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Engaging Theology: Catholic Perspectives

Church

Living Communion

Paul Lakeland

Tatha Wiley, Series Editor



A Michael Glazier Book

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To Elizabeth and Selwyn Palmer

For welcoming the stranger, and all that followed.

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Editor's Preface

In calling the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII challenged those he gathered to take a bold leap forward. Their boldness would bring a church still reluctant to accept modernity into full dialogue with it. The challenge was not for modernity to account for itself, nor for the church to change its faith, but for the church to transform its conception of faith in order to speak to a new and different situation.

Today we stand in a postmodern world. The assumptions of modernity are steeply challenged, while the features of postmodernity are not yet fully understood. Now another world invites reflection and dialogue, and the challenge is to discover how the meanings and values of Christian faith speak effectively to this new situation.

This series takes up the challenge. Central concerns of the tradition—God, Jesus, Scripture, Anthropology, Church, and Discipleship—here are lifted up. In brief but comprehensive volumes, leading Catholic thinkers lay out these topics with a historically conscious eye and a desire to discern their meaning and value for today.

Designed as a complete set for an introductory course in theology, individual volumes are also appropriate for specialized courses. Engaging Theology responds to the need for teaching resources alive to contemporary scholarly developments, to the current issues in theology, and to the real questions about religious beliefs and values that people raise today.

Tatha Wiley
Series Editor

Preface and Acknowledgments

A book about the Church could be a book about a number of different things. It could be about church architecture, but the building is not the Church. It could be about bishops or the clergy or the pope, but none of those is the Church. It is, of course, about us, because we are the Church. The Church is the community of believers down through the ages, and the Church today is the living members of the community, including but not exhausted by Church leaders. In conversations among Catholics “the Church” is too often the “them” with whom we disagree or who are telling us what to do or who are somehow objectified. We need another name for that portion of the Church, because the whole Church is the Church. For the great majority of laity, for whom over the centuries it has been hard to say “Church” and think “us,” the time has more than come when we have to say “Church” and mean “us,” with all that this implies for taking responsibility, insisting on accountability, and assuming adulthood. Becoming subjects of our own history, with all that this means for adults, is long overdue for the Catholic laity. It is in this spirit and with this Church in mind that this book is written.

The approach to ecclesiology adopted in this book is therefore resolutely inductive. That means that our starting point will be with the grassroots experience of Church, and that in its turn means that the book cannot be anything other than specific to a particular context. It is one of the marks of inductive method, perhaps the most important, that it begins locally, though of course the implications of local reflection can be profoundly important for the universal Church. It was Henri de Lubac who pointed out that ecclesiology is that branch of theology where we are talking about ourselves. In this book that is exactly what we will be doing, and this brief preface exists simply to explain a point or two about what this focus on “us” means and then to offer the customary but no less sincere thanks to a number of people.

The book begins with an updated reading of the marks of the Church—oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, together with an additional, fifth mark of eternity—which puts the Church of today into the context of tradition. In the second and third chapters we focus on the American Catholic Church, because you cannot do inductive theology from an abstract, universal standpoint. Of course, it goes without saying that catholicity means that many other local ecclesiologies will enter into dialogue with and correct that of North America, and that together all these theologies form the rich tapestry of Roman Catholicism. So the second chapter examines some challenges facing American Catholicism today, both internally and in terms of its mission beyond itself, confident in the knowledge that what we learn in our context will be as valuable to the rest of the Church as what happens in Africa and Asia is for us. The third and final chapter makes a brief foray into an American inductive ecclesiology for the twenty-first century. Borrowing its structure from some principles first enunciated by Bernard Lonergan, it focuses its attention on the need for conversion, for adulthood, and for accountability, and it offers four images to consider as a basis for ecclesial reflection. Three—pilgrim, immigrant, and pioneer—are drawn from the American experience. A fourth and perhaps startling image, that of hospice, I owe to the Catholic moral theologian Bryan Massingale, though I take full responsibility for the way it is used here. I ask the reader to be patient with this difficult image, and it will reveal its power and potential.

Because of the commitment to an inductive method, much of what the reader might expect to find in a Catholic ecclesiology will be missing. There is very little here that is purely informative about the history of the Church or its major doctrines. The emphasis is on Church, that is, on the shape of the community of believers, at this time and in this place. Of course, historical depth is a necessity for a full understanding of where the Church came from and what it is today. Some of this is provided in the first chapter, much of the rest of it will be found through following up on the notes, which I have kept brief and primarily bibliographical. It is there that the reader will find the suggestions for further reading that will augment and expand on what is here.

Principal among those who deserve thanks are those theological ancestors and current colleagues from whom I have learned so much. My ecclesiological ancestors include Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan. My colleagues happily still with us, some of them relatively young for theologians, include Joseph Komonchak,

Roger Haight, Richard Gaillardetz, Bradford Hinze, and Gerard Mannion. I have learned, like so many, from the writings of Elizabeth Johnson, and I wish she would write an ecclesiology, but I suspect she will not. I am grateful too to Tatha Wiley, the series editor for *Engaging Theology* and herself no mean theologian, who combines tact, charm, and being a pest into a well-nigh unstoppable force; and Hans Christoffersen of Liturgical Press, a model of patience and fortitude. As always, my colleagues in the Religious Studies Department at Fairfield University have provided me with help both direct and indirect, and I am particularly grateful to John Thiel and Nancy Dallavalle. My wife Beth and my son Jonathan are to be commended for keeping out of the way and pursuing their own equally important careers while letting me get on with mine. But the inspiration for this approach to ecclesiology has come to me above all from the many fine people I have met in traveling around the country these past few years talking to church groups, especially those associated with *Voice of the Faithful*. An inductive approach to ecclesiology is one that taps the wisdom of concerned and active laity such as these. I hope that this book will be some small return to them for all the energies and hopes they have placed in the future of the Roman Catholic Church in America.

Chapter One

The Marks of the Church

From ancient times the Church has been characterized by the four “marks” of unity, holiness, catholicity or universality, and apostolicity. These identifiers were added to the Nicene Creed, originally fashioned in 325 CE at the Council of Nicea, by the bishops at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Catholics and most other Christians today thus find themselves reciting their profession of faith in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” They are four distinctive characteristics of early Christianity, which most if not all Christian faith communities have maintained in their own traditions up to the present day. The Catholic Church, perhaps more than others, has not only consistently seen them as marks of the Christian Church but in times of polemic it has used them as indicators of where the one, true Church of Christ is to be found, namely, in the historic Roman Catholic Church. To borrow a phrase or two from ecumenical theology, most churches other than the Catholic Church would see the marks as objectives, destined to become realities on the day when we are all *united*. The Catholic Church has tended to see them as real marks of itself, to become perfected on the day when all Christians are *re-united*.

As ways of talking about fundamental characteristics of the Catholic Church that do not immediately lead to invidious comparisons with Orthodox or Protestant traditions, the marks of the Church are hard to better, though they need interpreting. They speak truths about the Church recognized by Protestants, Orthodox, and Catholics alike. All believe the Church is in some sense one, that it bears the characteristics of holiness

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and universality, and that it is faithful to the apostolic tradition and witness. For this reason it seems wise to choose the marks as an approach to exploring how the Church understands itself. But they cannot just be taken at face value. What is the true meaning of oneness when there is division? What is holiness in the light of the sinfulness with which the Church has at times aligned itself and from which it has never been entirely free? How is the Church universal if there are many forms of church and many places where it is not present? And what does it mean to claim to stand in the apostolic tradition?

In this chapter readers will encounter a fifth mark that is not part of the tradition and that would probably not be acceptable to most traditions other than the Catholic and the Orthodox, namely, the eternity of the Church. The other four marks are all introduced here as answers to the questions, *what, who, where* is the Church, and *what* is the Church *for*? To them, then, we add the related question, *when* is the Church? There are many other candidates too. Charles Curran has recently written that a fifth mark of the Church is its sinfulness, Michael Himes has suggested that conciliarity is another, and Dolores Leckey argues for the role of the laity as a further defining characteristic.¹ Cogent as all these are, here we will take up only five. They offer answers to the five most fundamental questions we can ask about the Church and provide a framework for our task here in this first chapter, to examine anew the Catholic tradition's understanding of the Church.

Holiness, or "What is the Church?"

When we approach a topic as vast as that of the worldwide Church, it makes sense to begin by making sure we are in agreement about what we mean by "Church." For one thing, and most of us will not need telling this, we are not using the term to refer to the building in which Catholic Christians worship. For that purpose, we employ the subtly different term "church." But "the Church," ah, that is so much larger and wider and more interesting a phenomenon, not always as beautiful as that ancient Gothic cathedral, nor as colorful or bizarre as some German rococo or Italian baroque edifice, but immeasurably more complex and alive than a mere building.

So "Church" refers to the whole religious family, in this book in the first instance that of the Roman Catholic Church, though other Christian

¹ In William Madges and Michael J. Daley, eds., *The Many Marks of the Church* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006).

churches are never far from our considerations and will occasionally be addressed directly. It is as geographically wide a descriptor as the entire world, at least for now (it could get bigger with space travel or missionary outreach to life-forms out there in the universe that we have not yet discovered), and as historically extensive as a couple of thousand years. It includes the holy and the not so holy, the pious and the relatively secular, the regular churchgoers and the “Christmas and Easter Catholics.” Doubtless, as we proceed, we will want to make some qualifying judgments about inclusiveness and exclusiveness, but the term “Church” as a term denotes all those who would recognize themselves somehow or other as members of the Catholic Church.²

While agreement about the meaning of the word does not even begin to scratch the surface of an answer to the question, “What is the Church?” it does bring before us the important initial challenge of determining how we would go about seeking an answer. If we were to build on the thoughts in the preceding paragraph and produce a detailed picture of what the Church looks like, describing the various places and historical moments that have made up its contemporary countenance, reviewing the types and numbers of peoples within its ranks, explaining its practices, and so on, we would not have definitively answered the question, because we would not have broached the issue of meaning. If, on the other hand, we were to turn immediately to a theological or philosophical question about meaning, we would be in the opposite danger of being way too abstract for what the Church on the ground is actually like. In other words, we can adopt neither an exclusively inductive nor deductive approach. Both the concrete reality of the Church and theological ideas about the Church will factor into a measured and helpful response to the question, “What is the Church?” However, the almost exclusively deductive approach of classical ecclesial reflection has to give way to a stronger orientation to bottom-up approaches, if only to restore some balance.

The question about the nature of the Church has most often been answered in a deductive or Procrustean³ fashion, defining either abstractly or—at best—unhistorically what the Church *is* as if this is what

² This way of identifying Catholics by personal affiliation rather than conformity to an external set of requirements will be consistently applied throughout this book, showing a preference for an “inductive” (bottom-up) rather than “deductive” (top-down) approach to ecclesiology.

³ Procrustes, the giant who trimmed or stretched his sleeping victims to fit the bed on which they lay, is a symbol of the distortions of deductive thinking, when real people and situations are forced to measure up to abstract ideas.

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it always *was* and probably always *will be*. One of the biggest problems with this approach is that it is so unself-conscious about the historical positioning of the answer being given, and of the historical subjectivity of the one offering the answer. It is, moreover, quite blind to the organic nature of the Church. Like any other body in history, the Church is always in a certain sense the same, but always equally truly in a constant process of change. The analogy to the human body is instructive. The continuity of my identity as me or yours as you is not guaranteed by the physical identity of the body I had ten or fifty years ago and the body I have now. It is, rather, the memory that maintains continuity in the process of constant physical change. Not even my self-consciousness now can guarantee that it is the same self-consciousness as was exhibited in this physical body at some prior time, without the string of memory to connect the two moments. Moreover, memory itself is a tenuous process, subject to forgetting as well as remembering, both intentional and accidental. On such a fragile thread hangs the identity of the Church, and a bold confidence in abstract universals fails because it does not respect this essentially historical reality.

The problems with a deductive approach to the identity of the Church can be illustrated by looking at one of the most successful efforts to employ it, the classic work by Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*.⁴ In a certain sense Dulles has already stepped beyond deductive approaches in preferring a multiplicity of models to the one definition preferred in recent centuries of the Church as a visible, perfect society here on earth. However, when we ask about where the models Dulles identifies and explains are derived from, we find them almost exclusively drawn from the work of specific theologians or Church leaders. Obviously enough, all theologians determine their personal ecclesiological orientations in dialogue with Scripture and the writings of the great thinkers of the early Church. But when a model proposes itself solely because of its scriptural origin, the result must be that it will be employed therapeutically with respect to the actual living body of believers at any one time. Ecclesiology understood this way then becomes a corrective to Church practice, seen probably as always more or less errant—because human—from the perfection of an ahistorical idea of Church derived somehow from biblical and patristic evidences. However, what one person sees as a necessary correction, another may well perceive as a distortion of the living reality.

⁴ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974; New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1991).

While we would be foolish to discard biblical and patristic sources in our search to understand what the Church is, we should be on firmer ground by beginning with the actual historical reality of the Church in the times in which we live. There are many consequences of this more inductive approach to ecclesiology, not the least of which is that it is ineluctably contextual.⁵ The Church seen from North American or African or Asian perspectives will evince different histories, cultural characteristics, and (perhaps) political alignments. The danger of this approach, though, is that it can lead to fragmentation, and to avoid just such a possibility it has to be combined with some overarching common understanding of its nature and purpose. Just as we said that it is memory that binds the Church now with the Church of bygone ages, so we need to search out the theological glue that holds together the many and various versions of the Church around the world. The tendency to identify the glue in terms of authority should be avoided, though it is far too common. While there is a kind of unity in all being in communion with Rome or having many liturgical practices in common, these are extrinsic signs of unity. Figuring out what the Church *is* will require a successful hunt for a common feature of ecclesial life that, wherever we find it, will be intrinsic to the sense of the community about what it is to be Church.

When we say that the Church is a community of faith, we are making a claim that is both banal and significant but one that will lead us quite a way along the path of answering our initial question, "What is the Church?" Initially, the statement that the Church is a community of faith seems quite minimalist. Where is the beauty, richness, and glory of the story of Roman Catholicism? How stark and simplistic this description seems and, indeed, to how many other religious groupings around the world it can be applied. It is surely true that Mormons and Baptists and Buddhists and Jews could all assent in some way to the accuracy of this description as applied to their own situation. On the other hand, to make this general kind of statement our starting point helps us avoid the single biggest pitfall of the history of religions in general and the self-understanding of Roman Catholicism in particular, namely, to define ourselves by our differences from others. So often in ecumenical dialogue among Christians someone makes the observation that "what we have

⁵ On this topic see especially two books by Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); and *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Local and the Global* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1997). See also Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

in common is so much more than what divides us." For Christians, at least, this is surely true and perhaps even truer than we imagine in the wider world of interreligious dialogue. But it comes as a surprise only because we tend to begin from our differences instead of from a more generic foundation of common purpose and understanding, dare one say, of common faith.⁶

To return, then, to our foundational assertion that "the Church is a community of faith," we need to spend a little time unpacking the meaning of the three nouns "Church," "community," and "faith," but proceeding in reverse order and approaching the task inductively. First, the faith that binds the community we call Church has to be explained by looking at the actual practice of Christian believers at the present and at any chosen moment in the past. There is always a temptation, of course, to short-circuit the project by turning to "the Faith" that we as Roman Catholics are supposed to be committed to, and to trot out a series of definitions from the Nicene Creed or the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as if they represent what is permanent and religiously satisfying in our experience of God. But this more deductive approach involves presenting a template to the Christian, inviting acceptance as the mark of possessing "the Faith," though among this list of beliefs there may be some with which we have genuine difficulty and there are certainly a few that we could not readily explain. In fact, creedal formulations or sets of beliefs taken from catechisms of one kind or another correspond to religious life only as grammar corresponds to the living language. One can speak a language and speak it grammatically without ever studying grammar. And grammar always follows after the living language, a fact with which grammarians have never been entirely comfortable. Indeed, grammar is quite dependent upon the way the language itself is spoken, and is always playing catch-up. It has its importance, but that importance lies in its explanatory potential, not in some presumed normative role it exercises relative to actual speech. In similar fashion, theology follows after religious life and experience; it does not precede it.

The analogy between faith/the Faith and speech/grammar requires us to begin by examining what is constant in the faith that two millennia of Christians have found at the center of their lives. It is heartening,

⁶ Ormond Rush has argued persuasively that in ecumenical dialogue the practice of explaining our positions to one another needs to give way to that of explaining how each tradition understands its faithfulness to the ancient apostolic Church. See *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004).

though unsurprising, to find that kernel of faith in *the experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ*. If any element of this description is missing, then we are only dubiously Christians; so if we do not believe in God or our God is not loving and caring, or we do not find the story of Jesus to be the way in which we come closest to God, then we may be good and even religious people, but we are probably not fully incorporated into a Church that claims to be “a community of faith,” whose faith rests upon the experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ.

This more inductive approach to determining the identity of the Church begins at the heart of what it is to be a believer and puts doctrines and creedal formulations in their proper and secondary place. Theology or religious reflection has a very important function in exploring and explaining the implications of our religious experience, but only so long as it retains appropriate humility. Again, the analogy with the role of grammar is instructive. Religious reflection functions properly when it protects the integrity of religious experience, just as grammar’s proper role is to ensure that speech communicates clearly, that it does what it is supposed to do. But religious reflection functions inappropriately when it tries to tell us what our religious experience is or must be, just as grammar oversteps its mark when it insists on real speech following rules that make it harder for people to understand one another. A particularly good example of religious reflection overstepping its bounds can be seen in the long parade through Christian history of efforts to identify the historical Jesus as opposed to the Christ of faith, or to determine the essence of Christianity, or indeed to organize the books of the Bible into those that are more important and those that are less so, in search of some “canon within the canon” that will correct and corral the wild and lively world of individual religious experience. When religious reflection becomes unhinged from the experience of God that it is meant to be subject to, it can turn literally deadly. No heretic was ever burned at the stake for her or his experience of God; they all went to their deaths because they understood their experiences of God to be primary and doctrinal formulations to be secondary. Their judges were the theological grammarians.

A person of faith as we have just described it, or indeed a multitude of such persons, does not of itself make a Church, and so we turn to exploring the meaning of the second term in our description, “community.” In ordinary American parlance, “community” is almost as over-used a word as “family,” and often equally sentimentalized. The Church

is rarely referred to as a family, and given the dynamics of all too many families, this is a blessing.⁷ But the Church is commonly and rightly referred to as a community, so we have to get clear what we mean by this. We certainly do *not* mean that its members are necessarily alike, or like-minded, or all agree with one another on everything, or feel that they have to socialize with one another, or wear the same uniform, or cheer on the same sports teams. We don't even have to like one another all that much.

In the first instance, to say that the Church is a *community* of faith is to assert that we are bound together by the common possession of an outlook on life, its purpose and destiny, grounded in the experience that "the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ." The Church, then, is not a club we join because we like what it offers or find the people congenial; it is a community we find ourselves a part of because each of us, individually, has encountered and been touched by the love of God in Christ. In responding to the call of Christ we find ourselves, perhaps to our surprise, shoulder to shoulder with a host of other human beings, past and present, dead and alive, who differ from one another in many ways but have heard the same call and responded to it. We did not choose them and they did not choose us. Think of it in the manner of Jesus' calling of his disciples. Jesus saw something in each of the Twelve, and they "left their nets and followed him." They did not get along with one another particularly well, they squabbled at times and remained a pretty fractious bunch throughout his public ministry, but these personal idiosyncrasies are dwarfed in importance by the common work they did of leading the young Church they built on Jesus' foundations.

If we may be permitted to call our common life within the community of faith our "ecclesiality" we can borrow a pair of terms from John Paul II's thinking about collegiality and describe our ecclesiality as possessing both an *affective* and an *effective* dimension.⁸ The affective aspect of our ecclesiality is the human bond between us, grounded in our common commitment to Jesus Christ. While we may not like one another, the fact that our lives and our world are rendered meaningful because of our

⁷ The family, curiously enough, is often spoken of as "the domestic Church." See *Lumen Gentium* 11, though the term goes back to patristic times.

⁸ See Paul Lakeland, "John Paul II and Collegiality," in *The Vision of John Paul II: Assessing His Thought and Influence*, ed. Gerard Mannion (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 184–99.

common link to Jesus truly does bind us to one another on a human level. This is true quite trivially for fans of the New York Yankees or Manchester United or Bruce Springsteen, all of whom, despite being as varied as the human race in its entirety, have this one thing in common to bind them into a discernible community. It is true at a much deeper level for members of religious communities because—though baseball, soccer, or rock music fanatics might disagree—the call to which members of religious communities have responded is so much more comprehensive. Even Yankee fans have to put their allegiance aside at times, to go to work or to negotiate with a spouse who may not share the same fascination, and most of them find they can balance these different dimensions to their lives. But the Buddhist or the Christian has to include all the dimensions of her or his life within their foundational identity as a follower of Jesus or the Buddha. Hence the affective bond between Christians is at a much deeper level than that between Grateful Deadheads or the Daughters of the American Revolution.

If the affective dimension of our ecclesiality is strong because of the claim made upon us, the community is only the more united because of *effective* ecclesiality. The effective dimension of the community of faith is what is more commonly called its apostolicity. To be an apostle is to be sent, to be a “missionary,” which itself means someone who is sent. Effective ecclesiality, then, is the common work of the Church as it fulfills the mission that Jesus Christ left to it. Another way we identify this aspect of our life as Christians is as discipleship. Our task is to be “other Christs” for the world in which we live, somehow to transmute the message of Jesus so that the changing world can continue to hear it clearly. And, as anyone knows, there is no better way to build a community out of a plain bunch of people than to give them a common task. Together, the affective and the effective work feed off and sustain one another.

This discussion of ecclesiality brings us to the third term in our description, that this community of faith is the “Church.” More precisely, let us recall, “the Church is the community of faith grounded in the experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ.” The world knows many communities of faith, each of which is distinguished from the others because of the particular character of its founding experience and the insights to which this experience leads. Formally speaking, the Church is no different from the others. But materially it is quite distinct. “Faith” has one character for Buddhists, another for Muslims, another for Christians, and while some religious traditions share a lot in common (the

Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example), others may be quite irreconcilable.

Communities all have at least some patterns of behavior and common structures, perhaps leadership models and even rules and regulations. Successful communities are those in which this organizational culture has grown organically out of the grounding experience upon which the community's affective and effective ecclesiality is based. In other and simpler words, first Jesus who is the Christ, then the community of disciples, then the Church. So, as we explore the term "Church" here we are turning for the first time to what in many other places is where ecclesiology begins, with structures. In this text, structures come after, and while in human terms it is pretty logical to think that first we have a group and then it develops structures to assure its own continuity, integrity, and effectiveness, to put things in this order when talking about the Church is more controversial than we might imagine. For one thing, it subverts the common assumption that the Church was fully developed in the mind of Jesus Christ while he lived and taught on earth. It does not, of course, challenge the belief that there is a discernible line of continuity between Jesus of Nazareth and the Church of the second or twelfth or twenty-first centuries. But it does suggest that the outline of that continuity is a whole lot clearer looking backward than it could ever have been looking forward.⁹ The parallel in our own lives is clear; when we are young we rightly imagine all kinds of possibilities and may have strong hopes for a particular future, but only later in life can we discern a pattern of any kind, because the pattern becomes clear only in retrospect.

As we think in a preliminary way about the meaning of "Church" we can neither anchor it in the distant or recent past nor see the entirety of its meaning only in the present form that it takes, and we have to be able to distinguish between which of its features are time-conditioned strategies for the better proclamation of the Gospel and which are essential. The Church in any and every age, let us recall, is that community of faith distinguished by the experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ. If we could travel back in time to any century in the last twenty, we would find the Church where we found such a community. We would

⁹ On a retrospective theory of tradition see the magisterial work of John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (New York: Oxford, 2000), esp. 84–94.

not always find the Church if we went looking for features of our present-day Church such as celibate clergy or permanent deacons or diocesan finance councils or cardinals or Gothic cathedrals. These things and many others have emerged at different points in our history as the Church has sought to be effective, and occasionally they have waned in importance or even disappeared, and sometimes even reemerged (as happened in the case of permanent deacons). None of these things on this list is essential to the Church, though some of them have been very important in its history. If they disappear, it will be because affective and effective ecclesiality is not as well served by them now as it once was. But there are other ecclesial phenomena that it is not so easy to imagine disappearing. What would the Church be, for example, without the Eucharist or without the Bible? These are fundamentals because although one could imagine a community of faith that had neither—and there are a number of Christian communities that pay little or no attention to Eucharist—it would not be *this particular* community of faith. Scripture and the Eucharist are fundamental to the experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ.

A more traditional way of approaching an answer to the question, “What is the Church?” is to explore the history of images that have been employed to describe or even define it. This, indeed, was the method used by the Bishops present at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) as they put together their major document on the theology of the Church, usually known by the first two words of its Latin text, *Lumen Gentium* (LG).¹⁰ The first chapter of this critically important document, “The Mystery of the Church,” assembles a whole set of images for the Church drawn from the pages of the Bible: a sheepfold, a flock, a cultivated field, a vineyard, the house of God, the holy temple, the Holy City, that Jerusalem which is above, our mother, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ. It then concludes this list with a reference to Christ who established “his holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as a visible organization through which he communicates truth and grace to all men,” and identifies this “sole Church of Christ” as one that “subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him,” though of course “many elements of

¹⁰ This translates as “light of the peoples,” but we have to remember that the light it refers to is Christ. The Church, say the council fathers, reflects that light in the world.

sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines” (LG 8).

The second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is titled “The People of God.” Much has rightly been made of the council’s decision to reorganize the sections of the document (from what had been presented in an earlier version) and place this chapter before the discussion of the hierarchical element in the Church. However, what is equally important though less commonly observed is that the discussion of the Church as the People of God belongs here precisely because it addresses the puzzle with which the first chapter has left us. Having said that “the one Church of Christ . . . subsists in” the Roman Catholic Church, but having added that “elements of sanctification and truth” are found outside it, the council fathers have to find a way to talk about the Church that places the Catholic Church at its center while at the same time relating all other believers in whatever religious traditions to its central saving role in God’s design. It is the determination to be Catholic without being exclusive, in fact, to be “catholic,” that drives them to an examination of the Church as the People of God.

We will turn to a fuller exploration of the image of People of God in the section “Who is the Church?” But here we need briefly to consider some other important facets of *Lumen Gentium*, for this document is after all—whether we are more liberal or more conservative in the way we read it—the single most authoritative Church statement on ecclesiology of recent times, perhaps ever. It represents a concerted effort of all the Roman Catholic bishops in the years of the council, aided by the best theologians, to draw together the witness of Scripture and the voice of Tradition¹¹ into a comprehensive picture of what it means to be the Church of Christ. It is not, and cannot be, the last word on the topic, because history is not like that. Times change and perceptions change with them. But it is, for now, the clearest utterance, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, of the meaning of our community of faith. So let us draw this section of our chapter to a close with a brief glance at important dimensions of the conciliar vision of the Church, aspects to which we will return frequently in the pages that follow. There are three we should attend to particularly closely, namely, the unity of the Church, the holiness of the Church, and the historicity of the Church.

¹¹ Throughout the text the word “Tradition” is capitalized when it refers to the living memory of the Church as the second source of revelation, after Scripture, in the Catholic vision of things.

The choice of the governing image of the Church as the People of God attests immediately to the critical importance of stressing the unity of the Church. To begin, as had originally been planned, with a discussion of the hierarchy before turning to other sectors in the Church, would not only have perpetuated the mistaken assumption that the clergy/laity divide was somehow fundamental to the Church's being but would also, and perhaps even more unfortunately, have left any discussion of unity looking like an afterthought. If you begin with the parts, you are left with the question of what it is that holds them together as one. But if you start with an organic principle of unity—a people—you are well positioned to relate each role in the Church to the good of the whole community.

A fine example of the way in which the bishops employed the organic image to good advantage can be seen in their treatment of infallibility. Their immediate inheritance in this regard was, of course, Vatican I's dogmatic definition of papal infallibility, and if they were going to approach the subject of infallibility again it was clear that they would have to do so in line with what had been said at that late nineteenth-century gathering.¹² Vatican I, though, was a notoriously incomplete council, hastily suspended after Rome came under siege. If the bishops in 1870 had intended to say more on the subject of authority, they were unable to get to it. Vatican II clearly set out to correct this lack in the earlier council, and the bishops chose once again to explore the notion of infallibility in the context of the organic unity of the Church. Having placed it where it belonged, as an action of the Holy Spirit as guardian of the Church's continuity in truth, they went on to identify three ways in which the Holy Spirit guarantees that the Church remains in truth, and so three ways the Church expresses infallibility. The first is the very same as Vatican I had identified, in the pope's role as the focus and symbol of unity of the entire community and the consequent responsibility that he has to clarify the faith of the Church, for the sake of its unity and its permanence in truth. Second, they located a similar exercise of infallible teaching in the entire college of bishops (always including the pope), not only when they are gathered in a council like Vatican II but even when—united in faith—they are dispersed around the world but teach with one

¹² Defined on July 18, 1870. For a good brief discussion of the notion of infallibility and the relation of its treatment in Vatican I to that in Vatican II, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 81–88.

voice. Third—more striking still—the bishops see what we might call a performative infallibility vested in the entire community of faith when they are united in their belief, the so-called sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*).¹³

The matter of holiness pervades the whole document but is discussed most directly in chapter 5, “The Call to Holiness.” While this chapter has its flaws, particularly the way in which holiness is discussed following the classic pyramidal image of the Church, starting with the bishops, then moving to priests and deacons and so on, it is prefaced by an important statement that the call to holiness is universal, as “all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love.” “By this holiness,” the council continues, “a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society” (LG 40). At the end of this chapter of the present book we will be answering the question of the purpose of the Church, what the Church is *for*. Right here, we can see that holiness is *for* mission, and that mission is oriented to the humanization of society. So when the bishops move on to discuss how holiness is manifested in the lives of bishops, clergy, laity, and even religious, it is always placed in this context. Holiness is not primarily or even significantly a matter of private piety. Holiness is always apostolic.

Finally, the council is at pains to indicate the historicity of the Church, that is, its dynamic presence within history, growing and changing and struggling with new circumstances and different conditions. While this topic is one of the central issues in that other great council document *Gaudium et Spes*, the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today,” in *Lumen Gentium* the bishops broach the subject in their surprising little meditation on the Church as a “pilgrim” (LG 7). “Pilgrim,” in fact, is a wonderful compromise image for a body of bishops not all of whom want to take history all that seriously. So, on the one hand, the chapter orients the Church within history toward its final consummation and fulfillment in the reign of God at the end of time. As a meditation on the communion of saints and the symbiotic union between what is sometimes called the “militant” and the “triumphant” Church, its theological content is deeply traditional. On the other hand, the very choice of the term “pilgrim” to describe the Church within history suggests an open and hopeful passage through time. The much-

¹³ The discussion of the respective roles of pope and bishops in the exercise of infallibility can be found at various points in sections 18–24 of LG. The proclamation of the infallibility of the whole community is to be found in section 12.

quoted reference of the council to the importance of “reading the signs of the times,” an emphasis above all of *Gaudium et Spes*, has its theological justification here. “[T]he final age of the world is with us and the renewal of the world is irrevocably under way,” yet “until there be realized new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells (cf. 2 Pet. 3:13) the pilgrim Church, in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the sons of God (cf. Rom. 8:19-22)” (LG 48). As a worldly pilgrim, the Church points beyond itself. Christ established his Church at Pentecost, say the bishops in this chapter, by sending his Spirit on his disciples to set up the Church as his Body, “as the universal sacrament of salvation.” In and through its sharing in the vicissitudes of the historical condition, in and through its imperfections, the Church points beyond itself to the reign of God. As a pilgrim, it travels hopefully, but it has not yet fully arrived at that toward which it points.

Eternity, or “When is the Church?”

While the council fathers at Vatican II were clear that the Church is the People of God, they seem to have left it to subsequent reflection to determine all that this might mean about its structure and ways of carrying out its mission. Alongside the theological reflection in *Lumen Gentium*, there are also several quite distinct sets of assumptions about how the Church came into existence. At times, the bishops tie its continuing existence to some set of essential characteristics in the mind of Christ, whom they consider its founder in some quite literal sense, while at others they see its origin in Christ’s post-resurrection gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples, which places the “founding” of the Church at some point after Jesus of Nazareth is no longer bodily present in history.¹⁴ At still others,

¹⁴ Compare the picture of the Church in sections 3–5 of LG with the quite different flavor of section 8. In the earlier passage the Church is inaugurated in Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom but coming more clearly or more fully into existence after his death and resurrection, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Here it is “the kingdom of God now present in mystery.” In the later passage, however, where the bishops are struggling with identifying the Roman Catholic Church as the one true Church, there is a quite different emphasis on an identity between the mind of Christ and the actual structures of Roman Catholicism. So the Church is established by Christ “as a visible organization. . . . Structured with hierarchical organs,” principal among them the office of Peter and the apostles.

they seem to think that historically conditioned details of Church history are somehow essential characteristics of the community of faith.¹⁵ Each of these ideas, and all of them together, lead us to different responses to the question, “*When is the Church?*” Does the Church come into existence with the birth of Jesus or with the calling of the disciples? At the moment at which Jesus breaks bread and blesses it and tells his disciples to do the same in his memory? At his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension into heaven? At Pentecost? When the followers of the Nazarene first accept the designation of “Christian”? Or at that precise moment, lost in time as it must be, when Jesus’ disciples first said in faith, “*Jesus is the Christ?*”

It is neither possible nor useful to pinpoint the moment at which there is a Church of Christ. Historically speaking, it must be related to the life and death of Jesus, and it cannot exist before Jesus, though there are theologians who have thought it was somehow anticipated in the history of Israel. Theologically, the existence of the Church is not necessarily tied to the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Just as theologians sometimes talk of the “preexistent Christ,” the Word of God from all eternity (most notably in chapter 1 of the Gospel of John), so the Church as part of the divine plan for the salvation of the world can be thought of as existing from all eternity too. Just so long, that is, as we do not make the mistake of thinking “eternity” means that the Church was “there” in history three or four thousand years ago, or even at the beginning of time. Our question, however, is one about the worldly history of the Church, not about its preexistence, and as a worldly reality its origin cannot be tied to a particular moment. It is not as if the early followers of Jesus held a meeting to draw up a constitution for their new society of friends, and we could date it as we can date the Augsburg Confession of the Lutherans or the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. And even if they had, it would surely be possible to argue that the “real” Church had come into existence with the faith of those who eventually saw the need to draw up a formal constitution, rather than with the constitution itself.

While we cannot pin down the precise historical moment at which the Church comes into existence, we can certainly provide a rule by which we can identify *if* there is a Church in existence at any particular moment. We can say, as we did in the last section, that there is a Church

¹⁵ It is one thing to represent the Petrine office as a primary characteristic of the Church, but it is quite another to insist upon its late nineteenth- and twentieth-century modes as definitive ways of exercising that office.

when there is an identifiable community, however small, bound together by the common experience that the loving care of God for them is supremely available in their intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ. To say that there is no Church until there is an identifiable community means that there is no Church just because Jesus planned to found a Church, if indeed he did. There is only a Church when the teaching and person of Jesus has led a group of individuals to form a community somehow focused upon his person. For those who favor a "low Christology," stressing the humanity of Jesus and his slow growth into knowledge and understanding of the implications of his mission for his identity, this is not a difficult idea. But even if you prefer a higher Christology, one that understands the historical Jesus from the beginning as the Son of God present in history, it is a mistake to think of the Church as real because Jesus Christ intended it. Low Christology or high, the Church as a historical reality depends upon the free, faithful response of ordinary human beings to the meaning of Jesus Christ. You can put it a little more strongly and say that without the human response in faith to Jesus, his status as Savior remains hidden, if it happens at all. True, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit into the world, but the Spirit of God cannot compel faith. Salvation is an offer of divine grace, not a manacle. Just so, there is no Church without disciples, and disciples freely respond to the offer of grace. Here, we might say, we see the courage of God, who subordinates the divine will to human freedom. A God who becomes incarnate has to pay this price.

While we can clearly discern in the first followers of Jesus an identifiable community gathered around him, this in itself is not sufficient to determine that the Church exists within the time of Jesus' public ministry. They must also somehow have a common experience of what Jesus means for them. But the gospels make it pretty clear that during their time following Jesus in his preaching and teaching and healing there was little or no unanimity among these followers about what and who Jesus was. In fact, they show every sign, despite having been captivated by his person, of people who are trying to figure it all out and often getting it wildly wrong. They fight among themselves about who will be greater in the kingdom of heaven, they do not or will not hear his clear predictions of his passion and death, they fall asleep in the garden of Gethsemane, and they flee in fear when Jesus is taken captive. Peter, their leader, is so confused that at one point Jesus says to him, "Get behind me, Satan," and his flight when Jesus most needs him is compounded by a threefold explicit denial of any connection to his Lord and master. As in so many other human situations, the women appear to be

a good deal more constant than the men, but taken overall it seems quite impossible to believe that this distinct community of followers has any kind of shared experience that grounds their fellowship, beyond the personal charisma of their leader. They follow him, but there is no clarity at all at this point about why they are following him, still less about the full implications of his mission. A puzzled and conflicted fascination does not qualify as faith.

The common experience of Jesus' first followers that will begin to change this group of individuals from an association of people captivated by the personality of Jesus into a community of faith will have to wait on the encounter with the risen Jesus. While Jesus preaches the coming of the reign of God, he himself is not the object of faith. In Mark's gospel Jesus appears from the beginning with the message, "Repent and believe in the good news, the reign of God is at hand" (see 1:15). The faith he calls for is faith in the reign of God, not faith in himself. In the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Jesus during his brief years of ministry consistently points away from himself and toward God and God's reign. If he draws people to him, as he surely does, it is because of the power of his teaching and healing as testimony to the coming reign of God. It is not because he himself becomes the object of worship. That will begin to occur only when the event of his death and the experience of his resurrection shift the attention of his disciples from the content of his preaching to the identity of the preacher himself. This genuine paradigm shift that makes faith *in* Jesus possible is the direct work of the Holy Spirit, occurring—as it always does—through human creativity.

If it is indeed the case that faith in Jesus must await the experience of the resurrection, it seems there cannot be a Church during Jesus' earthly life. For, while the teaching of Jesus certainly brought his followers to a greater awareness of the loving care of God for them, the proclamation of the advent of the reign of God is not enough to form a Christian community of faith. For that to happen, the early community must identify the story of Jesus himself, not his preaching of the kingdom, as the key that unlocks the meaning of history. Jesus himself has to be received by them as the perfect revelation of the saving love of God. Or, in the words of our working description of the Church, as making God "supremely available" to them. Before his death and resurrection they do not have the data to make such a confession of faith possible. However, even after these events they depend on further help from the gift of the Holy Spirit, without which they would have remained cowering in their hiding place, despondent and afraid.

The events of Pentecost are most often singled out as the key moment in the coming-to-be of the Church. Fear is replaced with courage, despair with confidence, and the disciples complete their transformation into apostles. When they encounter the risen Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes upon them in order to confirm them in their mission, to send them out to preach, as indeed they do according to the account in the Acts of the Apostles. These men, whom Jesus gathered around him because he saw something in them and they in him, are sent (an apostle is one who “is sent”) in the power of the Spirit to preach something that Jesus did not preach, namely, himself as the content of the message. It is, of course, probable that at the time of their initial preaching the apostles did not fully comprehend the message they were preaching and had not entirely plumbed the depths of its religious implications. Since we have not yet fully explored the meaning of Jesus Christ, we should not be surprised to learn that they had not done so either.

When the apostles began to preach Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, they were unaware that they were about the business of laying the groundwork for a new community of faith, but this does not mean that a new community was not in the process of formation. Looking backward from our historical vantage point we can see lines of development, both before and after Pentecost, that show the slow emergence of the Church of Christ. From within the events themselves, it is not at all as easy to see what is happening. But from where we stand there is no doubt that Pentecost was a decisive, if not the decisive, moment in the formation of the Christian Church. The beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (Mark 1, Luke 4) is consequent upon his being filled with the Holy Spirit, just as it was for those Peter addressed in Acts 2. The parallels are instructive about the development that is taking place, even allowing for the poetic license of the evangelists:

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying
“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent,
and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:14-15)

And Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you
in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall
receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

While the Church has subsequently become clearer that something decisive happened at Pentecost, it is true that much remained to happen before it could be said that the early followers of Jesus had developed a

full awareness of the meaning of their emerging community. While the apostles at Pentecost were engaged in something profoundly new, they could not foresee all that their preaching would lead to. The communal self-consciousness that was necessary before the community would begin to see itself as the Christian Church and to refer to itself in that way only developed over the course of the first century. Many elements contributed to this growing awareness: the preaching of the apostle Paul, the resolution of the Council of Jerusalem after which circumcision and inclusion in Judaism was no longer considered a requirement for becoming a Christian (around the year 50 CE), the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (70 CE), the writing of the gospels (around 70–100 CE), and the fierce but sporadic persecution that the early community experienced. The most important factor does not appear on this list and is largely hidden from history, namely, the continuing experience of the risen Jesus. For some forty years before there were gospels, the Christians gathered together to break bread and bless and share wine in memory of Jesus Christ. By degrees this memorial meal became ritualized into the sacrament of the Eucharist. It was the Eucharist, finally, that made the Church.

Some readers may be disconcerted by the above discussion of the slow emergence of a self-consciously Christian community, since the gospels themselves present a picture that at times looks as if the Church is very much in existence even during Jesus' life. The apostles are chosen and sent on mission, Jesus preaches his own resurrection, Jesus appoints Peter to be the rock on which he will build his Church, and so on. We can never forget, however, that the gospels themselves are written from the same retrospective vantage point as we occupy. Looking back at what must at the time have been much less clear, the gospel writers imposed a pattern upon those events that was not apparent to those who lived through them. In the light of history all seems clear; at the time, we live—at best—in hope. Consequently, the fact that the evangelists write from a distinctly post-resurrection perspective explains a lot of the conflation that leads to words and attitudes inserted into gospel texts that are expressions of a significantly later faith experience.

As we suggested earlier, pinpointing a precise time when the Church came into existence is neither profitable nor possible, but this very fact explains the occasional language about Jesus as its "founder." While we have determined that there is no Church, indeed there can be no Church, so long as Jesus himself is alive and preaching the coming reign of God, it does not follow that there is no connection between Jesus and the Church, or that a kind of ecclesial kernel was not somehow present in

his teaching. The point can be illustrated by analogy with the Roman Catholic position on the status of the human fetus. Faced with the question of when precisely in the passage from conception to birth a human fetus becomes a human being, many answers have been offered at one point or another in history: at implantation, at the moment when the growing fetus becomes able to survive outside the womb (viability), after one or two trimesters, at birth, and even, to be honest, sometimes at some point after birth. The Church maintains that the moment of conception is the only acceptable answer to this question, not simply because it makes it easier to maintain a consistently pro-life ethic and certainly not because it knows that the answer is correct, but because on a continuum it is wholly impossible to pinpoint a moment of certainty. Just such a historical continuity exists in the growing Church as we can see in the development of embryo, fetus, and child. Just such an answer is provided by the Church. There is no point in history at which we can say "aha!" now we have the Church. It grows in continuity with Jesus' determination to reform elements of Judaism. At Pentecost or at the Council of Jerusalem or in Corinth or in Rome around 66 CE when Peter and Paul die in the persecutions of Nero, we are tantalized by elements of Church. We see it peeking out from the mists of history, but if we could clear the mist we might be surprised by how much is not yet "the Church." Pentecost, sure, but what did they really preach at Pentecost if the early followers of Jesus were promptly offered a little corner of the temple where they could worship? Yes, it was the Church, but yes, it was also a group within Judaism, in the view of the Jewish community and in their own self-understanding. The child, they say, is father of the man. But the child is equally not yet the man. When your child grows into a woman, you can look back and see decisive moments at which she began to emerge. But at the time she was just a cute kid or a pushy adolescent.

This entire discussion of the historical development of the early Church forces us back to the consideration of historicity that we began in the previous section, and it requires us to resist the inclination to exempt the Church from the historical process. There is a naive reading of the Church's development that sometimes emerges in theological but more commonly in pastoral circles. One of its most notoriously unhelpful expressions occurs in the Anti-Modernist Oath that was established in 1910 as a way of stamping out what Pope Pius X had identified as "modernist" tendencies in the Church. All priests were required to affirm "that the Church, the guardian and teacher of the revealed word, was personally instituted by the real and historical Christ when he lived among us,

and that the Church was built upon Peter, the prince of the apostolic hierarchy, and his successors for the duration of time."¹⁶

The fundamental problem with all such approaches to the history of the Church is one of a misunderstanding of the way in which we should be reading the sources of our tradition. Today, scholars do not treat Scripture or early theological writings as if they somehow escape the historical condition. (This, of course, is one of the "modernist" sensibilities that Pius X was so concerned about.) The truth they contain—in the case of Scripture, the inspired word of God they offer—is accessed by treating them as texts with a history that might be as complicated as any other historical document. What we encounter in Scripture is not a set of blueprints that can always be read as true in some naive fashion that ignores their history but, rather, writings whose saving truth emerges in history as the human mind in this or that historical moment examines them in a careful, respectful, and scholarly fashion.

Explaining the great sea change that came over Catholic theology in the mid-twentieth century, the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan wrote that "[t]heology has become an empirical science in the sense that Scripture and Tradition now supply not premises, but data."¹⁷ When we go from thinking of theology as deductive to seeing it as empirical, dramatic changes occur in the way we utilize the tradition. For a long time (perhaps even in some circles still today) the Church thought of the vocation of the theologian as proving the truth of what Scripture and Tradition had already declared. While Christian theologians got around some of the problems of explaining the Old Testament through what was called "typological exegesis," that is, understanding a person or thing in Hebrew Scripture as foreshadowing or anticipating an aspect of the New Testament (so Noah's ark is a "type" of the Church), their treatment of Christian Scripture itself had necessarily to be much more literal. What was there was there because it actually happened in just this way. And theologians employed highly sophisticated philosophical systems and logical strategies to defend the literal truth of the Scriptures. To treat Scripture and Tradition as data rather than premises makes the theo-

¹⁶ See William J. Schoenle, *The Intellectual Crisis in English Catholicism: Liberal Catholics, Modernists, and the Vatican in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Garland, 1982), esp. 229. The full text of the oath can be found at <http://www.franciscan-archive.org/bullarium/oath.html>.

¹⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, ed. William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 58.

gian much more objective, much less of an apologist.¹⁸ As Lonergan put it, "Where before the step from premises to conclusions was brief, simple, and certain, today the steps from data to interpretation are long, arduous, and, at best, probable. An empirical science does not demonstrate. It accumulates information, develops understanding, masters ever more of its materials, but it does not preclude the uncovering of further relevant data, the emergence of new insights, the attainment of a more comprehensive view."¹⁹

As Lonergan develops his discussion of this change in the theological task he makes many important points, but one in particular is of value to us in our consideration of the Church. Because religion is about the relationship between God and the human person in the human community, says Lonergan, "any deepening or enriching of our apprehension of man possesses religious significance and relevance."²⁰ Classically, he continues, the tradition analyzed the human person as body and soul, but today we add "the richer and more concrete apprehension of man as incarnate subject." So a developing understanding of the human person and community changes at least one of the terms in our theological equation. And since the Church is fundamentally a community of faith, a gathering of human persons across history, Lonergan's point is particularly important. Indeed, it is quite helpful for our considerations to employ Lonergan's term of "incarnate subject" analogously in reference to the Church. The Church is made up of a multitude of incarnate subjects, but the Church itself can be seen as a kind of collective incarnate subject. People are understood differently as human knowledge of their complexity grows; just so, the People of God is understood differently too.

In looking for a foundation for the newly historicist and subject-centered approach to religion and theology that he has identified, Lonergan turns to the idea of conversion and discusses it in a way that converges nicely with the picture of the Church we have been developing. Conversion is an experience that affects individuals, a "radical transformation . . . on all levels of living." While it may be sudden or take a lifetime, conversion means that the subject sees everything differently, because the subject has become different. It is a product of experience

¹⁸ See Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Is Theology a Science?* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959).

¹⁹ Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

and while in essence it is private, yet "it can happen to many and they can form a community to sustain one another in working out the implications, and in fulfilling the promise of their new life."²¹ Just such conversions are visible in the effect of the Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost, and the emergence of the Church in the years that follow is an excellent example of the formation of a community to sustain individuals in their changed attitude to reality.

Loneragan's discussion of the shift from classical to historicist, or deductive to empirical theology, and his recognition of conversion as the foundation of theological method in the new scheme of things are enormously helpful in making a more sophisticated response to our question, "When is the Church?" While there are undoubtedly a few well-documented examples of the Damascus-like dramatic conversion experienced by Saul of Tarsus, most of us are more likely to undergo a far more attenuated conversion experience. Taking a lifetime, perhaps, or stretching over many years, it may be marked by moments of consolation, insight, and growing love for God and God's world. But it will also, because we are human, demonstrate the contrary, times when our sinfulness will be evidenced in turning inward to protect ourselves from the insistent demands of ongoing conversion. When, then, are we finally "converted"? Even the saints have their failings, and the centrality of human freedom requires that we recognize that no one, short of the moment of death, is beyond change, even change for the worse.

What we have said about conversion in the life of the human incarnate subject can be repeated analogously with reference to the Church, the community of those who celebrate and yet struggle with the daily demands of conversion to Christ. There is no blinding Damascus moment for the Church, no time when the Church suddenly became "converted to Christ," no "before" of sinfulness and certainly no "after" of saintly progress through history. When we look at the Church as a historical phenomenon and utilize Scripture and Tradition as data rather than premises, we become aware that the conversion of the Church of Christ to Christ himself is an ongoing process in which generosity is in tension with self-centeredness, and the freedom and confidence granted by the Holy Spirit must struggle against the timidity and fear of "the old Adam." Because conversion to Christ can be undergone only at great personal cost, individually and collectively we will not always embrace it whole-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65–66.

heartedly. And yet this fallible human community, Christians believe, is also God's chosen vehicle for reflecting the saving light of Christ in the world.

At this point we might usefully return to our working description of the Church and regroup. The Church, we said, in any and every age is that community of faith distinguished by the experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ. It would be quite accurate if too lapidary to rephrase this description: the Church is the community of the converted. And promptly add that the converted are always in the process of conversion. Two things follow immediately. The first, which we have already touched upon, is that where there is no conversion to Christ, there is no Church. Before conversion was possible, the Church was not possible. There was no empty structure or institution, waiting to be populated. The second, new to our discussion, is that if the ongoing conversion of individuals often includes moments of backsliding, then the Church seen analogously as the communal incarnate subject of the converted is also not immune from sinfulness. In recent decades, with particular though not exclusive reference to the Church's failures toward the Jewish community during the Holocaust, popes (especially John Paul II) have offered public apologies in the name of the Church for the failings of its members, but they have resisted the suggestion that the Church itself sinned. The reluctance to call the Church itself sinful is occasioned by a conviction of its divine origin. In Catholicism, the Church is not simply a community of those who gather together in virtue of their common conversion to Christ but also a part of the mystery of God's salvific intent. Without wishing to contradict that perception, we need also to recognize that when we treat Scripture and Tradition as data rather than premises, we have to recognize that when there were no Christians, there was no Church. In history, the Church comes into existence when two or three are gathered together in their common experience that the loving care of God for them is supremely available in their intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ. And so it seems reasonable to say that "Church" is empty without Christians. And if Christians sin, how can the Church not sin, since without sinning Christians, it would not exist?²²

²² On this question of the sinfulness of the Church, see Bradford E. Hinze, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 61, no. 2 (June 2000): 270-94.

Whether or not we are comfortable with the notion of a sinful Church, or simply want to settle for the certainty of sinners within the Church, the fact of sin within the Church leads us to another dimension of the question, "When is the Church?" We have already said that from a historical perspective there was a great deal of time—most of human history—when there was no Church, however much we may also want to say that the Church was "always" part of God's design. No Christians, no Church. But if this is the case, then do we not have to say that the Church itself *could* come to an end before human history itself comes to an end? As a purely historical judgment we would surely have to say that a time could come when faith in God's Church had disappeared from the world, and at such a moment there would no longer be a Church. Is the Church a reality like the Shakers, so that when the last few have disappeared, they are no more? Or is the Church somehow a dimension of what it is to be human, so that so long as there are human beings in the world, somehow there is the Church? To answer this question one way would mean we would have to say that there is, in a sense, always a Church, and this not only into the distant future, but also into the distant past. Earlier in this section we touched on how the Church is a part of God's design for salvation. As such, it is eternally present in the way that eternity is always present to each moment in time. We talk colloquially about "eternal truths." The Church would then be such an eternal truth and, like other eternal truths, not depend for its truth on whether people know it or accept it when it is put before them. Perhaps we might want to say that the Church is always present in history, but sometimes hidden, and that it was hidden for a very long time before it became apparent in the life and death of Jesus Christ—which might leave us with the interesting thought that the historical Jesus did not so much found the Church as unlock the door that revealed the hidden Church of the eternal incarnate Word. But then we are getting into deep theological water indeed!

God is eternal and we are time-bound creatures. Because we are destined ultimately to return to God, there is something eternal about us, surely, which is traditionally called the soul, but here in our human lives we deal in beginnings and endings, in knowledge and ignorance, in good and evil. We know the past somewhat dimly, the present as it flashes by, and the future not at all. If we are religious people, however broadly we understand that term, it means we do not see the meaning of history wrapped up in itself, but somehow beyond. Human history, of course, works itself out through strange combinations of chance and

planning, but its ultimate meaning, like that of anything including ourselves, lies somehow beyond it. In the end, this is what it means to have faith or to be religious, to believe in a meaning that transcends everyday reality. The word "God" is not a name, but what Paul Tillich called an "empty symbol" of that eternal reality upon which every moment in time depends for its meaning and, indeed, for its very existence. The eternity of God means that whatever is in God is present to us in every moment, though present in mystery precisely because from the vantage point of history we cannot see eternity clearly. We see now "only as through a glass, darkly." One day, says Christianity, we shall see clearly.

The Christian Church and the Catholic Church in particular believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit, guiding the Church into all truth. This gift of the Spirit was promised by Christ in John's gospel, and it is a mainstay not only of Catholic understandings of papal and ecclesial infallibility but of all Christian confidence in God's guidance through history. Fundamentally, this means that somehow the eternal God is present in the historical process. Christians believe that God was present in an especially concrete way in the life and death of Jesus Christ but also that God is present in the world even after Christ has gone to his Father. And when we look around for the Spirit, it is in human beings and human activity for the good in history that we find the Spirit present. This is clear in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, which states that the gift of the Spirit to the Church is found in the person of the pope, in the college of bishops, and in the whole assembly of the faithful. The Spirit is not out there somewhere, but in here somewhere.

When St. Augustine suggested that we should look for God within he was neither suggesting that God is synonymous with the human person nor arguing that the Spirit of God somehow lurks within some of us and not within others. His point was really one of philosophical anthropology, that is, he was making the claim that the human person as a human being is somehow attuned to or connected to God, even if this connection is damaged by sin.²³ And if this is the case, then it is the

²³ "Enter into yourself, leave behind all noise and confusion. God speaks to us in the great silence of the heart," and, "Where so ever you are, where so ever you may be praying, He who hears you is within you, hidden within, or He who hears you is not merely by your side, and you have no need to go wandering about, no need to be reaching out to God as though you would touch him with your hands" (*Homilies on the Psalms* 38:13).

case whether we know it or not or even, knowing it, we believe it or not or, believing it, we act on it or not. That is to say, openness to the presence of God within us comes to be a kind of structure of the human person, what the twentieth-century theological giant Karl Rahner called a “supernatural existential.”²⁴ Openness to God does not have to be articulated in the language of Christianity or theism, and the word “God” need not come up. But openness to God as openness to transcendence, to the idea of the more that lies beyond the everyday, to ultimate mystery, is constitutive of what it is to be a human being. That is the Christian claim about the nature of human being, and this openness is not restricted to those with “faith” in a narrower sense.

Now we are in a position to close out this discussion of “when” the Church is, and to proceed to ask *who* the Church is. For there is sense to the claim that the Church always is, or that it “was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,” though the poetry of this phrase returns us to that before and after of history in which the Church was not, is, and hopefully will be. The language in which this issue is negotiated is often that of “the plan of God.” The Church, we are told, is God’s plan for the salvation of the world, continuing the loving presence of Christ in the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, in the mind of God that lies outside time, the Church is part of the grand design. But in the hands of God’s agents in history, the Church must be nourished, protected, allowed to grow and change, understood as a dynamic historic reality. There is an element of human contingency about the Church, coupled somehow to the divine necessity of God’s design.

Seeing the Church as eternal because of its role in God’s eternal design for salvation means that every moment in time is somehow related to the Church, even those moments when, from a purely historical point of view, there was yet no Church. Some may find it helpful to talk about this earlier time as preparation for or an anticipation of the coming of the Church. This would fit well with that allegorical exegesis of Hebrew Scriptures that makes all the patriarchs and the great events of the early history of biblical Israel into foreshadowings of Christian history. But it may be more helpful to think of this prior time as the time when the People of God had not yet come fully into focus. We are all, in the words of Vatican II, from the most devout Catholic to the angriest atheist, somehow related to the People of God. The most fundamental meaning of

²⁴ See Karl Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 297–317.

“people of God” is “the human race.” The coming of Christ and the Church that bears his name gives focus and definition to God’s will for the salvation of all people, but that will—as eternal—is not made real by the existence of the Church or the actions of Christ. It is made better known, it is made more effective, it comes into its fullness in history, but it is ever-present to the eternal God.

Oneness, or “Who is the Church?”

The question of *who* the Church is raises the issue of membership, of who is “in,” and who is “out.” This is a different kind of discussion, one that shows us once again just how historically conditioned our community of faith actually is. While we always want to say that the “whatness” of the Church has not changed over the centuries and is somehow in direct continuity with the teaching of Jesus, there is no way to say that the Church has always maintained the same notion of its ecclesial “whoness.” The changing responses to the question of who the Church is can always be measured against our working understanding that the community of faith is bound together by the common experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ. But that joint conviction has not prevented there being a whole series of understandings of who, exactly, the Church actually is.

This question about who is in the Church clearly relates, then, to our immediately previous discussion about when the Church comes to be. The more willing we are to allow for a kind of preexistent Church based upon the natural openness of the human person to the transcendent, the happier we will be being more rather than less inclusive about “who” is in the Church. At the same time, however, we do not want to fall into the trap of telling people who are perfectly content in their own religious traditions that they are really somehow members of the Church. And so our problem comes into focus: Because we have defined the Church narrowly and, for most of its existence, over against those who are not part of it, have we perhaps created conditions that make the process of evangelization that much harder? And could it also be the case that we have misunderstood evangelization as the effort to draw others into a Church that stands over against that which is not the Church?

There is a current and highly controversial technical theological debate that tries to get at the truth of who is and who is not part of the Church. Sometimes it goes by the name of “the question of religious

pluralism,” and sometimes it comes dressed as “the theology of religions.” Behind its surface concern about the relationship between the truth of Christ and the truths of other religions lie even more profound issues about the nature of the Church and the workings of God in history. If, as Christians believe, God wills from all eternity (which means in every actual historical moment, not “at the beginning”) the salvation of every single human being, then either God is pretty hopeless at making what God wills happen, or God’s will is not tied to some claim that only inside the Church is salvation possible, or at least much easier. God’s will to the salvation of all means that the design is larger than the Church, though this is not to say that the Church is not essential to that design. Vatican II supports this point by making clear, on the one hand, God’s will for the salvation of all while saying, on the other, that “the Church is necessary for salvation” (LG 14). That is, the existence of the Church, not necessarily belief in or membership of the Church.

The religious pluralism debate has most commonly been conducted by identifying three basic attitudes to the relationship of the Church to other religious traditions. First, there is an *exclusivist* attitude, which essentially argues that the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the salvation it brings is not shared at all by other traditions. At its worst this has meant at different historical moments for both Catholics and Protestants that “outside the Church there is no salvation,” though it is pretty safe to say that most Christian believers today do not take such a harsh attitude to other faiths. Indeed, in surveys conducted in the last few years, 85% of Catholics asked said that so long as you believe in God, it really doesn’t matter what religious tradition you belong to.²⁵ A second position, more or less that of Vatican II, is labeled *inclusivist* because while it extends the possibility of salvation way beyond Christianity, indeed to the whole human race, it understands all salvation somehow to occur through the saving actions of God in Christ. Third, a *pluralist* position goes beyond the generosity of the inclusivists to a view that is essentially relativist, arguing that Christianity is one way among many that human beings try to give structure to their natural drive to transcendence. This discussion often becomes more complex, but however it is conducted there are always three understandings of the Church under consideration. The exclusivist sees the Church over against other religions, the inclusivist sees the Church in some mystical sense embracing them, and the pluralist

²⁵ William V. D’Antonio and others, *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

sees the Church standing shoulder to shoulder with them. Christians today can be found in all three camps, and most Catholics in all probability fall into the second group, though they have some sympathy, to the horror of their leaders, with the relativist position of option three.²⁶

While our background awareness as we continue our discussion of the Church must be the conviction that God's design is so much larger and more mysterious than our knowledge of it, our concern must be with the Church in a somewhat narrower sense. We can perhaps call the Church that sector of the People of God with more focus and definition, characteristics that come not from the virtue of its members but from the fact that it is this group of people who are the recipients and guardians of God's revelation in Scripture and, above all, in the person of Jesus Christ. This relates quite closely to the working description of the Church we have employed earlier, and which it would be good to recall once again. The Church, we said, exists when there is an identifiable community, however small, bound together by the common experience that the loving care of God for them is supremely available in their intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ. As we go forward here, our questions will be about who is actually part of this narrower Church.

Two final preparatory thoughts before we move on. First, to be part of the People of God in the wider sense does not require being the member of a distinct community, or a claim to have experienced the love of God, or any awareness of the central role of Christ in making the love of God more fully present and more efficacious in the world. And second, even this narrower understanding of Church with which we are largely concerned here is much broader than many Christians throughout history have thought, and perhaps broader than we too have usually imagined.

The dominant response over the centuries to the question about membership of the Church is one that relies on visibility. Because the Church itself has been thought of over the same period primarily as a "perfect society," its members are those "who profess the same faith, participate in the same sacraments, and who are subject to the same pastors," especially to the pope. This description, drawn from the writings of the sixteenth-century Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, was insisted on as late as the First Vatican Council (1870), which also proclaimed that

²⁶ For a classic exposition of this whole issue see John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993).

“we must believe that the Church of Christ is a perfect society.”²⁷ The idea of perfection, it need hardly be said, does not mean that the Church is a morally perfect society, for it is surely a Church of sinners. Perfection here refers to its completeness. That which is perfect, according to the schema *Tametsi Deus* (never voted on) is “that which is complete and independent in itself, fully sufficient in its own order to attain its proposed end, and not subject to any other society in those things which pertain properly to it.”

Once we commit ourselves to seeing the Church as a perfect society, however carefully defined, it inevitably happens that we come to see it over against the world, in contrast both to secular society and to all those religions beyond it. The rest of humankind is defined negatively, as those who are “non-Christians” or even, at times, “non-Catholics,” either hopeless sinners or ignorant or both. Evangelization is not so much proclaiming the Gospel as it is drawing converts into the Church, the community of the saved. Moreover, faith itself rapidly becomes a matter of assent to a series of propositions that operate as a sort of constitution for the Church. Faith, in other words, becomes “the Faith,” and membership of the Church is worn proudly as a badge of identity that distinguishes us from them. My parents used to tell me stories of leaving their Catholic elementary school every afternoon in the England of the 1930s, to fight in the streets with the little children from the Protestant school across the way. In a childish reenactment of the horrors of religious wars, they fought other children because, well, they were them and we are us. The English musical comedy duo of Michael Flanders and Donald Swann used to bring the house down at their concerts with a rendition of their song, “The English, the English, the English are best!” Tongue in cheek for them and most of their audience, of course, but the Catholic Church of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in Europe and North America, would have proudly sung its own version, “The Catholics, the Catholics, the Catholics are best,” as testimony to the ecclesial triumphalism that marked the period.

The emphasis on the Church as a perfect society and the concomitant identification of Church members by visible criteria is to a high degree explicable in historical and even sociological terms, and this truth is evident in the discussions at Vatican I over the preparatory schema in which the quotations about a “perfect society” appeared.²⁸ The majority

²⁷ *Supremi Pastoris* 10.

²⁸ Patrick Granfield, “The Church as *Societas Perfecta* in the Schemata of Vatican I,” *Church History* 48, no. 4 (1979): 431–46.

of the council fathers at Vatican I were solidly in favor of understanding the Church as a visible society, but there was a significant minority who preferred to employ the concept of the “Mystical Body of Christ.” While the minority lost out, they show that behind the facade of the council a different, more biblical and more theological account of the Church was beginning to emerge.²⁹ The emphasis on the perfect society version of the Church was dominant from the Council of Trent to Vatican I, precisely the centuries when the Church was at its most embattled, though the idea of the Church as a “society” can be traced back to St. Augustine’s *City of God*. Yet even some of its advocates recognized its limitations, making distinctions between those who belonged to the body of the Church (visible criteria) and those who belonged to its soul (much less clear).

Between Vatican I and Vatican II the preferred image of the Church came to be that of the Mystical Body of Christ, which has profound implications for the question of who is or is not a member of the Church. Though it was really only at the later council that the idea of the Church as a perfect society was definitively sidelined, studies of the Mystical Body appeared much earlier.³⁰ In turning to this image there is a definite preference for a theological rather than a sociological treatment of the Church. The Church as the Body of Christ is a favorite theme of St. Paul, who tells the Corinthians that they “are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”³¹ Paul does not use the word “mystical,” and in any case it seems to add little to the Pauline idea that all believers are members of the body, and Christ is the head, so that we are somehow joined together with him in an organic unity. Paul also uses the term to indicate that the members of the Church, like the members of a body, may have different responsibilities but all work together for the good of the whole, under the leadership of their head, who is Christ. Pope Pius XII in 1943 wrote a major encyclical letter explaining and extolling the beauties of the Mystical Body, so setting a kind of seal of approval upon the work of theologians over the previous century and confirming this image as the preferred *theological* model for the Church.³² However, this did not

²⁹ A similar point could be made about the legitimate differences of opinion at Vatican I over the wisdom of defining papal infallibility, differences that of course did not and could not show up in the final documents.

³⁰ Probably the most influential was *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, by the Belgian Jesuit Emile Mersch, published originally in 1944 (New York: Herder, 1958).

³¹ 1 Cor 12:27. See esp. 1 Cor 12:12-31 and Eph 1:22-23.

³² *Mystici Corporis Christi*, available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi_en.html.

mean the immediate demise of the more *sociological* model of perfect society.

To call the Church the Mystical Body of Christ does not immediately open the door to an idea of invisible members, and it was not employed in that way by St. Paul. His objective was simply to clarify the relationships between Christ and the Church on the one hand, and among the members of the Church on the other. Curiously enough, given subsequent history, the body image employed by Paul undercuts any preference for a more extrinsic unity like "society," perfect or otherwise. We *join* or *are incorporated into* a society, but we *are* a body. The latter is part of our being, the former a conscious choice. Separating ourselves from a body to which we are physically joined is hazardous to our health; leaving a society may be more or less traumatic, but it is probably not terminal. The preference for the nonscriptural and somewhat arbitrary image of the Church as a perfect society was born in controversy, insisted on in face of the threat of the Protestant reformers. Yet, even more curiously, the idea of the Church as a society, if not a perfect one, is much more congenial to the Protestant understanding of Church as a human construction than it is to the Catholic conviction that it follows organically from the life and death of Jesus Christ.

The strength of the Mystical Body image and its papal seal of approval in 1943 is testimony to its value as a counterbalance to the excessive emphasis on visibility in a "perfect society," and it inevitably draws attention to the question of invisible membership in the Church. Historically, that question had been asked with reference to the just who had died before Christ. What were we to say of the eternal destiny of Adam and Eve, of Abel (if not Cain), of Isaiah and Jeremiah and so on? Were they in hell, in limbo, or somehow "mystically" incorporated in the Church of Christ, and so in heaven? And if the case could be made for the greats, what about all the other righteous people who preceded the birth of Christ? And if they could somehow be included, then what of all those who have lived subsequently, but through no fault of their own never heard the saving word of Christ, though they lived good lives according to their own understandings and the voice of their consciences? If any of these are saved, and for most of its history the Church has been able to say that some, at least, are in that condition (who wants to condemn Noah to eternal damnation?), then the question arises of their relationship to the Church even while they were alive. So long as you can entertain the idea of an eternal Church, such as we discussed in the previous section, living *before* the historical Church is not in itself exclu-

sionary, but the question has most relevance to the here and now. The Christian Church has always deferred to God's mercy and our ignorance when difficult questions about the eternal salvation of others arise (for example, is Adolf Hitler definitely in hell?—answer, we don't know). But it has felt much readier to address the condition of the living, whether to anathematize them as heretics in the past or in more recent times to consider their relationship to the Church more benignly.

A substantive and balanced response to the question of membership of the Church has to await a clearer articulation of its identity. Who-ness is relative to what-ness. This in itself explains the emphasis on visibility in the years of ecclesial paranoia brought on by the twin challenges of the Enlightenment and the Reformation, and clinging to that image when the advent of the movement for Italian unification and the discovery of the historical-critical method drove the late nineteenth-century Church to the narrow defensiveness of Vatican I and the follies of the crusade against the straw men of modernism. If the theology of the Mystical Body was an important component in bringing intellectual Catholicism out of these dark ages, the less fearful papacies of Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII made for a more confident and thus humbler Church than that of the previous century. In less than a century the Church went from thinking of itself as a perfect society to proclaiming its character as a pilgrim people; in the same century, it opened itself up to the world, rethought its relationship to the world, and so was forced to a consideration of how the world is related to the Church. All this came to a head at Vatican II under the leadership of that most confident and optimistic of popes, John XXIII.

Returning now to Vatican II's central document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, and expanding on the brief consideration earlier in the chapter, "who-ness" follows smoothly upon decisions made about "what-ness." The first of seven chapters in *Lumen Gentium* is focused on biblical images for the Church that support the central concern to link the Church to the kingdom of God. So the Church is described as "the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery" (3), distinguished by virtues of "charity, humility and self-denial," with a mission to proclaim the coming reign of God and an identity as "on earth, the seed and beginning of that kingdom" (5). A multiplicity of biblical images adds richness to the picture: the Church is a sheepfold, a flock, a cultivated field, God's building, "the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb" (6), and many more. The images give way to an extended discussion of the Mystical Body (7); in the context of the proclamation that redemption comes to all human

beings (“redeemed man and changed him into a new creation”), the council fathers say that “Christ mystically constitutes as his body those brothers of his who are called together from every nation” (7). Only after this is mention made of the Church as a “visible organization,” though not as a “perfect society,” and important qualifications are immediately added. “The visible society and the spiritual community . . . form one complex reality” with “a human and a divine element.” And while this Church “subsists in” the Roman Catholic Church, “many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines” (8).

These important considerations in chapter 1 of *Lumen Gentium* set the stage for the even more remarkable discussion of the council’s preferred central image for the Church, that of “People of God,” which occupies the whole of chapter 2. Such an enormous amount has been written about the image of People of God, even some of it arguing that it is really “communion” and not People of God that is the heart of the conciliar vision of Church.³³ This is not a fruitful discussion, nor is it a controversy into which we are going to delve very deeply, except insofar as it has consequences for our concern about membership of the Church. Instead, we need an overview of what the document says about the People of God, which will lead to a focus on two issues in particular, the renewal of attention to baptism and the consideration of the boundaries of the People of God. As promised, we are going to find here a much more inviting sense of Church than had been employed for at least the previous four centuries, if not much longer.

Chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium*, “The People of God,” develops in three steps. First, the bishops establish that the People are God’s people, chosen by God first in the covenant with Israel on Mount Sinai, then continued in the New Israel now called “the Church of Christ.” Second, they present the entire Church as a priestly and prophetic people, in light of baptism, a community in which all are called to live holy lives, to participate in worship, and to bear witness to Christ. Third, they offer a quite remark-

³³ Communion ecclesiology is best approached first through Dennis Doyle’s book of the same name, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). The controversy over the respective weight of “People of God” and “communion” both at the council and in the postconciliar Church is discussed most fully by José Comblin in *People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004). There is also an excellent article by Edward P. Hahnenberg comparing the Aristotelian and Platonic approaches to the parallel images—as he sees them—of Mystical Body and Communion. See “The Mystical Body of Christ and Communion Ecclesiology: Historical Parallels,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 3–30.

able meditation on the Church as sacrament and sign of the unity of the whole human race, all of them somehow God's people. In all three moments in this extended theological presentation, unity and connections are highlighted, not—as in the past—division and opposition. Moreover, in selecting this image of "people" the council fathers beautifully finessed the challenge of balancing visibility and invisibility. They move smoothly between the language of "church," where visibility is always paramount, and "people," which is much more porous and distinctly fuzzy around the edges.

From the beginning of the chapter God's will "to make men holy and save them" is understood to entail the creation of a community or a new people, but in the context of a prior recognition that "at all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him" (LG 9; cf. Acts 10:35). Covenant, Church, and People of God all speak of God preferring community over individuality. God's design for "a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness" produces a historical narrative beginning with Israel and leading to "that new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ." The destiny of this people is the kingdom of God, "begun by God himself on earth" and to be brought to perfection at the end of time. Though not including all people and sometimes seeming "a small flock," it is "a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race." It is "the instrument for the salvation of all . . . the light of the world and the salt of the earth" (9). This People of God, then, this "Church" is born in the context of God's universal love, growing and changing through history, and commissioned to be a sign and instrument of the coming of the reign of God. Because it is part of God's design for salvation, its meaning is always to be found in relation to the divine will for the salvation of all people. The Church does not exist for the sake of its members, so much as for those who are not its members.

Because the meaning of the Church is directly related to its task as a sign and instrument of salvation, it is a priestly people. Christ the high priest, says *Lumen Gentium*, made the Church "a kingdom of priests to God, his Father." This common priesthood or priesthood of all the baptized is the fundamental characteristic of the Church, signaling its role as a community that stands somehow in a mediating role between God and the entire human race. The whole faithful people must offer themselves as "a spiritual sacrifice" to God, that is, as a gift to God to do with whatever God wills. They are charged to go throughout the world to "bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who asks a

reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs." While the priesthood of all the baptized differs "essentially and not only in degree" from the ministerial priesthood, yet in virtue of their priesthood all the faithful share in offering the Eucharist and exercise their priesthood "by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation and active charity" (10).

In the context of discussing the priestly character of the People of God, the sacrament of baptism is rediscovered for the Church. For so long it had come to be merely a sacrament of initiation. Perhaps the confusion arose from the preponderant Catholic practice of infant baptism, and it has not been helped by the meaninglessness of the sacrament of confirmation—the "other half" of baptism—in the current understanding of many Catholics. For too many, if baptism is entry into the community of faith, confirmation is their early exit in the midst of adolescence. *Lumen Gentium* dramatically corrects this picture, though it has to be said that the correction has largely not filtered down to the Catholic population. The council recognizes, of course, that baptism is a sacrament of incorporation, a new creation. But because of this the baptized "must profess before men the faith they have received from God through the Church." They are "true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed" (11). The Holy Spirit also "distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank," by which the Spirit "makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church" (12). The whole faith community is called to active apostolic work because the community into which they are incorporated is not something turned in upon itself but a priestly community oriented to God's design for the salvation of all people. We will return to this "call to mission" in the last section of this chapter when we will consider the question, "What is the Church for?"

Having established that all the baptized are called to apostolic activity in the world, the council turns back to the point at which it began chapter 2 and considers in some detail the relationship between the baptized and the rest of the human race. Everyone, they declare, is "called to belong to the new People of God," which is "present in all the nations of the earth." The "catholic unity" of the Church "prefigures and promotes universal peace," they say, once more seeing the Church as both a sign of a greater divine reality and an instrument of achieving the end of the divine design, namely, the incorporation of the whole human race into the People of God. In the present moment, however, we are not on the brink of unity, and in recognizing this fact the bishops make a remark-

able statement about the essential universality of the People of God. If the Church as the People of God is indeed the sign and sacrament of unity, then “in different ways to it belong, or are related: the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God’s grace to salvation” (LG 13). Catholics are “fully incorporated” and understand the necessity of the Church for salvation. If, having faith, they rejected it, then “they could not be saved” (14). The harshness of this condemnation is reserved for those few, presumably, who formally reject what they know to be true. In earlier times this would have been called “selling your soul to the devil,” abandoning belief for some immediate and selfish gain. The rest of the human race is treated much more gently, including other Christians to whom Catholics are joined through baptism and in a large measure of common faith, and to “those who have not yet received the Gospel” but who are “related to the People of God in various ways” (15, 16). Jews and Muslims are mentioned first, then those religious peoples from beyond the Abrahamic traditions, who “seek God with a sincere heart” and are moved by grace to do God’s will “through the dictates of their conscience.” Finally, divine providence gives grace necessary for salvation to unbelievers who “strive to lead a good life.” All this is “preparation for the Gospel” (16), and the work and prayer of the Church is so that “into the People of God . . . may pass the fullness of the whole world” (17).

While this conciliar picture of the relationship between the Church and the whole human race may not satisfy the more radical proponents of a theology of religions, it has much to recommend it and was in itself a huge step beyond what had gone before. There is no more negative language about those outside the Church. Vatican II pronounces no anathemas, though the nearest it comes is its severe judgment on the faithful who formally reject what they know to be true. Of course, like the conditions for eternal punishment, there is no judgment that anyone has actually met them, and the responsibility for this judgment is left to God. And while the council insists that the Church itself is necessary for salvation, they evidently do not believe that conscious or visible membership in the Church is necessary. It is enough to be “related,” and relationship occurs not in any intentional act of belonging or association but only in responding to the grace of God as it is received mysteriously in the lives of nontheists, unbelievers, and atheists.

The key to this picture of the Church as the People of God is the fundamental Christian conviction that Jesus Christ is the one Savior sent by God, and the Church is an essential element in God’s design, since

Jesus somehow bequeathed his Church to humanity as the continuation of his saving presence in the world. God's eternal design is for the world to be saved, to live through and through in the knowledge and love of God, and Jesus Christ is God's chosen instrument. The Church is the sign and effective continuing presence or "sacrament" of salvation. Making this clear at the very beginning of *Lumen Gentium* the council declares that "Christ is the light of humanity," and the Church as "a sign and instrument" reflects that light into the world. For this if for no other reason the visibility of the Church will never disappear entirely from ecclesiology. But its visibility is in the manner of a mirror reflecting the love of God. A mirror is always there, but if it is doing its job properly, what we see is what it reflects, not the mirror itself. If it is not reflecting something other than itself, it is not a mirror.

The remarkable insistence of *Lumen Gentium* upon seeing all human beings as somehow related to the People of God follows from the Christian conviction that Christ is the unique Savior and that it is God's will that all people be saved. This "inclusive" understanding of Christianity, to use the term we identified earlier, is an insight that the council owed to Karl Rahner more than to any other single theologian. It was Rahner who worked out in most explicit fashion a kind of syllogistic argument for the universal efficacy of redemption through Christ. "God wills the salvation of all people through the redemption wrought by his Son, Jesus Christ, but most human beings, through no fault of their own, do not know or have not heard the message of Christ," so goes the first premise. "But God's salvific will cannot be frustrated," comes next. Then the punch line: "So they must receive the saving grace of God through their own religious traditions sincerely held, or through their own convictions in conscience about the nature of the universe and how to live a good life."³⁴

The council's conviction that all salvation is through Christ also requires a focus on redemption as some kind of metaphysical act, some cosmic reordering of the universe to heal the alienation of the human race from God, and while theologians will never deny this, there are certainly some competing interpretations. The Church has fought vigorously to defend the traditional interpretation of the atonement against those, for example, who see redemption more as Christ showing the way to God and the reign of God. Here, the proponents of a lower Christol-

³⁴ Rahner, "Observations on the Problem of the Anonymous Christian," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976), 289-94.

ogy (one that emphasizes the humanity of Jesus as the starting point for belief) stress Christ's life and death as God's way of indicating our path to a fuller union with God. You can probably have both interpretations and do not need to choose between them, but the reason to consider this here is that the decision to see Jesus more as showing the way to God than as effecting a change in the order of nature is that it radically alters the estimation of other religious traditions. If Christ's death and resurrection restores humanity to relationship with God, then the salvation of anyone and everyone is accomplished through him. But if he shows the way to God, while Christians might want to insist that he does this in by far the best way possible, it is not impossible to see other religions and the founders of other religious traditions as somehow leading their followers toward the truth, even if neither they nor their coreligionists could or would express "truth" in Christian terms. Indeed, Rahner himself may have hinted at the less orthodox interpretation, though for the most part he explicitly endorsed the inclusivist version. In his famous essay on Vatican II as "the coming of the world Church," he refers to the generous words of *Lumen Gentium* on the salvation of unbelievers who follow the voice of their consciences and says that they imply "the possibility of a properly salvific revelation-faith even beyond the Christian revelatory word."³⁵ Perhaps Rahner let his famous guard down a little here, since he definitely seems to be suggesting that not all of God's grace has to be seen as mediated through Christ. Later theologians have paid a high price for similar observations.

It is critical in the end to see that the development of Church teaching on membership in the Church has reached the point in *Lumen Gentium* of recognizing a role for the visible Church that orients it toward the less visible and larger reality of the People of God to which all people of good will are somehow related. If we want to go with Robert Bellarmine's vision of the Church as a perfect society, we are not wrong because we see the Church as a visible reality that is somehow complete in itself. Of course it is a visible reality, and to say the Church is a perfect society is never to imply that it is not a Church of sinners. But when we place the reality of the Church more firmly in a historical account of how God's eternal will to the salvation of all has actually developed, and when we rediscover the importance of baptism as entry into priestly people, we see that the Church is so much more than just a perfect society or just

³⁵ *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 82.

the visible members. Of its nature as a missionary community, it reaches beyond itself to embrace all that God loves, the whole of creation. To the degree that the Church is explicable as a visible reality, it is so only because it is oriented to the invisible, where the grace of God is also efficacious. If you have a lamp, you do not hide it. You put it on a lampstand, not so that others can admire it but so that it can give light to the whole household.

Catholicity, or "Where is the Church?"

If our discussions in the previous section have some merit, then the answer to the present question, "Where is the Church?" ought to be brief. If everyone is somehow or other related to the Church, then the Church—in a certain sense—is everywhere. In all times and all places, the Church exists to draw everyone to Christ. However, the claim to universality or catholicity is one that was made from early in the history of Christianity, long before any credible assertion that in fact it had spread throughout the known world, and we might want to pause therefore and ask ourselves if "universality" primarily refers to geographic extension, or if it has some other meaning. An example comes to mind in a story from an Italian newspaper a few years ago. Under the catchy headline, "The Alien Is My Brother," a short article gave the authoritative opinion of a Vatican spokesperson that, in the event that extraterrestrial life-forms were ever discovered, these beings would be evangelized and, presumably, implied that Christ died for them too. But by no stretch of any imagination can we make the claim that the Church already has a parish or two on Mars. Universality seems not to mean what it first appears to mean.

The question of catholicity as geographical extension, or for that matter of temporal extension—which would bring us right back to our discussion of "when" the Church is—can be clarified by returning again to the tension between visibility and invisibility. The visible Church, whether the classical perfect society or the more contemporary Church as sacrament, communion, herald, servant, and so on, undoubtedly wants to be everywhere throughout the world, since presence is needed in order to be what these images or models exemplify. I cannot serve from a distance in any effective way, and I cannot proclaim the Gospel without "face time." But it is one thing to want and quite another to succeed. While Christ sent the Church to preach the Gospel to all nations, there has been no period of history when Christ's command has been

perfectly fulfilled and, indeed, the Church as sign and sacrament of the reign of God is directed more to the eschatological hope that God will one day establish the reign in its fullness than that ecclesial effort will conquer the world. Eschatological hope is not the same thing as utopian longing.

When we examine Vatican II's idea of the Church as the People of God in the light of our question about where-ness, the claim that everyone throughout the world is somehow incorporated in or related to the People of God suggests a more confident response. As we saw in the previous section, the council works with an understanding that the grace of God is universally available, and that through whatever cultural or religious forms it is encountered, it is the grace of God through the saving act of Christ that is received. While this is divine grace—though of course it is the grace of God, not the grace of the Church—a connection exists between the workings of divine grace in the heart of a Buddhist or a Taoist or an atheist and the Church of Christ that is the visible, tangible sacrament and sign of redemption. The Church celebrates the universal availability of God's grace, but it is not aware of most of the occasions on which the grace of God acts upon people. The communion of the members of the Church with God and one another merges into that larger and invisible communion in which the whole human family is united, whether or not it knows it, as the object and providential concern of the love of God.

While it is possible to see the catholicity of the Church as a kind of virtual geographic extension to the whole world (and in principle to our alien siblings around the galaxies), the Church's claim to universality is more about expressing inclusivity than it is a literal commitment to physical presence in the four corners of the earth. That it is concerned to preach the Gospel to all nations is important, but it would not guarantee catholicity. Most religious traditions have some missionary impulse and are open to honest inquirers and admit new members into their communities of faith, just as the Christian Church does. But to be present in the parliament of religions around the world, as one among many, is not catholicity. Indeed, the inclusivity of the Catholic Church can seem sometimes to look very like exclusivity. If divine grace is always through Christ, then the Church of Christ is really the only show in town. It is this kind of reflection that lies behind the consistent claim that the Catholic Church is not a religious denomination but somehow the whole family of God on earth, drawing all human beings to itself. Of course, if this is not to sound like supreme arrogance, it needs to be accompanied

by respect for other traditions as genuine conduits of divine grace, without which the Church could not be faithful to its character as the universal sacrament of salvation. For, if Vatican II is right and God's salvation is extended to those of any religion or none, then the Church as the sacrament of that salvation is intimately connected to all religions and embraces all human beings.

With this general statement about catholicity as virtual universality in the background, we can proceed to look at three expressions of the unity and extension of the community. The first is the cherished Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints, the belief that all believers, living and dead, are somehow united in one "cloud of witnesses." The second is very different, namely, the tension between seeing the Church as centered in Rome and spread from there throughout the earth and imagining it as essentially a worldwide family of churches somehow united to one another through an international symbol of unity in the Church of Rome. And the third, which will lead us naturally into the fifth and final section of this chapter of the book, is the issue of missionary activity in the traditional use of the term, that is, the efforts to expand the geographical extension of the Church, to "preach the gospel to all nations."

In most if not all Eastern rite liturgies and in the Anglican Eucharist there is a point before the distribution of communion when the celebrant raises high the consecrated bread and wine and pronounces, "God's holy gifts for God's holy people." This delightful prayer nicely encapsulates the two connected meanings of the *communio sanctorum*, the words from the Creed usually translated as "the communion of saints." While the phrase itself undoubtedly leads us to think first of a body of people, the Mystical Body of Christ, a moment's reflection on it makes evident that it can be read slightly differently as "all that the saints share with one another" or, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses it, "communion in spiritual goods" (949–53). Both ideas are easily traced back to the Acts of the Apostles, where we read that "the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul" and that "no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common" (4:32). The doctrine of the communion of saints that slowly developed from this beginning has tended to focus more on the first of the two meanings, leading in later centuries to controversies with Protestants who objected to the Catholic practice of praying to the saints in heaven for their intercessory aid, but it retains both meanings and is certainly distinctive of the Catholic tradition, having eventually found its way into the Apostles' Creed.

The Apostles' Creed is a short statement of basic Christian doctrines that in at least some form predates considerably the Nicene Creed (the creed formulated by the fourth-century Council of Nicea). The later and longer Nicene Creed is more familiar to most Catholics today because it is the one recited at Mass on Sundays, but both creeds follow pretty much the same pattern. Each summarizes the story of God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ, ending with his resurrection from the dead and the coming of the Holy Spirit. There then follows in both a short list of additional doctrines, which differ a little from one another. The biggest difference is that the Nicene Creed omits any reference to the communion of saints, while the Apostles' Creed places it immediately after "the holy Catholic Church." Most scholars understand "the communion of saints" to be a later interpolation into the Creed—which would certainly help to explain why it has no place in the Nicene Creed—and also see it rightly as an expansion or clarification of the preceding phrase, not some separate doctrine from that of belief in the Church itself. So, to say that "I believe in the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints," is to make one credal statement, not two, and opens up the way to some very interesting questions about who, exactly, these "saints" are.

The traditional teaching on the communion of saints is that it refers to all believers, those alive at the present time, those suffering for their sins in purgatory, and those enjoying the beatific vision in heaven. Only the souls in hell are excluded from the communion. The use of the word "saint" here, of course, does not refer to canonized saints or those who might be canonizable, but to saints as the Acts of the Apostles uses the term, to refer to all those who believe. These three distinct groups are bound to one another in various ways. The living pray *for* the dead in purgatory, who depend on the prayers of the living, and the living pray *to* the saints in heaven, and depend on their intercession. But the principle bond between them is that all share in the fruits of the redemption. They are the communion of saints because they share the spiritual goods of redemption, a communion in that other sense we mentioned above. The saints on earth celebrate the Eucharist as the foretaste of that final and eternal unity they will one day share with the saints in heaven.

The teaching of Vatican II that all people are somehow related to the People of God raises the question of what a "saint" actually is. Thus, we return to the distinction in thinking about the Church between the visible and invisible, or its body and its soul. *Lumen Gentium*, we can recall, evidently envisaged salvation stretching way beyond the visible confines of the Catholic Church to all Christians or even all those who believe in

God. Historically this question may have begun with concern for the plight of catechumens, those preparing to enter the Church, who die before they are baptized. The Church has traditionally taught that they are the beneficiaries of “baptism of desire” and that they share in eternal life. Similar teaching about “baptism of blood” developed to explain the fate of those who were martyred for Christ without having been baptized. Both these ideas allowed the Church to think of groups of people who were not actually members of the living saints who would yet, after their death and in some sense because of the manner of their deaths, enjoy posthumous membership in the communion of saints. It was not a big step from that to the more general belief that the righteous somehow participate in the soul of the Church even when they do not share the beliefs that would make them members of its body.³⁶

Once we admit the unbaptized into the ranks of the saved, then either the communion of saints has to be enormously expanded or we have to imagine heaven with compartments, one for “the saints” who have died in Christ and one for the rest. This latter possibility sounds pretty preposterous, even distasteful. And since it would be quite impossible to make the case that the unbaptized righteous achieve this condition only at the moment of death, sheer continuity and consistency requires us to see them somehow as members of the communion of saints here on earth. These concerns lead us back to seeing the Church as both visible and invisible, and in its turn that entails once again the reduction of the idea of the Church as a perfect society to the status of “partially true.” A perfect society image relies entirely on visible and demonstrable membership in a concrete historical community. The idea of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ has some capacity to expand to incorporate invisible members, but that of People of God or the general notion of a mystical communion accommodates them more easily still. There is, moreover, considerable beauty to the idea that the oneness of the human family under one God, hidden here in history, is made evident in the healing unity of all in the eternal reign of God.

Focusing now on the visible Church for a while, the second question about where-ness has to do with the relationship between the center and the periphery, or between the universal and the local Church. Is the Church’s catholicity primarily to be seen as the geographical extension of the Church of Rome, or is it more properly understood as grounded

³⁶ See Charles Journet, *Theology of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 168–86.

in the full ecclesial life of the local communities of faith? To use an analogy that is definitely oversimplistic but helps to make the extremes clearer, is the Church to be seen as a transnational organization with branch offices in various parts of the world, or is it to be looked at as a federation of local churches with its central administrative unit located in Rome? While neither of these possibilities alone is an accurate picture, the ramifications of leaning in one direction or the other are considerable for an understanding of authority, or religious pluralism, or forms of ministry and liturgy, or many other issues. Indeed, even attempting to hold in balance the priority of the universal and the priority of the local will have implications for all these questions.

When we think about the priority of the universal over the local Church, we understandably couch the discussion in terms of the centrality of the Church of Rome, but at the same time we have to recognize that the historical centrality of Rome is entirely accidental. Even if we are among those who make a close connection between the intentions of Jesus and the founding of the Christian Church, to say that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true Church of Christ is to make a statement about its historical continuity and its doctrinal integrity, not about the city on the Tiber. The Roman Catholic Church could, in other circumstances, just as easily have been the Antiochene Catholic Church or the Corinthian Catholic Church or the Carthaginian Catholic Church. The centrality of Rome to the Western Empire may have accorded a measure of geographical inevitability to the city's becoming the center of the Church, but theologically it is quite irrelevant. Additionally, historians have long known that while Peter and Paul were executed in the city of Rome during the persecutions of Emperor Nero, a vigorous Christian community in Rome with its own bishop was a development of the second-century Church. If there is any historical accuracy at all to the somewhat fanciful list of the early popes that the tradition maintains—Peter, Linus, Cletus, Clement, and so on—their location as leaders of the Church in Rome is not part of it.

While Rome's emergence as the center of the Western Church, however historically inevitable, is theologically irrelevant, the fact that local churches within the Western Empire came relatively quickly to recognize the authority of Rome over at least some matters is of much more consequence. The Church of Rome was accorded priority if not primacy, at least in the West, and was thus a natural adjudicator in disputes between local churches or within one local community. It was also increasingly vocal in addressing heresy. But in neither case should we imagine its

status as remotely like the present-day papacy, which all Catholic Christians understand as the supreme teaching authority and the focus of the unity of the world Church. While popes periodically made claims for their authority that seemed at the time outlandish, and may still appear that way, and while for most of its history the papacy was a player in what we would call secular politics, not really before the twentieth century was there a papacy that was understood to be one of purely spiritual authority, nor one whose reach or status was as high.

It is clear that over just a few centuries Rome came to hold a position of primacy within the Church of the Western Empire, but it is also true that there were churches in other places of equal antiquity to that in Rome, and they were not always willing to recognize that primacy. The Churches of the Eastern Empire never bowed entirely to Rome and eventually separated themselves totally, becoming the forerunners of today's Orthodox churches. A similar thing happened to the Church in England during the sixteenth century, and the split between Canterbury and Rome was over much the same issue, that of the nature of Roman primacy. These schismatic (i.e., separatist) churches initially went their own way over the issue of authority, though it had certain doctrinal complications. The churches of the true Protestant Reformation had much more substantial issues of belief and practice to add to the general distaste for the late medieval papacy.³⁷

The question of the balance between the local and universal Church is, however, primarily one of how those churches that are in full communion with Rome understand the nature of the relationship. Of course, to put it this way is already to swing the balance toward a priority for the local Church, since if "they" have their own understanding of this relationship they are already asserting a measure of independence. It is testimony to the current and fairly long-standing centralized authority of the Roman Church that the boundaries of the debate over local and universal rights and responsibilities are laid down by Rome itself. Consequently, while there has been a vigorous dialogue of late over how to understand the balance between the two, it is conducted under the explicit assumption of the primacy of Rome.³⁸ The question in the Catholic

³⁷ The best short survey of these differences is still that offered in just a few pages by Yves Congar in *Divided Christendom* (London: Centenary, 1939), 1–47.

³⁸ This issue has been most clearly debated in recent years in the exchanges between Cardinal Walter Kasper and the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Kasper began it in a book chapter, "Zur theologie und Praxis des bischöflichen Amtes," in *Auf neue Art Kirche Sein: Wirklichkeiten—Herausforderungen—Wandlungen* (Munich: Bernard bei Don Bosco, 1999), 32–48. Ratzinger responded in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*

tradition is never: is “Rome” an administrative convenience for the worldwide Church, or are the local churches emanations of Rome? The question is simply: in the balancing act of knowing what it is to be Church, in the background awareness of Catholicism, do we see the local Church in the context of the universal Church, or do we see the universal relative to the local?

The first answer to this question is a sacramental one. Rome is no more “the church” than is your local parish. Perhaps it is time to recall once more our working description of Church from earlier in this chapter: that community of faith distinguished by the experience that the loving care of God for us is supremely available in our intimacy with the story of Jesus Christ. Or, more scripturally, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20). Beside this truth, Rome and all the cathedrals in the world pale into insignificance. The whole Church is present in the local assembly, and all that it takes to be Church is in the gathered assembly. There is faith and sacramental life, baptismal and ordained priesthood, prophetic witness and apostolic mission to the world beyond the community of faith. Ecclesiologically speaking there is nothing more to be had.

The second response is a more sociological observation. While most Catholics look to Rome for at least some kinds of leadership, most if not all Catholics are primarily nourished in their faith life by the local community, not by the diocese or the national or world Church. Most if not all recognize the value of the international family of Catholics, but most do not connect much beyond their own parish, not even at the diocesan level. While Vatican II was at some pains to establish that the fullness of ordained priesthood resides in the bishop, to most Catholics the bishop is simply a distant figure who shows up on an annual basis to do confirmations and is in charge of raising money for the good works of the diocese. It is the local pastor who—sometimes to a fault—is the one around whom Catholic life is centered. All the wonderful flowering of lay ministry notwithstanding, the priest remains central to the life of the faith community, more important to it than the director of religious education, or the bishop, or even the pope. While this would be hard to

Zeitung (December 22, 2000), 46. Kasper argued further in “On the Church: A Friendly Response to Cardinal Ratzinger,” *America* 184 (April 21–30, 2001) and was answered yet again by Cardinal Ratzinger in *America* 185 (November 19, 2001). The easiest approach to this complicated set of exchanges is provided by an excellent overview from Kilian McDonnell, “The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 227–50.

defend theologically, as a sociological observation it is indisputable. And for this reason, if for no other, the growing shortage of ordained clergy and the consequent relative difficulty of access to regular Eucharist is an enormous and pressing problem.

If the local Church is more important sacramentally and sociologically than is the universal Church, we might be inclined to think that this is the end of the matter. This would be a mistake, since thinking politically about the question allows us to see the other side of the question. The political issue is not that of the role of the Church as an actor on the world stage, though that would be a matter for the universal rather than the local Church, but rather that of the good of the whole People of God. If all that we need to be Church is present in this community or that community, this does not mean that the world Church is simply the aggregate of all the local communities. "Rome" stands for that fullness of ecclesial life that is present in each local Church but that would not be so appreciable without a visible symbol. Rome is the visible symbol of all that these local churches hold in common, the sacrament—we might say—of the *real* presence of God's salvific will made concrete in the local community. Without the ecclesial life of the local community Rome would be irrelevant, since its energy is that of the faith that is only concrete in local communities, including those local communities in Rome itself. Without Rome, the local communities would be shorn of their sense of unity of purpose and devoid of presence to the world beyond the local context.

The missionary activity of the Church is the third component of "where-ness" to which we need to attend. The Church, local and universal, depends upon its outreach or "mission" to keep it focused on and energized for the proclamation of the Gospel. For a number of recent centuries the term "missionary" has been inextricably connected to the imperialist and colonialist project of European Catholicism. In these earlier centuries the geographical understanding of mission made sense, since there were a number of Catholic countries, mostly in Europe, and there were many parts of the world in which Christianity was more or less unknown and the Gospel had not yet been preached. Successful mission meant that the parts of the world where Catholicism was present, its "where-ness," was expanding. Today the Gospel has been preached in pretty much every corner of the world, though not always successfully; but the more significant happening is that the life of faith is diminishing even in the historical centers of Catholicism. Thus mission becomes not only or primarily the geographical extension of the Church to which

it was once directed but, rather, the defense, elaboration, or intensification of the life of faith wherever it happens to be. And given that the Catholic Church today is more vibrant in previous mission lands like Latin America, Africa, and Asia, there is even considerable talk about “reverse mission.”

Demographic, political, and geopolitical shifts mean that it is no longer helpful to think of missionary activity primarily in geographical terms, and these shifts suggest another way of thinking about catholicity. The cutting edge for evangelism today is not in pushing back the boundaries of heathenism in far-off corners of the world (and that has always meant “far off” from Europe) but in bearing witness to the life of faith in all societies and putting more energy into these efforts where resistance is strongest. The meaning of catholicity takes a turn, then, away from geographical extension toward cultural intensity. Politics, international relations, ethics, social life, the arts, and popular culture become the new frontier for Catholic missionary activity. Catholicity becomes engaged presence in any and every facet of contemporary culture and postmodern society. The challenges to the Catholic community of faith do not come primarily from “other” religions but from religious indifference born of a potent mixture of secular insouciance, rampant materialism, and existential anxieties. The evangelical gauntlet is thrown down not by the Qur’an or the *Analects* of Confucius but by the pervasive ability of large numbers of the citizens of the world apparently to get along fine without any religious sensibility at all.

In this new world of mission, the Church becomes much more lay centered than it was. In the days when the Church thought of itself as existing primarily for the continuing salvation of its own members, the clergy were its focus. When we know as we do now that it exists more for the sake of others than for its own sake, the shift to a lay-centered community is inevitable. The laity, both because of their sheer numbers and their lives in the world, are those primarily charged with mission to the world. This brings us smoothly to the last part of this chapter, the matter of apostolicity.

Apostolicity, or “What is the Church for?”

To say that the Church is apostolic in the first instance connects the community of today with the apostolic Church of the first century. It points to the unbroken continuity of orthodox belief and practice over two thousand years, stretching back to those first followers of Jesus

whom the Church—and perhaps Jesus himself—called “apostles.” An apostle is literally a messenger, but the word is richer than just someone who is given a message to pass along to someone else. An apostle is a messenger who is somehow marked by the message she or he carries, a true representative of the message. So, the first followers of Jesus and especially the Twelve after Pentecost are messengers in this richer sense, *sent* (the root meaning of “mission”) to proclaim the good news that it would be beyond them to represent unless they were filled with faith in its wonder and efficacy. At the same time and equally importantly, they are channels of the good news that comes not from them but from the one who sent them. The true apostle is then both filled with the Gospel and yet transparent.

The basic meaning of the word “apostle” leads the Church in the first instance to think of the twelve men whom Jesus selected to be his particular messengers, with the addition of the apostle Paul, a man who claimed the title of apostle for himself but whose extraordinary importance to the early Church made it a suitable designation. The requirement for being an apostle seems to have been contact with the resurrected Jesus. Whether or not Jesus actually picked out twelve men and specifically called them apostles during his earthly life, their apostolic status is fundamentally dependent on their experience of the risen Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Without the seal of the Holy Spirit, so the New Testament would suggest, they might never have emerged from hiding and begun their apostolic activity. During Jesus’ earthly life, of course, some one or other of the Twelve was sent off to do various errands on his behalf, but only after the resurrection can they make the transition to the proclamation of the good news that Jesus is risen. Selection as one of Jesus’ closer followers does not make someone an apostle; if it did, then Judas would have been an apostle in more than name alone. And there are two apostles—Matthias who was chosen by the eleven to replace Judas, and Paul who saw himself designated “the least of apostles” in his vision of Jesus Christ—who were definitely not selected by the earthly Jesus of Nazareth during his public ministry.

The criteria for being an apostle meant that they could not be replaced, though what they represented could continue. As they aged and died or were executed, their number dwindled. Before very long there were no more apostles in this primary sense, and the meaning of “apostolic” came to be a matter of standing in the unbroken tradition of the Church founded on the faith of the apostles. Apostolicity is then primarily a historically verifiable assertion of continuity in faith. It does not

mean that everyone has always at all times been utterly faithful to the apostolic tradition but, rather, that the community as a whole over the long haul has remained discernibly in continuity with the apostolic faith. The early heresies that the Church of the first few centuries had to wrestle with were primarily threats to apostolicity; to have succumbed to Arianism, for example, would have been to abandon apostolicity. Consequently, the claim to apostolicity has been used more often than the other marks of the Church in a polemical context. It, more than the other marks, is closely related to the claim to faithfulness.

Although the Church never replaced the apostles, someone had to take up the functions of leadership and preaching that had been their original gift and responsibility, their “office” in the Church. This is a complicated and often confusing story, but when the dust cleared the second-century Church had settled on the office of bishop as a successor to the apostles, though not an apostle himself. The bishop had oversight (Greek *episkopos* or “bishop” literally means “overseer”) of the local community of faith. The language to describe the office developed slowly, and sometimes in some places this role was the responsibility of a presbyter. The bishop was typically aided by deacons. Over the first two centuries of Church life the familiar ministerial structure of Roman Catholicism today emerged, with a bishop presiding over a local Church, aided by deacons, and with presbyters perhaps acting in the bishop’s stead at outlying communities. Bishop/priest/deacon was not part of the structure of the original Church of the apostles, but it quite quickly came to be the norm, even when the terminology had not necessarily become clarified. Over time, the bishops came to be seen as those in whom the apostolic tradition was handed on, through the laying on of hands that occurs at the consecration of a bishop when his brother bishops from other dioceses confer on him the power of episcopal orders. Hence, we have the term “apostolic succession,” which is one important dimension of what apostolicity implies, but is by no means the whole story.

While the note of “apostolicity” in the Catholic Church connects the community of faith throughout history to the original disciples of Jesus and the first Pentecost, the term refers to much more than the simple historical connection, important as that may be. More important, in fact, than the physical connection, though impossible without it, is the continuity in the apostolic faith. Because the Church is born in the events of the first Pentecost, when the apostles received the Holy Spirit and went out to preach Christ crucified, continuity in faith is tied above all to the

idea of Spirit-inspired mission to the world, proclaiming the good news that Jesus is risen, sin and death are overcome, and the way to the fullness of the reign of God is open. "The faith," meaning the whole panoply of teachings that have developed over the centuries to elucidate the Christian mystery, is instrumental to the heart of the good news that was preached at Pentecost before there were any councils, definitions, dogmas, or anathemas.

If apostolicity is the characteristic or "mark" of the Church directed toward ensuring continuity in faith, the question of the content of that faith remains. If faith as a set of beliefs or, better, as an ongoing commitment to the message of Jesus Christ is what is being protected, what is the message *for*? The short and correct response is that it is *for* the salvation of the world. Christians are identifiable by their fidelity to Jesus Christ as God's presence in the world, drawing the world into the possibility of a real relationship to God that it did not have before the death and resurrection of Christ. In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ we learn for the first time what God is like when God is human in history and, because God in Christ is human, we also learn for the first time that the gulf between God and human beings is not entirely impassible. While God remains absolute mystery, in Christ God reveals the way toward divinization, to becoming Christ-like and hence God-like. Christians are those who, in baptism, become possessors of the revelation of God in history. The revelation itself is for the sake of the whole world that God wills to save, but as a historically particular revelation in and through the life of one human being, it is offered in the first instance to a particular group of people, the first disciples of Jesus, and then to all those who follow in their footsteps. But while it is given *to* some and not to all, it is given *for* all and not just for some. And so we encounter the intrinsic connection between the possession of faith in Jesus Christ and the requirement to share the revelation that he is.

The content of Christian faith is the revelation of Jesus Christ as the presence of God in history, drawing all human beings to himself, and the responsibility of the Christian believer is to share that good news. Here, however, we need to take a leaf from the book of the great creative writers who follow the maxim, "Show, don't tell," while adapting it with a nod to elementary school children, "Show *and* tell." Sharing the good news is both about showing its transforming power and telling the story of the one in whom this power became effective in the world. Neither of these two components can be omitted, but historically it has to be said that the emphasis has far too often been on telling the story and not on

showing its effects. The partial missionary message of the benefits the newly baptized will receive if they accept Christ is the second step in preaching the Gospel. The first is to show the Christian community living in the transforming light of the love of God in Jesus Christ. That and only that makes genuine conversion possible. Only that makes baptism something more than simply initiation into the group; baptism is a sacrament of initiation, of course, but the community of faith that the new member enters is a community with a mission, a "missioned community." That mission is to spread the good news of salvation and, once again, the most effective way to spread the good news is to show its effects upon the community of the Church.

The good news of salvation is a message about the quality and character of human life. It is fundamentally a message of reconciliation with God through overcoming the weight of sin. Too often it has been presented in history as the blood sacrifice of a somewhat sadistic God, in which the death of Jesus ransoms human beings from their sins. There was a time when this particular story was a persuasive metaphor for the Christian community, but today we do not respond to a God who would kill his own son, and the only ransoms that anyone pays are to thugs and terrorists. Fear of God and fear of death have their place in the Christian scheme of things and could have a salutary effect on our world if taken seriously, but they cannot be central to the revelation of how a loving creator God chooses to offer the human race hope and reconciliation. As Christians step out to share God's saving message, they need more persuasively Christian demonstrations of the love of God, that is, of God's love for the world.

God's becoming present in history in Jesus Christ can be explained only in the context of God's creative will. In the first chapters of the book of Genesis we learn of God's creation of a world and of the divine intention to make human beings in the image and likeness of God. What distinguishes human beings from the rest of God's wonderful creation is their being in the image and likeness of God. Evidently, this has nothing to do with their physical constitution, pretty much all of which is identical to the genetic makeup of life-forms in general. Their difference is in their capacity to reason, certainly, but above all in their ability to receive and return the love of God in a truly free act. All of creation aside from human beings gives glory to God through being what it is; its task is easier and it is consequently much more successful. The natural world does not fail in giving glory to God unless human beings pervert it. But human beings choose to give glory to God, not necessarily in knowing

and loving God, but in being what God intended them to be. We are in the image and likeness of God when we live loving and generous lives as rational creatures. Then we are most God-like, and we are most fully human. When we fail to love, fail to be generous and fail to use our God-given reason we at one and the same time fail to be God-like and fail to be as fully human as we might be. Sin, surprisingly, is what makes us less human and, because that means less in the image and likeness of the creator God, it separates us from God. Since sin is behavior that is deficient in love, it also puts distance between us and other human beings. Sin is always an offense against humanity as much as it is an offense against God. Indeed, it is an offense against God because it is an offense against our fellow human beings and the world that is our home.

The mission of the Christian community rests in large part in showing and telling the connection between our creation by a loving God, the saving sacrifice of Christ, and the necessity of living lives devoted to fuller and richer humanity. The first step is the showing, both revealing the Church as a community held together in love and fired by the determination to share God's love with the wider world. The moment for telling will return, but the weight of history has overcome much of the world's capacity to hear the story of the Church. The much-heard cry that "I'm spiritual but not religious" is provoked not by secular indifference but by the poor performance of the Church of God in recent centuries. For all the wonder and love that moves it and inspires its members, the Church is seen as riven within by foolish differences, out of touch with the modern world, and lately, corrupted by the sexual abuse of children and the efforts to cover it up. None of these charges is the whole story. The tale of the great social good that Christians of all communities currently work in the world more than balances the folly of those same churches, but the good news is drowned out. What we show the world is not consistent with the story we have to tell.

The mission of the Church to share and spread the love of God for the world requires at the present day that, locally and universally, the Church be in the forefront of the struggles against everything that threatens human flourishing in the world that is our home. The first priority is the defense of human dignity at every level, because everything that threatens human dignity impedes our capacity to live as "made in the image and likeness of God." Love, wonder, creativity, reflection, and joy, these are the things that the human race must choose for all its members if it is to be what God intends in creation. Choosing this way may sound a little bit like a Hallmark card, but the truth is that it requires some hard

social and political choices. Acting in defense of the human in our world today is profoundly countercultural. The weak and meek and poor of our world do very little to damage it unless forced to do so by the necessity to survive, but the powerful and strong consistently act in the best interests of their own kind, sometimes simply in their own individual best interests, and we have seen what that does to the world. Greed, terrorism, and fear are the soup out of which we are in danger of fashioning a world in which we will be the enemies of human promise and fulfillment. No wonder if our physical world turns against us at that point.

All the baptized are called to be apostles, baptized into an apostolic community, whose mission to be the hope of human longing has to begin in the local community. All the words of all the popes and bishops are worth nothing if they do not come from a community that is showing what they are telling. Hence, apostolic work starts in the community of faith and in solidarity with all other people of goodwill. Every community of faith in its own locale must be a lamp set on the lampstand, must be the leaven in the mass. Of course it will be centered on its eucharistic worship, bringing the cares of the world before God and drawing sustenance from the sacrament. But God will not value worship if it is not the praise and thanksgiving of a missioned community, up to its neck in the daily struggle for a more human world. The prophet Amos warned as much when God said through him that “feasts and solemn assemblies” are despicable unless they come from a community that seeks to do justice. As Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt 7:21, NRSV).

Taking the apostolicity of the Church seriously and asking the question that goes with it, “What is the Church *for*?” requires us to look somewhat differently at the Church than we are accustomed to do. For so many centuries during which Christians thought of the Church as the place of refuge from the world, the gathering of the elect who possessed faith and were moving steadily toward eternal life with God in heaven, the focus was on its internal life and structure. “The Church,” indeed, was a term primarily taken to refer to the higher and lower clergy, the rituals and practices and the buildings themselves. The people attended the services conducted by the clergy, received (mostly moral) instruction from them, and were expected to live their lives in the world “giving good example,” which primarily meant testifying to the Catholic way of being Christian as it showed itself in pious practices and not eating

meat on Fridays. The good works of the institution were primarily directed toward taking care of our own or perhaps somehow reaching out to those who might be moved to enter the Church and so be saved. The Church was a rock and a mighty fortress, proudly isolated in the raging seas of life.

Because the creator God who is love creates as an expression of the excess to which love is given, the Church that bears the name of Christ exists not for its own sake but for the sake of the world to which it is sent. Such a sacramental understanding of the Church is easy to grasp in principle, hard to live out in practice. We rightly say that Christ is the sacrament of God in the world, and that we the Church are the sacrament of Christ. Christ shows the face of God when God is human, and we are called to show the face of Christ when Christ is made flesh again within the community of faith. In the Church, the Eucharist is the sacrament of the continuing incarnation of God, the real presence of Christ. But the Eucharist signifies very little if Christ is not also incarnate in the believing community as the Holy Spirit enlivens them to spread the message of God's love for the world. The Church when it is true to its nature is trinitarian, powered by the Spirit, being Christ in conformity to the Creator's purposes. Like the Trinity, the superabundance of love that is its heart bursts the bounds of its own being and spills over into love of that which it is not. God loves the other of God, namely, the creation that God fashions and preserves. The Church must love not only God but also the human world that is the primary object of God's outpouring of love. The Church is not the center. We need the Church only because the world needs to be saved. If the world had not failed to return the love of its creator, there would be no Savior and no Church.

Focusing on the other-directed or apostolic mission of the Church puts the importance of its structure and its ecclesial ministers, both ordained and lay, in a new light. It is not that they become unimportant or even less important but that their true importance comes into clearer focus. Relative to the internal life of the community the ordained have primary responsibility for preaching and celebrating the Eucharist, and lay ministers foster the internal health of the community. Relative to the other-directed mission of the Church, they are all—in the best possible sense of the phrase—support staff. Their work is vital, but it is not the heart of the Church's mission. Apostolicity, in other words, is a mark of the Church primarily carried by laypeople, since it is the laity who shoulder by far the greater part of the task of being the loving presence of God in the world. If the Church is to work for a fuller humanity and to take

sides with all those who fight the forces of the antihuman, it is to the laity that this responsibility primarily pertains. They require the sustenance of the sacramental life celebrated within the community of faith, but the meal is “bread for the journey.”

So, through this lengthy discussion of the marks of the Church, we come to today’s Church, the Church of Vatican II and beyond, a community increasingly led by the laity, with ordained clergy in much shorter supply than in recent centuries, with a new growth of lay ecclesial ministers whose *raison d’être* is not simply to be a stopgap for the shortage of traditional vocations. We come to the Church that is far more open to other Christians, to other religions, and to the world around it than before. We see a Church that at its worst is victim to pride, greed, and the rest of the seven deadly sins. But at its best we see a Church that has so much to offer to the world to which it is sent, a message of the signal importance of finding our way to a more truly human community in which the fostering of human dignity can only lead us all to better preparation for the coming of the reign of God. In our next chapter we will turn to consider ten challenges or opportunities facing the Church today as it seeks to be faithful to its calling to be the lamp on the lampstand.