social order" in this statement of Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*: "62: "Social order exists *only* as a product of human activity.... Both in its genesis (social order is the result of past human activity) and its existence in any instant of time (social order exists only and insofar as human activity continues to produce it) it is a human product"?

¹¹ This is the main point of method in James Gustafson's: moving "from the common toward the unique."

namely that at the same time that Catholics were leaving a social or institutional approach to the Church in favor of more theological approaches, Protestant ecclesiologists were moving in the opposite direction.¹² Robert S. Paul's book, *The Church in Search of its Self*, led me to a set of books that, somewhat unexpectedly, made more sense to me than many works by Catholic ecclesiologists. Paul grouped three works by Protestant theologians--Claude Welch's *The Reality of the Church* (1958), James Gustafson's *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (1961), and Langdon Gilkey's *How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself* (1964)--as attempts to explore theologically the human and social aspects of the Church. This was something of a new development in Protestant ecclesiology which had tended to restrict its attention to the divine dimensions of the Church, to the comparative neglect of the human, and particularly the institutional, dimensions.

Gustafson put the issue as one of avoiding two tempting reductionisms. Theologians were careful to warn against a sociological reductionism that sees the Church simply as another social group among many, as capable as any other of being understood, and exhaustively understood, in terms of the elements it has in common with many other social bodies. They were less careful, he thought, to avoid a theological reductionism which Gustafson defined as "the exclusive use of Biblical and doctrinal language in the interpretation of the Church," on the "explicit or tacit assumption that the Church is so absolutely unique in character that it can be understood only in its own private language."¹³

The three works I have mentioned wished, of course, to avoid the first reductionism, but they were equally, perhaps even more, concerned to overcome the theological reductionism common among Protestant ecclesiologists. Thus Welch stressed the Church's "subjective pole":

The church may be fully dependent on God's act, but it is not simply God acting. It is a people believing, worshipping, obeying, witnessing. Thus we can and must make fast at the outset our understanding of the church as a body or community of human beings, albeit existing in response to the activity of God. In this sense, the ontology of the church means in the first instance the humanly subjective pole of the relationship.¹⁴

Gustafson had a similar comment: "The Church exists only where the meanings objectively carried by the forms are subjectively appropriated and believed in by persons." "The internalization processes are the human counterparts to the prior action of God's power and spirit, bringing men to a knowledge of Jesus Christ through the Church."¹⁵ And Gilkey identified it as a "category mistake" when "symbols expressing the *relation* of God to the life of the existing churches have been mistaken for the substantial *elements* out of which the church is

¹² For contemporary surveys and analysis, see J. Robert Nelson, *The Realm of Redemption: Studies in the Doctrine of the Nature of the Church in Contemporary Protestant Theology* (London: Epworth, 1951) and Robert S. Paul, *The Church in Search of its Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

¹³ James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961) 100.

¹⁴ Claude Welch, *The Reality of the Church* (New York: Scribner's, 1958) 48.

¹⁵ Gustafson, *Treasure*, 103, 109.

itself composed,” that is, “the actual human beings who make up the ecclesia.”¹⁶

This emphasis was sufficiently novel among Protestants that, as Gustafson once told me, some wondered if his book indicated that he was Romeward bound! After all, wasn't it Catholics who, precisely in response to the Reformation's perceived emphasis on the invisible Church, had so emphasized the visible and institutional dimensions of the Church that their ecclesiology had shrunk into a mere hierarchology?

Thinking about the actual Church

All sorts of things conspired, then, to give me a fairly distinctive orientation once I had identified the chief challenges facing an ecclesiologist a decade after the close of Vatican II. I would attempt to effect in the theology of the Church a shift similar to the one Lonergan attempted when he transposed the terms and relations of a metaphysical psychology of grace to ones derived from analysis of interiority, the experience he described as being in love without qualification.¹⁷ This move “from substance to subject” (only now one had to speak of subjects, in the plural) would mean moving from considering the Church as a reified, super-personal entity standing over-and-against-and-above its members to considering it as “the community that results from the outer communication of Christ's message and from the inner gift of God's love.”¹⁸ I would be elaborating an ontology of the Church by beginning with what Welch had called its humanly subjective pole: the effect in men and women of the word and grace of God. It was this new and distinct thing that I would be studying, the Church, the only difference, as John Knox (another Protestant I found very congenial) put it, between the world as it was before Jesus Christ and the world as it was after he had lived.¹⁹

How did this new thing come into existence? It consisted of men and women who had stumbled along behind Jesus of Nazareth on the dusty roads of Palestine and whose eventual hope that he would be the one to redeem Israel had been shattered by his arrest and execution (see Lk 24:19-21). But these people had become convinced that this same Jesus had been raised from the dead and made both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36) and had begun to experience a new communal life. As Knox put it, the Church was the community of men and women who remembered Jesus of Nazareth, who confessed him as Lord, and who lived in the power of his Spirit.

And then they began to talk about him. Listen to the stuttering, wondering testimony of a

¹⁶ Langdon Gilkey, *How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Itself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 134.

¹⁷ See *Method*, 288-89.

¹⁸ *Method*, 361.

¹⁹ See John Knox, *The Early Church and the Coming Great Church* (London: Epworth, 1957) 45. Knox makes an even stronger point in another work: “The historical Event to which all distinctively Christian faith returns is not an event antedating the Church, or in any sense or degree prior to it, but is the coming into existence of the Church itself”; *The Church and the Reality of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 22.

representative of that first generation:

What was from the beginning, what we heard, what we saw with our own eyes, what we gazed upon, what our hands handled—about the word of life: and the life has become manifest, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the life eternal that was with the Father and was made manifest to us. What we saw and heard we proclaim to you so that you too may have communion with us, and our communion is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things to you so that our joy may be full (1 Jn 1:1-4).

There is so much that can be unpacked from this passage that the Italian ecclesiologist Severino Dianich has made it the core of an entire treatise on the Church.²⁰ There is the focus on the word of life, which is not just a word about life but a word that gives life, that gave life to those who had seen and heard and even touched it, that is, had known it from experience. There is the invitation into this experience of life by the communication of it to others and the *koinonia* that is realized when others accept it as the word that gives them life. There is the intersubjectivity revealed in the joy of those transmitting the word of life and rejoicing because others have received it. And there is the vertical, transcendent dimension of a *koinonia* that is with God himself and with his Son Jesus Christ. This is the genesis of the Church, not just in the sense of its origination out of the apostolic witness, but in the sense of its genesis generation after generation, indeed day after day.

To this generating moment corresponds the traditional designation of the Church as the *congregatio* (or *convocatio*) *fideliū*, the assembly or gathering of believers. I believe that this is a primary designation from both a sociological and a theological standpoint. Sociologically, it fits with theories of community that focus on the constitutive role of common meaning and value (more on this in a moment). Theologically, it identifies the primary and basic role of faith: in the Christian life and in the constitution of the Church there is nothing, save the grace and word of God, prior to faith. To bring others to birth in and as the Church is to bring them to believe. St. Thomas Aquinas could say that the entire structure of the Church is only as strong as the strength of its faith.²¹

By God's free gift, then, the Church is the *creatura Verbi*, the creation of the word of life, and by the grace-enabled reception of that word, the Church is continuously being built up as men and women come to believe in Christ. The divine gift effects a human community.²² Is not the first thing we must say about the Church that it is a group of human beings, a *coetus hominum*, the words with which Robert Bellarmine began his famous definition of the Church? The words were anticipated by Augustine when he said, "People are the Church" (*Ecclesia*

²⁰ Severino Dianich and Serena Noceti, *Trattato sulla Chiesa* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2002); for the basic method, see Dianich, *Ecclesiologia: Questioni di metodo e una proposta* (Cinisello Balsamo: Ed. Paoline, 1993), and for a full discussion, see *Sui problemi del metodo in ecclesiologia: In dialogo con Severino Dianich*, ed. Antonion Barruffo (Cinisello Balsamo: Ed. San Paolo, 2003).

²¹ "Fides est sicut fundamentum, ex cuius firmitate tota firmatur ecclesiae structura"; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Colossians*, ch. 1, l. 5 (Marietti n. 57).

²² See my essay, "The Church: God's Gift and Our Task," *Origins* 16 (1987) 735-41.

homines sunt)." By his time, as he noted, the word was also being used of the building that holds the people, but the proper and original referent of the word "Church" is the people who gather there.²³ Augustine was not unaware that there is a Church that consists of angels, but that Church, he said, will become known to us only at the end when, as we hope, we are joined to them and share their everlasting happiness. Meanwhile, however, "it is the Church still wandering on earth that is better known to us because we are in it, and because it is composed of human beings like us."²⁴ It is this more familiar Church that is the object of this inquiry.

That people are the Church might be thought too obvious to need mention. But it is not rare to find people referring to the Church in a way that seems to lift it above and beyond its members, to a supra-personal sphere, where it is a distinct subject of attributes and actions.²⁵ For example, Charles Journet and Jacques Maritain maintained that the Church is herself a "person," with an ontological subsistence distinct from that of any or of all of her members.²⁶ This made it easier for Journet to propose as a solution to a notorious problem the adage: "The Church is without sin but not without sinners."²⁷ This metaphysical abstraction of the Church is sometimes matched by an abstraction out of history, as when Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the Church as "a single subject" whose life, he claims, knows no breaks or ruptures. "She is a subject that grows in time and develops, yet always remaining the same single subject, the People of God on its journey."²⁸ But what can this Church be, or, better, *who* can this Church be?—a question I have found it difficult, indeed impossible, to answer.

On a more popular level, one often hears people say something like, "The Church is more than its members, or more than the sum of its members." This, of course, is true. But is it not also true of any other organized body? Is not a university's finance committee more than the sum of

²³ "Nam Ecclesia homines sunt"; *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum, In Leviticum*, 57; see 81; PL 34, 703-704, 711; see also *Epist.* 190, 5:19; PL 33, 863-64.

²⁴ "Haec ergo quae in sanctis Angelis et Virtutibus Dei est Ecclesia, tunc nobis sicuti est innotescet, cum ei conjuncti fuerimus in finem, ad simul habendam beatitudinem sempiternam. Ista vero quae ab illa peregrinatur in terris, eo nobis notior est, quod in illa sumus, et quia hominum est, quod et nos sumus; *Enchiridion*, 61; PL 40: 260-61.

²⁵ Is this objectification of the Church also encouraged by the doctrine of the *ex opere operato* efficacy of the sacraments, which tends to efface the human ministers, and particularly if this efficacy is not explained in terms of Christ but as a kind of mechanically certain causality. But as Louis Bouyer shows, this effacing of the human does not apply in the non-sacramental exercises of ordained ministry; see *The Church: Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982) 499-503.

²⁶ For a balanced assessment of such views, see Yves Congar: "La personne 'Eglise,'" *Revue Thomiste* 71 (1971) 613-40.

²⁷ See a collection of his papers in Charles Journet, *L'Église sainte mais non sans pécheurs* (Paris: Éd. Parole et Silence, 1999).

²⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, 22 December 2005. The remark was anticipated twenty years earlier: "There are no leaps in this history, there are no fractures, and there is no break in continuity"; *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Report on the State of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) 35.

its members? In any case, but especially in the case of the Church, must one not try to explain what that “more” is that makes a simple aggregate of human beings into a social body?

To answer that question, I proposed to follow Gustafson’s method and to move “from the common toward the unique.” In a paragraph that anticipates the argument of his entire book, he wrote:

The Church shares in common with other communities a natural and political character. The common characteristics, however, do not end here. It shares the processes that make any community identifiable through time and across space. Its differentiation does not lie in the fact that it has a language, but in its *particular language*; it does not lie in the processes of interpretation and subjective understanding, but in that which it interprets and understands. Loyalty and deeds are common to all communities; the specific object of loyalty and its consequent effect upon actions marks the differentiation between the Church and other communities. Thus one moves, in a social theory of the Church, from the common toward the unique. Uniqueness per se is not a quality of the Christian community; its object of loyalty and faith marks its uniqueness.

He hastened to anticipate and forestall an objection:

One does not move from the less theological to the more theological. At every point one might consider the meaning of the social and historical processes in the light of Christian belief about divine action through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is a theological task toward which the present essay points, but does not complete. Suffice it to comment: perhaps God acts through the very processes of Church life that can be interpreted from the point of view of social theory.²⁹

Working with a similar method, one expects to find what is unique about the Church illuminated by what it has in common with other human communities. Thus, if one borrows from Lonergan the idea that communities are constituted by common meanings and values, one will ask about the common experiences that make possible the community of human beings that is the Church, about the common understandings that give it form, about the common judgments and decisions that make it real and effective. By asking and answering such questions, one will fill out Lonergan’s concise statement: “The Christian church is the community that results from the outer communication of Christ’s message and from the inner gift of God’s love.”³⁰

Following another thread, one can understand the Church as a distinct communal entity in what Lonergan called “the world constituted by meaning and motivated by value”; it does not, in other words, belong to the world of nature but to the world of spirit. It originates in God’s communication of his word and life in Christ and the Holy Spirit, but it has not yet come to be—and indeed that communication has not taken place—until that word and life have been received and appropriated by believers. As Severino Dianich put it in an early essay:

The Church has its point of germination, its deepest constituent, in the encounter of two freedoms: the freedom of God and the freedom of man. Without any compelling

²⁹ Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, p. 13.

³⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. 361.

need, purely gratuitously, God calls and grants his grace. And man is freed by the grace of God, that is, he is given the ability freely to welcome the divine offer for his salvation. This encounter of the freedom of God and the freedom of man is the determining principle both of the “new man” and of the Church.³¹

He later made the same point even more strongly.

... it is simply not possible to think about the Church, whether theologically or historically, while prescind[ing] from what happens in the individual consciousness of a person who freely welcomes the announcement and decides for faith. That the members of the Church are people who have freely decided to believe is not a prior or marginal condition with respect to the nature of the Church, but rather its basic constituent.³²

In other words, the freedom of its members is constitutive of the Church. The Church consists in, and has no existence apart from, the free human acts of meaning and value—faith, hope, and love—with which men and women receive and respond to the word and grace of God.³³ It is an event of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity in response to God’s redemptive initiative in our regard. There is a Church where, to the degree, and as long as these acts occur; where they have never occurred, the Church has never existed; where they have ceased to occur, the Church has ceased to exist.

I am trying here to spell out Lonergan’s dense paragraph:

Through communication there is constituted community and, conversely, community constitutes and perfects itself through communication. Accordingly, the Christian church is a process of self-constitution, a *Selbstvollzug*.... The substance of that process is the Christian message conjoined with the inner gift of God’s love and resulting in Christian witness, Christian fellowship, and Christian service to mankind.³⁴

When in one of the last courses on the Church that I taught at Catholic University, I proposed that the Church, too, is constituted by acts of collective intentionality, of shared meaning and value, one student objected that something firmer was needed, something closer to the image in chapter 16 of St. Matthew’s Gospel of a Church built on a rock strong enough that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Extending the objection, what about all those institutional elements? The sacraments? The hierarchy? The Creed? The Bible? Aren’t all these

³¹ Severino Dianich, “Soggettività e chiesa,” in Associazione Teologica Italiana, *Teologia e progetto-uomo in Italia* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1980), p. 110.

³² Dianich, *Ecclesiologia*, 73-74. See also the comment of Pierre Vallin in a review of Gabriele Cislighi, *Per una Ecclesiologia pneumatologica. Il concilio Vaticano II e una proposta sistematica*, “The believer’s conscious experience is a constitutive element of the ontological reality itself of the Church, ‘*congregatio fidelium*’”; *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 94 (2006) p. 264.

³³ I mean to include under “acts” here habitual orientations that perdure even when not explicitly or consciously posed, as is the case also, for example, in a friendship or a marriage.

³⁴ Lonergan, *Method*, 363. The word “process” in this paragraph reminds me of a sign I once saw on a door warning people not to enter: It read: “EVENT IN PROCESS!” I thought that might be a great description of the Church: The Church is an event in process!

things “objective”? Don’t they stand over-and-against us individual Christians? Mustn’t the Church’s ontology be made of sterner stuff than subjectivity and inter-subjectivity?

Well, tell me what this stronger, firmer thing is. Take that building-on-rock image. Did not Jesus say that it means hearing his word and doing it (Mt 7:24-27)?³⁵ Did not the same Peter whom Jesus would call a Rock sink like a stone because of his weak faith (Mt 14:25-32), and is he not, for this reason, a perfect image of the Church?³⁶ In what does the Church’s resistance to the gates of hell consist? Aquinas quoted this explanation from the Glossa: “The gates of hell will not separate the Church from love for Christ and faith in him.”³⁷

Or think of those instituted realities: does any one of them exist apart from human co-intentionality, that is, from shared acts and habits of understanding, judging, deciding? Do the sacraments exist except as performed by believers? Are not faith and right intention conditions of their validity and fruitfulness, that is, of their effective existence? And if we say that they cause grace, is this not a judgment that God is at work in them? That God is at work in the sacraments is true, we believe. But is not this the point? *We believe it. We believe it.*

And what of the hierarchy? What would a pope be if no one acknowledged his authority? Does not his authority precisely consist in what he and other Catholics believe about it? Is not his authority in fact co-constituted by those who believe it to be divinely established?

And is not the creed a statement of what Christians believe? And the inspired Scriptures? Apart from the faith of those who read them, what are they but black marks on white paper? But, you say, they really were divinely inspired! Yes, but this also is a judgement, *our* judgement.

Yes, all these things really, “objectively,” exist, but their objectivity is not like that of Gibraltar or of Mount Everest, whose existence is independent of human subjectivity. The Church itself, and its institutional elements, belong to the world constituted by meaning and motivated by value. Their reality is not apart from human subjectivity, but consists precisely in

³⁵ In his *Catena aurea* on Matthew’s Gospel, Aquinas cited Pseudo-Chrysostom: “Christ is that wise man who built his house, that is, the Church, on rock, that is, on the strength of faith.”

³⁶ Augustine thought so: “Considering this member of the Church, let us discern what is from God and what from us, for then we shall not totter, then we shall be founded on a rock, and we shall be fixed and steady against the winds, the rains, the floods, that is, against the trials of this present life. But look at that Peter who then was a figure of us: now he trusts, now he falters; now he confesses the immortal One, now he fears that He will die. For the Church of Christ has strong people and it also has weak people; it can’t be without the strong nor without the weak. That’s why the Apostle Paul said, “We that are stronger ought to bear the works of the weak” (Rm 15:1). When Peter said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ he symbolized the strong; when he trembled and faltered and did not wish Christ to suffer, fearing his death and not acknowledging his life, he symbolized the weak of the Church. In that single apostle, Peter, first and foremost among the apostles, the one in whom the Church was figured, both kinds of people are symbolized, that is, the strong and the weak, because the Church is never without both” (Sermon 76, 4; PL 38, 480-81). Aquinas’ commentary on Matthew has this lovely thought: “The Lord permitted Peter to sink because he was to be a pastor, and he wanted to display both his strength and his weakness”; *Super Mattheum*, ch. 14, l. 2.

³⁷ Ludolf of Saxony added: “Thus it is clear that the Church consists of the people in whom the knowledge and true confession of faith and of truth exist.”

regularly, habitually produced and reproduced acts of meaning and value.

The great difficulty that often lies in the way of accepting this as an ontology of the Church is the phenomenon known as reification, which Berger and Luckmann describe as “the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will.”³⁸ John Searle is talking about the same thing when he writes:

It is tempting to think of *social objects* as independently existing entities on analogy with the objects studied by the natural sciences. It is tempting to think that a government or a dollar bill or a contract is an object or entity in the sense that a DNA molecule, a tectonic plate, or a planet is an object or entity. In the case of social objects, however, the grammar of the noun phrases conceals from us the fact that, in such cases, process is prior to product. Social objects are always, in some sense we will need to explain, constituted by social acts; and, in a sense, *the object is just the continuous possibility of the activity*.³⁹

“What we think of as social *objects*,” Searle goes on a little later, “are in fact just placeholders for patterns of activities.” This priority of process over product means that an institutional or social fact continues to exist only because of the continued collective intentionality of those who make use of it, because “each use of the institution is a renewed expression of the commitment of the users to the institution.”⁴⁰ Institutions last as long as the collective intentionalities—the common agreement and acceptance—last.

That is why it is not very helpful to distinguish between the Church as “event” and as “institution.” At least as commonly understood, this way of posing things assumes a reified notion of an institution, that is, it neglects that institutions are themselves events, that is, processes. An institution exists if and when people agree about regular typified ways of doing things, and an institution ceases to exist if and when people cease to agree that those things should be done in that typified and regular manner or simply cease doing them in that manner.

On the very last day of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI had addresses read out to several groups of people: rulers, intellectuals and scientists, artists, women, the poor, people sick and suffering, workers, and young people. The intention was to show the Church’s esteem for them and to offer a word to each group specifically. Yves Congar noted that some of them made it appear that the Church stood over and against these groups as if it was something distinct from them, as if they were not part of the Church.” He asked himself, “*Pro quo supponit Ecclesia?*” What was being meant by the word “Church” here? To what did it refer?⁴¹

Congar often asked that question. When speaking of the Church as “Mother,” what was meant by “Church”? Does it refer to the hierarchy or to the entire Church as bringing new

³⁸ Berger and Luckman, *Social Construction*, 89. The temptation to reify is all the greater in ecclesiology because Christians believe that the Church is precisely a “manifestation of divine will.”

³⁹ Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, 36. I would say: “the *probability* of the activity.”

⁴⁰ Searle, *ibid.*, 57.

⁴¹ See Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2012) 875.

members to birth in Christ?⁴² When the Council says that the Church is a “sacrament of salvation,” who is or, better, who are those who in the world perform the role of “sign and instrument” and in what ways, by what acts, do they do this?⁴³ I have found that many people, even many ecclesialogists, do not ask such questions and might even be surprised to be asked, after they have made statements about “the Church,” to whom these statements refer, of whom and in whom are they true.

St. Augustine didn’t hesitate to ask a similar question. When commenting on Ps 127:3–“Your wife as a fruitful vine, on the sides of your house”—he said that the husband of the Psalm was Christ and his wife was the Church, that is, Augustine made clear, we were the wife. But then he asked in whom the Church is a fruitful vine and, looking at his congregation, he answered that it was not in the wicked who were gathered there, but in those there who clung to Christ.

“*Sed in quibus*” was Augustine’s question, and I always want to ask it when the word “Church” is employed or invoked. Who is, who are, meant by the term? Must it not be true of someone or of some ones for it to be true of “the Church”? Does it refer to the hierarchy? Well, then, why not say “hierarchy” or “pope” or “bishops” or “the Roman Curia”? Is it not common to leave statements about the Church unexplained, as if they are true of some vague entity invoked in the third person as if standing over and against and above us--“the Church”?

That was not always so. One of the joys of reading St. Augustine’s sermons is to see how he did not leave biblical images unexplained but tried to show his people how they illumined their lives as Christians in the Church. Take two of these images: the Church as Virgin and as Mother, two themes which many a preacher would do his best to avoid today. Augustine didn’t avoid them. He explained how the Church gave birth to new members and the various acts through which she did so, and he brought the image down from the theological skies by reminding his congregation that if each of them singly was a child of Mother Church, Mother Church consisted of all of them together.⁴⁴ Like Mary, this Mother was also a virgin because her faith, hope, and love were intact, and she was a pure virgin because and to the degree that her

⁴² Yves Congar, “Mother Church,” in *The Church To-day* (Mercier Press, 1968) 37-44; this is a shorter version of Congar’s preface to Karl Delahaye, *Ecclesia mater chez les Pères des trois premiers siècles: Pour un renouvellement de la Pastorale d’aujourd’hui* (Unam Sanctam 46; Paris: du Cerf, 1964).

⁴³ Yves Congar, *Un peuple messianique: L’Église, sacrement du salut. Salut et libération* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1975) 75.

⁴⁴ Here are three texts in which Augustine describes the ecclesial dialectic by which Christians are at once children of the Church and themselves Mother Church: “The Church is to herself both a mother and her children; for all of those of whom the Church consists, taken together, are called a mother, while those same individuals, taken singly, are called her children” (*Quaestionum Evangeliorum*, I, 18:1; PL 35, 1327). “All the Christians hurrying together to Church are said to be children rushing to their mother, even though the one who is called mother consists of those same children.” (*De diversis quaestionibus*, 59, 3; PL 30, 48). “We are called children of that mother even though she consists of us” (*Ibid.*, 75, 2; PL 40, c. 87). I wonder if this ecclesial dialectic could illumine and be illumined by Antony Giddens’s notion of recursiveness in social systems.

members were virginal in their faith.⁴⁵

Similarly, when first the Donatists and later the Pelagians claimed that the Church was “without spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:27), he referred them, not to some sinless Church imagined to subsist apart from her sinful members, but to the Lord’s command that the entire Church pray every day, “Forgive us our debts,” and to the Apostle’s statement, “If we say that we are without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8). In one sermon he asked the Pelagian whether he was without sin, and if he admitted that he was not without sin, Augustine asked, “How then is the Church of this time without stain and wrinkle, since you are its stain and wrinkle?”⁴⁶

It was all wondrously concrete. St. Augustine thought that these biblical images of the Church were true of his Church, that is, of the Christians standing before him as he preached. No one more than he emphasized that the one Church was catholic, spanning both nations and generations, but this single Church consisted of the many Churches, and these Churches consisted of Christian men and women, so that what was true of the one Church was true in the many Churches, and what was true of the Church in the Churches was true, if it was true, in the Christian men and women. There simply was no other Church—out there, up there.

Let me repeat: to say that the objective reality of the Church is thoroughly subjective is not to say that it is not divine in origin. It is to say what it is that God wishes to exist as the Church. To say that the Church is divinely willed is to say that God wishes that certain subjective and inter-subjective acts, habits and relationships—precisely the ones summed up in the three great virtues of faith, hope, and charity—occur and perdure. These are the human acts, habits, and relations that result from God’s will that there be a community of grace; by his free and gratuitous decision God wills that human subjectivity and inter-subjectivity create and constitute a new collective entity, the Christian Church, which consists entirely of human beings eliciting the receptive and responsive acts.

Some implications

In various essays I have tried to apply this basic approach to a number of particular aspects or dimensions of the Church. For example, I have made use of social thinkers to explore what authority is and how it works, and I was delighted to find the notion I elaborated—that authority is co-constituted by those subject to it—confirmed by two great nineteenth-century Catholics, Antonio Rosmini and John Henry Newman. In several essays I discussed the relationship between the so-called universal Church and local Churches, trying to prevent the

⁴⁵ See Marinus Agterberg. *“Ecclesia-Virgo”*: Étude sur la virginité de l’Église et des fidèles chez saint Augustin (Héverlé-Louvain: Institut Historique Augustinien, 1960). This book shows that for Augustine the Church that is a Virgin is not some abstraction nor identified with any group or with any office in the Church: “Christians are virgins because the Church is a virgin; the Church is a virgin because Christians are virgins” in mind and heart (p. 122).

⁴⁶ Sermon 181; PL 38, c. 980. See : “As long as she has such members [sinners], holy Church is not yet without stain or wrinkle”; *De continentia*, ch. 11, 25; PL 40, 366.

former from being considered in abstraction from the latter or the latter considered, or treated, as if they were simply administrative sub-divisions of the former. I have also been concerned that in ecclesiology, too, the statement of an ideal not be confused with a description of the real, and this in particular reference to the question of sin and holiness in the Church, a matter important also for addressing the question as to where the “true” Church is to be found. My Père Marquette Lecture argued the thesis that statements about the Church are statements about persons, and that it should be possible to say in whom or of whom they are true. Most recently, I developed an argument that the Second Vatican Council be considered a moment in which the Catholic Church made an effort to become “a fully conscious process of self-constitution.”

Finally, I have tried in general to counteract the tendency, unfortunately too common still, fifty years after Vatican II opened, to identify the word “Church” with the hierarchy, a temptation not restricted to the higher clergy. So many people too often still use the third-person singular when speaking of the Church, when really we should speak of it in the first person plural, as something in which we participate, which we help constitute, which we enact as a sign and instrument of Christ in the world. Whether there is a Church, whether it is alive, and whether it makes a difference in our world depends also on us.