The Changing Face of Ecclesiology[1]

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To say that Catholics are living in an age of transition would be the understatement of the century. That the transition has resulted in a state of general confusion is probably nearer the truth. It evokes a variety of reactions ranging from suppressed excitement to stoical resignation or pained shock. It all depends on who you are and how you look at it. A little old lady from Memphis prays: 'O God, take me soon, so I can die a Catholic!' Ladislaus Orsy feels differently: 'To be a Christian is to build *some* order and to live with confusion. We must seek our security elsewhere and in other ways than we did in the past. Our God may be the God of order; He is also and by equal right the God of confusion'.[2]

For us—priests, seminarians, sisters—committed observers of today's scene, it cannot but be of interest and personal concern to reflect on what is even more important and vital: the ferment in the way in which people systematically view and think about the Church—the ferment in ecclesiology. So I venture to present an over-all picture of the Changing Face of Ecclesiology today, in the hope that information may stimulate enquiry, and reflection, perhaps, nourish prayer. We shall restrict ourselves to the twentieth century, which is both near enough to be obviously relevant, and varied enough to be sufficiently representative.

Richard McBrien, in his book, *Church: The Continuing Quest,* suggests that our view of the Church depends upon the way we do theology—our theological methodology; and he finds three 'basic theological foci' underlying the multiplicity of ecclesiologies. The first two can be classified as 'positivistic' and the third, 'correlative'—using the term in the broadest meaning of Paul Tillich's 'method of correlation'. The first two methods, the *doctrinal* and the *kerygmatic,* agree in the assumption that theology bears essentially—if not exclusively—on what is contained in its primary source which, for the doctrinal method, is the teaching or doctrine of the Church, and for the kerygmatic or biblicist, the Word of God as found in Scripture. The *correlative* method, on the other hand, which is eschatological, is essentially

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[2] *The Lord of Confusion,* Dimension Books, Denville, N. J. 1970, p. 13.

related to the processes of history and the changing forms of culture as reflected in the concrete situation, from which the questions are asked and to which the sources re-interpretatively speak.[3]

Avery Dulles favours rather the symbolic approach. In his book, *Models of the Church,* he says:

> Symbols transform the horizon of man's life, integrate his perception of reality, alter his scale of values, reorient his loyalties, attachments and aspirations in a manner far exceeding the power of abstract conceptual thought.[4]

The term 'model' in theology signifies an image that 'is employed reflectively and critically to deepen one's theoretical understanding of a reality'.[5] Dulles maintains that we operate theologically—and also in practical life—out of certain models. Models however, he rightly cautions, are necessarily partial and inadequate, and will often have to be complemented—and sometimes corrected—by the use of other models, if one is to avoid the danger of one-sidedness and distortion.

It seems to me that we can find a sufficient general correspondence between McBrien's classification and three of Dulles' models to warrant the use of the latter for the purposes of our present survey. I submit, then, that the general trends in twentieth century ecclesiology can be typified by Dulles' models of the Church as *Institution,* as *Mystical Communion,* and finally as *Servant*; and that this corresponds roughly to the order of their appearance on the theological scene. A cautionary remark will be in place here. The following classification and descriptions should not be taken too sharply or exclusively, because types and periods merge into one another and the borders are frequently blurred . With this proviso we may say that the institutional model of the Church largely held the field up until the early twenties of this century; the sacramental communion model succeeded to it and was current during the next forty years; and it is from the sixties that we witness the emergence of the servant model.

The *institutional* model is a hangover from the so-called Counter Reformation. It is the much-maligned and sometimes caricatured ecclesiology of the manuals on which so many of us were brought up, and is too well known to need description here. With the insensitivity to history and evolutionary processes so characteristic of this thinking, the task of theology tended to be reduced to the tracing back of the current teachings of the magisterium to the sources of Revelation—with the inevitable danger of its being a reading into the sources. Bishop De Smedt of Bruges characterised this ecclesiology at Vatican II in scathing terms which have since become famous. He described it as clerical, juridicist and triumphalistic.

[3] *Church: The Continuing Quest*, Newman Press, Paramus N. J. 1970, p. 9.

[4] *Models of the Church*, Doubleday and Co., Garden City, N. Y., 1974, p. 18.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

While the institutional model continued to dominate Catholic ecclesiology, a breakthrough began in the twenties and thirties in the direction of the *sacramental communion* model: the community of grace, which finds expression in various interpersonal relationships. In some Protestant circles this idea developed in a negative, anti-institutional direction, as with Rudolph Sohm and Emil Brunner; but in others more positively, as in Bonhoeffer, who sees the church as an interpersonal community.[6] Among Catholics, thinking about the communitarian model is associated especially with the names of Emile Mersch, Yves Congar and Jerome Hamer. It was Mersch who initiated an ecclesiology based on the Pauline image of the Body, a trend which softened the angularities and vivified the aridity of the institutional model. Congar used these insights in his pioneering ecumenical studies. And both he and, later, Hamer emphasised the notion of the sacramental communion, which received official endorsement in Pius XII's 'Mystici Corporis' in 1943.

On the Protestant side the biblicist approach developed in a quite different direction with the epoch-making work of Karl Barth. Barth's ecclesiology is centred on the Word of God and its acceptance by the community of faith. The Church's mission, as *herald,* is incessantly to proclaim the Word. The community itself happens as 'event' wherever the Word is received in faith. Catholic ecclesiology is indebted to Barth for his singular emphasis on the dignity, power and creativity of the Word—insights which were incorporated in Vatican II's constitutions on the Liturgy and on Revelation. However Barth's transcendentalism fails to do justice to the incarnational element in Christianity. The Church as institution in effect is emptied of salvific content and meaning.

Among Catholic theologians, Hans Küng's ecclesiology most closely parallels that of Barth. In his thought-provoking book, *The Church,* Küng writes:

> *Ekklesia,* like 'congregation' means both the actual *process of congregating* and the *congregated community* itself: the former should not be overlooked. An *ekklesia* is not something that is formed and founded once for all and remains unchanged; it becomes an *ekklesia* by the fact of a repeated concrete event.[7]

Unfortunately Küng, like Barth, seems to do scant justice to the meaning and role of the Church with respect to the Kingdom.

In the dialectical theology of Rudolph Bultmann and the thinkers influenced by him we have, in Dulles' phrase, an 'existential variant of kerygmatic theology'. The Word of God is eschatological happening, in existential encounter with the believer, demythologized and shorn of any real relation either to past or future. Says Bultmann:

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[7] *The Church*, Sheed and Ward, N. Y., 1967, p. 84. Quoted in Dulles, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

> Just as the Word of God becomes his Word only in event, so the Church is really the Church only when it, too, becomes an event. For the Church identity with a sociological institution and a phenomenon of the world's history can be asserted only in terms of paradox.[8]

Bultmann's dialectical theology offers rich and spiritually stimulating elements for a theology of the Word. For all that, however, his existential approach devalues the horizontal, historical character of the Church even more radically than does Barth's kerygmatic theology.

The various ecclesiologies we have touched on, whether of the institution, the communion or the kerygmatic models, tend to abstract from, when they are not positively indifferent to, history. 'Non-historical orthodoxy' Michael Novak terms this kind of theology.[9]

We now move on to the third main type: what is called *eschatological* ecclesiology. This theology, in contrast to the two preceding types, uses the 'method of correlation'. Paul Tillich describes this method briefly:

> The answers implied in the event of revelation are meaningful only in so far as they are in correlation with questions concerning the whole of existence. . . Being human means asking the question of one's own being and living under the impact of the answers given to this question.
>
> In using the method of correlation, systematic theology . . . makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions.[10]

Eschatological ecclesiology focuses on the final Kingdom of God, and attempts to find and express the reality and meaning of Church and World in their relationship to it. In its broadcast acceptation, it includes a wide spectrum of ecclesiologies.

Leaving aside here the more extreme positions, like those of Albert Schweitzer and Martin Werner, we may mention in the first place what McBrien calls 'salvation-history eschatology', the 'mainstream position', which counts among its adherents theologians like Cullmann, Schnackenburger, Jeremias, Kümmel and the majority of Catholic theologians. This, of course, is the position with which we are most familiar. The Church lives between-the-times, in a fruitful tension between the Christ-event and the Parousia, the perfected Kingdom. Her sacramental reality, in McBrien's phrase, 'incorporates all three

[8] H. W. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, Vol. 1, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1961, pp. 209-210. Quoted in Dulles, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

[9] *The Open Church*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1964, p. 56.

[10] *Systematic Theology*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1951, Vol. I, p. 70. Quoted in McBrien, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

tenses: past, present and future'. The mission of the Church is to proclaim God's saving act in Jesus Christ, to herald his Second Coming, and to be a living sign of hope in the fulfilment of God's promises.[11]

The sixties of this century have witnessed the gradual yet definite emergence and growth of a new trend in salvation-history eschatology. In general, this is characterised by an attempt at a closely integrated vision of Church-World-Kingdom, which has led to more basic questions about the Church's mission—and ultimately about her nature. Teilhard de Chardin and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are prominent among the thinkers who prepared the ground for the new secular ecclesiologies.

On the Catholic side, John XXIII and Vatican II represent a remarkably new and positive opening to the world, in dramatic contrast to the defensive and somewhat dismal tone of several earlier pronouncements of the official Church. *Gaudium et Spes,* in Dulles' summation,

> recognises the 'legitimate autonomy' of human culture and especially of the sciences; it calls upon the Church to update itself . . . so as to appropriate the best achievements of modern secular life. It affirms that the Church must respect the accomplishments of the world and learn from them, lest it fall behind the times and become incapable of effectively heralding the gospel. Finally it asserts that the Church should consider itself as part of the total human family, sharing the same concerns as the rest of men.[12]

Other Catholic landmarks on this new road have been John XXIII's *Pacem in terris* (1963); Paul VI's *Populorum progesssio* (1967); the conclusions of the General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin (1968); and the document on Justice in the World issued by the Roman Synod of Bishops in 1971. The last Synod (1974), on 'Evangelisation in the Modern World', is another bold step forward in the same direction. Though the Synod failed to arrive at any comprehensive statement on the theology of evangelisation, its most outstanding theological contribution could be said to be its new theological approach. As Fr. D. S. Amalorpavadass, its Special Secretary, wrote in the Evaluation of the Synod by the Indian participants:

> The Synod has thus, consciously or unconsciously, established in practice and encouragingly proved the validity and relevance of a theological approach which starts from below: from the dynamic realities of the world, history and life, in full identification with and concern for men by involvement in life situations, and interpreting God's designs and the church's mission through the signs of the times, in the light of the Gospel.

[11] *Op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.
[12] Dulles, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

> Such an approach sets in relief the immanent, historical, anthropological, communitarian and cultural dimension, calling for social change and involvement, searching for relevance and meaningfulness.[13]

The twin-pronged thrust of the Synod's thinking was that dialogue and liberation are inseparable from evangelisation, and are, in fact, constitutive dimensions of it.

It is instructive to observe a similar shift of concern and emphasis in the various Assemblies of the World Council of Churches.[14] While Amsterdam (1948) betrays a still inward-looking ecclesiology, Evanston (1954) begins to manifest a concern for 'mission', in addition to Word and Sacrament. From New Delhi (1961) to Uppsala (1968) we witness a radical shift; and the message rings out loud and clear in the W.C.C. Report, "The Church for Others", 1967:

> The church exists for the world. . . This is not election to privilege but to serving engagement. The church lives that the world may know its true being. It is *pars pro toto*; it is the first fruits of the new creation. But its centre lies outside itself; it must live 'ex-centredly'. It has to seek out those situations in the world that call for loving responsibility and there it must announce and point to *shalom*. This ex-centric position of the church implies that we must stop thinking from the inside towards the outside.

And further on,

> The church is that part of the world where God's concern is recognised and celebrated. . . In terms of God's concern for the world, the church is a segment of the world, a *postscript*, that is, added to the world for the purpose of pointing to and celebrating both Christ's presence and God's ultimate redemption of the whole world.[15]

The ecclesiological model which best symbolises this new thrust is the *Servant* model. Though the term 'servant', as Dulles points out, can be and is applied to Christ and the Christian, the New Testament does not seem to offer any basis for the notion of *diakonia* of the whole Church towards the world. Yet we may find an 'indirect biblical foundation' in the Servant songs in Isaiah. Jesus, identifying himself with this Isaian figure, proclaims that he is 'sent to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the

[13] "Theological Trends in the Synod," *Word and Worship*, Special Number on the Synod, Vol. VIII, 1975, p. 32.

[14] C. W. Williams, "The Church" in *New Directions in Theology Today*, Vol. IV, Lutterworth Press, London, 1969, pp. 14-16.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

prison to those who are bound' (Is. 61:1; cf. Luke 4:16-19).[16] Eschatological theology elaborates its concept of the 'servant church' specifically in its relation to the Kingdom of God. The Church is not to be identified with the Kingdom, but is rather God's instrument for the transformation of the world into the Kingdom.

The more radical representatives of this trend of thought in English-speaking Protestantism and Anglicanism are Gibson Winter, Harvey Cox and J. A. T. Robinson.[17] The common underlying resonance of these versions of eschatological ecclesiology is their Christian secularity. The Church's mission, they insist, is not alongside the forces that go to make up the world, but must be conceived as integrated with them. Says Harvey Cox in *The Secular City:*

> The starting-point for any theology of the church today must be a theology of social change. The church is first of all a responding community, a people whose task it is to discern the action of God in the world and to join in His work. . . A church whose life is defined and shaped by what God is *now* doing in the world cannot be imprisoned in antiquated specifications. It must allow itself to be broken and reshaped continuously by God's continuous action; hence the need for a theology of social change.[18]
>
> The church's task in the secular city is to be the *diakonos* of the city, the servant who bends himself to struggle for its wholeness and health.[19]

And J. A. T. Robinson puts it in his own inimitable way:

> We have got to relearn that the 'house of God' is primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor's hut set up in the grounds.[20]

This leit-motiv of the newer eschatological ecclesiology has been orchestrated with variations in the current theological constructs that have emerged in the last ten years or so. The most outstanding and influential among these is the so-called 'proleptic theology' or 'Theology of Hope' of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. As Carl Braaten of the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, comments:

> Here we do not start with a doctrine of the church, then ask about the church's relation to the world, and finally to the Kingdom of God. Instead we start with the Kingdom of God in Jesus' preaching. . . Starting with the Kingdom of God as

[16] *Op. cit.*, p. 93.

[17] Dulles, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[18] *The Secular City*, Revised edition, Macmillan Co., New York, 1966, p. 91.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[20] *The New Reformation?*, SCM Paperback, London, 1965, p. 27.

> the basis of the church, it is essential to drive through the world to reach the Kingdom of God. That is, there is no relation between the Kingdom of God and the church that does not include the world. . . The church has a vocation (its election) under the Kingdom of God to pave the way for the absolute future of mankind.[21]

Given the eschatological thrust of the 'Theology of Hope' and the new hermeneutic, it is not surprising that Latin America should be developing its own brand of this ecclesiology. For Latin America is unique in this, that it is the only continent of underdeveloped and oppressed peoples who are in a majority Christians.[22] Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo are trying to evolve, in that context, a 'Theology of Liberation'.

Johannes B. Metz, on his part, speaks of a 'Political Theology'. A brief overview of his theology will be instructive, since he incorporates several of the basic insights of the eschatologies we have mentioned. He has not developed any full-scale ecclesiology, but has expressed his thought only in individual essays. I refer here to two of these: "The Church and the World",[23] and "The Church's Social Function in the Light of 'Political Theology'."[24] 'The modern man's understanding of the world,' he writes, 'is fundamentally oriented towards the future'.[25] For him, 'the golden age lies not behind us but before us'.[26] His categories of thought are personalistic, functional and processive. This horizon of the Future permeates and transforms reality and man's grasp of it. It 'reveals the world as history, history as final history, faith as hope, and theology as eschatology'.[27] This futuristic perspective is essentially Christian, based upon the biblical belief in the promises of God—an orientation which the New Testament, in its proclamation of the Kingdom, only confirms. The Christ-event has not put the future entirely behind us or stripped it of creative significance. On the contrary,

> The proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus, which can never be separated from the message of the crucifixion, is essentially a proclamation of promise which initiates the Christian mission.

[21] "The Church in Ecumenical and Cultural Cross-fire," *Theology Digest*, Vol. XV (1967), No. 4, p. 286.

[22] G. M. Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation", *Theological Studies*, Vol. 31 (1970), No. 2, p. 243.

[23] J. B. Metz in *The Word in History*, T. P. Burke (ed.), Collins, London, 1968, pp. 69-85.

[24] *Id.* in *Concilium*, Vol. 6 (1968), No. 4, pp. 1-11.

[25] "The Church in the World", *op. cit.*, p. 71.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

> This mission achieves its future in so far as the Christian alters and 'innovates' the world toward that future of God which is definitely promised to us in the resurrection of Jesus.[28]

Metz, like many modern theologians, describes the Church as the 'exodus community',[29] that is, a people who are leaving the protective ambience of a passing socio-religious system and its institutions, and must now live its faith in God in new forms of personal commitment. 'The orthodoxy of a Christian's faith must constantly *make* itself true in the "orthopraxy" of his actions reorientated toward the final future, because the promised truth is a truth that must be *made*'[30] (cf. John 3:21 ff). The Christian's faith commitment and the world-view based on it cannot be evolved in the privacy of his 'conscience', 'before God', in splendid isolation from the worldly structures in which he lives and moves and has his being. His theology of the world must be a 'political theology'. It 'must place itself in communication with the prevailing political, social and technical utopias and with the contemporary maturing promises of universal justice and peace.[31] 'Christianity should not establish itself as a "micro-society" beside the "great secular society".'[32] The Church must live within the social reality as an institution of social criticism, raising her voice in prophetic protest against every form of oppression and totalitarianism, and in the proclamation of love as a principle of revolution as against brute force. When we ask the question: What is the relation of the Christian's hope to the human effort for the transformation of the world? Metz merely warns that this hope does not canonize man's own progress. It is, rather, 'a hope against every hope which we place in the man-made idols of our secular society',[33] and 'Christian eschatology is . . . a *theologia negativa* of the future'.[34]

We would rather call on Karl Rahner here. In a characteristically dense and closely-argued essay, he addressed himself to the topic, "Christianity and the New Earth",[35] for which Vatican II's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World merely provides some hints. There is not, Rahner feels, and cannot be any specifically Christian ideology, still less an absolute concrete programme, which the official Church could proclaim. The real basic question is how Christians value life on earth. To make the world that man himself creates merely the neutral 'material' for his moral testing, would be not to take the world and history seriously enough. On the other hand, the

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 84.
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] K. Rahner, "Christianity and the New Earth", *Theology Digest*, Vol. 15 (1967), No. 4, pp. 275-282.

final Kingdom, a gift of the divine initiative, presupposes the 'death' and radical 'transformation' of man's world. Rahner would maintain a fundamental dialectic between these two members of the dilemma which both keeps the future open and allows the present to retain its basic value. The Incarnation encourages us to believe that human history somehow enters into God's own fullness. But the new earth will not result from recipes special to Christians and to no one else.

Conclusion

'What we are experiencing at the present time', Carl Braaten wrote in 1967, 'is a profound struggle for an adequate (true) doctrine of the church comparable to the decades, even centuries, of conflict in the ancient church for the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the God-manhood of Jesus Christ.'[36] The twentieth century has, in fact, witnessed a remarkable ferment in ecclesiology. Barely fifty years ago all was quiet on the Western front. We basked in the comforting glow of the 'societas perfecta', which knew exactly what it was and where it was going, and which felt it had most, if not all, the answers. Our complacency was first shaken by a return to the sources of Revelation. We began to realise as never before that the Church is not mainly institution, that love is more than law, and that life overflows structures. And in the Protestant camp theologians were emphasising the event character of the community of faith. Little did we suspect that this was only the beginning of what was still to come. The fifties and sixties of this century have experienced the concerted onslaught of numerous powerful forces that have shaken the Church and social institutions all over the world: the technological revolution, the communications explosion and the resultant cultural revolution, which is so strongly marked by secularity, openness and freedom. Vatican II was a spectacular effort of the Church at a renewed self-understanding in this new world of changing values. Yet the Council represented only a modest, initial achievement—inevitably hampered by compromise—in the face of the immense problems thrown up by the new world that is a-borning. We are faced today with pluralism in ecclesiology, as in so many other fields of thought which, within limits, is a good thing. It may reflect both the depth and fullness of the mystery of the Church and the inadequacy of any one human attempt to express it.

Ecclesiology is in the crucible from another angle, too. As the spotlight has focused, in Christology, on the humanity of Christ, so, too, it is trained on the human element in the Church today. While the critical method continues to dissect and analyse the Bible, sociological and historical research have more recently got to work on the structures of the Church. Though their results may, at first glance, seem to be disturbing, they can help us to re-assess long-taken-for-granted views of hierarchical structures, apostolic succession, the magisterium, infallibility and the like, with gain to the ecumenical dialogue

[36] *Op. cit.*, p. 284.

and personal profit to ourselves. Many years ago, in a similar time of crisis, that perceptive Catholic thinker, Friedrich von Hügel, said that science can be the purgatory of faith. We would do well to remember this today.

The more recent trends in ecclesiology, as we have seen, tend to 'ex-centre' the Church and to view it in the perspective of God's larger concern for His Kingdom in the world. This is no doubt one of the signs of the times. Perhaps God's own medicine, too, for our age-old triumphalism and prophylactic for the Pilgrim Church of tomorrow. The Servant model of the new ecclesiologies, with its personalistic, historical and secular emphases, ties in well with the Sacrament model of Vatican II, and both invites and challenges us to ask the questions that the Council did not—and could not—ask about the mission of the Church and what it means to be a Christian in the world of today. But when all is said and done, we shall have to beware of the temptation of thinking that our enlightened twentieth century has 'got it all together' at last. As Peter Hebblethwaite recently reminded us: 'There will be no point in the future when everything will fall into place, when all the changes have finally been made and the lost Golden Age restored. . . [The Church] is only the anticipation of the Kingdom, not the Kingdom itself. Perfection, the Golden Age, is a sustaining vision along the way and the gift of God at the end of time, not something that will come about next week or in the next decade or even in the fateful year 2000.'[37] Meanwhile the Pilgrim Church must trudge her weary way, listening to what the Spirit says in every age, and content only to be, like her type and model, the 'Servant of the Lord'.

[37] P. Hebblethwaite, "The Church of the Future", *Commonweal*, Vol. CII, (1975), p. 618.