

Straining Toward Communion: Implications for Catholic Higher Education

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As Catholic institutions of higher education attempt to engage in conversations around the role and limits of civil law and canon law in their operations and mission, and at a time when shared governance requires deeper conversation with faculty, Trustees, and sponsoring religious congregations, an understanding of the nature and structure of the Catholic Church itself can prove instructive. The nature of the church, as with any structured body, is multi-dimensional and complex. This same complexity and many of the same tensions are reflected in institutions of Catholic higher education that have emanated from the heart of the Church.

For centuries, theologians have grappled with various models and images of the church that try to represent both its social and historical nature while portraying an analogous understanding its mystery. Each formulation tries to hold in tension the "both/and" nature of ecclesial life.¹ Late in the twentieth century, an ecclesiological model was proposed that attempted to deal in a contemporary way with that tension. The model is *communion*: the church as *koinonia*/communion, a communion of communions.² Understanding how the church is envisioned as *koinonia* or communion can be informative for conversations about inclusion, partnership, Catholic identity, and mission in Catholic higher education in the twenty-first century. The medium of Catholic higher education can provide a critical forum for understanding multivalent expressions of communion ecclesiology and its implications, as well as the value and constraints of the various interpretations that are currently operative.

Theological Elements of Communion Ecclesiology

What exactly is communion ecclesiology and how is it distinctive in the way it defines the nature of the church? First of all, *communio/koinonia* is an ancient scriptural term used to describe relationships within the Christian community that image the divine Godhead; it is also used to describe analogously the relationships among the triune Persons as equal yet distinct, and as unified while being unique. Scholars generally agree that for the first one thousand years of the Christian story, the church was primarily understood as the body of Christ, a *koinonia*, a communion of churches.³ "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*." (Acts 2:42). "We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship [*koinonia*] with us; and truly our fellowship [*koinonia*] is with God and one another" (1 John 1:3).

The Christian word "communion" comes from the Latin *communio*, which is a translation of the Greek political term *koinonia*, meaning "partnerships created by holding goods in common."⁴ The early Christians adapted *koinonia* for their use and extended it beyond the initial Greek meaning to denote the inherent unity of their relationship as believers in Christ Jesus. *Koinonia*, particularly as evidenced in 1 John, expresses union with God (a vertical relationship) as intrinsically connected to communion with others in concrete historical events (a horizontal relationship).

Communion ecclesiology is essentially about relationships of unity. As a system within theology, communion ecclesiology consists of theological elements that, when used appropriately, can represent and describe the nature of the church.⁵ Theological characteristics that are essential to communion are: (1) God is one and triune; the Trinitarian relationship of communion is the central image for the divine, (2) communion with God and communion with others are intrinsically related, (3) unity and diversity exist within the Trinity, and the Trinity witnesses to the necessity of both elements in authentic unity, (4) appropriate collegial functioning of authority at all levels is paramount, and (5) the animating role of the Holy Spirit is primary within the body of Christ to bring about the reign of God. Institutions, relationships, and partnerships existing within any organism of the church, especially those as richly complex as institutions of Catholic higher education, need to wrestle with and strive to reflect these characteristics as well.

Communion ecclesiology then is primarily a way of understanding the nature of the church by seeing it as rooted in the mystery of the Trinity and seeing all its relationships as striving to manifest radical unity with the divine communion of triune persons. As stated in *Lumen Gentium*, “The universal Church is seen to be ‘a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.’”⁶ The unity manifest in the “indwelling” of the divine persons is the result of the self-giving that lies at the center of this unique communion. Freely communicating with one another, both speaking and listening, the persons of the Trinity exhibit a coexistence of unity within plurality. *Koinonia*/communion constitutes the church intrinsically; all else flows from this.

Although communion must always be seen as analogous, understanding the nature of the church from an enriched Christology and pneumatology leads to insights about what the church and its related institutions are, as well as what they can be. Modeling life on the self-giving of the Trinitarian persons provides a constant call to conversion and communion while continually striving to live in unity in a church that is increasingly multi-cultural. All relationships and functions within communion are rooted in and modeled on the divine activities of self-giving, self-communication, and mutual indwelling. Ultimately, divine communion is both a symbol for and a sacrament of the very communion toward which the church strains, seeking to model it more fully on earth.

Relationships within and from the heart of the divine communion situate the believer’s experience of God in direct relationship to and always contingent upon a relationship with other believers. J. M. R. Tillard describes this intersection as fundamental to Christian life:

If we need to characterize in one word the fundamental inspiration of Christian behavior, we would speak of communion - communion with God and with others in faith, charity, and hope. . . the *other* is always in view because of God.⁷

In this intersection, the theology of communion focuses on a shared, common identity (*koinonia*) or on the vertical relationship that all believers share with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were all called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:1-7).

Operative at the same time and growing out of this vertical communion is the horizontal or personal dimension of relationships, highlighted in the words of John Paul II in *Redemptor Hominis*.

The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life. . . . The Church is the community of disciples each of whom in a different way - at times very consciously and consistently, at other times not very consciously and very inconsistently - is following Christ. This shows also the deeply 'personal' aspect and dimension of this society.⁸

Following Christ is done within real time and human history, and within and among a body of believers who are seeking the same end, *koinonia*, partnership. This body of believers, the body of Christ, the church universal, which is both mystical and institutional, is where communion with God is both found and lived. Communion ecclesiology intimately links *koinonia*/communion with Christ to the obedient Christian life as it is lived at the intersection of a relationship with God and relationship with others in community. In the twenty-first century, communion with God in Christ and the Holy Spirit is seen most fully in the community of believers who place themselves as members of the church at the heart of the world in "the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish" of the human community.⁹

The Challenge of Unity and Diversity within Communion

Communion ecclesiology is always concerned with unity and with its manifestations in the church, e.g., in the Eucharist, the sacraments, Petrine primacy, and areas of ecumenism. Equally important is the inclusion of difference with all its multifaceted expressions in collegiality, subsidiarity, autonomy, and collaboration. Vatican II, in *Lumen Gentium*, struggled to promote unity more than uniformity, and diversity without division.

A diversity of members and functions is engaged in the building up of Christ's body, too. There is only one Spirit who, out of his own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives his various gifts for the welfare of the church. . . . The same Spirit who of himself is the principle of unity in the body, by his own power and by the interior cohesion of the members produces and stimulates love among the faithful (LG 7).

Straining toward communion entails struggling with how to balance, within one construct, the necessary incorporation of both unity and 21st century diversity. French Dominican J.M.R. Tillard points out that both elements are central to any discussion of communion.

Indeed, difference is intrinsic to the communion that constitutes the church; difference is one of the components of this communion. The church is neither abolition nor addition but communion of "differences". . . . By causing the common reality hidden under differences to emerge, one manifests a communion, one reveals the riches of unity, one acknowledges the nobility of difference.¹⁰

The current theological landscape exhibits several varying interpretations of how the principles of pluralism and diversity can and do coexist within unity. Significant differences exist in how to balance and maintain both fundamental unity and appropriate variation within the life of the church. How the one are many and the many are one is the heart of twenty-first century ecclesiology.

Building up the body of Christ is the primary function and purpose of any visible structure or organizational outreach of the church. With an ecclesiology that attempts to balance both unity and charismatic diversity within the one body of believers, it becomes necessary to subsequently ask how relationships in the church are to be understood and determined in a model of *koinonia*/communion. This is an essential question because it is from within these various relationships that communion is both lived and sought.

The forms and tasks of life are many but there is one holiness, which is cultivated by all who are led by God's Spirit and, obeying the Father's voice and adoring God the Father in spirit and in truth, follow Christ. . . . All, however, according to their own gifts and duties must steadfastly advance along the way of a living faith, which arouses hope and works through love (LG 41).

Collegiality, a principle promoted by Vatican II as a way of relating that is congruent with a theology of communion, engages persons in dialogue and decision making in ways that are appropriately collaborative, cooperative, and unifying. By strict definition, collegiality primarily refers to the relationship between the pope and the college of bishops. The conciliar authors urged the pope and the bishops to work together in "a bond of unity, charity and peace . . . to reach agreement on questions of major importance, a balanced decision being made possible thanks to the number of those giving counsel."¹¹ The Council seemed to anticipate the future need for practices and modeling of shared decision-making that could lead to spirit-centered solutions.

At every level, in harmony with and reflective of the ultimate goal of communion, a spirit of collaboration, respect, and mutuality serves as the chief arbiter of what truly is authentic communion. The relationships of all members within the body to one another are to be interdependent and modeled on *koinonia* as witnessed in the early church. Recognizing that the multiplicity of charism, gift, and/or office does not weaken unity, communion is the fruitful interaction between and among the various ministries within the body of Christ; it is in this interaction then that the Gospel of Christ is most fully preached and the Trinitarian model of love, mutuality, and communion is most clearly evidenced.

An example within Catholic higher education of how the struggle to maintain unity within a spirit of communion is expressed by Otto Bird in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*:

In the modern world, where pluralism reigns and the university through the fragmentation brought about by specialization has become a multiversity, there is a unifying task to be undertaken. It is one capable of making the university more of an intellectual community than it is now. . . . At its maximum, it consists in agreement regarding the true and the false, the good and the bad, thus establishing a unity of doctrine. . . . The minimal degree of unity consists in agreement upon the end that the community is pursuing, thus providing a unity of purpose.¹²

Not only institutions of higher learning struggle with balancing the one and the many. As noted earlier in the essay, all models of the church have struggled to hold in tension the earthly and the mystical, the organization and the sacrament, the People of God and the institution. Vatican II struggled with these issues and clearly affirmed that the church is a "hierarchically constituted society."¹³ The council went on to state that true "hierarchical communion" can only be achieved when each member of the society seeks to exercise the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in communion with all the other members of the society for the sake of the divine mission.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the manifestation of God's self-communication in time and history, is an essential element within communion ecclesiology. It is, in fact, the animating action of the Holy Spirit within the body of Christ that leads to communion. Central to any recovery of communion is an ecclesial model that must rediscover the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. As Congar notes in *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, for the Western Church, the Holy Spirit could be described as "the forgotten God."¹⁴ For centuries, the primary emphasis in ecclesiology has been Christocentric and modeled only on the vertical relationship of God the Father with the Son. Nineteenth and twentieth-century theologians tried to revive the truth that the Holy Spirit *is* the heart and life of the church. Orthodox theologian John Zizoulas describes the distinction: "Though Christ *instituted* the Church, it is the Spirit that constantly *constitutes* it."¹⁵

In a preconciliar work entitled *The Church Is A Communion*, Jerome Hamer notes the importance of understanding the role of the Spirit in the life of the church:

The Spirit is, indeed, the creator of unanimity. . . . In this capacity the Spirit is at once the principle of unification in the whole of the Church's activity and the principle of its continuity in time. But in addition to that, as we have seen, he is the creator of that particular form of unity which is communion. . . . The oneness of the Church lived in communion depends primarily not on the prudence of its leaders, the shrewdness of its theologians, the capacity of its organizers, the vigour with which its message is disseminated or the strict application of a universally accepted discipline. It depends on the Spirit. Without him any human effort is void.¹⁶

Emphasis on the role of the Spirit in the ongoing constitution of the church necessarily introduces elements of change and transformation. It is the very Spirit of God, working within not only the universal church but also within individual churches, institutions, and persons that engenders newness and life. Yves Congar describes this as a gift of God to the church when he writes:

The Church was established in the world by Pentecost, which gave it a vocation to universality, which was to be achieved not by means of uniform extension, but by the fact that everyone understood and expressed the marvels of God in his own language (Acts 2: 6-11). Through the mission and gift of the Holy Spirit, the Church was born universal by being born manifold and particular. The Church is catholic because it is particular, and it has the fullness of gifts because each has his own gifts.¹⁷

For a variety of theological and ecclesial reasons, *koinonia*/communion remains the primary ecclesiological model for describing the nature of the church in the twenty-first century. Although communion ecclesiology may not be and should not be the only ecclesiological model operative now or into the future, it does provide the contemporary church with a coherent paradigm. In addition, there are sufficient grounds for its consideration because of its fluidity and its inclusiveness.

The idea of communion ecclesiology is that it tries to unite, sometimes in tension, an understanding of the church that is inclusive yet has designated boundaries, that is structured yet interpersonal, that is human yet mystical, that is visible sign and invisible transformation.¹⁸

Seeking to live in communion, and to envision the Church as ultimately a communion, is to strive to be faithful to the life of Christ and the life of the Trinity. Currently, one's interpretation

of communion, particularly when viewed through the lens of authority, is distinct depending on how the issues of unity and difference are nuanced.

Differing Interpretations of the One Ecclesiology

Since 1985, the model of “*koinonia*/communion” has been presented as *the* central model for understanding the nature of the church and designated as “suitable for expressing the core of the mystery of the church.”¹⁹ The unequivocal presentation of communion as “the one basic ecclesiology” emerged with two basic interpretations: (1) a theology of communion that focuses on unity and oneness in Christ as mediated through ecclesiastical authority and witnessed most particularly in the Eucharist (exemplified in the writings of John Paul II, and Benedict XVI), and (2) a theology of communion that focuses on communion as unity with diversity brought about through the power of the Spirit working within the whole church (exemplified in the writings of Yves Congar, J.M.R. Tillard, and Walter Kasper).

These two interpretations are both grounded in a Trinitarian-based communion ecclesiology that sees communion as the central image for the church in the twenty-first century. Beyond this core agreement, there is divergence and difference, especially when implementation addresses issues such as authority, dissent, decision making, ecumenism, and collegiality. Even though official church pronouncements name only “one ecclesiology that is Catholic,” various interpretations continue to emerge in evolving attempts to name, appropriately yet analogously, the true nature of the church, and to understand and actualize how the many are one.²⁰ As scholars have noted, “Communion ecclesiology is still under construction.”²¹

The divergent interpretations of how “communion” is implemented within the visible, historical reality of the church can be described and distinguished in the following manner: (1) communion existing primarily in unity and represented expressly through union with the divinely inspired teaching of institutional authority, and (2) communion expressed through diversity-in-unity and manifest in relationships of dialogue and collaboration under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

A critical element that distinguishes the two versions is how each interpretation understands the relationship between unity and diversity, and the priority or emphasis given to each within its framework. Though both approaches recognize the existence and necessity for unity and diversity co-relating within communion, they diverge distinctly in how unity and diversity are interpreted, what constitutes unity, and how diversity is nurtured and implemented.

In the first interpretation of communion, priority is given to unity as its defining element. The “unity orientation” is rooted in the Trinitarian communion of persons and sees the *communio personarum* as the supreme model for the church. John Paul II writes:

Communion is the fruit and demonstration of that love which springs from the heart of the Eternal Father and is poured out upon us through the Spirit which Jesus gives us, to make us all “one heart and one soul”(Acts 4: 32).²²

Three particular aspects of the unity orientation distinguish it from other versions: (1) unity is a visible union that is manifest most clearly in the Eucharist and in the magisterium; (2) the Holy Spirit is the source of unity and brings unity about through action within church structures; and

(3) tangible unity incorporates diversity. These characteristics are not exhaustive or definitive of the unity paradigm but they serve as illustrative of its preponderant expression.

Proponents of a unity orientation, such as John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, stress that the essential link between the visible-historical-institutional expressions of communion and the invisible-ideal-spiritual aspects of communion is the hierarchical church, or the “church as the sacrament of salvation.”²³ They situate their position within the framework of “hierarchical communion” as defined primarily in *Lumen Gentium*. There the council fathers expressed their understanding of the church as a “hierarchically constituted society” with a divine mission to preach the Gospel.²⁴ This hierarchical society has a papacy which is “a lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and communion.”²⁵ Within this society of communion, the council documents clearly delineate the various roles of the hierarchy, particularly that of bishops, and they emphasize collegiality as the primary operating principle.

For John Paul II, the church’s single end is that “each person finds Christ.”²⁶ Therefore, the institutional structures of the church are secondary in the sense that they are intended to preserve and promote communion with Christ through their defined doctrines and stable sacramental and ministerial orders. This orientation sees the visible structures, however, as requisite for an appropriate mediation and facilitation of communion.

Unity, or communion between the particular churches in the universal church, is rooted not only in the same faith and in the common baptism, but above all in the Eucharist and in the episcopate. . . . The unity of the Eucharist and the unity of the episcopate with Peter and under Peter are not independent roots of the unity of the church, since Christ instituted the Eucharist and the episcopate as essentially interlinked realities.²⁷

For proponents of the unity paradigm, the Petrine office itself is primary among the ecclesial structures that serve unity. By bearing witness to Jesus Christ, the Supreme Pontiff serves as the source of unity and communion for the whole church. Within this function of communion, a second essential ecclesial structure exists in the college of bishops, which represents and promotes the communion of the particular churches. Vatican II describes the role of the college of bishops with regard to the process of collegiality as follows: “Together with its head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, it [the college of bishops] is the supreme and full authority over the universal church.”²⁸ For John Paul II, “neither primacy nor collegiality can be rightly understood except in reference to the other.”²⁹

As with any ecclesiology, the role of the Holy Spirit is central, and how one understands the functioning of the Spirit within each particular vision of the church is determinative. Within the unity orientation, theologians focus primarily on Christ and see the Spirit as operating principally as a unifier whose power within the body holds all in oneness. “The Lord Jesus poured forth the Spirit whom he had promised and through whom he has called and gathered together the people of the new covenant, which is the church, into a unity of faith, hope and charity.”³⁰ Thus, the signs of the Spirit’s presence are mainly in the church itself, in its unity.

Each interpretation understands the Spirit’s function, purpose, and character differently and it results in distinctly diverse interpretations of the collaborative functioning of authority. The unity orientation sees the role of the Spirit as mediated through the episcopal offices of the institutional church, especially with regard to issues of authority, primacy, and decision making.

Because the unity orientation focuses strongly on unity as seen in communion with the universal church, at times, some might see the unique charismatic expressions of the Spirit subordinated. The unity interpretation of communion cautions against “the idea of a ‘communion of particular churches’ (being) presented in such a way as to weaken the concept of unity of the church at the visible and institutional level.”³¹ This interpretation also urges caution and suspicion of change that emerges primarily out of the ethos of any one historical moment. This cautionary position is expressed by then Cardinal Ratzinger in *Called to Communion*:

Every new situation of humanity also opens new sides of the human spirit and new points of access to reality. Thus, in her encounter with the historical experiences of humanity, the Church can be led ever more deeply into the truth and perceive new dimensions of it that could not have been understood without these experiences. But skepticism is always in order where new interpretations assail the identity of the Church’s memory and replace it with a different mentality, a move that is tantamount to attempting its destruction as memory.³²

Those who see unity with the universal church as primary are “intent on valuing and developing forums and structures which, in accordance with the Second Vatican Council’s major directives, serve to ensure and safeguard communion.”³³

Proponents within the unity orientation do envision and call for an ongoing renewal of ecclesial structures. From this perspective, the renewal of the church does not depend on a *positive* release of the Spirit for regeneration but rather on a *negative* reduction in human interventions and constructions, an *ablatio*, that results in removing those things that do not allow access to the church’s truest self. The Church itself is the ultimate instrument of union with God.

The fundamental liberation that the Church can give us is to permit us to stand in the horizon of the eternal and to break out of the limits of our knowledge and capabilities. In every age, therefore, faith itself in its full magnitude and breadth is the essential reform that we need; it is in the light of faith that we must test the value of self-constructed organizations in the Church. This implies that the Church must be the bridge of faith and must not -especially in her life as an inner worldly association -become an end in herself.³⁴

The unity paradigm seeks to promote unity within the body of believers through its structures and ministries. These very elements demand a uniformity and emphasis on tradition and order, with a subsequent caution regarding innovation and change. The values this model preserves cannot be easily dismissed.

Fostering a unity that does not obstruct diversity, and acknowledging and fostering a diversification that does not obstruct unity but rather enriches it, is a fundamental task of the Roman pontiff for the whole church . . . But the building up and safeguarding of this unity . . . is also a task of everyone in the church, because all are called to build it up and preserve it each day, above all by means of that charity which is the ‘bond of perfection.’³⁵

The second interpretation of communion ecclesiology, one that puts the accent on striving for unity with diversity, delineates its position primarily from a belief in the work of the Spirit in the historical reality of the church and its believers. The central movement is a pneumatic and

charismatic thrust reflective of 1 Corinthians 13. Proponents of this version seek a retrieval of an appreciation of the action of the Spirit within the body of believers. Tillard describes this understanding of the role of the Spirit when he writes:

The Church is a living organism, animated and governed by the Holy Spirit, one which contains, vitally, its law within itself. It cannot be understood from the outside, solely by way of scientific inquiry or criticism [The church's reality] is grasped only by the Church itself and by each individual in the degree in which he lives in it, in its fellowship.³⁶

In communion ecclesiology with diversity, the Spirit is the enabler of unity and the promoter of difference. The Spirit guides the church through the ages, and the Spirit calls the body of Christ to ongoing conversion and reconciliation. Key to understanding this version of communion ecclesiology is an appreciation of the word *koinonia* and its original meaning of “partnership,” a partnership with Christ that is enlivened by the Holy Spirit and lived out within the body of Christ for the good of the coming of the reign of God. Bernd Jochen Hilberath describes the role of the Spirit in this animated partnership; the Spirit engages human beings as an “enabler, accompanier, and accomplicher of what humans do.”³⁷

When communion is manifest in unity through partnership and participation, inclusion is affirmed and promoted. Individual gifts are received and given for the common good, and respect of culture and tradition are protected. Connecting diversity in ways that partner with unity is always the goal; partnership with the unity of the universal church for the sake of the coming of the reign of God remains primary. Theologians who espouse the collaborative version of communion assert that “difference” is intrinsic to the Trinitarian communion. They see the church as “neither abolition nor addition but a communion of ‘differences.’”³⁸ A presupposition for theologians from this interpretation is that communion is rooted in a view of the common good that is broad and inclusive, and that it is not achieved by simply abolishing or adding diverse elements. Communion requires a shared truth, a shared relationship.

On the contrary communion demands that a common reality, a unique value be present in all members and that all have part in it, albeit in very diverse ways. There is a radical unity on which their difference flourishes. By simply adding up differences, one creates a crowd. By causing the common reality hidden under differences to emerge, one manifests a communion, one reveals the riches of unity, and one acknowledges the nobility of difference.³⁹

Unity in Christ is the goal of the life of the church. Theologians who interpret communion within a more collaborative, decentralized, and Spirit-centered framework acknowledge the foundational model of the Trinitarian communion, and they offer a renewed understanding of the role of the Spirit within the work of the economic Trinity. They recognize and affirm the goal of unity for the sake of the building up of the one church; and, they reaffirm the tradition of freedom in the Spirit and regard for diversity within the local churches as necessary for revealing the common unity within the whole. They acknowledge the gifts of the Spirit given to the body of Christ at each moment in history, while at the same time they affirm the oneness expressed in the Eucharist, the sign and instrument of the unity in Christ of all believers.

Freedom of thought, which the experience of the gospel endorses, and the responsibility of each person challenged by the Spirit have free play. Without the specific contribution of each and each local church, communion fails to thrive. Every person receives the Spirit and transmits it with his or her own breath.⁴⁰

The two main orientations toward communion ecclesiology, that is, communion as unity, and communion as unity within diversity, both seek to preserve the church's identity and mission, and to ultimately symbolize and achieve communion. Each position sees its values and its contributions clearly, and its flaws or overstatements obscurely. The whole church, both universal and particular would benefit if the proponents of the various approaches were engaged in a serious and respectful dialogue that acknowledged the value and the constraints of each interpretation. Without such engagement, as Hermann Pottmeyer notes, the church is left in tension.

What Vatican II has left us, then has remained, until today, simply a building site. The council laid the foundations of a renewed ecclesiology and supplied basic elements for the structure of a church that takes the form of a communion of churches. . . . For the time being, however, what we have is a juxtaposition of different priorities and different ecclesiologies, each with its own emphasis. This is an inevitable source of many conflicts in the church, because legitimate expectations are aroused and then repeatedly disappointed.⁴¹

Implications for Catholic Higher Education

Colleges and universities that desire to understand their relationship to the Catholic Church and their relationship within themselves can gain insight and direction by appreciating the current model of communion ecclesiology as it exists in the Church today – an understanding that “communion” is and can be interpreted in at least two distinctly differing ways. Differences in interpretation can and do affect relationships within and outside the Church and/or its institutions. The existence of differing interpretations can lead to functioning collegially in an academy more comfortable with one interpretation, and/or to an awareness that the present context is “both/and” and evolutionary in nature.

Several essential insights persist that can aid us: (1) communion is both horizontal and vertical by nature, and (2) communion is intrinsically about a striving for unity with difference. These two essentials create a lens through which all structures and relationships may be seen. The question to be continually asked and re-asked is: how is what we are doing or what we are saying aiding us in our “straining toward communion”? How are we striving to attain unity? How are we striving to respect difference? Seeing all through such a lens is a constant reminder that the only way toward communion with God (or one another) is by and through communion with the other.

Communion modeled on the Trinity calls for a specific response and integration:

The symbol of the Trinity functions to call forth loving relationships in the community and in the world as the highest good. . . . The goal of all creation is to participate in the trinitarian mystery of love. . . . Only a community of equals related in profound mutuality, only a community pouring itself out for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, corresponds to the triune symbol.⁴²

Questions of partnership, authority, inclusion, and distinction – all become framed through an understanding of communion as striving for unity through an inclusion of difference. Two interpretations do exist and dialogue partners need to be able to name clearly and claim how difference is included in unity. Is unity best understood in an honoring of a hierarchy of relationships while striving to remain connected to a common mission? Or is unity the drawing together of differing charismatic expressions shared in ways that enrich and strengthen oneness?

The questions above are not answered simply, especially in complex, culturally embedded groups and institutions such as Catholic colleges and universities. Perhaps a better beginning question might be: how are both unity and difference honored and expressed in structures and relationships which are historically immersed in legal, ecclesiastical, and charismatic contexts? Issues of inclusion, discussions of how the many are one, debates about the role and function of legitimate authority and shared governance – all become dialogue partners who illustrate the evolutionary dynamics present in Catholic higher education in the twenty-first century. To the degree that the two models authentically hold in tension the elements of hierarchy and participation, collegiality and divinely inspired authority, and charismatic leadership and licit partnership, Catholic higher education and the church itself will be well-served.

The way forward for ourselves and for all of humanity seems dependent on how we individually and communally answer the questions of unity and difference. Science, psychology, and human experience have begun to teach us. They clearly illustrate that our very survival is dependent on our understanding that at the heart of all reality is relationship.

In reality there is a single community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action, is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe.⁴³

Colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to name and frame a new understanding of unity that is inclusive of the multi-cultural, 21st century, global reality in ways that can deeply enrich the life of the church and the mission of the universities. To the degree that we can grapple with and begin to live into a renewed reality of communion is the degree to which the entire body of Christ can be helped to move toward ultimate communion – communion with Eternal Life and Love.

Notes

1. See STEINFELS, MARGARET O'BRIEN, "Dissent and Communion. You Can't Have One Without the Other," in: *Commonweal* (Nov 18, 1994): 9-12. Also see DULLES, AVERY, *Models of the Church*, Garden City, NY, 1974, expanded edition, 1987, for his now classic treatment of six models of the Church, i.e., church as *institution, sacrament, herald, mystical communion, servant, and community of disciples*. For a fuller bibliography on modern ecclesiology, see DULLES, AVERY / GRANFIELD, PATRICK, *The Church. A Bibliography*, Wilmington, 1985.

2. Extraordinary Synod of 1985, "The Final Report," in *Origins* 15 (19 December 1985): 441.

3. See TILLARD, J. M. R. *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ. At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. BEAUMONT, MADELEINE, Collegeville, MN, 2001, especially pp. 1-31, for TILLARD'S understanding of the church as *communion* as evidenced in scriptural and liturgical material from the the undivided church, 50-450 C.E.

4. VANDERWILT, JEFFREY T., *A Church Without Borders: The Eucharist and the Church in Ecumenical Perspective*, Collegeville, MN 1998, 10. See VANDERWILT for his explanation of the Greek understanding of “human” as essentially that which human beings hold in common with one another, rather than the things that make them different (10).

5. For other enumerations of elements of communion see: KASPER, WALTER, *Theology and the Church*, New York 1989, 150-165; POTTMEYER, HERMANN J., *Towards A Papacy in Communion. Perspectives from Vatican Councils I and II*, New York, 1998, 132; and DOYLE, DENNIS, *Communion Ecclesiology. Visions and Versions*, Maryknoll, 2000, where he names the relationships involved in communion theology as divine, mystical, sacramental, historical, and social (74).

6. LUMEN GENTIUM. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in: FLANNERY, AUSTIN (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Rev. ed., New York, 1996, par. 4. (Hereafter referred to as LG, with appropriate paragraph #). Also see LAWLER, MICHAEL G. / SHANAHAN, THOMAS J., *Church: A Spirited Communion*, Collegeville, MN, 1995, 2-3, for a description of the development of LUMEN GENTIUM and an analysis of its shift from a priority of organization to a priority of grace. LUMEN GENTIUM “provide(s) ample evidence of the council’s conviction that the Church is a mysterious vertical communion between God and believers, and a horizontal communion between believers, before it is a hierarchical institution” (3).

7. TILLARD, *Flesh of the Church*, 1.

8. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, par. 13, as quoted in DULLES, AVERY, “The Ecclesiology of John Paul II,” in: PHAN, PETER C. (ed.), *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology*, Collegeville (2000): 96-97. Also see JOHN PAUL II, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of Vatican II*, trans. FALLA, P. S., San Francisco, 1979, for particular insights into his understanding of Trinitarian communion.

9. GAUDIUM ET SPES. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, in: FLANNERY, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, par.1. Hereafter referred to as GS.

10. TILLARD, *Flesh of the Church*, 9.

11. LG, par. 2.

12. Bird, Otto, “The Difference of a Catholic University.” In Theodore M. Hesburgh, (ed.), *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame (1994): 32.

13. LG, par. 20.

14. CONGAR, YVES, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, translated by SMITH, DAVID, London (1997): 5. Also see MOLTSMANN, JÜRGEN, *The Spirit of Life. A Universal Affirmation*, trans. KOHL, MARGARET, Minneapolis (1992): 1.

15. ZIZOULAS, JOHN, *Being as Communion*, New York 1985, 140, as quoted in: LAWLER / SHANAHAN, *Spirited Communion*, 5.

16. HAMER, JEROME, *The Church Is A Communion*, trans. MATTHEWS, RONALD, New York (1964): 188.

17. CONGAR, 25-6.

18. Steinfels, "Dissent and Communion," 11
19. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," in: *Origins* 22 (25 June 1992): 108. Hereafter referred to as "Some Aspects" or "CDF 'Letter of 1992.'"
20. See DOYLE, *Visions and Versions*, and in his earlier writings presents the tension as more conciliatory and nuanced, while others such as TILLARD and LEONARD BOFF would see the distinctions as acute.
21. HEALY, NICHOLAS, in a response session to DOYLE'S, "Communion Ecclesiology. Visions and Versions", CTS Convention, Portland, Oregon, June 1, 2001
22. JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. Apostolic Letter to the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, Rome 2001. Hereafter referred to as *Novo Millennio*.
23. CDF, "Some Aspects", 108.
24. LG, par. 20.
25. LG, par. 18, quoting Vatican I, *I Pastor aeternus*.
26. DULLES, "Ecclesiology of John Paul II," 98.
27. CDF, "Some Aspects," 110.
28. LG, par. 22.
29. Dulles, 98.
30. CDF, "Some Aspects", n. 27.
31. CDF, "Some Aspects," 109.
32. RATZINGER, 20.
33. JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio*, par. 44.
34. RATZINGER, JOSEPH CARDINAL, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, transl. WALKER, ADRIAN, San Francisco 1996, 145
35. CDF, "Some Aspects," 111.
36. CONGAR, *The Mystery of the Church*, xiv.
37. HILBERATH, BERND JOCHEN, "Sender, Receiver, and Message. The Holy Spirit as the Communicator between God and the World", in: HINZE, BRADFORD E. (ed.), *The Spirit in the Church and the World*, Maryknoll (2004): 3-17.
38. TILLARD, *Flesh of the Church*, 9.
39. *Ibid.*

40. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church*, 10.
41. POTTMEYER, *Towards a Papacy In Communion*, 124.
42. Johnson, Elizabeth. "Trinity: To Let the Symbol Ring Again," in *Theology Today* 54:3 (October 1997): 300.
43. Berry, Thomas. *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future*. New York (1999): 4.