

Models of the Church (Avery Dulles)

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."

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 problematical. 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.

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 ,

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 ecclesialogists. 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.

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 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 realization 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 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.

the Church 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.

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 inad-equate 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 rivaled at the present time by two others 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.

CHURCH AS HUMAN COMMUNITY MODEL

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 fulfill humanity's deepest needs. Hence the conviction that the institutional Church is essential is well founded, even from a psychological and sociological stand point.

THE CHURCH AS A 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.

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 indigenization 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.

For Further Reading:

Dulles, Avery. 'Imaging the Church for the 1980's', *Thought* 56:221 (June 1981) 121-138.