THE LIMITS OF ECCLESIAL METAPHORS IN SYSTEMATIC ECCLESIOLOGY[1]

Brian P. Flanagan
College of the Holy Cross

ABSTRACT

This article looks at two major metaphors used in contemporary ecclesiology, the church as "the People of God" and as "the Bride of Christ," which have functioned in some of the polarizing debates within the Catholic Church in North America. It then suggests some methodological reasons why reliance upon metaphors in ecclesiology, either through the balancing of different metaphors or the promotion of a dominant metaphor, is inadequate to the task of understanding the church systematically. It then suggests some avenues for future ecclesiological method that may help to understand the church better and so to respond better to contemporary ecclesiological debates.

I. Introduction

In his 2003 book *A People Adrift*, the journalist Peter Steinfels analyzed numerous challenges facing the Catholic Church in the United States today.[2] Steinfels argued that the institutionalization and mutual suspicion of polarized groups in the United States, rather than the existence of different opinions, is what should continue to concern American Catholics. This polarization of Catholics predated the sexual abuse crisis, and will continue to be a major fault line in U.S. Catholic life for some time to come.

Many of the questions that divide the Catholic Church in the United States are ecclesiological; they are questions of authority, of

[1]These ideas were first presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Theology Society at Regis University, Denver, Colorado, on June 2, 2006. I am grateful for the comments, questions, and suggestions of the participants in that section, particularly Elaine MacMillan, Jim Caccamo, and Mary Ann Hinsdale, I.H.M. They were further developed in my dissertation, "Communion, Diversity, and Salvation: The Contribution of Jean-Marie Tillard, O.P., to Systematic Ecclesiology" (Ph.D. Diss., Boston College, 2007). Finally, I am grateful to the editor and referees of *Horizons* for their careful suggestions and questions.

[2]Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

Brian P. Flanagan completed his Ph.D. in systematic theology at Boston College in 2007, writing on communion, diversity, and salvation in the ecclesiology of Jean-Marie Tillard, O.P. He is currently a Visiting Lecturer at the College of the Holy Cross (Worcester, MA 01610).

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power, of rights, of obedience, of tradition.[3] A seemingly unlikely, but potentially fruitful, contribution to moderating these polarizations might be a renewed attention to method in ecclesiology. By asking the question of what we are doing when we speak in different ways about the church, I think that theologians might assist the American Catholic community in negotiating some of these polarizations.

There will be two major divisions in this article. First, I will look at two ecclesiological metaphors that have functioned as dominant metaphors and as rallying points for various groups in the Catholic Church, the church as "People of God" and the church as the "Bride of Christ." In the second section, I will ask about the ecclesiological method that leads theologians to look for these "dominant metaphors" of the church, and suggest some starting points for a more systematic ecclesiology. I will suggest that there are limitations on the utility of metaphors for systematic ecclesiology, and that an attempt to understand the nature of the church that moves beyond biblical and liturgical imagery might provide a slightly duller, but more theoretically adequate, way of speaking about the church.[4]

II. Two Metaphors of the Church

Before looking at the metaphors of the church as "People of God" and "Bride of Christ," I need to explain my use of the term "metaphor" and address some reasons for the choice of these two particular metaphors. A full exploration of the concept of metaphor and its use in contemporary theology is beyond the scope of this essay, as the nature of the relationship between images, metaphors, symbols, models, and definitions in theology is an important and open methodological question. Paul Avis provides a working definition of metaphor in describing the event in which two perceptions are juxtaposed or related to each other, in a constructive and often surprising way. Avis points out that while metaphors often involve images, to the point that "we sometimes loosely say 'image' when we mean 'metaphor,' a metaphor is much

[3]A similar point was made recently by Mark Massa in "Beyond 'Liberal' and 'Conservative': The Internal Sectarian Threat to U.S. Catholicism," in *Inculturation and the Church in North America*, ed. T. Frank Kennedy (New York: Crossroad, 2006), 127–44.

[4]As a Roman Catholic theologian writing about ecclesiology in a way that I believe potentially fruitful for continuing dynamics within the Roman Catholic community, I must also be clear about my use of the word "church." When speaking of "the church" from my confessional perspective, I do so recognizing the irreplaceable ecumenical context of contemporary Christian theology and with the hope, rather than the surety, that in raising questions about "the church" these reflections may help in the multidenominational attempt to understand the one church of Christ in and through our particularities.

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more than an image. . . . In metaphor we envisage one thing in terms of another, bringing two images into juxtaposition."[5] Ecclesial metaphors, the events of the connection of a biblical or liturgical image with the complex sociohistorical and theological reality of the Christian church are, I would suggest in agreement with Avis, the starting points for Christian ecclesiology.

With regard to the selection of these two metaphors, why am I leaving out the church as "Body of Christ," as "Temple of the Holy Spirit," as "Communio,"[6] as "Vine and Branches," as "God's Flock," or any of the other biblical and liturgical metaphors used in Christian language and practice? The main reason is the familiarity of these metaphors and the way they function, for many theologians and believers, in ecclesiological arguments between "traditional" Catholics and "progressive" Catholics. The scare quotes are to remind us how sloppy and porous those divisions are, but they are an increasingly common aspect of how Roman Catholics, at least in my North American context, tend to identify themselves.[7] Taking a metaphor stereotypically associated with the proposals, identities, and language of the Catholic "left" and another associated with the proposals, identities, and language of the Catholic "right" prevents an argument of this sort from being misinterpreted by either "side" as a point of order against the other. In good Pauline terms, "all have sinned." At the same time, hewing closely to

[5]Paul Avis outlines these basic definitions of metaphor and image, as well as symbol and myth, in the course of his argument about the irreducibly metaphorical nature of theological language in *God and the Creative Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 94–98. But while Avis is suspicious of any theology that forgets its basic symbolic and metaphorical—in short, imaginative—roots, and provides an important warning for theologians who forget the limitations of their speech and method, I will continue to argue below for the possibility of more and less systematic, more and less clear and consistent theological methods, that avoid Avis's "wild-goose chase" for "greater and greater degrees of literalness" (102) without abandoning the attempt for systematic theological clarity.

[6]Is "communion" a metaphor? Unlike the other liturgical and biblical metaphors presented here, *communio* seems to be more of an abstract theological concept than a metaphor drawn from human experience. At the same time, the model of the church as "communion" has arisen just as quickly as many ecclesial metaphors, and could potentially be superseded just as quickly as the other "blueprint ecclesiologies" of the twentieth century (the term is Nicholas M. Healy's; see Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, Studies in Christian Doctrine [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 25–51; see also Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007], 36–38). I have elsewhere argued that while "communion" is just as susceptible to such a non-systematic usage as these ecclesial metaphors, it may also be used in a less hegemonic and more explanatory way to speak about some aspects of the nature of the church (Flanagan, "Communion, Diversity, and Salvation," 185–91).

[7]Cf. Massa, "Beyond 'Liberal' and 'Conservative.'"

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some metaphors currently in play shows how better ecclesiological method might lead away from a sterile clash of imagery toward a more careful conversation about the church.[8]

A. The Church as the People of God

Speaking of the church as "the People of God" is obviously not new,[9] and while the metaphor of the church as the People of God only explicitly appears once in the New Testament (1 Peter 2:9-10), the numerous Old Testament texts as well as some key New Testament texts which linked the Christian community with Israel as "God's people" (Galatians 3:6-29; Romans 9-11) provided a rich source for Christian reflection upon the church throughout its history.[10] While the metaphor was rarely absent from Christian reflections upon the church and liturgical discourse, it took on new life in the middle of the twentieth century as Roman Catholic theologians seeking to describe the church using a central metaphor or metaphors grew increasingly critical of the prevalent ecclesiology of the church as "Body of

[8]The metaphor of the church as the "Body of Christ" would be the most likely contender as a major metaphor of the church that determines Christian ecclesiology in a significant way (although not all theologians or exegetes would identify this Pauline phrase as a metaphor; e.g., see Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology,* 2 vols. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 2:211–15). But while there are definite systematic difficulties involved in clinging too closely to the metaphor of church as the Body of Christ (e.g., the difficulty in understanding the relationship of non-Catholic Christians to the Roman Catholic Church, if the latter is identified as "the Body of Christ"; the image of the church as a physical "body" lends itself to a binary division: one is either part of a body, or not), the metaphor does not play a comparable role in intraecclesial Roman Catholic divisions, and so an analysis of the metaphor is less pressing at this time.

[9]For a brief overview and extensive references on the use of the metaphor in ecclesiology, see Christopher O'Donnell, "People of God," in *Ecclesia: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 357–59. Some of the crucial sources for understanding the notion and its historical genesis are Yves Congar, "The Church: The People of God," *Concilium* 1:1 (January 1965): 7–19; Mannes Dominikus Koster, *Ekklesiologie im Werden* (Paderborn: Verlag der Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1940); Karl Rahner, "People of God" in *Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner et al., 6 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968–70), 4:400–2; Joseph Ratzinger, *Das Neue Volk Gottes* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969); idem, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1992 [original diss. 1951]); and the documents of Vatican II themselves, particularly chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium*.

[10]This analysis is based upon Daniel Harrington, "The Church and the People of God," in *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teach Us Today* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 69–81. For more on the people of God in the Scriptures, see Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 75–83; Pierre Grelot, "People," in *The Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour (London: Chapman, 1973), 416–22; R. Meyer and H. Strathmannn, "Laos," in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 4:29–56.

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Christ."[11] Of crucial importance for understanding Catholic ecclesiologies of the People of God is the introduction of the term as a chapter heading in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution of the Church.[12] This chapter was introduced by Cardinal Suenens during meetings of the Coordinating Commission in the summer of 1963, before the second session. By incorporating material from an earlier draft's section on the laity, and by placing this chapter before chapters on the church's hierarchical constitution and on the laity, the Commission, and the Council Fathers who later approved the new ordering, used the metaphor of the People of God to emphasize that which all the baptized share in common prior to other ecclesial distinctions, as well as the common sharing of the entire people in Christ's priestly and prophetic offices (§§10-12).[13] The document's use of the metaphor emphasizes the "common responsibility" of the baptized to be Christ's presence in the world in a way that anticipates the fifth chapter's discussion of the universal call to holiness.[14]

The history of the reception of Vatican II is obviously still ongoing, and so conclusions about "what happened" at the Council and afterwards are precisely that which is at issue in current ecclesiological discourse. But one can note that in the post-conciliar period, the metaphor of the church as the People of God was enthusiastically embraced in different ways in different parts of the Catholic Church. As canonists institutionalized the Council in canon law, "the People of God" became the title of Book II of the 1983 Code, dealing with the faithful in general, in a way which made the hierarchical organization of that people clear.[15] Here in North America, the metaphor's emphasis upon the

[11]The bibliography on the church as the "Body of Christ" is as extensive as that on the People of God. Again, a good starting point is the article "Body of Christ" in O'Donnell, *Ecclesia*, 62–64. The three major sources which brought Body of Christ language from the Roman School into the center of twentieth-century ecclesiology are Émile Mersch, *La théologie du corps mystique*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949), along with Mersch's earlier biblical and historical studies; Sebastian Tromp, *Corpus Christi quod est ecclesia* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1946), available in English as *The Body of Christ, Which is the Church*, trans. Ann Condit (New York: Vantage Press, 1960); and Pius XII's 1943 encyclical *Mystici corporis*, AAS 35 (1943): 193–248, of which Tromp was a primary author.

[12]*Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents, New Revised Edition*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P., 2 vols. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), 1:350-426, esp. chapter 2, "The People of God", 1:359–69.

[13]See Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, 5 vols. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995–2006), 2:411–12; 3:43–44.

[14]See Joseph Komonchak, "The Significance of Vatican Council II for Ecclesiology," in *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 83–86.

[15]See James H. Provost, "Introduction to Canons 204–329," in *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, ed. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1985), 117–19.

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equality and dignity of all the baptized was very well received in a culture familiar with democratic institutions. It also became an important theme in the rhetoric and theology of various reforming groups such as Call to Action, the We Are Church movement, and, more recently, Voice of the Faithful.[16] It appears that these tendencies in Europe and North America, as well as the use of the term "people" with political or Marxist connotations by Latin American liberation theologians, raised concerns among some Vatican officials, including Joseph Ratzinger, who in numerous publications and in the 1984 letter *Libertatis nuntius* warned against using the term "people" in an overly "sociological" sense or to describe a "people" as a "class."[17] Concerns regarding precisely this slippage from a biblical to a supposedly sociological understanding of "people" in "the People of God" may have contributed to the tendency of later documents, including the 1985 Report of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, to emphasize "communion" as a key term over that of "People of God."[18]

Even if, as I argue below, ecclesial metaphors cannot by themselves replace the work of systematic ecclesiology, they are crucial in their ability to summarize and emphasize constituent aspects of the mystery of the church. To what ecclesiological values, then, does this particular metaphor appear to point? First, biblically, the metaphor suggests the calling of Israel and, by extension, the church, as a community, rather than as a collection of disparate individuals. Second, the metaphor entails the biblical ideas of being chosen by God (the "being called out" of the *qahal Yahweh*[19]: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" [1 Peter 2:10]), rooted in the idea of covenant, and God's covenant faithfulness to God's people. Finally, as its use in *Lumen Gentium* suggests, the idea of the church as the People of God provides

[16]See, for example, Bradford E. Hinze's treatment of the Call to Action movement in *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 64–89.

[17]See Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church,* trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 46–48; Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion,* ed. Stephen Otto and Vingang Ofnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 126–29; and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation' (*Libertatis Nuntius*)," *Origins* 14 (September 14, 1984): nos. 11-13. Note that in this letter the CDF refers not to the "People of God," but to the term "Church of the People"; however, given Ratzinger's comments as a "private theologian" regarding the use of the term "people" when discussing liberation theology, I think it legitimate to identify the same concern in these different formulations.

[18]This argument is forcefully made by José Comblin, *People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), esp. 52–62.

[19]See J.Y. Campbell, "The Origin and Meaning of the Word *Ekklesia*," *Journal of Theological Studies* 49 (1948): 130–42.

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a corrective to an ecclesiology overly focused upon church office and institutional distinctions (Yves Congar's "hiearchiology"[20]) to emphasize the common baptism and common witness to God in Christ shared by all Christian believers. While the hierarchical ordering of the People of God is a constituent aspect of *Lumen Gentium*'s understanding of the metaphor, the value of recognizing the church as the community of the *Christifideles*, the Christian faithful, before distinguishing roles and offices within that people, must be a part of a systematic ecclesiology.

B. The Church as the Bride of Christ

An increasingly important metaphor emphasized in Catholic speech about the church is that of the church as the bride or spouse of Christ. Again, the novelty of this metaphor is not the metaphor itself, but the use to which it is being put in contemporary theology. Biblical imagery of Israel and of the Christian church as the spouse of God and the bride of Christ creates an important, though not uncontroversial, tradition of ecclesiological reflection.[21] In Hosea in the Old Testament, in Revelation, and especially in chapter 5 of the Letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament, one finds the seeds for a long tradition of reflection upon the metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ. *Lumen Gentium* includes the metaphor in its collection of ecclesial imagery at the end of the first chapter on "the Church as Mystery" (LG §6), and Christopher O'Donnell reports that the Doctrinal Commission stated that three things were being asserted in the use of this metaphor: "the intimate union between Christ and the Church; the distinction between the Church and Christ; [and] obedience to him."[22]

In recent years, the two most prominent sources for a renewal of nuptial imagery for the church have been the work of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, and various statements of John Paul II and other Vatican officials, partially influenced by von Balthasar, that have invoked the metaphor of the church as bride in discussing practical questions of women's ordination and same-sex relationships. Von Balthasar's corpus is extensive and multifaceted, and it is far beyond

[20]Congar, "The Church: The People of God," 17–18.

[21]See "Spouse" in O'Donnell, *Ecclesia*, 427–28. On biblical use in the Old and New Testaments, see Joachim Jeremias, "Numphê, numphios," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:1099–1106; Ethelbert Stauffer, "Gameô, gamos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:648–57; Gilberte Baril, *The Feminine Face of the People of God: Biblical Symbols of the Church as Bride and Mother* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); and R.A. Batey, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 1971). For an early feminist critique of spousal imagery in biblical texts, see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

[22]O'Donnell, "Spouse," 427.

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the limits of this essay to survey it in depth.[23] But a major element of von Balthasar's theological anthropology, of his understanding of the relation of Christ and humanity, and of his understanding of ecclesial office involves an assertion of the importance of gender, and particularly the complementary relations of male and female, masculinity and femininity.[24] As did Vatican II's Doctrinal Commission, von Balthasar uses the metaphor to emphasize the intimacy of the relationship between Christ and the church, the distinction between them, and the subordinate role of the church in relation to Christ. In his ecclesiological writings, however, von Balthasar makes it central to understanding a variety of ecclesial relationships.[25] While feminist theologians have rightly raised questions regarding the use of the Christ-Bride relation in anthropology and in modeling the relations between men and women,[26] the ecclesiological questions arise when von Balthasar applies the metaphor's values of activity and receptivity to ecclesial structures. Von Balthasar's assertion of the Marian, that is, feminine and receptive role of the church as a whole in relation to God's action in Christ appears to prevent privileging men over women, or leaders over

[23]There are numerous introductions to the theology of von Balthasar available. See Bede McGregor and Thomas Norris, eds., *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994); Edward T. Oakes, S.J., *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1997); Edward T. Oakes, S.J., and David Moss, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995). It is important to note that while for the purposes of this essay I have focused upon important aspects of von Balthasar's thought on gender and ecclesiology, it would be a significant error to reduce his theology to these topics and positions.

[24]For articles that summarize this aspect of von Balthasar's thought, some critically, see Corinne Crammer, "One Sex or Two? Balthasar's Theology of the Sexes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 93–112; Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology," *Theological Studies* 64 (2004): 566–95; David Moss and Lucy Gardner, "Difference—The Immaculate Concept? The Laws of Sexual Difference in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Modern Theology* 14 (1998): 377–401; and Susan A. Ross, "Women, Beauty, and Justice: Moving Beyond von Balthasar," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25 (2005): 79–98.

[25]Two of the most immediately accessible collections are his 1974 work *Der antirömische Affekt*, available in English as *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), and his 1961 collection of essays with the significant title *Sponsa Verbi*, volume two of his *Explorations in Theology*, available in English as *Spouse of the Word*, trans. A.V. Littledale and Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991). Another programmatic article in the journal *Communio*, which von Balthasar helped found, is "Mary—Church—Office," *Communio* 23 (1996): 193–98.

[26]Michelle Gonzalez's article is particularly helpful in showing how von Balthasar and feminist theology have much in common in their mutual appreciation for gender, embodiment, and relationship as important aspects of a theological anthropology, while she also critiques von Balthasar's attempt to simultaneously assert an equality of the two sexes and a certain priority to the "active" male over the "receptive" female; see Gonzalez, "Hans Urs von Balthasar," 570–72.

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people in general. But in his treatments of ecclesial office, he further claims that the Petrine ministries of the church, by participating in Christ's active presence, place most of the members of the church in a passive relation to their leaders.[27]

John Paul II's theology of the body also has much in common with feminist theology in its effort to take gender and bodies seriously as important constituents of an adequate theological anthropology. But John Paul II also maintains a strong theory of difference and complementarity between genders.[28] Susan Ross has analyzed the way in which a theory of gender utilizing spousal imagery arose in parallel to developments in the women's movement within the Catholic Church, and became prominent in Catholic arguments in the debate over the ordination of women in the middle of the 1970s.[29] Beginning with the declaration *Inter Insigniores*, and continuing with the Apostolic Letter "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Mulieris Dignitatem*, a strong theory of gender and of gender complementarity became "the dominant motif . . . in the understanding both of priesthood and of the nature of women."[30] Ross's later work also shows how the metaphor became a major part of the argument against a revision of the church's teachings on same-sex sexual relations; she suggests that here John Paul II's emphasis upon the gendered humanity of Jesus and Mary, and of the gender of all human beings, forged a "metaphysical gender complementarity" which overemphasized the importance of gender and read uncritical assumptions about "active" masculinity and "receptive" femininity into theological anthropology.[31]

While the work of these scholars has focused primarily on questions of anthropology, the question remains of the strengths and limitations of the analogy between the relation of Christ and the church for ecclesiology. Ecclesiological statements regarding the church and the question of women's ordination have focused upon the need for male presiders at the Eucharist in order to symbolize Christ as the Bride-

[27]For example, see von Balthasar, *Spouse of the Word*, 22. Cf. Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 113.

[28]This section relies heavily upon the readings of John Paul II by Susan Ross in *Extravagant Affections*, 102–15, and her essay "The Bridegroom and the Bride: The Theological Anthropology of John Paul II and Its Relation to the Bible and Homosexuality," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung, with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 39–59.

[29]Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 106–8.

[30]Ibid., 107. For a recent work of theology that explicitly combines the thoughts of von Balthasar and John Paul II on gender and gender complementarity in theological anthropology and ecclesiology, see Angelo Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borras (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

[31]Ross, "The Bridegroom and the Bride", 51.

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groom of the church.[32] Combined with the analysis of Christ's "maleness" as being important because of being "active," this raises questions about the relations of those who lead, teach, and administer, and those who are led, taught, and administered. While there is an important truth here in this understanding—in Catholic ecclesiology, ordination does place the minister in a position of leadership within the community, and the particular structures of that leadership are not arbitrary, but divinely willed[33]—one can see where some of the values drawn from the metaphor of the church as the People of God and those drawn from that of the Bride of Christ begin to conflict in a particularly practical way, and do so *without providing any resources internal to the metaphors for negotiating these values*.

As was the case with the People of God, the church as the Bride of Christ gathers together from Scripture and ecclesial tradition a number of values that are important for a systematic ecclesiology. It emphasizes the close connection of Christ with the church while maintaining a distinction between the two. In this way, the metaphor resonates with some of the Pauline ecclesiological thought on the Body of Christ and Christ, the Head of the Church, as well as Augustinian reflections on the church as *totus Christus*.[34] Second, this metaphor emphasizes the necessary dependence of the church upon Christ. While the analogy to human marriages based in male autonomy and female dependence raises major questions for the metaphor's continued use—as Susan Ross points out, "the metaphor was used precisely because men and women were not equal" within marriage[35]—the idea of dependence on Christ remains important in ecclesiology. Third, the metaphor brings into ecclesiology an eschatological perspective: the imagery of the wedding banquet and the kingdom remains that of the "bride" of Christ rather than the "wife" of Christ, calling to attention the need for ecclesiology to think in eschatological and not simply temporal-historical terms.[36]

[32]See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "On the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" (*Inter Insigniores*), *Origins* 6 (February 3, 1977), no. 5; and John Paul II, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*), *Origins* 18 (August 15, 1988), nos. 25–26.

[33]This can be argued in a less simplistic way than "Christ ordained the Apostles, shortly after the First Mass in the Upper Room"; see Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *From Apostles to Bishops* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001).

[34]For a recent article on this concept, see Tarsicius Van Bavel, "The *Christus totus* Idea: A Forgotten Aspect of Augustine's Spirituality," in *Studies in Patristic Christology*, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 84–94.

[35]Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 111.

[36]For the biblical sources of the eschatological reading, see Richard Batey, "Paul's Bride Image: A Symbol of Realistic Ecclesiology," *Interpretation* 17 (2001): 176–82; and Annette Merz, "Why Did the Pure Bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11.2) Become a Wedded Wife

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In all these values, however, one can see the limitations of a single metaphor. Just as the People of God metaphor may have difficulty addressing hierarchical distinctions in the church, the bridal metaphor seems less well equipped to respond to abuses of power or to questions of co-responsibility for the mission of the church. Similarly, the People of God may better recognize sinfulness of the church in history by its emphasis upon the church as a pilgrim people, a people *in via*, but this can also lead to an underestimation of Christ's presence in the church. At the same time, too strong a reading of the church's eschatological future as the spotless bride into the historical church can and has led to an inability to see and respond to sin in the church and, at times, a proud triumphalism.[37] Finally, the metaphor of the People of God does well to emphasize the continuity of God's saving action in the history of Israel with the history of the church,[38] but that of the Bride of Christ better points to the newness and the centrality of God's saving action in Jesus of Nazareth.

So where does this leave us? What are the possible ecclesiological responses to take account of the diversity of these (and numerous other) ecclesiological metaphors? What is the relation of these metaphors in their complexity to the work of a systematic ecclesiology?

III. The Project of a Systematic Ecclesiology

What, then, do I mean by "a systematic ecclesiology"? Broadly, by "systematic" theology or ecclesiology, I understand the kind of theological investigation described by Bernard Lonergan as the functional specialty "systematics," namely the attempt, starting from doctrines, "to work out appropriate systems of conceptualization, to remove apparent inconsistencies, to move towards some grasp of spiritual matters both from their own inner coherence and from the analogies offered by more familiar human experience."[39] Systematic ecclesiologies investigate the church methodically, critically, and constructively, in contrast to catechetical and pastoral exercises in theological communication

(Eph. 5.22–23)? Theses about the Intertextual Transformation of an Ecclesiological Metaphor," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 79 (2001): 131–47.

[37]The major issues around the sinfulness of the church have been masterfully addressed recently by Francis A. Sullivan, "Do the Sins of Its Members Affect the Holiness of the Churches?" in *In God's Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism in Honour of Michael A. Fahey, S.J.*, ed. Jaroslav Z. Skira and Michael S. Attridge (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), 247–68.

[38]For an introduction to some of these issues, see George Lindbeck, "The Church as Israel: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism," in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 78–94.

[39]Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 132.

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and to academic religious studies approaches to religious phenomena. Systematic ecclesiologies attempt to answer questions about the church by raising relevant questions, defining terms and the relations between those terms in relatively stable ways, and attempting to understand a reality through consistent methodological choices. They are theoretical discourses that aim at an understanding of the church by viewing the patterns, relations, and structures of the church in relative abstraction from the concrete churches themselves, although with critical attention to the factors that limit one's ability to produce an all-encompassing or complete theological system. Ecclesial metaphors are necessary but not sufficient resources for the construction of such an ecclesiology, and at least two attempted solutions to the diversity of ecclesial metaphors are, in my judgment, insufficient.

A. Juxtaposition of Metaphors

One solution to the difficulty of a plurality of differing metaphors carrying different ecclesial values is that of juxtaposing them without attempting to correlate them in anything other than an ad hoc way, invoking one metaphor in response to a particular issue, and another in different circumstances. There are two varieties of this in contemporary ecclesiology, a "common sense" version and a more sophisticated version exemplified in the early work of Avery Dulles, S.J. In the first variety, this sort of ecclesiology resembles what Bernard Lonergan in *Insight* calls the domain of "common sense":

> Common sense . . . never aspires to universally valid knowledge and . . . never attempts exhaustive communication. Its concern is the concrete and particular. Its function is to master each situation as it arises. Its procedure is to reach an incomplete set of insights that is to be completed only by adding on each occasion the further insights that scrutiny of the occasion reveals.[40]

In other words, this is the kind of intellectual activity that is able to respond in a particular situation, thanks to the wisdom of experience, with actions appropriate to the situation. It is the ability to apply the right proverb: should I "look before I leap," or "take life by the horns"? In the church, an experienced pastor knows his or her congregation, their concerns and context, and the scriptural texts at hand well enough to decide whether emphasizing that "we are one body" or that "we are each called to be living stones" makes most sense in a particu-

[40]Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 176–77.

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lar setting. And while this is knowing—a very particular and difficult kind of knowing, as pastors and catechists can confirm—this is a different kind of knowing than that which we call "scientific" or "systematic" knowing. In anthropology or sociology, a "best guess" or "hunch" might be a helpful start to an investigation, but more is required to proceed to a well-grounded theory. Similarly in ecclesiology, or in any branch of theology: this is one reason why responding to a parishioner in crisis requires something different than a recitation of a passage from Thomas' *Tertia Pars*.

A second version of this avenue of ecclesiology is best exemplified by the first edition of Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church*, and is dependent upon a particular understanding of the church as a mystery. In reaction to inadequate, textbook-based Bellarminian theology that focused almost exclusively on the visible church, the development of a renewed sense of the church's participation in the mystery of God was and is a very good thing.[41] A sense of ecclesial mystery is an important check on too confident, too objectifying, a systematic ecclesiology. But in some approaches, including that of Dulles, an understanding of mystery has functioned to hold ecclesiology back from too definitive or clear an elaboration of ecclesiological terms and relations. Dulles uses the idea of "models," taken from his reading of the physical and social sciences, to outline an ecclesiology in which no one model takes precedence:

> The term mystery, applied to the Church, signifies many things. It implies that the Church is not fully intelligible to the finite mind of man, and that the reason for this lack of intelligibility is not the poverty but the richness of the Church itself. Like other supernatural mysteries, the Church is known by a kind of connaturality. . . . We cannot fully objectify the Church because we are involved in it; we know it through a kind of intersubjectivity. Furthermore, the Church pertains to the mystery of Christ; Christ is carrying out in the Church his plan of redemption. He is dynamically at work in the Church through his Spirit.[42]

Dulles is correct to point out two major issues for ecclesiological method, namely, our direct involvement in the reality under investigation (shared with the human sciences), and God's involvement with

[41]For historical summaries of how this movement to reclaim the church as mystery, beginning in the Tübingen school, developed in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, see Yves Congar, *L'Église de saint Augustin à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970), 417–37; and Michael J. Himes, "The Development of Ecclesiology: Modernity to the Twentieth Century," in *The Gift of the Church*, 45–67.

[42]Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 17–18.

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that reality (shared with the rest of theology). And his investigation of ecclesial models has been immensely important for ecclesiology in presenting some of the characteristics of various ecclesial metaphors as they provide data, as it were, for its investigation of the nature of the church. But does the early Dulles's understanding of mystery, and of the limits for ecclesiology this understanding entails, end ecclesiology's investigation too early?

Karl Rahner's theology of mystery is helpful here. While one of the major theologians who brought back into awareness the mysteriousness, the strangeness, of human speech which attempts to say something about God,[43] he also argued against confusing the overabundance of communication in God as mystery with the absence of meaning found in our everyday "mysteries," or in the mystery of sin. As mistaken as the impulse to believe our theology has "captured" or "comprehended" the mystery of God is the impulse to treat mystery in theology "as something which is of no concern to man at all, so that he cannot deal with it or make any pronouncement on it."[44] While when speaking of God "we can only stammer of him and speak of him vaguely and indirectly," Rahner writes, ". . . we ought not to be silent about him only because we cannot speak of him properly."[45]

Joseph Komonchak also argues strongly against giving up the pursuit of understanding the nature of the church too quickly. Like Rahner, he acknowledges that the mysteriousness of the church should alert the theologian to the fact that her object of study involves the excess of intelligibility that is found in God and God's involvement in the world. "It is true, of course, that an ecclesiology which does not place the Church's life in God at its center or which claims to have exhausted its meaning thereby disqualifies itself."[46] At the same time, Komonchak argues that to stop pursuing a systematic understanding of the church out of fear of transgressing the limits of human reason is to misunderstand the relation of systematic theology to the mystery that is God.

[43]Particularly in his early lecture "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *Theological Investigations,* vol 4: *More Recent Writings* (New York: Crossroad, 1966), 36–73. Originally published as "Über der Begriff des Geheimnisses in der Katholische Theologie" in *Schriften zur Theologie,* vol. 4 (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1960), 51–99.

[44]Rahner, "Mystery," in *Sacramentum Mundi:* 4:133.

[45]Rahner, "God is No Scientific Formula," in *The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner's Theological Writings*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt, trans. and ed. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 228. It may be interesting to note that Rahner is much more interested in his time in making the "mystery" of God mysterious again, that is, of working to prevent the mysteries of the Christian experience of God from being moved about by theologians like so many pieces on a chessboard. From the standpoint of theology today in postmodernity, we are likely to be too anxious about the inadequacies of our language to even begin "stammering."

[46]Komonchak, "Ecclesiology and Social Theory," in "Foundations in Ecclesiology," ed. Fred Lawrence, suppl. issue, *Lonergan Workshop* 11 (1995): 65.

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> But this [the inexhaustibility of the Mystery of God in the church] does not mean that Mystery and the systematic effort are mutually exclusive, as a reading of almost any few pages of Aquinas might make clear. In fact, it could even be argued that the systematic exigence is powered by Mystery, by the presence in Word and grace of the God towards whose inexhaustible depths one may be drawn in intellectual desire without having to suspect oneself of attempted deicide.[47]

"It also helps to keep in mind," Komonchak continues, "that not all efforts to speak of Mystery are equally inadequate and that Mystery is not legitimately invoked as a reason for not exploring fundamental differences in the efforts or for not criticizing and evaluating them."[48]

The attempt to catalogue the various metaphors used to point to important aspects of the nature of the church is an important first step. But evading the further step of critically relating the values suggested by these metaphors in a non-metaphorical system, even out of respect for the complexity and the mystery of the church, limits the scope of a theoretical understanding of the church.

B. Choosing a Dominant Metaphor

The attempt to further specify the relations between different metaphors brings us to the second possible way of constructing a systematic ecclesiology, a privileging of one metaphor as the primary or basic metaphor of the church. This was the dominant ecclesiological trend for much of twentieth-century ecclesiology.

The historical succession of ecclesiological terms in the twentieth century, from the church as Body of Christ, to church as People of God, to ecclesiologies of communion, suggests that there is something problematic about trying to find a "key metaphor" for the church. John Ford comments that "the life expectancy of a given biblical metaphor in ecclesiology seems to be two to three decades."[49] Nicholas M. Healy has presented the strongest critique of "the attempt to encapsulate in a single word or phrase the most essential characteristic of the church."[50]

[47]Ibid. The further possibilities and limits of a systematic ecclesiology that considers the concept of the church's participation in theological mystery, while drawing on critical reason and social scientific discourses, have been explored by Neil Ormerod in "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 3–30; and "A Dialectic Engagement with the Social Sciences in an Ecclesiological Context," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 815–40.

[48]Komonchak, "Ecclesiology and Social Theory," 66.

[49]John Ford, "Koinonia and Roman Catholic Ecclesiology," *Ecumenical Trends* 26 (1997): 42.

[50]Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 26.

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Healy is most concerned about the idealism of what he terms "blueprint ecclesiologies," their disconnect from the reality of the church as experienced and their tendency to provide widely diverging views of what the church "should" look like, a critique seconded by Neil Ormerod:

> They provide often inspiring but idealized models of church life based on profound notions of *communio*, *perichoresis*, *mysterium*, and *diakonia*. They describe a church that we would all want to belong to. But when we look at the church as an historical concrete reality we may wonder about the discrepancy between the idealized form and the historical facts.[51]

Furthermore, beginning to understand these single-metaphor ecclesiologies as rhetorical strategies, as Healy proposes, raises questions not only of their connection to reality, but of their ideological potential. Ecclesiologies are presented by contextualized theologians, and those theologians are involved in differing ways in discourses of power. "Of itself," Healy writes, "a model can offer few answers to ecclesiological questions. The model cannot function as a normative principle, but only . . . as a concept summarizing the ecclesiological proposals a particular theologian is advancing or analyzing."[52] If that theologian is, for example, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith or the president of a theological society, then the uncritical use of an ecclesial model is not only theologically but also politically questionable. This is particularly problematic in relation to the issues of ecclesial polarization with which I began this essay, in which dominant ecclesial metaphors are no longer invoked only to assist in understanding the church, but to rally a faction in support of a particular program of ecclesial practice and reform. In a strange way, these ecclesiologies echo their earlier, neoscholastic precedents: in their attempt to promote a "People of God" ecclesiology or a "Body of Christ" ecclesiology, one can find the lingering desire to capture an understanding of the church in a single, easily-referenced volume *De Ecclesia*.

C. Constructing a Systematic Ecclesiology

How then ought theologians proceed in our use of ecclesial metaphors and our construction of systematic ecclesiologies? And how might this be of assistance in easing some of the polarizations within

[51]Ormerod, "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," 5.
[52]Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 46.

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Catholic Christianity? First, there is a need for greater discernment in distinguishing different kinds of theological discourse. Second, I have some broad suggestions as to what such an ecclesiology might look like.

1. Distinguishing Speech About the Church

It seems that one ought to begin by discussing how to distinguish different kinds of theological discourse. This is a question not only in ecclesiology, or even in theology, but one that arises in any specialized field of knowledge: namely, the need to distinguish the language and the kind of meaning found in theoretical explanations from that found in other kinds of language and meaning. Personal narratives of the church, liturgical invocations of the church, a sermon preached on the church—these kinds of theological speech are different from a systematic theoretical understanding of the church. As Charles Hefling has written, "Theology stands to religion as political science does to government, or economics to business and commerce. All three are specialized intellectual enterprises that aim to understand, assess, and promote activities that are already going on."[53] The kinds of ecclesiology outlined above that attempt to describe the church through a metaphor or series of metaphors fail to ask questions about the church in the methodical, self-critical way that the study of a complex reality calls for. Systematic ecclesiology cannot be content with enumerating the language the church uses to describe itself in prayer or narrative, but requires a more methodically controlled exploration of these terms in relation to each other, to other theological doctrines and questions, and to non-theological theoretical discourses. Without such a method, the clarity, relative stability, and interconnection with other theological and non-theological positions that ecclesiology requires are not possible.

This is not an argument that the use of ecclesial metaphors is worthless or inappropriate in all circumstances, but that attention should be paid to how metaphors can and cannot function in ecclesiology. Ecclesial metaphors provide suggestions, starting points, broad pictures of the values embodied in ecclesial relationships, but cannot on their own explain the relationships between these metaphors or relate them to other theological and social scientific theories.[54] The

[53]Charles C. Hefling, Jr., *Why Doctrines?* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1984), 74. Hefling's statement builds upon the distinction of realms of meaning elaborated by Bernard Lonergan; cf. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 81–85.

[54]In fact, there may be numerous situations in which metaphors would be essential to ecclesiological reflection. This would seem to be especially the case in preaching or in what Lonergan calls "Communications" (*Method in Theology*, 355–68). But these are two tasks: the task of preaching the church in a way that stirs hearts and minds, and the task

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strengths of ecclesial metaphors, their open-endedness, their conceptual and experiential richness, and their symbolic depth are what make such metaphors essential to liturgical and spiritual life. But these characteristics make ecclesial metaphors insufficient for a systematic investigation of the church that requires defined categories and concepts, foundational positions, and relatively stable definitions of terms and of the relations between those terms—in Hefling's words, that requires a "specialized intellectual enterprise" comparable to political science in its investigations of government or economics in its theories of the market. By communicating many of the important ecclesiological values of the tradition, these metaphors provide much of the material from which a systematic ecclesiology is constructed. But without critical reflection on these metaphors in the context of a systematic ecclesiology, what remains is an idealist, and possibly ideologically motivated, vision of the church that may have little to do with the day-to-day ecclesial experience of most Christians. Komonchak warns that in attempting to free the church from the thin, juridically focused ecclesiologies of the past, ecclesiologists are liable to limit ecclesiology further by divorcing it from reality. "The displacement of a narrowly juridical understanding of the Church by various more fully theological understandings," he writes, "leads thus to a curiously abstract ecclesiology which neglects the concrete self-realizations of the Church in favor of an interpretation or simple reproduction of biblical or doctrinal statements."[55]

One may follow Komonchak and conceive of the relation between systematic ecclesiological and ecclesial metaphors in terms of Bernard Lonergan's functional specialities,[56] or one may draw on a more broadly-based method which makes distinctions between preaching, liturgy, prayer, and systematics. But to know what one is doing when doing systematic ecclesiology, how that differs from other kinds of speech about the church, and the strengths and limitations of metaphors in such a project, is crucial to doing systematic ecclesiology well. This does not make it more important than some other tasks of speech about the church, but it does make systematic ecclesiology

of understanding the church in a deliberate and critical way, sometimes boring to all but the most dedicated specialist. While these two tasks are obviously related, distinguishing what one is doing when one is preaching from what one is doing when one is pursuing a systematic ecclesiology is a necessary clarification.

[55]Komonchak, "Lonergan and the Tasks of Ecclesiology," *Lonergan Workshop* 11 (1995): 52–53. It is also for this reason that Komonchak, Ormerod, and others insist upon sustained and critical ecclesiological attention to the social sciences.

[56]See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 125–45.

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different from what other forms of speech about the church are trying to do.[57]

This is crucial for a theological understanding of the church, because ecclesiology is not a subject that can be pursued independently from the other doctrinal and theological questions systematic theology addresses. One might view ecclesiology as a chapter of soteriology, as a foundation for an evangelically adequate canon law, or as a combination of these projects and more. But in each of these investigations, coming to some greater systematic clarity in our understanding of this community of grace called "the church" may be beneficial for the short-term practical issues of our current generation as well as the long-term issues which will continue to face the church in coming millennia. If we believe that there are more and less adequate ways of speaking about theological mysteries, then our search for truth about the church requires us to use the best theological, philosophical, and social-scientific tools available to understand the church, and that task is hampered if the metaphors that aided ecclesiology in recognizing ecclesial mystery become braces restricting its further development.

2. Some Preliminary Characteristics of a Systematic Ecclesiology

What would such a systematic ecclesiology look like? At this point, I can provide only some broad suggestions and examples rather than a full program for research.

First, such a systematic ecclesiology is likely to be far more boring than some of the ecclesiologies of the twentieth century, and than some other kinds of speech about the church. Comparison with political science or sociology, two of the closest cognates to ecclesiology in the social sciences, might be helpful here. A legal definition of citizenship, and an analysis of how those relations function in the overall context of civic life, is not likely to become reading for the beach, nor be useful in the distinct rhetorical task of inspiring good citizenship or drawing support for democracy and the rule of law. But it is crucial to understanding clearly how parties relate to each other, to knowing how to adjudicate disputes between parties in a fair and just way, to analyzing

[57]Some of the best work in exploring the relation between different kinds of speech about God has been done in recent years by liturgical theologians in their reflections upon the difference between liturgical praxis and theological discourse, and their mutual influence; their discussions of how to draw systematic propositions out of liturgical practice without stripmining the liturgy for data or seeing liturgy only as a source for "real theology" are some of the more sophisticated attempts to distinguish and relate different kinds of theological speech. See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001) and Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) for two examples.

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the concept of citizenship itself, and to equipping civic institutions to respond adequately to the needs of its citizens. Likewise, systematic ecclesiologies may look less like sermons and more like textbooks. But unlike neoscholastic manuals *De ecclesia* that assumed the invalidity of any ecclesiological reflection besides their systems, they will likely be more cautious in approaching their topic. A new kind of systematic ecclesiology will take into account the difficulties of understanding the church as mystery, the limitations of its methods and purposes in relation to other kinds of thought about the church, and the location and perspective of its authors in order to avoid the temptation to canonize *a* systematic ecclesiology as *the* systematic ecclesiology.

Second, such a systematic ecclesiology will be more humble in its claims, maintaining what Gerard Mannion calls an "epistemic humility" that recognizes the limitations and fragility of its own methods.[58] It will have to renounce its efforts to find a term or metaphor that would function as a "magic bullet" and eliminate the need for constant, careful systematic reflection. For example, the immense importance of the idea of "communion" for Catholic ecclesiology and for the ecumenical movement in recent years has had many benefits, not the least of which has been providing a common language to ecumenical theologians in dealing with some of the impasses in questions of universality and locality, membership and non-membership, unity and plurality. But important critiques can and have been raised regarding the ability of a single notion to respond to all of the questions related to the Christian church.[59] If "communion" is the answer to every ecclesiological question, then the concept is stretched beyond its ability to answer specific questions well, and is thereby made irrelevant as theologians wait for a new, more popular ecclesiological term. Systematic ecclesiologies will need to be more humble in attempting to "summarize" or "define" the church.

Third, we are likely to encounter a single systematic ecclesiology less often than we will find numerous systematic treatments of particular questions. This is already far more often the case in our ecclesiological practice. Works on questions of episcopal authority, on the nature of salvation in and out of the church, on the place of the laity in the church, on relations between the local and universal church, and on

[58]Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*, 125. See also a later section of that chapter, "Humility in Method," 132–34.

[59]In addition to Ford, "Koinonia and Roman Catholic Ecclesiology," see Nicholas M. Healy, "Communion Ecclesiology: A Cautionary Note," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995): 442–453; Thomas P. Looney, "*Koinonia* Ecclesiology: How Solid a Foundation?" *One in Christ* 36 (2000): 145–66; and David McLoughlin, "*Communio* Models of Church—Rhetoric or Reality?" in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002), 181–90.

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numerous other questions are more likely than a single treatise *De ecclesia*. This is due to a greater awareness of the complexity of the church as a theological and as a human reality, to the vast increase in data available from both the theological and social sciences,[60] and to the numerous social locations from which theologians begin to investigate the church. Ecclesiology will continue to become an increasingly collective enterprise as theologians recognize their own limits and the danger of absolutizing their own particular perspectives.

Finally, this sort of ecclesiology may be of more practical assistance in our current church, and in the questions of polarization with which I began. It would be naïve and dangerous to suppose that if we just got our ecclesiology right, all the problems in the contemporary church would disappear. But if systematic ecclesiologies can begin to point the way beyond the use of ecclesial metaphors as rallying cries for conflicting factions, then they could help to ease some of those tensions. For example, in a study of ecclesial authority, one of the major topics of conversation and tension inside and outside of the Roman Catholic Church, the metaphor of the church as the People of God may suggest a strong awareness of the fundamental baptismal equality of the members of the church, and of their mutual responsibility in the church's mission. That of the church as the Bride of Christ may suggest the importance of the bishop's representation of Christ in the assembly, the real authority of officeholders in relation to their congregations, and the dependence of the entire church, leaders and laity, upon Christ. A systematic ecclesiology will look at the question of authority with reference to these images, to other theological topics, to social-scientific and historical studies, and will attempt to present some preliminary definitions of concepts and statements of the relations between those concepts.[61] And finally, while such ecclesiologies

[60]The need to investigate the concrete life of the Christian church remains necessary, whether one holds, with Komonchak and Mannion, that the modern social sciences can in some instances be of assistance in this endeavor, or, with Healy, Ormerod, and other theologians influenced by the critiques of John Milbank (*Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993]), that non- or anti-Christian assumptions in the social sciences require that ecclesiology call their conclusions into question and require an analysis of the lived church from an explicitly theological perspective (Healy's "practical-prophetic" ecclesiological method and Ormerod's "dialectic engagement").

[61]Healy's recent discussion of the lack of consensus regarding authority in the church provides another helpful example of the kind of systematic ecclesiology I am recommending: it addresses a particular question, with reference to the scriptural, theological, and social data, and comes to conclusions regarding the nature of authority in the church which give a better understanding of authority in the church without attempting to capture these conclusions in a single metaphor or notion which would occlude the reality's complexity. See Nicholas M. Healy, "'By the Working of the Holy Spirit': The

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may not always "preach well," they may help us to "understand well," that is, to analyze the structure and function of the church in a more accurate, less ideologically driven way that makes claims for relatively adequate definitions while recognizing the limits of its own systematic constructions. It is obvious that much of this work is already happening this way in contemporary ecclesiology.[62] But clarity about the uses and limits of metaphors in ecclesiology, and about the structure and limits of ecclesiology more generally, will contribute to the collaborative project of plumbing the mystery of the church.

Crisis of Authority in the Christian Churches," *Anglican Theological Review* 88 (2006): 5–24.

[62]Some examples might be Bradford E. Hinze's recent book, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles, Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006), and the continuing work of Francis A. Sullivan, Richard Gaillardetz, and Paul Lakeland on church authority. See Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1983); Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003); and Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

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