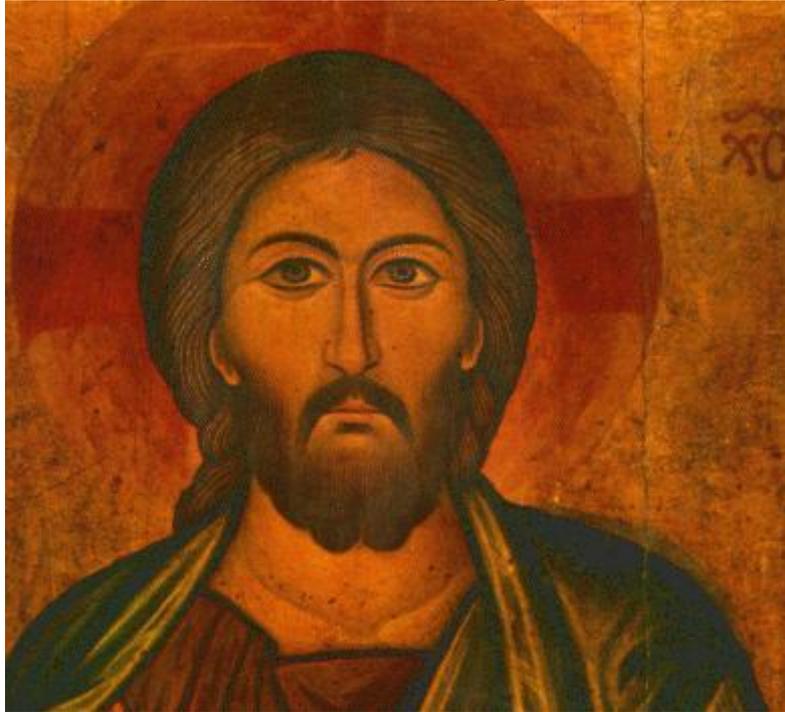


# Models of the Church (Avery Dulles)



*Avery Dulles' Models of the Church*

It can be seen that a theology of Church has emerged that reflects definite changes in political, social, philosophical and religious thinking. An American Jesuit theologian, Avery Dulles, has tried to present some evaluation of prominent "models" in ecclesiology (*Models of the Church*, 2nd Edition, Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1988).

In his text Dulles outlines some of the historical and theological "images" of Church that had developed in the past two thousand years of its history :

## **THE POLITICAL SOCIETY MODEL**

In the period between approximately 1600 and the year 1940, Catholic ecclesiology had one dominant model or "paradigm" (the technical term for a dominant model) for describing and understanding the nature of the Church. That model was the secular political society, the State. It is the model that [Robert Bellarmine](#) presented in his classic definition of the Church in *De Controversiis* (1588):

"The one and true Church is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and participation in the same sacraments under the authority of legitimate pastors and especially of the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff.... The one true Church is as visible and palpable as the Kingdom of France or the republic of Venice."

This definition, which enumerated only the visible and structural characteristics of the Church, did not fully express Bellarmine's concept of the Church. But it was this definition which Catholicism took to itself with enthusiasm in the following centuries, sometimes referring to the Church as the "perfect society". It is the model that is found in Cardinal Gasparri's Catechism (1932), which intentionally reflects Pius XI's *Mortalium Animos* (1928). We will generally refer to this model as the "political society model".

It was a serviceable model in the Counter-Reformation period. It gave definite guidelines by which Catholics could identify one another. Some elements of this model must be incorporated into any complete description of the Church; the bonds of professed faith, of

sacraments and of government figure prominently in Vatican II documents. And in Catholic ecclesiology, as well as in that of most other denominations, the Church is essentially a society that can be identified by visible characteristics. But the emphasis on visible, institutional characteristics alone together with its polemical, exclusivist intent makes it a very deficient model of the Church. The Church is much more than a social structure. Other essential characteristics must be represented: the life of grace, a Christian communion of faith, hope and charity, the abiding presence of Christ and the gifts and assistance of the Spirit. In fact, the whole "mystery" dimension of the Church goes unrepresented in this model. And that is surely a basic weakness in a model that aims to express a reality that is above all a mystery of faith.

This model was dominant for far too long, with serious effects on Church life. It fostered what Yves Congar has called a "hierarchology" rather than an ecclesiology. With this went a corresponding over-emphasis on authority and a corresponding lack of lay involvement in the life and mission of the Church. Much heroic missionary activity was undertaken in the period, but the aim was generally to build up the Church society on earth, efforts to save souls being directed precisely to bringing more and more people into the Church society. Success for the missionary, and for the pastor at home as well, was measured in statistics of conversions, baptisms, regular attendance and communions. Bishop de Smedt was describing succinctly the effects of this model when he criticised the first preliminary schema on the Church presented to the Fathers at Vatican II, using the words "clericalism, juridicism, and triumphalism".

### ***THE BODY OF CHRIST MODEL***

After such a long period under one single paradigm, it was the beginning of a new era for ecclesiology when another model began to rise to prominence. This model was the "Body of Christ". It was an ancient model resurrected by the Tübingen School in the nineteenth century (Mohler, Scheeban) then given prominence through the work of such theologians of the 1930's as Emile Mersch and Sebastian Tromp, the latter eventually being the ghost-writer of the encyclical [\*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#) (1943).

This model stressed all those things that were obviously missing from the political society model. It was a more democratic model as well, stressing the activity and gifts of the Spirit in all members and the dependence of all on the contributions of each. It was a welcome and much needed complement of the earlier model, and much enriched ecclesiology and Catholic Church life.

However, it did not solve all theological difficulties. Indeed it raised in an acute way one central ecclesiological concern, in particular the relationship between the mystical and the visible, between the supernatural community of grace in Christ and the visible society of very human beings. The relationship between these two has been perennially problematic. It sees that Church as not just an invisible communion of grace, but it also sees the visible community as the fullness and completion of Christ, Christ in the Church being in some sense brought to complete achievement. Stressing the mystical dimension of the spiritual communion can take an anti-institutional turn, as has occurred with some Protestant theologians such as Rudolph Sohm and Emil Brunner. On the other hand, stressing the visible community as the Body of Christ, continuation of the Incarnation, and so forth, can draw one towards "biologism" or a form of panchristism, a crassly literal application of the model which is, after all, essentially a metaphor. This leads to a divinisation of the Church, making it one divine organism with the Head, hypostatically united with the divine nature.

In 1943 Pius XII in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* signalled each of these dangers by stressing on the one hand that the Church is not "something invisible, intangible, a something merely 'pneumatical'", and conversely that any presentation of the doctrine is to be rejected that makes the faithful in any way pass beyond the order of created things so that even one single attribute of the eternal God can be predicated of them in the proper sense.

Throughout his works Yves Congar stresses that the fellowship with God and with one another in Christ and the totality of means by which this fellowship is produced and maintained are two inseparable aspects of the one reality. In Vatican II it is stated that the society furnished with hierarchical agencies and the Mystical Body of Christ are not to be considered as two realities, but the visible assembly and the spiritual community are "one interlocked reality" (unam realitatem complexam efformant, in: [Lumen Gentium](#), 8).

The tendency to identify the human with the divine in the Body of Christ model, thus giving the impression of a hypostatic union, can probably best be counteracted by attending to the "negative analogy" of the model, a term that has some importance in model theory. In this case the negative analogy signifies that the biological model does not aim to represent the union in the Body of Christ as a biological union. It must remain an interpersonal communion in which individuals retain integrally their own individual distinctness.

Thus the tension still remains between the visible, institutional society and the essentially spiritual communion. Both are essential. But it is not clear how they are combined from the expressive power of the Body of Christ model alone.

### **THE SACRAMENTAL MODEL**

The next model to emerge, that of the Church as Sacrament, initially took on vigour in the late 1940's, in large measure through the work of Henri de Lubac. Again it was the case of a resurrection of a very ancient model used by Cyprian, Augustine, Aquinas and in the nineteenth century, by Scheeben. It was adopted and further developed by Rahner, then by Edward Schillebeeckx, Yves Congar, and many others. Thereupon it was accepted into the Vatican II Constitution on the Church in the statement: "The Church is in Christ as a sacrament or sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind." It became a major theme of the Council (ch. L.G.9, 48; S.C. 26; A.G. 5; G.S. 42).

A sacrament is both sign and instrument. It describes in some sense the indescribable and inexpressible spiritual reality. For instance, pouring of water expressed spiritual purification: the Church as a sacrament of Christ expresses Christ ("the glory of Christ shines on its face"), and, as sacrament of salvation, the Church's community life expresses something of what salvation essentially consists in. At the same time a sacrament is an instrument which effects what it signifies. The symbolic washing brings about the spiritual purification it expresses: the Church as a sacrament of Christ brings about the continuation of Christ's ministry and as sacrament of salvation builds a community of salvation in the world.

From 1949 onwards this was a very popular model among Catholic theologians, though it never seems to have caused much excitement among non-Catholic ecclesiologists. To many it appeared to offer a solution to the dilemma of the relationship between the visible and the invisible. The visible community in this model was the visible form of the invisible communion in Christ. It was seen to have an advantage over the Body of Christ model in permitting a kind of shaded area in place of a sharp line of demarcation between Church and non-Church. Many could not help but be uneasy with Pius XII's dogmatic and exclusivist statement in *Mystici Corporis Christi* that the Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church, a statement which he reiterated in [Humani Generis](#) (1950) with the words, "The Mystical Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same thing" (a statement which he intended in the exclusivist sense).

In this model, however, if the Church is the visible form of the invisible communion in Christ and the visible form of salvation itself, then there is little basis for the exclusivist claim that the Church of Christ or salvation itself is coextensive with the Roman Catholic Church. Vatican II officially accepted that conclusion in the famous change of wording in the document on the Church from "The unique Church of Christ is the Catholic Church" to "The Unique Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church". This change was made, as the Relator explained to the Council Fathers, in order that "the whole statement may be more in accordance with the affirmation of ecclesial elements which are found elsewhere".

This model had the capacity to provide a new impetus to the missionary activity of the Church by stressing the fact that the Church community is essentially an effective sign as a light to the world, a beacon of hope, and a community-building force at the heart of the world, rather than some weird sect on the fringe of human society. The model could also motivate loyalty to the Church from the realisation of the importance of being in the community and striving to be one with it. One would thus be striving to accept its doctrines and discipline and yet be permitted the right to make constructive criticism in the light of the Church's collective effort to be a better sign. The model thus avoided the static, "perfect" (complete) impression given by the previous models, since human expressions of the divine are never adequate!

But for all its qualities this model has never had the impact on the life of the Church that the political society model or the body of Christ model have had. It remains very much a theologian's model, not easy to popularise. This is most probably because "sacrament" is already a technical term, the meaning of which is difficult to grasp and consequently poorly understood. Hence it would not impress with the simple clarity of the earlier models.

### ***THE PILGRIM PEOPLE MODEL***

The dominant model of Vatican II was that of "The People of God" or more exactly, "The Pilgrim People of God". Several decades of important work in the fields of scriptural, patristic and liturgical studies gave a renewed sense in the Church of "sacred history", the gradual unfolding through history of God's plan to unite all men in Christ by means of a single people. This people is itself on pilgrimage through history like the rest of humanity. But this is a favoured people; because it has hope, it is enabled to walk by faith, led by the Spirit of God. It sees itself in this model as in the vanguard of the whole pilgrim human race not, hopefully, in the old triumphalist way, but specially graced in order to lead the rest of them on their pilgrimage to their ultimate destiny.

In this model the Church is no longer seen as an immobile, supra-terrestrial institution (*semper idem*), unaffected by time, change and history. It is a historical community on pilgrimage. Not only has it not "arrived", it still has a long way to travel; it has limitations that are to be overcome with the assistance of the Spirit of God. It is not exempt from the common human lot of having to live with uncertainty and make its way tentatively, often by trial and error. The people have the consolation that all along the way God travels with them, and the providential guidance of the Spirit will always be with them. New insights, ideas, methods and approaches are continually to be expected. There is no provision made for "things" to settle down into a new static stability after a period of transition and updating. Yesterday was yesterday - today we have new ground to cover.

Thus after three and a half centuries in which we understood the Church by means of a static model, followed by a brief interim period under an only marginally less static model, the Church had this paradigm thrust upon it. From a timeless model long entrenched we have changed rather abruptly to a model of the Church situated in the heart of history. One must, I believe, agree with Cardinal Suenens when he stated that "the change of imagery imposes a kind of mental revolution". Once the mental revolution had been accomplished - if that is what they were about in the Council - the real revolution had to begin: the Church had to start to assimilate the consequences. Cardinal Suenens pointed out that in the Exodus, a basic category that goes with this model, the people were trained to be content with few cumbersome accessories and stocks of provisions, but travelled with tents that could be quickly folded up and moved. Once one begins to apply the model one catches a glimpse of how radical it is. It affects all concepts of Church structures, traditions, liturgy, education in the faith.

The Pilgrim People model is a democratic model, emphasising the fundamental unity of all that precedes any diversification of roles or offices in the Church. Hierarchical offices are seen as different forms of service to the whole people. The model was used in the Council in a designedly anti-hierarchical manner, to offset the clericalism and juridicism that tends to dog Catholic Church life. It is also designedly anti-triumphalist, emphasising that the Church is a human group in history, stressing that the mercy of God is the basis of the people's existence,

stressing the continual dependence on and inadequate fidelity to the Spirit of God, and stressing the need for repentance and renewal. It avoids the tendency to divinise the visible community, a difficulty with the Body of Christ model, but does so at the expense of understressing the relationship between the people and Christ. This is considered a weakness of the model. Congar has pointed out that it fails to bring out what is new in this covenant relationship, namely that all persons become by adoption the children of God. Dulles claims that many authors, not exclusively Protestant, explicate the model in a way that leaves the impression that Christians are still living under the conditions of the Old Law.

The Pilgrim People of God model, even though it has the weight of the authority of the Council behind it, seems never to have imposed itself as a paradigm outside the Council and its documents. While it is no doubt stronger now than the political society and Body of Christ models, it seems to be rivalled at the present time by two other models which, if not arising from the Council, were at least given considerable impetus by the Council. Now these two models are going from strength to strength in the post-Conciliar period.

The first of these is the human community model. This model generates simple prayer groups, house Churches and pentecostal gatherings. More sophisticated groups apply principles of sociology and psychology and related fields such as transactional analysis, groups dynamics, and even Gestalt therapy. Such groups give promise to fulfilling a need that is very real in modern society, a need for a style of Christian life that is more personal, less hampered by institutional structures, and in which friendship and trust have an essential place. The dangers have been well aired by those who are not swept away by the trend. The model can at times engender an exaggerated anti-institutionalism and narcissism, tending "to encourage the formation of little communes in which people enjoy each other, and undergo rarefied and beautiful experiences, but do not contribute responsibly to the development of human society as a whole" (Dulles). This is a worry, for instance, when promoters of such groups speak of getting past the superficiality and unimportance of much of what they have been experiencing in Churches, and achieving relationships of depth and meaning and concern. If such groups are born of despair then they can easily cast themselves loose from their institutional moorings, then become underground Churches and finally sects. It is possible to be excessively optimistic about the capacity of simple unstructured human communities to fulfil humanity's deepest needs. Hence the conviction that the institutional Church is essential is well founded, even from a psychological and sociological stand point.

But the fruits of this model, hopefully, will be a large-scale loosening up of the rigid social system that has been constructed in the Church under the influence of the political society model. If institution and community can be moulded into one we will be coming much closer to realising the Catholic ideal.

### **THE CHURCH AS A SERVANT**

The human community model owes less to theological theory than to basic human needs and to pastoral strategy. The final model, however, owes a great deal to theology, especially a theme that developed in an unexpected manner in the Council itself: the model of the Church as Servant. This model is dominant in Vatican II's pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World, and all the official social documents that have followed the council have further developed and applied the model. Commencing from an explicit acceptance that the Church must be part of the human community and intimately associated with all that is genuinely human, because that was what Christ became through the Incarnation, the Church sees that it is called to make a positive contribution to all persons whoever they are and whatever their particular needs, after the example of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. Briefly, as Christ came to serve, the Church must carry on his mission of service to the whole world.

This model is not an invention of Vatican II. One can link Teilhard de Chardin with its early development. But one of the earliest, if not the earliest clear formulation of the model in recent times is to be found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* in which, after presenting Christ as the Man for Others, he proceeds to call on the Church to become a servant Church, sharing in the problems of human life, not dominating but helping and

servant, after the example of Christ. The revival of the theology of hope by writers such as Moltmann and Pannenberg, and among Catholics by Metz and Schillebeeckx, has come under the influence of this model. The Church is at times presented in this theology as an "exodus community" pioneering the future of the world. A similar thought is expressed by Harvey Cox in a chapter heading of *The Secular City*: "The Church as God's Avant-Garde".

Generally, however, and in a way that is surprising in Catholic writing and official documents, this model is developed in a low-key, non-authoritarian, even humble vein. Emphasis is placed on the need first of all to scrutinise the "signs of the times", a phrase originating in the New Testament (Mt. 16:2-4), but given a particular twist and introduced into Catholic theology by Pope John XXIII, especially in *Pacem in Terris*. These "signs" can be summarised as the major movements of men towards personalization (development) and socialisation (grouping for the achievement of common purposes). These movements are considered to reflect the movement of the Spirit in the world towards the achievement of the plan of God. Thus this model introduces a rather new attitude of listening to and learning from the world. It is claimed that it makes the world a theological focus, that is, a reality to be investigated by a properly theological method.

Having scrutinised the signs of the times and discerned the action of the Spirit in the world, the Church's task is then seen to be to associate itself through its members and as an institution with all movements working for the values of peace, liberation, justice, development and reconciliation in the temporal order.

This model makes many demands on the Church institution to become more obviously structured towards the mission of service instead of building up its own house. In mission territories it is being concretely worked out by rapid indigenisation and greater concentration on ministering to the basic human needs of under-developed nations. The impact of the model has been most felt in the third world, so it is not surprising that major contributions to the theology of liberation, as the theology dominated by this model has come to be called, have been made by nations outside Europe, especially Latin America. It is not surprising, too, that in some areas theology of liberation has further evolved into "political theology", and fostered alliances with social movements originally inspired by humanist and Marxist ideologies, a turn of events that has been given a measure of positive official encouragement under Popes John XXIII and Paul VI.

This is the latest model to rise to prominence in ecclesiology. It is an exciting and hazardous model, and impresses theologians as fundamentally very sound. But further clarifications are yet required. The special mission of the Church, its proper and distinctive contribution in the socio-political sphere, is not clear. More basically, it is not clear what is the relationship between human development and the growth of the Kingdom, the progressive restoration of all things in Christ. Also the terms used in this theology are often biblical terms: liberation, salvation, peace, justice, charity, community, life, oppression, injustice. But being biblical terms they originally belong to biblical models, and there is a danger of obfuscation if terms are taken over by a different model without advertence to inevitable shifts of meaning. In this servant model they are given a rather clear and definite social meaning. It has yet to become apparent where the shifts of meaning and over-simplifications lie.

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