

CONCILIAR ECCLESIOLOGY

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Abstract: Ecclesiological diversity abounds in our Mother Church. So too are the ecclesiologies resplendent in the sixteen documents of Vatican II. These sixteen documents are the communitarian, cumulative, and progressive fruition of the application of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, the principles of *Nouvelle théologie* – labelled as French Theology by Pope Francis. It is this *théologie* that shaped the intellectual vision which laid the theological foundation for the formulation of the documents. This article makes an academic voyage through the kaleidoscope of compelling and convincing *Nouvelle théologie* to unearth a Conciliar ecclesiology that acknowledges many emerging ecclesiologies reverberating with new pastoral approaches.

Keywords: *Nouvelle théologie*, Ecclesiologies, Theological Pluralism, *Ressourcement*, *Aggiornamento*, Collegiality.

1. Introduction

Ecclesiological diversity abounds in the life events of the nascent Church in the New Testament. It continues to be present throughout the history of the Church as understood by the Christian community as a sign of the living presence of the Spirit of the Risen Lord. With the assumption that Vatican II did not provide one standard ecclesiology, this article investigates if the Council¹

¹ ‘The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council’ / ‘Vatican II’ is referred to as ‘the Council’ throughout this research paper.

provided a new orientation for a Conciliar ecclesiology that acknowledged many emerging ecclesiologies. Being divided into two sections, this article largely draws insights from the works of two Conciliar *periti*, Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac. The first section deals with the contributive factors of the Council including the *Nouvelle théologie*, the Conciliar outcome, and the barriers that make their implementation for the pastoral life of the Church hard and sluggish. The second section describes some of the models of the Church, elucidated by the ecclesiologists, primarily by Avery Cardinal Dulles. In the end, the article proposes that Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) imbibe the ingredients of the Conciliar ecclesiology and concludes with a reminder of Pope Francis to study the documents of the Vatican II in depth (in a spirit of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*) so that we will be prepared well for the Holy Year 2025 celebration.

2. Ecclesial Environment at the Time of the Council

At the beginning of the 20th century, Catholicism in France witnessed the separation of State and Church, an anti-clerical campaign, the expulsion of the religious from the country,² and the dismantling of the legal privilege of the Church by the proclamation of Ferry Decree. These aspects called for a bold Catholic response to the political, social, and intellectual challenges of the 20th century. The realistic and proactive response was given by the Catholic Church, which paved the way for a genuine engagement of Catholics in public life, and the Catholic Church's peace with modernity. During this time, the theologians of the *Nouvelle théologie* faced titanic challenges both from the state and the Church including harsh captivity,³ time of disgrace,⁴ and condemnations by the authorities who represented Roman Imperialism.

² Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Denis Minns (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), v.

³ Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, iii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

2.1 Roman Imperialism: Institution Model of the Catholic Church

The Church as an Institution had strong endorsement in the official Church documents before the Council.⁵ Its residues were present even during the post-Conciliar times because of the presence of the Roman Imperialists. The Curia operating on the Institutional Model of the Church created a crisis of anarchy in the Church.⁶ It attempted to sabotage the plan of Pope John XXIII to convoke the Council. The Curia members felt that a new council was unnecessary. The new Council would be a direct threat to the central position defined for the Pope by the First Vatican Council, i.e., authoritative approval of papal primacy and infallibility.⁷ The model of the Church as an Institution served to give the Roman Catholics a strong sense of corporate identity.⁸

This ecclesiology enshrined within itself several major liabilities. Exaggerated institutionalism led to many serious theological problems.⁹ Ecumenically, this ecclesiology was sterile.¹⁰ 1920s onward, the ecumenical movement suffered some severe setbacks from Rome.¹¹ Dulles throws light on some of the drawbacks of this model: “The institutional model, by itself, tends to become rigid, doctrinaire, and conformist; it could easily substitute the official Church of God, and this would be a form of idolatry.”¹² Yves Congar’s ‘return to the sources’ approach had enormous consequences on the life of the Church.¹³ It aimed at the reform

⁵ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image, 2002), 34.

⁶ Henri de Lubac, *Vatican Council Notebooks Volume Two*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 9.

⁷ Bernard M. Daly, *Beyond Secrecy: The Untold Story of Canada and the Second Vatican Council* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2003), 19.

⁸ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

¹¹ Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 4.

¹² Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 186.

¹³ Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, xlvi.

of Curia.¹⁴ His writings reveal that he perceived the Church as a living organism.¹⁵

2.2 The *Nouvelle théologie*

The project, the *Nouvelle théologie*¹⁶ in the 1940s was a fruition of relationships, institutions, friendship, and mentorship in exile. The theologians of the *Nouvelle théologie* made a huge contribution to the process that led to the announcement of the Council. Due to its commitment to returning to the traditional sources, it set the foundation and the ignition for the revitalisation of modern Catholicism.

Through the primary methods of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, making use of Patristic writings and Thomistic Scholasticism, it reimagined the nature of the Catholic Church and its relationship to political order. It shaped the intellectual vision¹⁷ that laid the theological foundation for the formulation of the documents of the Council. The *Nouvelle théologie* brought Catholicism into the twentieth century through the determined and resolute efforts of a group of Jesuits led by Henri de Lubac, along with the Dominicans Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar who “returned to the medieval and ancient sources of the Catholic tradition in order to find resources for an authentically Catholic modernity.”¹⁸

2.3 Protagonists of the Council

This article presents Congar and de Lubac, two major protagonists of the Council seen through their written reports of the Council: Congar’s *Mon Journal du Concile* (My Journal of the Council) and de Lubac’s *Carnets du Concile* (Vatican Council Notebooks, Volume I and Volume II).¹⁹ The sources show how “with de

¹⁴ Ibid., 859.

¹⁵ Ibid., xlvi.

¹⁶ Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 221.

¹⁷ Ibid., 325

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Vatican Council Notebooks, Volume One*, trans. Andrew Stefanelli and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 9.

Lubac, Congar worked assiduously for a reform of the hierarchical and centralised Church that had been dominant from medieval times and, in particular, from the Council of Trent.²⁰ It is to be noted that papal condemnations of both of them before the Council were driven by concerns about authority and change within the Church.²¹

2.3.1 *Yves Congar*

Yves Congar was named a consultor of the Preparatory Theological Commission in July 1960.²² He was an unassuming person,²³ yet his journal of the Council was written with uninhibited and brutal frankness.²⁴ Journalists had access to Congar during the Council.²⁵ He possessed a capacity for synthetic thinking that allowed him to honour the irreplaceable foundation of faith and still integrate what was new and creative. His ecclesiology was essentially biblical, patristic, ecumenical, apostolic, and practical.²⁶ He valued the mission of the lay people in the Catholic Church.²⁷ For him, missionary activity is an extension of the entire life of the Church.²⁸ He opted for ecclesiological renewal, and pastoral and missionary opening.²⁹ From 1928 onwards, Congar directed his works on ecumenical vocation as well as on ecclesiological vocation.³⁰ He sincerely desired reconciliation with separated Christians. His writings portrayed a Church that wanted to renew itself and rejoin the world in a spirit of dialogue and service.³¹ This

²⁰ Richard R. Gaillardetz (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), xvi.

²¹ Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World*, 230.

²² Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, ix.

²³ De Lubac, *Vatican Council Notebooks, Volume One*, 9.

²⁴ Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, xxxv.

²⁵ Daly, *Beyond Secrecy: The Untold Story of Canada and the Second Vatican Council*, 13.

²⁶ Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, xlviii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xix.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vi.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

renewal becomes a reality by theologising and by returning to sources in both Scripture and Tradition.³²

Congar spoke of episcopal collegiality in place of Roman centralisation.³³ During the Council, he experienced more trusting collaboration between bishops and theologians³⁴ and intense collaboration between pastors and theologians paving way for the intra-ecclesial ecumenism and ecclesial communion.³⁵ His vision of the renewal of Catholicism was centred on Christ.³⁶ At its root, the Church of Congar is *Ecclesia de Trinitate*, People of God, Body of Christ, and Temple of the Spirit, characterised by a transition from an essentially juridical vision to a sacramental one.³⁷ He envisioned a Christian human being full of biblical vigour³⁸ and spoke of the sacrament of salvation in which the people of God are inserted into the history of humankind.³⁹

Congar also emphasised a vocation to holiness and apostolic fruitfulness.⁴⁰ Evangelical conversion of the Church and concern towards the world of the poor abound in his works.⁴¹ He desired the approach that was more pastoral, and less scholastic. In his eyes, the draft of *schemata* at the Council was overly academic and philosophical.⁴² Rejection of the *schemata*, he believed, was a first Conciliar act.⁴³ According to Henri de Lubac, Congar looked very tired during the Council.⁴⁴ After he had given a conference at the Vatican, he was even ridiculed by certain people

³² Ibid., xvi.

³³ Ibid., xiv.

³⁴ Ibid., xxi.

³⁵ Ibid., xxii.

³⁶ Ibid., xxvii.

³⁷ Ibid., xxviii.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., xxix.

⁴⁰ Ibid., xlvi.

⁴¹ Ibid., xiii.

⁴² Ibid., 88.

⁴³ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁴ De Lubac, *Vatican Council Notebooks, Volume One*, 375.

who distributed a leaflet against him.⁴⁵ All along his life, Congar had devoted himself to ecclesiological research with an increasingly marked interest in the history of the doctrines. According to him, investigating the history of doctrines has a direct connection to ecclesiology, and there was a relation between doctrinal questions and pastoral concerns.⁴⁶

2.3.2 *Henri de Lubac*

Henri Sonier de Lubac⁴⁷ was one of the principal thinkers and inspirers of the Council.⁴⁸ He himself appeared to be astonished at his nomination as a consultant to the Preparatory Theological Commission in July 1960, and Council expert (*peritus*) on Doctrinal Commission in 1962.⁴⁹ Because of the theological controversy of the 1940s⁵⁰ due to his involvement in the *Nouvelle théologie*, he suffered much in the 1950s⁵¹ and had to put up with grave consequences.⁵² In his time, there was a sharp tension within French Catholicism.⁵³ According to him, the *Nouvelle théologie* was in no way formed on a school of thought.⁵⁴ De Lubac was closely involved in the Council's work.⁵⁵ During World War II, he got involved in the spiritual resistance and the *Cahiers du Témoignage chrétien* (Notebooks of Christian witness). In his view, the central conception of religious thought was the close link between the natural and the supernatural.⁵⁶ In his notebooks, he places greater emphasis on the evolution of the Conciliar situation.⁵⁷

⁴⁵ De Lubac, *Vatican Council Notebooks, Volume Two*, 183.

⁴⁶ Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, vii, xvi, and x.

⁴⁷ De Lubac, *Vatican Council Notebooks, Volume One*, 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

De Lubac's works contribute to a better understanding of the work of the Council.⁵⁸ De Lubac

was an active participant in or witness to all the diverse aspects of the Council i.e., the general congregations, the Doctrinal Commission (which met in the afternoons during the sessions but continued its work during the intersessions as well), meetings of the French bishops, private encounters between French and foreign bishops on the fundamental questions, various conversations, preparation and clarification of interventions at the council at the request of the numerous bishops, lectures in front of audiences of bishops or of seminarians studying in Rome. He was always present, except for a brief interruption due to illness at the beginning of the second session.⁵⁹

At the Council, he confronted future Conciliar schemas prepared by his adversaries. In the end, his theology had the upper hand in the formulation of *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum*.⁶⁰ He firmly and persuasively defended, "... , particularly one on which he insisted: the orthodoxy of the Catholic Faith of Father Teilhard de Chardin."⁶¹ He observed that French bishops had little desire to consult Congar,⁶² and were non-cooperative during the Council.⁶³ According to him, the presence of the personalities from outside Europe, the Melchite patriarch Maximos IV and the presence of other Churches, particularly the African Church, "brought out in a striking manner the universality of the Church, her catholicity."⁶⁴ De Lubac also observed "the nearly equal ignorance"⁶⁵ of the well-qualified theologians, the exegetes, and

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

⁶² Ibid., 231.

⁶³ Ibid., 265.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12.

the bishops of the traditional doctrine on the Scripture. He pointed out that some excellent *formulae* were set aside by them.

In his writings, de Lubac has kind words for Joseph Ratzinger, future Pope Benedict XVI. According to him, Ratzinger was a “theologian as peaceable and kindly as he is competent.”⁶⁶ He also observed the assertiveness of Archbishop Wojtyła, future Pope John Paul II, “whose interventions struck him because of the seriousness, the rigor, and the solidity of his faith.”⁶⁷

2.4 Impact of the *Nouvelle théologie* on the Council

The *Nouvelle théologie* conscientised the participants of the Council and the members of the varied drafting commissions well in advance. The *Nouvelle* theologians helped to enshrine the key tenets of the *Nouvelle théologie* in the documents of the Council.⁶⁸ Here are some of its significant contributions.

2.4.1 *Ressourcement and Aggiornamento*

Ressourcement and *aggiornamento* are widespread in the Catholic Church beyond France. The efforts of returning to the ancient sources of the Catholic tradition enabled the Catholic theology dialogue with the modern world. *RESSOURCEMENT* and *AGGIORNAMENTO* would eventually become the guiding principles behind the Council.⁶⁹ New Evangelisation promoted by Pope John Paul II and his successors are also direct results of the *Nouvelle théologie* regarding the pastoral response of the Catholic Church to what would be the pastoral concerns and challenges of the 21st century. Most of the people in the Christian community understood the impact of the *Nouvelle théologie* in France as the work of the Holy Spirit! It was an apt response to make the Church relevant to the world. It withstood the challenges

⁶⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁸ Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics*, 6.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 222.

and hurdles, and had a profound impact on the formulation of the documents of the Council.

2.4.2 Theological Methodology (Inductive Approach)

The most significant impact of the *Nouvelle théologie* on the Council, however, was manifested in the broader spirit and tone of the documents.⁷⁰ We see this especially in the theological methodology they adopted – what Chenu called their inductive approach – which gave new prominence to the role of history in the life of the Church. It was most clearly on display in *Gaudium et Spes* that broke new ground by proceeding from an examination of the contemporary historical situation and interpreting the Church’s mission in the light of the signs of the times. This meant acknowledging that the Church is a historical reality and that changing circumstances call for new pastoral approaches. These innovations, justified by appealing to the Scripture and the Church Fathers, are an indication that the Council was equally committed to returning to the sources of the tradition. Here we can witness perhaps the most profound effect of the *Nouvelle théologie* on the Council.⁷¹

2.4.3 Pastoral Style of the Conciliar Texts: Literary, Spiritual, and Inclusive

Embracing *ressourcement* in turn transformed the very style and language of the documents of the Council. The Conciliar texts departed dramatically from the juridical, abstract language of scholastic disputation that had dominated previous Councils, encyclicals, and of course the early draft documents. Instead, they adopted the pastoral style of the Church Fathers. These stylistic choices reflected and communicated the spirit of the Council.⁷² *Ressourcement* was “the most traditional yet potentially the most radical” of the various approaches to change invoked at the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁷¹ Ibid., 239.

⁷² Ibid., 239.

Council.⁷³ It was possible because of the immense contribution of the stalwarts of the members of the Jesuits and the Dominicans who were the leading theological advisors at the Council – a landmark event in the life of the Church and European history more broadly.⁷⁴

2.4.4 Advocacy for Theological Pluralism and Resistance to Roman Imperialism and Roman Theology

The *Nouvelle théologie*'s appeal to the authority of the Scriptures and of the Church Fathers also implicitly challenged the authority of the Vatican, "which gives such authoritative approval to scholastic theology."⁷⁵ The spirit of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* was met with stiff opposition by the ecclesial authorities in the Vatican in the form of Roman Imperialism and Roman Theology. But Conger and de Lubac in the Preparatory Theological Commission became strong advocates of theological pluralism. The formulation of Constitutions, Decrees, and Declarations was a clear testimony to the inclusive spirit of the Council.

2.5 Ecclesiological Practices Emerged from the Council and Hurdles to Conciliar Recommendations

The history of the reception of the Council was initially marked by exuberance, which was subsequently followed by a sense of disappointment presumably because of the slowness and indecision in the intended implementation of the Council in the life of the Church. Even the liberal Catholics labelled the Council – a disappointment far from the intentions of the theologians of the Council, and for breaking some of its promises. Some theologians were willing to go beyond the Council through a call for the Vatican III. The reformist theologians looked beyond the Council. They called for a reform of the Church by the Conciliar documents. At the forefront of their mind were the completion of the liturgical reform, the implementation of the collegiality in light of the new

⁷³ Ibid., 240.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 225.

ecclesiology, the limitation of juridicism in the Church, the reform of the Roman Curia, the opening to the modern world, and the deepening of the ecumenical dialogue.

Toward the end of the Council, the debate concerning the content and the role of *Gaudium et Spes* revealed the division within twentieth-century theologians between the neo-Augustinians (Danielou, de Lubac, Ratzinger, von Balthasar) and the neo-Thomists (Chenu, Congar, Rahner, Lonergan, Schillebeeckx).⁷⁶ The controversies did not bring together the theologians of the Council but contributed to an increasing rift between interpretations.

Also, there were rifts and tensions in the ranks of the leaders of the council. Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968), Jacques Maritain's book *Le Paysan de la Garonne*, the unprecedented removal from office of one of the leaders of Vatican II (Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, archbishop of Bologna), and the disappointments regarding the implementation of the newly created Synod of Bishops, together represented major moments in the council's difficult reception.⁷⁷

2.5.1 Collegiality

The Episcopal Conferences and the Synod of Bishops are the two instruments of collegiality. The episcopal conferences are national or international associations of bishops of a country or region who gather for personal planning and action for their churches. The Council affirmed the existence of the episcopal conferences from the earliest ages of the Church and called for them to flourish with renewed vigour to serve the growth and discipline of their churches more effectively.⁷⁸

The Council Fathers had hoped to establish a representative collegial body to assist the Pope in his teaching office and government of the Church. But that did not happen. In his interview

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁷ Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, 23-24.

⁷⁸ Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II Constitutions Decrees Declarations* (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 2007), 310.

in *Informations Catholiques Internationales* in 1969, Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens indicated the need for collegiality in the Church and underlined the shortcomings of the new Synod of Bishops.⁷⁹

2.5.2 Call to Participation and Mission, and Role of Women in the Church

The Council was made aware of the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of the people of God in the temporal affairs and within the Church. It inspired the formulation of the parish and diocesan pastoral councils in the Church. The situation of women within the Roman Catholic Christian Community has seen much growth and change since the Council. The Council also opened the door to discussion of what it means to be a baptised member of the Body of Christ and what constitutes personhood in the image of Christ. This allowed the question of women's role and their imaging of Christ to become a topic of discussion at the grassroots and in theological reflection.

Although the insights of Conciliar *periti* opened the door to a more global consideration of the Church, they were largely unable to walk through that door. They were unable to give full and adequate expression to the perspectives of the many Christian women who constituted the silent majority of the Church. There is a significant disagreement over the development of adequate Conciliar hermeneutics.

2.5.3 Conciliar Commentaries

A series of commentaries on the texts of the Council was published for theologians, priests, seminarians, and religious men and women, and also for a broad readership eager to gain more familiarity with the texts of the Council by theologians by profession, and not holders of ecclesiastical offices,⁸⁰ who acted during the Council as consultants/*periti* in the official commissions, or as private theologians serving their bishops during the preparations for their interventions in *Aula* and the Council commissions.

⁷⁹ Faggioli, *Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning*, 22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

2.5.4 Sedevacantists' Rejection of the Council (Vatican II: Not a Dogmatic Council, but Pastoral)

The questioning of the legitimacy of the Council as a council in the tradition of the Church created some difficulty in its reception. The sedevacantists⁸¹ denounced the Council as a disaster and chaos in the Church. Their negative views of the results of the liturgical reform could be applied uniformly to all the major developments of the Council namely liturgical reform, biblical renewal, a people of God ecclesiology, reform of the Roman Curia, ecumenism, religious freedom, and the Church and the modern world. This minority even opposed the direction of the Council documents on all the major issues. The idea of change in the Church was the real enemy for them. They viewed the Council as a dangerous and potentially catastrophic event for the Catholic Church.

Those, who contested the legitimacy of the Council following its conclusion *Coetus Internationalis Patrum*,⁸² formed an informal group comprised of some conservative minority with a few leaders, spokespersons, and some bishops mostly from Latin America, Italy, and Spain. Their intense opposition led to even labelling the Council pastoral, not dogmatic. This small group of ultraconservative bishops initially opposed the direction of the Council documents, and then later chose to reject the Council completely.

3. Bible-Inspired Conciliar Church

The Council Fathers were enthused with the pastoral orientation and dialogical attitude. This orientation and attitude were manifested

⁸¹ Ibid., 29-37. *Sedevacantists* were those who claimed the Papal See became vacant since the death of either Pope Pius XII in 1958 or Pope John XXIII in 1963. They judge the Council to have departed from tradition and to have taught heresy. In their opinion, Pope Paul VI ceased formally to be pope; his successors to the papacy, elected by cardinals he appointed, were invalidly elected, thus their decisions are not to be obeyed. This minority even opposed *the direction of the council documents* in all the major issues. *The idea of change in the Church was the real enemy of the Council's minority*. They viewed the Council as a dangerous and potentially catastrophic event for the Catholic Church.

⁸² Ibid., 30.

in the formulation of a renewed understanding of the Church, its engagement with the world, its encounter with other believers, and its transformed relation to other religious traditions by the Council. This orientation and attitude paved the way for articulating the role of scripture and tradition in the Church's life. For all the real advances of the Council in its renewed ecclesiology of the local church, the Council's treatment was inadequate insofar as it still defined the Church in terms of the ministry of the bishop and the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Council did not articulate a standard ecclesiology but offered a decisive new orientation for Catholic reflections on the Church. Having returned to an ecclesiology grounded in baptism, discipleship, and mission, the Council recognised the priority of baptism over the holy orders. The Council encouraged Christians to remain a people called and sent by the Triune God in hope and courage, and to deepen their relationship with God growing in intimacy as a disciple of Christ inspired by the parable of the vine and the branches.⁸³ This new understanding of the Church, advocated by *Nouvelle théologie*, provided opportunities to Yves Congar, Henri du Lubac, Karl Rahner, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, and Gerard Philips, to make ground-breaking ecclesiological contributions.⁸⁴ Many of them were influential as Conciliar *periti*.

This vision of the Church enables us to reimagine ministry, discipleship, apostolicity, laity, episcopacy, papacy, and magisterium with a breadth and depth marked by deep ecumenical sensitivity and insightful pastoral perceptiveness. The model of the Church as Servant⁸⁵ would be able to work out a biblical augment indirectly in favour of a socio-political role for the Church.⁸⁶

⁸³ Jn 15:1-15.

⁸⁴ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), xv.

⁸⁵ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 81-94.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 93. In the New Testament, the notion of salvation is to a large extent individualised and spiritualised. The emphasis is apocalyptic, not prophetic. It

3.1 Church as Mystical Communion

The idea of the community either as the Mystical Body of Christ or as the People of God is significant in the way the Council understood the nature of the Church. People of God ecclesiology provides the space to understand the Church within the whole of human history.⁸⁷ It was viewed as the most accurate expression of the ecclesiology of the Council.⁸⁸ Since 1985 Extraordinary Synod, the word *Communio* has been regarded as an appropriate synthesis of the essential elements of the Council's understanding of the Church. In French-speaking Roman Catholicism, the Dominicans Yves Congar and Jerome Hamer made the category of community or communion central to their ecclesiology.⁸⁹

Communion was the central theme in the early Christian centuries. Saint Paul assumed that all believers would participate in the building up of the life of the community and its mission in the world. The Church is not an aggregate of individuals but a new relational reality that confers identity upon those who enter its life.⁹⁰ The salvation of God working in Christ draws us into the communion of the divine life through a historical communion on earth. In many respects, the communion model is an improvement over the Church as an institution. It has a better basis in the biblical notion of communion/*koinonia* as found in the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline descriptions of the Church as the Body of Christ.⁹¹

This approach is ecumenically very fruitful. Because the themes of the Body of Christ and the People of God are far

is not suggested that it is the Church's task to make the world a better place to live in. The Church is seen as existing for the glory of God and of Christ, and the salvation of its members in a life beyond the grave.

⁸⁷ Walter Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 123.

⁸⁸ William Madges (ed.), *Vatican II Forty Years Later* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 9.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁰ Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent*, 22.

⁹¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 50.

more congenial to most Protestants and Orthodox than the institutional model. The notion of People of God could well open up a path to dialogue with Jews and with other major religions.⁹²

Communion ecclesiologies have an excellent foundation in the Catholic tradition. Communion-type ecclesiologies agree well with the highest doctrinal teaching of the Church in the past generation. Pope Pius XII made the theme of the Body of Christ central to the official ecclesiology of his day, and the Council deliberately subordinated the theme of hierarchical office, which loomed large in the nineteenth-century documents, to the concept of the Church as People of God. It helps to revivify spirituality and a life of prayer. It does much to restore the warm and vital interrelationships so central to the New Testament vision of the Church. However, the model has some drawbacks too. This model leaves some obscurity regarding the relationships between the spiritual and visible dimensions of the Church. This model tends to exalt and divinise the Church beyond its due. The effort to find a perfect interpersonal communion in the Church has led to frustration, if not to apostasy. Gregory Baum articulates it well when he says, “The longing desire for the warm and understanding total community is the search for the good mother, which is bound to end in disappointment and heartbreak.”⁹³

3.2 Church as Pilgrim and Eschatological

The understanding of the Church as a pilgrim Church is more adequate for healing the wounds caused by the personnel of the Church.⁹⁴ A community that embodied the Council’s teaching is a pilgrim church, a people on a journey still on the way to its completion. All are called to holiness,⁹⁵ and that holiness could best be deepened through immersion in the life of the community. The Church is a people on a journey between Pentecost and the

⁹² Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, 123.

⁹³ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 53-54.

⁹⁴ Madges (ed.), *Vatican II Forty Years Later*, 159.

⁹⁵ Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, 58.

culmination of all history in Christ. As we travel on that pilgrimage,⁹⁶ may we keep ever before us the vision of Pentecost as a community that has learned to hear and celebrate the one Christian faith, each in its language. The Church is an exodus community pioneering the future of the world. This model inspires that the Church has the task of introducing the values of the Kingdom into the whole of human society, and thus of preparing the world, insofar as human effort can, for the final transformation when God will establish the new heavens and the new earth. The coming of the Kingdom will not be the destruction but the fulfillment of the Church.⁹⁷ The learning Church is taking priority over the teaching Church!

3.3 Church as Herald and Missionary

The Church exists for a mission.⁹⁸ In a speech to his fellow cardinals before the conclave that would elect him as Pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio invoked the image of Jesus knocking at our door. He acknowledged that this metaphor, drawn from the book of Revelation, placed Jesus on the outside waiting to come in. But then the Pope reversed the image and asked about all those times Jesus knocked from the inside trying to get out! He argued that the Church be a church with open doors, and not simply to welcome in those who might come. The Church must open its doors so that the whole people of God could go out to a world sorely in need – out to those on all the peripheries of life, those on the edges of sin, pain, and injustice, those trapped in ignorance, indifference to religion, and all forms of suffering. This going forth – this mission of evangelisation in its broadest sense – is now the *raison d'être* of the Church, a church, which, according to the Council, is missionary by its very nature.⁹⁹ Rethinking all of the

⁹⁶ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 104.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁹ Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (eds.), *A Church with Open Doors: Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), xi.

ecclesiology in the light of missiology would surely pave way for an ecclesiology of a community of missionary disciples.

Catholic ecclesiology cannot remain closed in on itself; it must engage the world beyond the walls of the Church drawing inspiration from the Conciliar openness and receptivity and the exemplary life of Pope Francis. No theology can retreat into solipsistic solitude or remain locked behind closed doors. Any renewal, the Council would bring in, would be for the sake of a more intelligible and effective preaching of the gospel. The Conciliar Church is missionary by its nature.¹⁰⁰

This ecclesiology goes with a strong evangelic missionary thrust. It upholds that the Church's responsibility is to evangelise all nations by the great commission.¹⁰¹ It has a good biblical foundation in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament and Paul.¹⁰² It gives a clear sense of identity and mission to the Church – especially the local church – as a congregation that heralds the good news of Jesus Christ. It is conducive to spirituality on God's sovereignty. It leads to obedience, humility, and readiness for repentance and reform.¹⁰³ It gives rise to a rich theology of the Word.¹⁰⁴ Here the Church proclaims the coming of the Kingdom in Christ and that the proclamation itself is an eschatological event in which God's saving and judging power are already at work.

3.4 Criteria Acceptable to Supporters of the Varied Ecclesiologies

A balanced theology of the Church must find a way of incorporating the major affirmations of each basic ecclesiological type. No good ecclesiologist is exclusively committed to a single model of the Church. Avery Cardinal Dulles proposes these criteria acceptable

¹⁰⁰ Flannery (ed.), *Vatican II Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, 444.

¹⁰¹ Mt 28:18-20

¹⁰² Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 76.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

to adherents of ecclesiologies: (a) basis in Scripture, (b) basis in the Christian tradition, (c) capacity to give Church members a sense of their corporate identity and mission, (d) tendency to foster the virtues and values generally admired by Christians, (e) correspondence with the contemporary religious experience and theological fruitfulness, and (f) fruitfulness in enabling Church members to relate successfully to those outside their group.¹⁰⁵

4. Conclusion

Rightly so, Pope Francis encourages us to study the documents of Vatican II investing our valuable resources in preparation for the celebration of the Holy Year 2025.¹⁰⁶ It is hoped that the study of the Conciliar documents will provide more insights into the ecclesiology of the Council. These insights along with the pastoral initiatives inspired by the many ecclesiologies found in the Basic Ecclesial Communities inspired by the Council will pave for a genuine and sincere *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* across the globe promoting peace, building sustainable community structures leading to building human communities, social harmony, grassroots measures to address the Climate Change, gender-sensitivity, resource development, ecumenical initiatives, and inter-faith/inter-religious initiatives to make the role of the religion relevant and urgent! We are hopeful that the affirmation in many ecclesiologies in the Conciliar documents will offer peace and hope, and another chance to the future generation.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 183-184.

¹⁰⁶ C. Wooden, "Pope asks Catholics to study Vatican II before Holy Year 2025," *Crux Taking the Catholic Pulse*, June 28, 2022, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2022/06/pope-asks-catholics-to-study-vatican-ii-before-holy-year-2025> (accessed on 02.07.2022).

