

VATICAN II'S MODEL OF THE CHURCH

JOHN LOFTUS

“Thou speak'st wiser than thou art ware of”
(*As You Like It*: Act II, scene 4, 1. 55)

So many hands have sown the ideas in this article, and over such a long period of time, that I have forgotten many of them. I can recall Richard McBrien declaiming from his book, *Do We Need the Church?* as he strides across the field, so sure and so impatient. I can hear Christopher Butler, in his black habit with the hood up, quietly chanting *The Theology of Vatican II*. But I cannot remember who it was that planted the most fruitful seed of all: “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was the first document of the Second Vatican Council. It would have been very different, if it had been the last”.

The ripening, I know, took place in the warmth and light of Avery Dulles' *Models of the Church*. But his was the kind of sunshine that forced me to seek the shade of second thoughts; and once there, I wondered if I dared to disagree with him.

In this article, I present an argument which is made up of three suggestions about how we are to understand Vatican II's ideas concerning the Church. To illustrate the point I am trying to make, I raise some questions about how this affects our view of the sacraments. And I ask whether this is not a case of the famous *sensus plenior*, the ‘fuller sense’ which appears to have been discussed only by scripture scholars up to now, but is surely relevant to the interpretation of council documents.

My first suggestion is simple and obvious, yet crucial for the argument. It concerns the way in which we approach the records of the Council.

Vatican II did not bring exploration of the mystery of the Church to an end; but its documents do provide us with a good starting point for further exploration. The trouble is, we tend to use them in a very odd way.

There was a time when we thought of the Bible as one book—although I do not know by what winding linguistic route “*ta biblia*” (a plural form meaning “the booklets”) came to be “the Bible” (a singular form). We are wiser now, and much richer for recognising the differences between the books and the lack of continuity, as well as the development of ideas. No longer are we tempted to use each and every verse as coin of equal value and legal tender in the market of controversy.

But what we once did with the Bible, we are now quite happily doing with the set of documents which we lump together under the title, *Vatican II*. We forget that these documents appeared at intervals over a period of three years, that they were the outcome of four separate sessions, that each one represents different degrees of compromise between ever changing views and interests, and that every one of them emerged in a constantly broadening context (broadened at the very least by each preceding document as it appeared).

My suggestion is that we must cease to regard the documents of the Second Vatican Council as if they were a harmonious whole, with chapters from one pen and mind, and paragraphs of equal worth and significance.

My second suggestion brings me into conflict with Avery Dulles. His splendid book, *Models of the Church*, is a comparison of five different ways of talking about the Church. His conclusion is that each has its limitations, but that they all contain some truth. He contends, therefore, that "by a kind of mental juggling act, we have to keep several models in the air at once." (p. 8).

I want to maintain that during the life of the Council (October 1962 to December 1965) the thinking of the assembly of bishops concerning the Church, developed in such a way that some of their later views did not simply add to, but actually superseded, some of their earlier views. And this was because not every model of the Church is compatible with every other model, *pace* Father Dulles' skill in the theological circus ring.

Let us consider the course of the Council. Can you recall the first result of Vatican II which affected us in any way? On Friday, November 30th, 1962, the Sacred Congregation of Rites published a decree inserting the name of St Joseph in the canon of the Mass. We know now that there was a very moving story behind John XXIII's decision to respond in this way to a plea made in the Council three weeks previously. At the time, however, in the tundra of the North East of England, where folk had no such intimate knowledge of the inner working of the Council, but where we were simply waiting for a little light and warmth from the great assembly to cheer us in our winter gloom, the insertion of the name of St Joseph in the canon seemed to be a mighty small result, after two months of talking by more than 2,300 Council fathers. Clerics, who were aware that the Council was discussing Liturgy, wondered whether the November decree was a hint that not Liturgy but rubrics were the real subject of debate.

The point is that the Council's first topic was Liturgy. And the first full document from the Council to be promulgated was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (December 4th, 1963). The Constitution, of course, (which Clifford Howell rushed to translate for us) proved to be much more than rubrical reform. And by mid-

winter 1963-4, we were feeling happier than we had felt the previous winter.

On reflection, however, was it not an extraordinary enterprise to launch into a renewal of the Liturgy, without first giving a lot of thought to the nature of the Church? I have tried to find out why the Liturgy was the first item on the Council's agenda, rather than the Church. The only conclusion I can come to is that the Preparatory Commission for the Liturgy (created in June 1960) had finished its homework sooner than the Preparatory Commission for Faith and Morals. Thus its schema was one of the seven submitted to the bishops prior to the Council (in July 1962), whereas the schema, *De Ecclesia*, was not distributed until November 23rd, 1962 (five weeks after the Council had opened).

One cannot, in fact, talk about Liturgy without either presenting or presupposing a view of the Church. In the case of the Liturgy Constitution, there was a bit of both. It is also true that much of the debate on the document in the Council was a debate about the Church. It was here that the conservative/progressive split became evident. The curial cardinals (by and large) argued for uniformity and for strong central control in matters liturgical, on the grounds that above all the unity of the Church must be preserved. The more pastorally minded bishops argued for adaptation and diversity, for simplification and for the use of the vernacular, and for decentralisation of control in liturgical affairs, on the grounds that only thus could the Church ensure lay participation and achieve some communication with other men. Here, certainly, were two different attitudes towards the Church: but were they two basically different models of the Church?

I do not know the average age of the twenty three hundred Council fathers in 1962; but I feel it would be safe to say the majority of them had completed their seminary studies before World War II. They would, then, share an acceptance of that model of the Church which dominated Catholic theology until about 1940 (as Dulles tells us, p. 27). Pius XII's encyclical which brought the Mystical Body analogy to the centre was published in 1943. And the effects of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, written in the same year as a green light to Catholic scripture scholars, were not to be felt in seminary education for some years. Apart, then, from the scholarly few, not many of the bishops could have experienced the force of a biblical way of thinking or talking about the Church. In 1962, both the Curia and its opponents shared the same model of the Church, though they differed about how it should be operated, because they had different purposes in mind.

The model in question is that of the Church as an institution (the subject of Dulles' second chapter). In this model, the Church is a society, a perfect society, and as such capable of description in terms of analogies drawn from political society. This was the

model presupposed in the Liturgy debate, and the model which is dominant in the Constitution, despite the infiltration of other images. Much of the argument in the course of the Council's first session was over the shape of the power structures in the Church seen as a perfect society.

Even the pastoral concern of the diocesan bishops (in contrast with the curial bishops) did not necessarily indicate some other model of the Church. If pastoral and missionary effort is based on the assumption that there is little or no truth, life or hope outside the boundaries of the Church, the implication is that it is perfect-society-centred.

This is explicitly the view of the Church presented in the opening paragraph of the Liturgy Constitution: "It is the goal of this most sacred Council . . . to strengthen those aspects of the Church which can help to summon all of mankind into her embrace". And in the very next paragraph, the model of the Church as Sacrament (although that word is not used, only the word "sign") is cleverly subordinated to the primary model, and the function of Liturgy is defined in that context: "The Liturgy is . . . the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church . . . To outsiders the Liturgy . . . reveals the Church as a sign raised above the nations. Under this sign, the scattered sons of God are being gathered into one until there is one fold and one shepherd". It is a modified institutionalism, not completely wide open to De Smedt's first two criticisms of "clericalism and juridicism", since it certainly finds room for the faithful in the Church and makes the expression of the mystery of Christ in their lives, a preaching. But the assumption of the *sola ecclesia* which underlies it all, cannot escape the accusation of "triumphalism".

The model is not merely concerned with externals. In part the institutionalism is modified by introducing elements of the Mystical Body theology. The presence of Christ in the Church is a major theme. But this is given a particular twist by emphasising that Christ is present "especially in her liturgical celebrations" (para. 7). "From this it follows that every liturgical celebration . . . is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can match its claim to efficacy, nor equal the degree of it" (para. 7). Paragraph 9 hesitates: "The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church . . ."; but in paragraph 10 the hesitation vanishes: "Nevertheless, the Liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the fountain from which all her power flows. For the goal of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in her sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's supper".

I feel uncomfortable with that view of the Liturgy and the view of the Church which underpins it. And I believe that if the fathers had debated Liturgy last rather than first (provided they were consistent in developing their later view of the Church), they would have given us a different kind of document. I believe this is possible, because they moved on to a new model of the Church, from which point of view everything looks different. The shift took place as they passed (via the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which was debated 1-7 December, 1962, 30 September - 31 October 1963, and again 15-18 September 1964) to the end of the debate on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (which occupied two periods, 20 October - 10 November 1964, and 22 September - 7 October 1965).

It was not until after the Liturgy debate, at the end of the first day's discussion of "the Sources of Revelation" (14 November, 1962), that the thought occurred to someone (and it was the Melchite Patriarch of Antioch, not one of the Roman-rite bishops) that a prolonged and profound look at the nature of the Church was required, before the fathers went any further. "I ask once again", he said, "that the schema on the Church and the hierarchy be submitted as soon as possible. Everything depends on that schema, because we can then take up pastoral and social questions. All of us await that moment."

Pastors have a tendency to be pragmatists, and to underestimate the part played by *theoria* in *praxis*. They had been prepared to undertake a study of what should be done, in Liturgy, without the preliminary study of what the Church is all about.

It was a further nine days before the schema on the Church was distributed; and not until 1 December, 1962, did the discussion of the draft begin. They had less than a week, before the first session came to a close. It was long enough for the alliance of pastoral bishops and theologian bishops to make it clear to the curial bishops that they were not satisfied with the juridicism, clericalism and triumphalism of the commissions's draft. The cry went up for the Church to be dealt with as a Mystery, as the People of God, as a body with a mission to the nations.

Nine months later, they returned to debate a different kind of document. That was in September 1963. This document was dealt with during the first month of the Council's second session; and out of that emerged a third draft, for voting purposes at the third session (September 1964). It was only after that draft had undergone further amendment that the final version appeared – the one promulgated in November 1964.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church was certainly a remarkable and fruitful modification of the Bellarmine-Billot view of the Church, as a perfect society, centred on the papal monarchy. Compared with the earlier preoccupation with juridical

structures and clerical powers, the Constitution made great advances with the help of notions of the Church as the sacrament of union with God and of unity among men, of using the biblical images for the Church, of the central position of the People of God (considered prior to any distinction between hierarchy and laity), of setting the papacy in its proper context of the episcopal college, of the ministry as a genuine *diakonia* or service, and of elaborating a theology of the laity.

Yet, the ghost of the earlier model is still there. It is qualified, but it is still there. Evidence for this can be found in statements such as that which opens paragraph 13: "All men are called to belong to the new People of God". And the long paragraphs 15 and 16 are determined attempts to relate all men to the Church in some degree or other. Or consider paragraph 17, which interprets the missionary work of the Church entirely in terms of the objective, "that the entire world may become the People of God, the Body of the Lord. . . ." The model is still that in which the Church is the centre and goal of all human history. If you are convinced that this is the meaning of the dictum, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, then you have to spend a great deal of time, with the assistance of theories about Baptism of Desire, associating with the Church those who are clearly not members: that is the significance of paragraphs 15 and 16 mentioned above. The only surprising thing is that the complementary theory of Limbo does not put in an appearance.

To highlight the problem I have with this view of the Church, take the last section of paragraph 13. No one could quarrel with the truth of its final statement: ". . . all men are called to salvation by the grace of God". It is the supreme revelation: God loves all men. But is that final statement understood to be the same as the opening statement of the paragraph, "All men are called to be part of this catholic unity of the People of God"? To put the question in another way, is the Church considered to be identical with the Kingdom?

The Constitution is ambiguous on the point. Sometimes, it speaks as though they were the same; sometimes, it seems to distinguish them. For instance, in paragraph 5, it says: "The Church . . . receives the mission to proclaim and to establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God. She becomes on earth the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While she slowly grows, the Church strains toward the consummation of the kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her King." Perhaps, the opening towards a new model lay in the Council's inability to identify definitively the Church and the Kingdom.

What is certain is that in the course of the debate on the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the fathers had an opportunity

to start thinking about the relationship of the Church to the world. It was this matter which was taken up in the extraordinary document which began as schema 17, became schema 13, and ended up as the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

It is the Pastoral Constitution which says: "Christ . . . was crucified and rose again in order to break the stranglehold of the evil one, so that it (the world) might be fashioned anew according to God's design and brought to its fulfilment" (para. 2); and which goes on, in para. 3, to say: ". . . this sacred Synod, in proclaiming the noble destiny of man and affirming an element of the divine in him, offers to cooperate unreservedly with mankind in fostering a sense of brotherhood to correspond to this destiny of theirs. The Church is not motivated by an earthly ambition but is interested in one thing only—to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for he came into the world to bear witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served". Surely, the Council is here rejecting not merely any claim to worldly imperialism, but also any idea of spiritual imperialism. Is it admitting that the Church exists to offer a service to mankind, rather than to recruit all mankind into its ranks?

Instinct tells me that were the question put as crudely and directly as that to the fathers of the Council, then many of those even who voted in favour of the adoption of the Pastoral Constitution would revert to the stance of the Dogmatic Constitution, "All men are called to belong to the new People of God". But the question was not put to them in that way, and the new model stands without qualification in their final utterance. And that model, which sees the Church as Servant, is not compatible with their original model: either the Church is the goal or purpose of God's endeavours, or it is a means to God's further purpose; it cannot be both. The final model, therefore, replaces the original model: even if not all of the bishops realised this.

The very method of procedure which they adopted in the Pastoral Constitution, namely reading the signs of the times, already implies an abandoning of the model of the Church as monopoly (whether of truth or of grace). As para. 11 says, "The Spirit of the Lord . . . fills the whole world", and "moved by that faith, it (the People of God) tries to discern in the events, the needs, and the longings which it shares with other men of our time, what may be genuine signs of the presence or of the purpose of God". And it is of special interest, in view of my earlier remarks, to see how in picking up this theme of the availability of God to all men, the Pastoral Constitution cuts the Gordian knot which the past had tied out of the two strands of Baptism of Desire and Limbo: the key words are in the penultimate section of paragraph 22:

"The Christian is bound both by need and by duty to struggle with evil through many afflictions and to suffer death; but, as

one who had been made a partner in the paschal mystery, and as one who has been configured to the death of Christ, he will go forward, strengthened by hope, to the resurrection.

All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of goodwill in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For, since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.”

Here you have one goal for all mankind, yes. You have the utter centrality of Christ in bringing men to this goal, yes. You also have the universal mission of the Spirit of Christ. But you do not have the *sola ecclesia*. The partnership with Christ of those who are not members of the Church, is simply “in a way known to God”. *Limbo* is consigned to *limbo*.

In Part 1, Chapter 2, of the Pastoral Constitution, entitled “The Community of Mankind”, the Council came up with a new phrase to describe the final destiny of the human race, namely that they “might become the Family of God” (para. 32). Now, it is significant that in the next chapter, “The Role of the Church in the Modern World”, where it is said that “the Church . . . travels the same journey as all mankind and shares the same earthly lot with the world” (para. 40), a distinction is then made between the Church and the Family of God, where we find: “it (the Church) is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the Family of God”. Would we not be close to the mark, if we read the term “Family of God” as a code name for “the Kingdom of God”? Does not this passage amount to an admission that the Church is a means to that end; but as means, it is not to be identified with the end? If this interpretation is accepted, then it follows that the earlier model in which the Church is the goal or end of God’s plan for men, has indeed been superseded.

It is with that in mind, that I raise my questions about the Liturgy. If the Church is only a means to some further end; and if that end has to do with the union of all men in one family, the Family of God; and if the Church’s task is to serve mankind with that goal in view—can we take the view that the Liturgy Constitution took, that “the Liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed” and that “the goal of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church . . .”?

Certainly, the Liturgy must be seen as having an important role within the Church, as a way towards making the People of God the instance *par excellence* of the union of God with men and of the unity God wished to bring about among men. But is it “the

outstanding means by which they can . . . manifest to others the mystery of Christ”, that which reveals to outsiders “the Church as sign”?

The Pastoral Constitution puts the emphasis elsewhere: “It is the function of the Church to render God the Father and his incarnate Son present and as it were visible, while ceaselessly renewing and purifying herself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is brought about chiefly by the witness of a living and mature faith, one namely that is so well formed that it can see difficulties clearly, and overcome them. Many martyrs have borne, and continue to bear, a splendid witness to this faith. This faith should show its fruitfulness by penetrating the whole of life, even the worldly activities, of those who believe, and by urging them to be loving and just especially towards those in need. Lastly, what does most to show God’s presence clearly is the brotherly love of the faithful who, being all of one mind and spirit, work together for the faith of the Gospel and present themselves as a sign of unity” (para. 21).

It is by loving, not by liturgising, that we are to be a sign—an effective sign that brings about what it signifies. It is the community as a Sacrament of Love and not the sacraments of the community, which is the service we have to offer the world. That is the way to the Kingdom; and the Kingdom is greater than the Church. As Christ said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13: 35). It is typical of the spirit of the Pastoral Constitution that it should open its final paragraph with those words, and then go on to say, “Christians can yearn for nothing more ardently than to serve the men of this age with an ever growing generosity and success” (para. 93).

My third suggestion is that the Servant model must be more appropriate than the Perfect Society model, because it reveals to the world what the earlier model concealed, the authentic Christ. It is amazing that the one criterion of the worth (and the worthiness) of a model for the Church which Avery Dulles does not list, is that it should be an image or way of talking that helps to make visible and real to people the Mystery of Christ. This is a clue to a fault inherent in much ecclesiology, that it tends to lose sight of Jesus Christ. For all the references to Jesus Christ in the documents of Vatican II, can we honestly say that it is Jesus Christ who emerges from the Council pages? Truly, it was the Council of the Church, as Vatican I was the Council of the Pope. But it is Christ that men need; and it is surely significant that since the Council interest has swung away from the Church as such to the person of Christ himself. Only that model of the Church which unveils the hidden Christ can be appropriate in our time.

My main point has been made, and perhaps at too great length.

But I cannot resist asking a topical theological question. Is what happened to the bishops' talk about the Church an instance of a *sensus plenior*? They committed themselves to saying what they said in the Pastoral Constitution, apparently without realising that what they were saying actually rendered redundant some of their earlier expressions about the nature and purpose of the Church. The meaning of their words exceeded perhaps their intention. And yet it seems to be fair to accept the sense of their words which were clearly set down, even if they did not see all their implications. The reason being, of course, that it is what is said, the subject matter of a statement, which determines meaning, rather than the intention of the writer. And when the subject matter is the mystery of God's dealings with men, that must be allowed to have its own dynamic which cannot be blocked by the limitations of men's understanding. If this is the case, then the Council's earlier pronouncements must be seen to have a built-in obsolescence, and their whole venture to be a pointer towards the future, a future that will leave Vatican II behind.

NEW BLACKFRIARS for your friends

If you think an article in *New Blackfriars* would especially interest one of your friends – let us know about it.

Just send the name and address to our Manager and she will send off an extra copy free of charge, (with a note to say that it comes from you).