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Contemporary Catholic Discussion of the Church

Cover Page Footnote

This talk was delivered at Sacred Heart University on March 26, 1992 as the fifth annual Bishop Walter W. Curtis Lecture.

RICHARD P. McBRIEN

*Contemporary Catholic Discussion of the Church**

I am honored to have been invited to deliver the Curtis Lecture this evening, and I hope that my presentation will do justice to the series in which it is given and to the bishop in whose honor the series was established. I have been asked to address the topic, "Contemporary Catholic Discussion on the Church," and to pitch the talk to an audience described as "rather diverse." I should hope that the paper will not seem too scholarly for some, or too popular for others. In striving to find the happy middle, however, I may simply fall between the cracks.

Let me say, first, what I do not intend to do. I do not intend to offer a detailed map of the contemporary ecclesiological terrain, scattered with names like Yves Congar, Avery Dulles, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, Jean Tillard, Michael Fahey, Joseph Komonchak, and the like. There would be some real value in having a detailed critical bibliography of the field, but that is more suited to a written article than a public lecture.

What I propose here is something more modest and at the same time more pastorally useful. I shall identify and briefly elaborate upon six ecclesiological themes derived from the Second Vatican Council, examining their impact on the activity and self-understanding of the Church over the past two-and-a-half decades, and suggesting how these themes might continue to shape the life and thinking of the Church into the next century and the beginning of a new Christian millennium.

This reflection may also help us understand a little better the often sharp conflict that marks the Catholic Church today. It is a conflict of ecclesiologies, more concretely a conflict of interpretations of, and attitudes toward, the Second Vatican Council. On the one side are those who have been directly or indirectly formed by the council, are entirely sympathetic with it, and who exercise their

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ministries in accordance with its spirit; on the other side are those who wish the council had never happened, or who pretend it didn't, or who assume that the defeated minority point of view in fact prevailed. That's the essence of the conflict in a nutshell: two different views of the Church, two different assessments of the council.

There are many aspects to the Second Vatican Council, but I shall focus on just six ecclesiological themes which may help to provide a framework for understanding why Catholicism in the United States and elsewhere has developed the way it has since 1965, when the Council adjourned, and how Catholicism might continue to develop throughout the 1990s, into the 21st century and the Third Christian Millennium.

Before beginning this review of conciliar ecclesiology, I should point out that the second-most important influence on contemporary Catholic ecclesiology, second only to the council itself, is biblical scholarship, Catholic and Protestant alike. Nowhere is the impact of biblical scholarship on ecclesiology more clearly and succinctly described than in Father Frederick Cwiekowski's book *The Beginnings of the Church*, published in 1988 by Paulist Press. Modern biblical scholarship challenges and transforms several pre-Vatican II assumptions about the nature and foundations of the Church. For example:

1. Jesus did not leave us an ecclesiastical blueprint, complete with seven sacraments, specific ordained ministries, and a detailed body of doctrines, by which the Church was to be guided for all time.
2. Jesus did not set about to destroy Judaism or to replace it with a different religion. There is no evidence that Jesus provided for a distinctive mission directed to the Gentiles, or non-Jews.
3. There was a great deal of diversity and conflict in the early Church regarding the observance of the Mosaic law concerning circumcision, food, and worship.
4. There is no evidence for the traditional belief that Peter founded the Church in Rome, nor for the belief that a single individual in the mid-80s actually functioned in the Petrine role for the universal church at Rome, at Antioch or anywhere else.
5. Christians of the 50s lacked church buildings or temples, cult statues or traditional sacrifices. They had no cult leaders who were

called "priests," and none of Paul's letters says anything about who presided at the celebration of the Lord's supper.

6. The view that the apostles chose successors who would carry on their work of leading and guiding the church does not accurately represent the role of the apostles historically and does not allow for the actual complexity and variety involved in the exercise and succession of leadership in the early church.

7. There are indications that there were women office-holders in the early church.

For a further discussion of these and other pertinent points, consult Father Cwiekowski's book, *The Beginnings of the Church*. I shall return now to the most important influence on contemporary Catholic ecclesiology; namely, the Second Vatican Council itself.

1. The first and most basic ecclesiological principle at Vatican II is that the Church is a *mystery*, or *sacrament*, and not only or even primarily an institution or organization. Both/and, not either/or. To say that the Church is a mystery means, in the words of the late Pope Paul VI, that it is "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God." In other words, the Church is not just an organization to which we belong or which we serve. It is the corporate presence of God in Christ, with a unity created and sustained by the Holy Spirit. "I believe in the Church" does not mean "I believe in, am loyal to, the magisterium, the pope, the hierarchy, or the rules of the Church." Only God is a proper object of faith, God as present and active in the Church.

A sacramental understanding of the Church has helped us to see how essential renewal and reform are to its mission and ministries. More and more since Vatican II, the Church has been challenged to practice what it preaches because we recognize more clearly than ever before that the Church has a missionary obligation to manifest visibly what it embodies invisibly. It is supposed to be a visible sign of the invisible presence of God in the world and in human history.

In the words of the document "Justice in the World," from the 1971 World Synod of Bishops: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes." We should expect that this sacramental understanding of the Church will continue to shape the life and ministries and theology of the U.S. Catholic Church

in the years to come. More and more frequently, the connection will be made between the call for justice *outside* the Church and the practice of justice *inside* the Church. Indeed, this is the great unfinished business of Catholic social teachings, having just marked their 100th year of evolution. You will recall that on last May 15 we celebrated the centenary of the Church's first major social encyclical, Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*.

In their pastoral message of November 1990 in anticipation of this important anniversary, the U.S. Catholic bishops acknowledged that Catholic social teaching must apply to the Church itself. "We are also called," they said, "to weave our social teaching into every dimension of Catholic life, especially worship, education, planning and evangelization. . . . We cannot celebrate a faith we do not practice. We cannot proclaim a gospel we do not live."

The bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on the economy was even stronger in its language. The following sentence was italicized in the text: "*All the moral principles that govern the just operation of any economic endeavor apply to the church and its many agencies and institutions; indeed the church should be exemplary.*"

This principle of sacramentality will increasingly affect the way Catholics function as Church at the parish, diocesan, regional, and national levels, in the Catholic school, and in every Catholic agency and institution: how money is spent, how employees are treated, how ministries are distributed and exercised, what sort of environment is provided for worship and education, how pastoral leaders are appointed and live.

Indeed, the principle of sacramentality is as practical a principle as U.S. Catholics shall ever be called upon to implement between now and the beginning of the 21st century, and indeed *into* the new century and the new millennium. Catholicism's mission, according to the Second Vatican Council, is to be a universal sacrament, or sign, of salvation for all the world.

Gustavo Gutierrez made the same point in his now classic work of some twenty years ago, *A Theology of Liberation*: "If we conceive of the Church as a sacrament of the salvation of the world," Gutierrez insisted, "then it has all the more obligation to manifest in its visible structures the message that it bears. . . . The break with an unjust social order and the search for new ecclesial structures . . . have their

basis in this ecclesiological perspective."

As always, it's not a question of either/or, but of both/and. Both justice *outside* the Church, and justice *inside* the Church.

2. A second major ecclesiological principle adopted by the council is embodied in its by now familiar insistence that the Church is the whole *People of God*. The Church is not only the hierarchy, the clergy, or members of religious communities. It is the whole community of the baptized. When we use the word "church," it means "us" and not simply "them." And that community of "us" is marked by a rich diversity of gender, of class, of education, of social status, of race, of ethnic background, and of culture.

The People-of-God principle also highlights the plurality of charisms and ministries which have always belonged in the Church, and which since the council have begun to flourish again. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, affirms that charisms are available to all the faithful, "of every rank" (n. 12). Indeed, the whole Church, and not just the ordained or religiously professed, is called to holiness (*Lumen Gentium*, chapter 5). We find this People-of-God principle realized, with very different degrees of success, in parish councils, in base communities, in the multiplication of so-called lay ministries, and particularly in ministries associated with the liturgy, education, and social justice.

The Church that enters the 21st century and the Third Christian Millennium will be a Church in which even more of its members, women and men alike, will be ministerially involved, as they are increasingly today. That is a good thing in itself; however, to some extent it has been accelerated by a corresponding decline in the number of ordained priests and in vocations to the priesthood.

But unless the Church changes its current discipline on obligatory celibacy and the ordination of women and unless a different kind of bishop is appointed, less ideologically rigid and more pastorally open and imaginative, it will be a Church with too few ordained priests who are at the same time healthy human beings. One can understand why the council's emphasis on the People of God has been downplayed in some quarters of the Church today. It introduces a democratic principle into ecclesiology and the life of the Church – a democratic principle at odds with a highly clericalized, authoritarian view of the Church.

As always, however, the principle of sacramentality remains crucial. If the Church is truly the People of God, it must look and act like the People of God. Catholics have to practice what they preach and teach, and then preach and teach what they practice.

3. A third major conciliar theme is contained in its teaching that the mission of the Church includes *service* to human needs in the social, economic, and political orders, as well as the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments. There is more to the mission of the Church, therefore, than the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.

Better still: evangelization, i.e., the preaching of the Gospel, essentially includes the pursuit of justice and the transformation of the world. As the late Pope Paul VI put it in his extraordinary document of 1975, *Evangelii nuntiandi* ("The Evangelization of the Modern World"), evangelization involves "a message especially energetic today about liberation."

This surely represents one of the most significant changes wrought by the council. The Church is seen now, more clearly than ever before, as a servant Church, an instrument of social justice, human rights, and peace, as well as the comforter of the afflicted, the healer of the spiritually sick, the reconciler of sinners, and the like. Again, it's not a matter of either/or, but of both/and. The Church is called to be *both* the comforter of the afflicted *and* the afflicter of the comfortable.

It is highly instructive that even so conservative a Pope as John Paul II should continue to be so forthright, so aggressive, in fact, about the Church's social teachings. This is evident not only in his three major social encyclicals – the 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), the 1988 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On the Social Concern of the Church), and his most recent encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year) – but also in the homilies and public addresses Pope John Paul II has given in Central and South America, in Poland, in the Philippines, in Africa, and at the United Nations.

As the Church moves into the 21st century and the Third Christian Millennium, one expects that ecclesiology will be linked increasingly with social ethics, and will focus with increasing frequency on a moral issue to which the Pope has been especially sensitive:

consumerism. Not the consumerism we in the America may identify with Ralph Nader's movement, but the consumerism criticized in Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), and in the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1986 pastoral letter on the economy. Consumerism is the sin of consuming more than we need, even for comfortable living, in a world where so many have less than they need even for bare human survival.

Faithful Christian discipleship challenges consumerism. We have a right to what we need, but we have an obligation in justice, and not only in charity, to share what the medieval theologians called our "superfluous goods" with others in greater, and sometimes desperate, need. As the Pope reminded us in his famous sermon at Yankee Stadium in New York in October of 1979, this moral principle applies to nations as well as individuals. "We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom," the Pope declared, "if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors. In the light of the parable of Christ, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility. Riches and freedom create a special obligation."

Pope John Paul II made the same point again in New Orleans, at Xavier University, on September 12, 1987: "It is not enough to offer to the disadvantaged of the world crumbs of freedom, crumbs of truth and crumbs of bread. The Gospel calls for much more. The parable of the rich man and the poor man is directed to the conscience of humanity and, today in particular, to the conscience of America."

Preaching in Edmonton, Alberta, on September 17, 1984, the Pope declared that "in the light of Christ's words, this poor South will judge the rich North. And the poor people and poor nations – poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human rights – will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expense of others."

The challenge Catholics in the United States and elsewhere face as they approach the 21st Century and the Third Christian Millennium is to articulate much more effectively, and then really put into practice, these one-hundred years of Catholic social teachings. Nowhere is this dual responsibility of outreach and internal renewal more sharply stated than in the 1971 World Synod's "Justice in the World," Chapter

III. On the one hand, we are reminded that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world" are "a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." On the other hand, we are also reminded of the sacramental nature of that commitment to justice: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, it recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes."

Both/and, not either/or. Both outreach *and* internal renewal.

4. A fourth conciliar theme is expressed in the principle that the Church is a *communio*, a communion between God and ourselves and a communion of ourselves with one another, in Christ. Because the Church is a communion, its institutional structure is *collegial* rather than monarchical.

The universal Church is not simply one big, undifferentiated parish under the pastoral leadership of the pope. The Church is a college of local churches, each of which is the Body of Christ in its own particular locale (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 26). Together these local churches constitute the universal Church. Their unity is rooted in the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit as well as in the celebration of the Eucharist, but their unity is also expressed and nurtured by various ministries, and in particular by the Petrine ministry exercised by the Bishop of Rome.

On the other hand, collegiality, rooted in the doctrine of communion, is incompatible with a monarchical, pyramidal model of the Church, with the pope at the top and the so-called "simple faithful" at the bottom. Collegiality means that local churches — dioceses, regional grouping of dioceses, and national churches — are churches in their own right, and not simply administrative subdivisions of the universal Church. Accordingly, when there are conflicts between the pastoral policies and practices of a local church and those of the central administration of the universal Church, it is not always the case that the local church must yield to the central administration. The principle of subsidiarity, so crucial to Catholic social teaching, mandates that nothing should be done by a higher level of authority that can be done as well, if not better, by a lower level. Or, in other words, decisions ought always to be taken at a point closest to where those decisions will have their greatest and most immediate impact.

The recent conflict over the proper role of national episcopal conferences is really a conflict over the meaning of the theology of communion and of collegiality. Those who still look upon the Church as an absolute monarchy view national episcopal conferences at worst as a threat to that monarchical structure and at best as an unnecessary mechanism. For them there is only the pope and the curia, on the one side, and the local bishop, on the other, accountable directly and exclusively to the pope and the curia. For Vatican II and for Catholic ecclesiology there are intermediate bodies of governance; namely, councils, synods, and episcopal conferences. No conciliar teaching on the Church has encountered greater resistance than this one; namely, that the Church is a collegial, not a monarchical, reality.

5. A fifth conciliar theme is expressed in the principle that the Church includes more than Catholics. The Church is the whole Body of Christ: Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, and Oriental Christian alike. The Church is *ecumenical*, which means, literally, that it embraces "the whole wide world."

These past twenty-five years and more have been marked by formal ecumenical dialogues, joint prayer, collaboration in social ministry, and cooperation in theological and pastoral education. It is now theologically improper to use the word "church" and mean only the Catholic Church, unless you make it clear that you are, in fact, limiting your reference to Catholicism. Although newsworthy advances have been few and far between in recent years, the ecumenical movement still lives. There were ecumenical observers at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod in Rome and they issued a generally positive statement about the synod and about their hopes for the future of ecumenism.

Perhaps the most ecumenically successful of all the Pope's many trips abroad was his visit to England in June of 1982, in the midst of the Falklands (Malvinas) war between Britain and Argentina. It was an ecumenical triumph, highlighted by a joint prayer service led by the Pope and the then Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie. Catholic-Anglican relations in Britain have never been the same since, so profound an impact did the visit make.

Ecumenism will continue to shape the course of Catholic life and mission well into the next century, in all the areas where it has already made its mark. Two major breakthroughs remain to be achieved. The

first will involve some official recognition of, and support for, intercommunion, on however limited a basis; and the second, some official recognition of the validity of one another's ordained ministries, at least between churches where substantial agreements have already been reached, e.g., Catholics and Anglicans, and Catholics and Lutherans. However, the recent response of the Vatican to the final report of the first Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission suggests that such changes may be long in coming.

6. A sixth ecclesiological theme from the council is embodied in the principle that the Church is not an end in itself, but exists always and only for the sake of the reign of God. In other words, the Church is an *eschatological* community.

Before Vatican II it was widely assumed, even in the neo-Scholastic theology of the seminary textbooks, that the Church and the Kingdom of God were one and the same. More precisely, that the Church is the Kingdom of God on earth. This generated an attitude characterized at the council as one of triumphalism. Because the Church thought of itself as the Kingdom of God on earth, it too often behaved as if it had already attained the perfection of the heavenly Kingdom of God, beyond the need for reform and renewal, and beyond the reach of criticism.

The council, especially in the fifth article of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, insisted, over against this view, that the Church is at most "the initial bidding forth" of the reign of God. It prepares for the coming of God's reign by its preaching, by its worship, by its witness, and by its service. At the same time, the Kingdom that it hopes for and prays for is, in some mysterious way, already present in the Church. Otherwise the Church would not be a mystery or a sacrament.

Here again, it's a matter of both/and, not either/or. The Church is both "already" and "not yet" within the reign of God. Insofar as it is "already" in the Kingdom, it is itself an object of faith ("I believe in the Church"). Insofar as it is "not yet" in the Kingdom, it is a sinful Church on pilgrimage through history, holy but always in need of penance, reform, and renewal.

In summary, if these six ecclesiological trends continue, the Church of the future will be a church more conscious of itself as a

sacrament of Christ and more conscious of its missionary obligation to practice what it preaches.

The Church of the future will be a more democratic church, recognizing that the Church includes the hierarchy but is not co-extensive with it. The Church is the whole people of God.

The Church of the future will be more fully engaged in social ministry, conscious that the martyrs of El Salvador like Archbishop Oscar Romero, the four churchwomen, and the six Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter were not murdered because of their defense of papal authority and the hierarchical structure of the Church, but for their courageous commitment to social justice and human rights.

The Church of the future will be less centralized because more sensitive and responsive to local needs, local cultures, local traditions, and local charisms. The Church of the future will be more ecumenical, still Catholic at its core, but more genuinely open and responsive to the truths to be found outside the Church, among people everywhere.

And the Church of the future will be more aware of its own limitations, less prone to equate itself with the reign of God itself and, therefore, less inclined to strut across the stage of history as if the Church, not God, were the center and driving force of the divine plan of salvation.

The future Church is still in process. Like the reign of God, it is "already" but "not yet." We are — all of us — an important and indispensable part of the "already." Our hope is to see and experience what is "not yet."

That hope is rooted in an unshakable faith in Christ, "who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever," and in the Holy Spirit who makes all things new.